

Working Up the Bottle

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ABSTRACT

Working Up the Bottle is the story of three friends from youth who decide to rob a restaurant. Hunter, a chef with suicidal tendencies yet cursed with drunken immortality; Riley, a waitress (who Hunter loves) trapped in a dead-end job and an abusive relationship; and Jack, a successful entrepreneur who amuses himself by toying with his old friends' existence. The novel finds Hunter and Riley trying to achieve some measure of salvation in escaping the world of the service industry; a forgotten community of addicts, miscreants, misfits, and savages. Set against the backdrop of an unnamed Canadian metropolis, *Working Up the Bottle* is a darkly humorous tragedy that discusses the sad reality of the educated working poor, characters whose aspirations have long since dissolved into the bottom of their drinks and their desperate attempt to climb back to the top.

for Hillary

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HUNTER

I.

There's a violent knocking, followed quickly by my doorbell which is exceptionally loud. And I'm absolutely covered in vomit. I mean a lot of vomit. More vomit than one would expect from someone whose diet is mostly poutine and Tums. The vomit is covering my shirt, my favourite shirt, my Palace Brothers shirt, speckled in half-digested pills and bits of cheese curd and thinned gravy, and the doorbell keeps shaking the walls. There are significant cuts on my hand. I go to the door and open it to find a short Middle-Eastern man holding a bag of what is obviously food delivery.

–12A. 12A. I ring ten time. Poo-tin for you. Ten-time,” he yells at me.

I'm not sure exactly the course of the day that brought me here. I remember drinks with Jack, my overly attractive and successful childhood friend. I remember panties and bourbon. I remember a bird. I remember being left in the bar. I have no recollection of ordering the food, but it must be mine because I see the familiar white plasticized take-out container seeping a mahogany-shade of gravy out the side and mix against the white bag making a strange vertical puddle. My diet ginger ale is in there too, the condensation fusing with the gravy puddle, rapidly changing its consistency. I can even tell they've forgotten the napkins and hot sauce, as they always do.

–Eight-fifty. Eight-fifty plus tip,” he's still barking at me, which builds upon my headache as if the doorbell has lodged itself in my frontal lobe. I'm shuffling through my pockets, but of course my hands just keep sliding around in remnants of vomit, vomit which has yet to deter the poor little man from demanding his eight-fifty. Plus tip.

–I, uh, I don't have any money friend. I'm so sorry. I don't remember ordering. I. I. I was supposed to be dead, eh...” I trail off at the end, still confused by the moment.

–But you are not dead. Not dead. Eight-fifty.”

–Ya, I know I’m not dead. And you can’t imagine my disappointment. Could you take it back?”

–Back. Back to where? One Poo-tin. One ginger ale. Diet. Hot sauce. Eight-fifty.”

–Well, for one I can see already there’s no hot sauce.”

–Hurry please, I have many orders. Eight-fifty.”

–What can I say, dude? I took these pills, and some Lamb’s Navy, and there was this Indian moth...indigenous—aboriginal moth. Not-you moth. Or something.”

–Pills? Pills? Are you little girl? Do you use tampon? Does your cycle align with the moon and other little girls? Pills and rum are for little girls. Are you a little girl?

–No.”

–Eight-fifty. And use knife.”

–Ya, I got this thing with my hands, you see this scar.”

–EIGHT-FIFTY.”

–Ok, dude. Can I get you tomorrow? Or can we make a trade; I think I’ve got a volleyball here somewhere. Or a *Vanity Fair*? Good article on Tina Fey and some bit on Islamabad...” I trail off again.

–No trade. I come back tomorrow. If you are dead, I will take volleyball and Tina Fey.”

–You’re a delight. I’ll leave the door open.”

He shoves the bag into my chest, which warms against the vomit, and he takes off down the hall swearing. My neighbour sticks its head out the door and shakes it in disapproval.

–Botched suicide,” I offer. –And poutine.” And I hold up the bag, which promptly splits under the weight of escaping gravy and sweating diet ginger ale, all of which splatter across the

hall floor, the remains looking almost exactly like what's on the Palace Brothers shirt. I pick the ginger ale out of the mess and close the door. I crack it open and take a large swig, the carbonation both cooling and burning my ravaged vomit-weary throat, and catch my thumb awkwardly on the can, slicing into an old scar. I kind of wish I had the poutine. The gravy would cauterize the wound. Maybe.

Then it occurs to me that I can't recall where the scar on my left thumb even came from. I know a knife was involved. I know that for a while it really did resemble a moth, and before that an Indian head dress. Aboriginal head dress. I remember pain. There was a hospital, or at least a doctor. The Polish and carrots were not involved. My medical bill was covered by the state, both provincial and federal. It must have been in a kitchen somewhere. I would have been underpaid, overworked, hungover, hung-under, worked-over. The waitresses would have been young, and cute. The chefs, the cooks, older and weathered. The cuisine fused, the cutting boards clean, the owner absent. I believe a potato instigated the cut, and I'd have given in to its tuberous bravado, its Irish blood. The when escapes me and I wonder how the years could have dissolved so quickly into a vast imbalance of time and memory.

It also occurs to me that I have never fucked a girl with too many tattoos. I have no idea why it occurs to me, but suddenly I'm overwhelmed by a rush of shortcomings and evidence of an incomplete life. I have never enjoyed a Wednesday in its entirety. I can't dance, save for some pseudo-Gord Downie/Ian Curtis thing that is meant to explain that I can't dance, but I'm self-deprecating – in a Canadian way. I have never enjoyed a David Lynch movie. I don't care for, though I claim to, the works of Hart Crane. I have never been on an all-inclusive vacation, never swam up to a bar or tipped a bellman. I've never walked up to a girl and spoken to her, just because I thought, maybe, she might want me to. I masturbate with my right hand, and I am

afraid of attempting the act with my left. In fact, my hands often deceive me. I can't snap my fingers. Can't throw a curveball. I have horrible knife skills. Which brings me back to the once moth-like scar on my left thumb.

The blood continues to run from the wound, uncauterized and fed by the thick humidity in the room. The thermostat in my apartment says it's 19 degrees, but it feels way hotter. I feel hotter. I sweat constantly. It's important, I remind guests, it's important to hydrate. I have hydration issues, myself. *The Last Waltz* is on the TV, as it always is. If I had a cat, it would be dead, though I would have named it Hemingway or Dave. If I had a partner, she'd have left many tumultuous years ago. She would have taken the cat. She would have taken the cat, and it would have been a scene. I'd have chased her out onto the street, the cat screaming in confusion in her arms. Her father or brother or new lover would've been there to keep me back, to threaten violence. I wouldn't have hit him. But I'd have wanted to. Desperately. The cat would've preferred to stay, but would have been given no voice.

The place smells like Levon Helm. I smell like Richard Manuel. The walls are a dirty mustard colour. I once tried to decorate them, hang pictures of memories; a mix of decades best unremembered. But the effect is that of an unkempt framing store, or a bad aisle at IKEA. A few empty prescription bottles lay to rest on my coffee table. There is a half-bottle of Lamb's Navy rum. There is ruin and regret.

My vision is fading. The scar and new wound dance gently in the fading light of its body's once subtle glow. The blood trickles off the hand onto my shirt into an estuary of gravy, and ginger ale. Something from earlier is taking over, but I can't recall what it was. I miss a girl who may have missed me, once. I miss five am, and my first drink, and my tenth, and that

feeling you get at almost, the thoughts that fill you at maybe, that barrelling wonder of chance,
and the crushing emptiness of never.

II.

I don't wake up until the next morning. Though I'm vaguely unaware of the day, I assume that I should be at work by the fact that it seems to be daytime, and I tend to work during the daytime. My shirt has dried enough that I can peel some of the poutine and pills from it in large pieces, yet after careful consideration I come to the conclusion that showing up for my shift in a vomit encrusted concert tee is not the best of ideas, even if I hide it beneath a hoodie and change swiftly upon arrival into my chef whites. Even if I've done it before and no one really gave a fuck. I search for a non-vomit encrusted shirt, and come up with some greyish rag that appears to be stainless, though smells strongly of cigarettes, what can best be described as minted car fumes, and heavy layers of Old Spice deodorant. I decide a heavier layer of Old Spice will override the rest of the olfactory accomplishments of my outfit, which is complimented with a pair of jeans I haven't spent a day without in four years, and a pair of blue Chuck Taylors that are constantly on the verge of turning into sandals. I pick bits of pills and curd from my beard, which is more neglect than style, and stab at my teeth with a toothbrush so ancient it may predate fluoride. I wrap myself in a dark blue hoodie and a pair of aviators, which sit crooked against my face.

A crisp morning's chill greets me immediately as I step from my building. It's later in the year than I expected or remembered. As busses cruise past me, their exhaust is thick in the season's cold, lingering against the day and signalling an end of better months. The hoodie quickly proves useless against the elements, though I'm too lazy to go back upstairs and change and I push forward darting quickly past anything and everything, refusing to break my gait. Given the temperature, the amount of other assholes in the streets, and sounds of teenagers

milling about the high school commons a block over, my best guess is that it's around 8:30am, which will actually make me early for work.

I cut through the back alley that runs behind the block where the restaurant is located. The cold concrete exterior, with establishment names scratched against it for the benefit of delivery trucks and employees creates an urban suburb in the middle of the city. Cookie cutter and sad. Indistinguishable, save for what's behind the doors. The restaurant, *Agharta*, is the third door from the east, marked only by a large 'O' and a sign that reads: "~~Her for Delvries.~~" I use my manager's key to let myself in, thought there's no need to enter my alarm code as I can hear the scurrying of activity from the prep kitchen in the basement.

I sneak into the change room downstairs and change into my whites. The starched white chef's jacket, with black cuffs and 'Hunter' stitched across the top of the left breast. The spot below my left shoulder where my thermometer slides into its holster. The crisp black pants that break ever so gently over my shined black leather CSA approved work shoes. This may be as good as I'll ever look.

I begin the day as I do all others: I bake three sheets of cornbread. Milk, eggs, oil, in one bowl and flour, sugar, baking powder, salt, and cornmeal in another. Let them rest. Fold the wet into the dry. Pour onto baking sheets. After they're ovened, I check my levels making sure I have enough of everything to get me through the lunch rush and prepare a pre- and post-rush prep list. *Agharta* is located just beneath a large, 10 storey government office, so our lunch rush is filled with civil servants with but one hour to spare for a meal. It's hectic, mostly unrewarding, and at times violent work, but it's better than working nights. I prefer to drink from 4:30pm to whenever, as opposed to working a dinner rush and drinking from 11:00pm until whenever. I enjoy seeing the end of the day, the 5:00pm happy-hour bars of people with normal

lives, killing three cosmos or pints of Leffe before speeding off to the suburbs for family dinners and talk of tiles and fabric swatches. I enjoy the darkness that comes with 10:00pm, the scurrying light of memory against the numbed embattled glow of drink and confidence.

With the cornbread baking, I quickly find order in my station. I work the hot side, so I cook all of the meats, and sauces, the pastas and the baked dishes. I am manic about the perfection of my station. Each 1/4 insert has its place. Each 1/8 insert has its place. As does each 1/2 and full. The grill must be spotless, glazed ever so slightly with olive oil. My bain-marie must have the perfect amount of water, and each cylinder must rest in order. Black bean soup, butternut squash and caramelized apple soup, soup du jour (aujourd'hui: dark beer/cheddar/potato) pasta sauce du jour (aujourd'hui: spinach almond pesto cream), béchamel, sauce piquante, 1 full insert rice, 1 full insert baked garlic and cayenne new potatoes. The salamander must burn at 210 degrees, the convection oven at 411 once the cornbread is finished baking at 380. I like all of my elements burning just slightly, ready to go at a second's notice. My oils must be placed in order to my right: olive, canola. My spices: one dish 3 parts pepper, one part salt, one dish of chili flakes, one dish paprika and one of cumin (for garnish and colour).

Around an hour in, the rest of the staff begins to disrupt my day. Working with me, as on most days, is Day, who works the cold side. Don't know why he's called Day, as to the best of my knowledge that is neither his first nor last name, nor his favourite of things. Day is around six foot four, shaved clean bald and tattooed as one can be. His arms are covered in Japanese embryos, his back weaves the names of all six of his kids in and out of each other in faux-Cyrillic or Gaelic or Greek, and on his chest is a naked brunette holding two shotguns, sitting in a half-empty martini glass. I like Day. More than I like most people, I guess. Because I hate people. He calls me Hunt, the _t' sound trailing off, as he always says my name quickly,

urgently giving the impression that he's calling me Hun. Appropriately, we toy with each other, affectionately, almost like a married couple, for that's what we are at the best of times. Cooking is not a pretty vocation. It requires a skill and congruence that most would not believe. A wife like Day makes me good, makes my days easier.

Day grunts hello, which comes out as fag, and goes to setup the cold side, which apart from salads, desserts, cold apps, and garnishes, also includes a pizza oven that fashions gourmet thin crust pies like arugula, fig and asiago; or wild boar, 10 years-aged cheddar and shaved fennel, so that the silly servants feel as if they're not at a pizza lunch buffet. The only drawback to Day working the cold side is that that is where the kitchen stereo is located. As he does every shift, he quickly removes whatever Silver Jews album I'm playing, curses my appreciation for alt. country, compliments my vagina, while quickly filling the kitchen with whatever half-assed hard rock shit he's into at the moment. Today he's listening to Methods of Mayhem, perhaps the only person in the world with an appreciation for the later work of Tommy Lee, besides his pornographic endeavours.

–How you doing fag?” he asks, almost as a courtesy or responsibility, as he looks through his lettuces. Before I can answer, he's cursing out the absent night cooks for leaving rotting mescalun mix in his fridge. –Fucking faggots. Fucking wet black-green shit leaving faggots.”

–I'm good Day. Could we listen to someth...”

–You know we can't faggot. You try to kill yourself last night, or what?”

–Ya. Pills though. And rum.”

–What are you, a little girl?”

–Apparently.”

–If you didn't have the knife skills of a Harvey's fry cook, I'd lend you my knives to finish the job. But you'd fuck that up, wouldn't you?"

–Most likely."

–You want to go to McCabe's after work and get fucked up?"

–Yes, yes I do."

–Good. You're buying though. I got kids, and I'll be alive next week."

–Ya, I know."

We pause.

–You ok?" he asks.

–I'm ok."

–Good, let's feed the shit out of these faggots."

Conversation gives way to work, and slowly the serving staff begins to filter in. Brie arrives first. Every restaurant has a Brie. She utters some measure of hello, and then goes about cursing her existence as she comes in and out of the kitchen to prepare the front of the house for the rush. Brie's about forty, but looks fifty easy. She's been serving tables in shitty places in shitty cities since she was about fifteen. She has dark black hair, that's flecked in greys and whites. Her complexion is weathered by years of smoking, late shifts and poorly chosen companions. She was quite certainly once beautiful.

Dean comes in next. Dean is our quota-filling gay server. Interestingly enough, Day never calls him faggot. He calls him Straighty. Dean comes onto the hot side and steals a piece of cornbread. He says nothing, but does gently grasp my cheek in a knowing way that could break my heart.

“Let him touch you like that and you’ll catch the gay,” Day warns, and Dean goes back to setting up and eating his breakfast.

Two more servers and a bartender come in, but they’re not worthy of remembering. This industry is filled with interchangeable pieces, and to name or recall them here would be a sign of disrespect to those I do. A dishwasher comes in last, some high school drop-out who steals car stereos and sells shitty outdoor pot. We’re ready to go.

At eleven thirty the rush begins. Day and I dance a dance both awkward and graceful, speaking only in grunts and calls of table numbers and dishes. It is in these moments that I am not broken, that I don’t consider the labour of days. In these moments I am important, beautiful, graceful. Day and I move around each other like tethered preschoolers at recess, floating gently from dish to dish, garnish to garnish, bill to bill. We can’t hear, and don’t care for, those around us. They are less important, less beautiful, less graceful. We know that in these moments we are as perfection. But, as the time goes past, bells ring and tables exit; we are drawn carefully, slowly, sadly back to life, to the reality of what we are, of our limits, of the consequences of our simplicity. The quiet desires of what happens when we are not here. When we are absent. When we crave, and replace, and substitute, and falter. When we lack the order of imperial-sized inserts, and crisp perfectly ladled sauces, and plates as beautiful as any poem or song, woman or goodbye.

Once the rush is over, Day and I sit out back for a bit, filling ourselves with more coffee and smoking cigarettes like they’re the cure. The scent of oncoming winter mixes in the alley with old deep fryer oil from a barrel we share with three other fooderies on the block. Occasionally a vagrant will pop back, and we’ll give them some soup or stale bread or something. Delivery

trucks come and go, with better produce and product than I should ever have access to. Grunts and salutations are made in French and English, bills signed, and prep cooks yelled at to come restock. There's an odd hierarchy at play here, with Day and I at the top of the heap. It's a sad heap, a heap that pays us barely a living wage, sees us spend to the cent on every second Thursday, only to get our bank accounts slightly replenished in the wee hours of Friday morning automated banking.

The rest of the afternoon is spent with one eye on the clock, prepping for the night shift who will roll in around 3 or 4. This is the tedium of the job, the paper filing, the data entry. Conversation is sparse, usually just calls to change the music, or cursing a mid-afternoon order to cook. At times we discuss our lives, but for the most part in this place we exist in a quiet ignorance of each other. For example, though I know Day has six kids by two women I couldn't name more than one of them, women or kids, if he held his knife to my throat which he has done on occasion. Or the fact that I've known many of my co-workers for several years, in various forms and at various restaurants, many of them lack surnames. I have no idea where any of them lives, and if pressed in an emergency I could maybe come up with three of their phone numbers. Not that they all have phone numbers. Day hasn't had a phone since 1998. He still can't open up a bank account under his own name, which is not unusual among our people. I have to cash his endorsed paycheques through my account, which is fine with me as I tend to make 4 or 5 bucks a transaction. They have hotmail addresses and myspace profiles. They live behind. They don't have RRSPs or credit cards or mortgages. They don't day-trade. They have no interest in media conglomeration or literature, or where the dollar closes. Many don't have aspirations, or hobbies, or euchre skills. They don't live off the grid; it's just that the grid pays them no mind.

The fact that I have both a cell phone and a computer ranks me at the head of the class. Summer school valedictorian.

Bryce, the head chef, a large dopey man of around thirty-five who claims to be straight, arrives as a sign of our day ending. He gives both Day and me a hug before grabbing a clipboard to evaluate lunch, as Day screams mockingly that he's caught the hiv. It has always surprised me that Day accepts Bryce's embrace so readily, without violent comment or protest, but rather measured humour and comfort. Bryce natters on about some chick at some other restaurant that he's in to, but it seems like over-compensating to those of us who know him. Like I said, he's a large man, maybe six-two, two-forty. He has thinning black hair cropped short, and large well-defined lamb chop sideburns. He always talks about his ex-wife, but she seems too constructed to be real. The odd thing is that within this industry, there is little prejudice, so resting in the closet seems unnecessary. But, whatever, let the fat man do what he wants. I don't have to fuck him.

Other cooks and servers come in. I take the last half-hour of my shift to make myself my bi-daily meal, a poutine to be remembered. I start with potato wedges that have been soaked in water infused with maple syrup and brown sugar for three days. After patting them dry and coating them in olive oil, I bake them for about twenty minutes in the convection oven at 400 degrees. My gravy is a wild mushroom, roasted red pepper and bourbon reduction that I made a few days ago, and had on the back of the stove simmering for most of the afternoon. For cheese, I grate one part Edam, one part herbed havarti, and some Monterey Jack. I mix in a slight bit of crumbled feta, for the saltiness. Removing the potatoes from the oven, I flash fry them in the newly fresh deep fryer oil, and then toss them in salt, pepper, Hungarian paprika, and chili flakes. I layer them evenly, spreading the cheese over top, and then letting the warm reduction

melt together. I leave it under the heat lamp while I run down to change, have a quick shower in the sink and layer myself once again in deodorant. I bound back upstairs and take the poutine with me to the bar to sit quietly and read *The Globe and Mail*, complementing the dish with a bottle of San Pellegrino and a double Knob Creek, three cubes. Ya, I know. Cubes. I'm a little girl.

Just as I'm finishing up, Al walks out from the back of the house and spots me at the bar. He nods a quick hello, and then takes a moment to pat his belly and survey the dining room. Al is easily six-five, three hundred pounds. He's of some sort of Eastern European decent, Hungarian or Lithuanian or something-ian. He's into perogies and miscellaneous porks and sour cream, anyway. His wife, a French-Canadian cougar, une cougar, bought the restaurant, but Al runs it. Apparently she comes from old Casse-Croute money. I think she ate a prep cook once. Al's mostly harmless and has been nothing but indifferent to me. He pops behind the empty bar and makes himself an espresso with a shot of grappa, and then places it next to my empty dish. He comes around the bar to join me, though says nothing as he sips at his drinks.

-Busy?' he asks, mostly out of habit.

-Ya. Ok for a Tuesday."

-It's Thursday, Hunter."

-Oh. Then no." I quickly try to calculate where two days went.

-So, try to kill yourself last night?' he asks as he twists the last of the coffee down his throat.

-Yup."

-But you're alright now?"

-For now."

–Good. Bad time of the year to be hiring and all. Pills?”

–Yup.”

–Jesus, Hunter. What did I say about pills?”

–Only the Polish off themselves with pills.”

–Atta boy!” He clears his and my dishes and heads off through the kitchen. The buzz of the night shift can be heard from the back, and the disturbing cackles of incoming happy hour regulars from the front, so I decide to make my escape. I pull on my hoodie, and place my aviators into position, pop the hood tightly around my face, and prepare a smoke for the walk home. Another day complete. There is eighteen dollars in my pocket. Seven hours till payday.

JACK

III.

I can't decide whether or not the waitress is wearing panties, or any undergarment for that matter. I've been staring at her ass, sipping on my Kettle One and Seven, for about twenty minutes, and I've got say I'm completely stumped. Maybe I'll ask her. And if she is wearing panties what are they like? Are they new? Do they have flowers on them? Are they cotton? I like cotton. A good breathable natural fibre. Girls wear really cool panties nowadays.

She has beautiful tattoos. Ink that suggests an artistic yet deviant past. They lurk from behind her outfit in a manner that is furiously teasing. I want to know where those tattoos go. I will find out where those tattoos go.

Hunter comes in, a half-hour late, and breaks my concentration. He stumbles awkwardly across the room. He looks like a mug shot model, like the guy I didn't give my spare change to outside the bar, and the closer he gets the more I regret asking him for a drink. His 7-11 aviators are pressed against his head like it was a pie and he was the clown. Is the clown. His ragged blonde hair is trying to escape from his toque, and his beard is about three days shy of trimming. And then there's the rest of his uniform, of course. Band t-shirt, hoodie, unwashed jeans, Chucks. I'm not sure he ever washes, or changes, except to go to work. He looks lost in this room, weary of every face, in search of a familiar one. He finds me, takes off his glasses, and beelines for the table. His eyes are blue and bloodshot. I remember when those eyes were something. Could have been something.

The places I'd rather be. In our youth, he could always score the good drugs, find the worthwhile parties, provide the evening's entertainment. But those qualities, ones that make you king in one life, leave you the fool in another. And here he is, the fool. All dressed down, and

nowhere to go. Waiting impatiently by the drain, as the eddy gets thankfully tighter. I mean, I love him and all, but, fuck.

–Hunt, good to see you,” I lie like the snake. Cast me in Genesis, cast this one in wax, leave him in another time. They all blame the snake, but the snake gets off easy. Let drunk Adam here sit frozen and alone in the garden. Fuck Hunter it was just fruit, son.

–Jack, you're looking good.”

–You, my friend, are not. Christ Charlie, couldn't you shave once in a while. They know me here; they'll be confused as to why I'm entertaining vagrants.”

–Ah, leave them enough money Jack. You can buy these people, too.”

–Sit down. How've you been?”

–Suicidal.”

–Still? You're exhausting. And apparently unsuccessful. Consistent, though. I'll give you that. Do you not have a knife and a bathtub? Or drain cleaner? Shit, I read the other day about a Chinese kid who died playing video games. Fatigue! Fatigue can kill you. You look tired as it is, let's go rent you a Wii and finish this thing.”

–You're so full of love. And the kid was South Korean.”

–They all serve hot and sour soup, kid. That's all I care about. At least suicidal is a step up. Congratulations. I thought we were going to linger in the land of wallow and self-pity in perpetuity. You should have called; we could have had you over for cake and sleeping pills. Karen has some Ambien we could cut with rat poison.” The waitress comes over. No panties, I'm sure of it now. And there's an oriole on her left shoulder that I need to get to know better. –Hunt, need a drink? Of course he needs a drink. Look at that face. It begs for drink, don't you think sweetheart?”

–“What can I get you, sir?” She is obviously unimpressed with my company.

–“Maker's with three cubes. Double. The bourbon, not the cubes.” If he's paying he'll drink spilled beer out of an ashtray. When I'm getting the cheque it's thirteen dollars worth of Kentucky. Like at this point in his day it fucking matters. Might as well drink bleach, he's going to end up in the same place. The waitress scurries off.

–“No.”

–“No what?”

–“No she's not wearing panties, dude.”

–“You know me too well. How can you tell?”

–“Look for the crease.”

–“If only you had some kind of tangible, marketable skill.”

–“If only you had a soul. Or a conscience.”

–“It's okay to attain and obtain Hunter.”

–“I would like a loft apartment and a trophy wife with the IQ of my left sock. Are yours for sale?”

–“Everything, for the right price.”

–“How about my blood. Do you have a collection of minion blood yet Jack? There's something that would set you apart from the other assholes.”

And for this brief moment we are the friends we used to be. Existing within our own time. I wonder where that man went. I miss him. There are still elements of that Hunter left. You have to look for them, but they're there. Like his steadfast defence of the weak. Just a while back, we were at Starbucks in the middle of some collective barista nightmare. They had run out of coffee, the line went to the door, the cream was curdled, the Alanis CD was skipping. And

this horrible woman in her mid-forties at the head of the line was berating the staff. I mean just laying into them. Everyone else in line felt her frustration, and I'm sure a few of them were cheering her on quietly. But Hunt couldn't take it. Couldn't let it pass. He made his way up to this woman and calmly, politely, and succinctly gave her everything she had given those baristas right back. I mean, it was beautiful. He talked about the working class, about workplace stress, about over-caffeination within the café industry, how her station in life was better than theirs, how they make less in a year than her handbag is worth, and how dare she, *how dare she*, breach the decorum of propriety for a goddamn coffee when Ethiopian children were starving, when polar ice caps were melting, when most of the world was losing, when she was wearing that hat. He referenced Marx once and Trudeau twice, and when he was done, when his argument was complete and her very being was indefensible he took her coffee and poured it into her handbag. The crowd roared. I mean literally fucking roared in approval. I swear to fuck he hasn't bought a coffee since. But he's found some hole to crawl into, and there's no getting out. Those of us who know him, have known him, have tried and we're tired. Either he finds himself again or he waits at the bottom for the ground above to bury him. I don't care anymore. Caring is time consuming, all consuming with Hunter.

–How's Steve?"

–How's that?"

–Your wife, Karen? Remember the wedding, white dress, tuxedos, AC/DC, fat aunts, engagement ring that cost those Ghanaian children their lives?"

–First of all they were Batswana and only three kids died. Second, they were already sick. And third, we rent one of those Ethiopian kids from TV so it all evens out. And, there was

no AC/DC, only you singing ~~–Shoot to Thrill~~” while I danced with my mother to Spandau Ballet. And Karen’s fine thank you very much.”

He sits in contemplation of a past mistake. It’s his look really. He’s an ass for bringing up my wife at a time like this. I’m trying to get to the bottom of a very serious question about waitresses and panties. He did it on purpose, shouting out ~~–wife~~” to cockblock like we’re still competitive sixteen year-olds. The competition is over friend, and you have lost. Second prize is your useless shit of an undereducated, underemployed, underwhelming, under-the-radar life. Enjoy that free drink boy, that’s as good as today gets.

~~–How was your day? Fuck any terminally ill geriatrics out of their life savings? How’s your dad Charles, and the rest of the Ponzi family doing? Or did you go golfing?”~~

Oh sweet Hunter, if you only knew what I did today, that sugary bourbon could do very little to ease the pain.

~~–Jealousy, my failed friend, looks worse and worse on you every day.”~~

There is a pause. He stares at me for a minute. An hour.

~~–What are you doing to yourself?” I ask.~~

~~–I don’t know.”~~

The bar putters around us slowly. It’s the kind of place that they feature in style magazines, and *New York Times* inserts, that wouldn’t look out of place in any fashionable metropolis. The decor is simple and modern, the clientele wealthy young business types in dark outfits sharing the victories of their days. Hunter is a flashing beacon of out-of-place. I really don’t know where he gets all the band tees. There must be some online fashion depot for men who are afraid to grow up. If there isn’t, there should be. I make a note.

We chat. We sift through the excruciating minutiae that is his excuse for a life. He tells me about the girl he loves, still. The fucker holds on to his past like it is life, like if he lets go the present will disappear. I tell him again about my beautiful wife, the nameless affairs I have going on the side. I leave out the names. The names would hurt. The names would kill. He drinks more. He talks about the job he hates. I tell him about how the company's about to go public, how I hope to be retiring soon. If he makes it to thirty, I'll eat my mortgage. His eyes slowly start to shine over, perhaps the drink, perhaps the day, perhaps he can read the truth in his ice cubes, in my face. Always on the verge of tears this one. Maybe that explains the beard, like a roll of super absorbing Bounty permanently fixed to his wounded mug. We drink more and more, likely so that we can tolerate each other, or at least so that I can tolerate him. He tells me about how he's been taking some prescription drug he found and talking to God, trying to find, make, discover peace.

The waitress is finished her shift, and the bartender is now serving us. She sits at the bar, occasionally looking over flashing knowing smiles of want. That's what an eighty-five-dollar tip on a hundred-and-seventy-dollar bill will get you. Everyone is for sale, especially the lesser beings, the creatures of minimum wages and high-school educations. I excuse myself from my old friend. Tell him I'll be right back. I won't be back. The waitress can feel me coming, doesn't even turn to greet me. But she knows I'm there. She knows what happens next.

HUNTER

IV.

Post-work I go to McCabe's for a pint, and wait for Day to get off work and join me, since his shift bleeds into the next more than mine. McCabe's is a mail-order Irish pub that could find you in any city, anywhere in the world. It lacks originality. The walls are pasted with pictures of Joyce, and Bono, and Yeats, not that any of the fuckers in the bar would know the difference. The Pogues play incessantly. If I ever meet Shane MacGowan I'll stab him in the eye with my thumb. How did Joe Strummer ever end up with those fuckers? The waitresses are dressed in black lycra, one bad decision away from a Hooters career. They are all barely eighteen, all look fifteen. At this hour the crowd is comprised mostly of middle-aged knobs having post-work drinks before heading home to neighbourhoods that don't even have shitty mail-order Irish pubs. It's mostly male, hence the high school wait staff. They flirt sadly with the waitresses. A few women speckle the crowd, mostly desperate cougars-in-training, hungry for either an affair with one of the knobs or fantasizing about taking one of the young waitresses out into the back alley and slicing them apart so that they can wear their taught skins as body suits.

The staff knows me as one of their own, so they let me sit quietly at the bar without being bothered or overcharged or acknowledged much. The waitresses giggle at my nonsense for no particular reason. There will be hockey on TV. There will be laughter and scoring chances. People will go outside to smoke. They'll come back in. They'll leave me alone. I'll drink. The Guinness, though heavy and iron filled, starts to burn a bit against the poutine, so I take a half pack of Tums. More Guinness. A Scotch or brown liquor of some variety. A Guinness. Someone gives me a chicken wing. It's no poutine. I get a phone call. Eight-fifty. I have a tampon. There's a girl who is smiling at me. No one is smiling at me. Somebody says something. No one says anything. A Guinness. Something brown. *If that's the way you see it,*

then I'm certainly not Ryan. There's a girl smiling at me. The waitress is smiling at me. She makes me want to drink. Day's not coming. Day is coming. Day's not coming. I buy the girl a drink. Her name is not Rosie. Her name is not Sara. Her name is not yours. I buy the girl a drink. I buy myself a drink. She knows my name. She doesn't know my name. Have to stay until midnight, or I can't pay my bill. The girl plays with her hair. She laughs when I say things like *what shall I do with this absurdity-O heart, O troubled heart - this caricature, decrepit age that has been tied to me as to a dog's tail?* She touches my hand sometimes. She touches my hand sometimes. Day's not coming. Day's coming. She tastes like I taste. I buy the girl a drink. It is after midnight. I buy the girl a drink. I buy the girl a drink. I buy the girl a drink. *I don't think that's what your mother had in mind, Ryan.* Her name is not yours. There are no knobs left. No women who want to wear you as a suit. The waitresses have homeroom in five hours. She tastes like I taste. She touched my hand. That's the sign. I buy the girl a drink. Day's coming. *Does the imagination dwell the most upon a woman won or woman lost? If on the lost, admit you turned aside from a great labyrinth out of pride, cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought or anything called conscience once; and that if memory recur, the sun's under eclipse and the day blotted out.* You're funny. I'm not, really.

V.

When I wake up I am alone. I haven't had poutine or Tums in several hours. There are signs that someone was in my bed with me. Long hairs on the pillows and tied up in my groin. Foreign packs of cigarettes on the bedside table, half-empty glasses. There are obvious attempts at condoms strewn about the bedroom, though success is hard to judge. A hastily written note with a name, a number, an email address. Not Rosie. Not Sara. Not you, though I may be Ryan. It seems to be daytime, judging by the bits of sunlight trying to force their way through the heavy faux-velvet reddish curtains covering my bedroom window. I search memory for some sort of recollection of the day or date. My phone is flashing urgent red lights. Looks like I should have been at work about an hour ago. I can't remember the last time I showered with purpose.

I spend a bit of time in the shower, vomiting bile and doing my best not to fall down. There is no shower curtain, and the hottish water is spreading all over the bathroom soaking my take-out menus. I like to read take-out menus in the bathroom. Research, maybe. Or laziness. I often just get upset at blasphemous poutines, like the ones with spaghetti sauce or chicken or vegan alternatives. Why don't we just diet on Sunny D and ketchup for godsakes?

After I've successfully rid myself of everything in my body that wanted out, and a few strings of blood that probably did not, I check my messages. I'm very late for work and some Indian man is still very anxious to get his eight-fifty. I'm late to the point where it's probably not worth going, but I feel for my kitchen brethren covering my ass, so I suit up and head out. The sun is unbearably bright, and finds its way to my reddened eyes past the crooked aviators. It's a two cigarette walk as always, and each drag pulls me a little closer to normalcy. When I arrive it's just a few minutes before the lunch rush, and the entire staff looks both angry and surprised to see me.

–Thought you might be dead, fag,” mutters Day, as Limp Biskit beats against the kitchen walls.

–No, I’m out of pills. Where were you last night?” I ask as I fill a mug with coffee, my hands shaking as if in mid-seizure.

–One of my kids beat the shit out of another kid at school. Got in trouble for some reason. Fucking kids. Just wanted another kid’s nap blankie. Fucking kid wet himself. So proud. Brought my little girl to Dairy Queen for her dinner.”

–Your kids do love their Peanut Buster Parfaits.” It’s truly the only thing I know about them.

–Fucking right.”

Bryce comes around the corner, and it’s immediately apparent that he is not happy, nor should he be. I’d beat me with my own shoes if I were him. He starts in about responsibility and team and accountability and blah fucking blah and half-way through I puke a bit in my mouth, but mostly because of the Limp Biskit. Sorry, man. Sorry, man. Sorry, man. Sorry, man, but I don’t really mean it.

–You’re adorable when you’re managerial, you know that,” then Bryce hugs me, which makes me at once feel both comforted and guilty.

–Go get changed.”

–Yes, mother.”

I go get into my whites. The lunch rush happens. Food is made and served. Korn replaces Limp Biskit, then some Kid Rock which makes me puke in my mouth again. Day makes smart-ass comments. I puke a bit into the garbage can online. I cut off part of my left

pinky. Day and I smoke cigarettes. I puke a bit in the dumpster, and a vagrant offers me a napkin.

–How’s life?” he asks.

–Unnecessarily complicated, fuelled by alcohol and a deep sense of regret. I’ve never fucked a girl with too many tattoos, and my dick hurts.”

–It gets worse. Wait _til your prostate enlarges.”

–I’ll look forward to that.”

Bryce sticks around to make sure I’m competent, which has never been a problem for me, no matter the hangover or injured appendage. Towards the end of the shift my groin starts to itch, which I hope is just a matter of cleanliness and not the onslaught of an STD and what the fuck am I doing having unprotected sex, because that’s a slow painful suicide Loudon Wainright, and god forbid I’m pregnant. I make a mental note to do gitch laundry soonish.

To make amends for my lateness and general lack of maturity, I stay later into the shift so that Bryce can take a break and Day can sit at the bar in my place and get drunk. This forces me to see some of the night staff that I rarely run into. The Filipino Mormon dishwasher says something to me upon his arrival in what I assume is either Filipino or Mormon, that likely translates into –I thought you were dead” or –I can show you a way to God and many wives” or –How does one make his own tacos?” Al’s wife strolls in, and happily requests that I make her something special for dinner which comes out as a euphemism for cunilingus. I make her pumpkin seed encrusted Fanny Bay oysters with a blueberry crème fraiche which she pairs with a Pelee Island Chardonnay while she hits on some new gay daytime server. Al arrives, but doesn’t seem to care, or knows his place. Day drinks. And then, Riley arrives.

Riley is the head server, the night manager. I've known her since grade eleven. Me, her, Jack. We were quite the threesome, then. Spent long summer nights in urban parks, drinking 50 and getting high. Arguing the merits of Neil Young songs, and religion, and mass-produced bongos. Speaking boldly of leaving town, for other towns, for better towns. Cursing the other kids, for their belligerence, or wealth, or aspirations. Aspirations were for the weak, and ours were so simple as to defy the meaning of the word.

Riley is petite, but not small. Pretty, but not beautiful. Curved, but not voluptuous. Confident, but not conceited. Intelligent, but not smart. Tight, but not gaunt. Cold, but not distant. She has shortish blackish hair. It is my understanding that she is pixyish or elfin in her features, as a while back I wanted to jerk off to a picture of her but she had blocked me from seeing her photos on Facebook so I did some googling, and found a whole site filled with Riley look-a-likes giving head and getting fucked, and all the tags were _pixie' and _dfin' and _Natalie Portman look-alike.' That's a lot of information. She's cute, anyway.

–Hey Hunt, what are you still doing here?” she asks, and comes behind the line and gives me a hug. It lingers. Does it linger? It lingers. Maybe our cheeks touch. Maybe she kisses my cheek. I don't know.

–I'm covering Day for a bit so he can get drunk. Er.”

–Really? I heard you got drunk at McCabe's and took some poor little girl home.”

–Is that what you heard?”

–That's what I heard. Also heard you keep trying to kill yourself with pills. Suicidal, and still able to get laid. Do they like that? the high school girls? the tortured dude thing?”

–They love it. As soon as I can get my hands on a gun, and start failing with bullets I'm going to get so much pussy. Just like high school.”

–You didn't get laid in high school.”

–True. How's your new place?”

–I'm not telling you where I live, Hunt.” She won't tell me where she lives. I tend to get stalky when I drink.

–And your girlfriend? Matt is it?”

–Mark's fine. You seen Jack?”

–No. He's busy being successful. Takes up a lot of his days.”

The banter continues a bit, but it's not interesting. I did something. She did some stuff. This one night happened, and then another just like it. Mark did something horrible. She did something horrible to get back at him. She leaves to count her float, and check the night's reservation book, and tend to the other nonsense of the day.

Finally, and somewhat reluctantly, the Manitoba Man Whore arrives. Manitoba is the night bartender. He is every bartender. He's an asshole. I think by just standing next to him, one could get syphilis. He makes me sad for everyone.

–Sup, SeaHunt?”

–Naw much. How's the gonorrhoea?”

–Itches like your mum, dude.”

–Super.”

–Why you still here? Heard you fucked some piece at the pub. Man, I hear you were wobbly. I heard you-”

–Riley's here, eh.”

–Shit, what the balls am I doing chatting up your mug?” His disappears quickly into the front of the house, making some promises about a drink at McCabe’s later in the week. Horrible thing to do to Riley. I just couldn’t take any Manitoba in my state.

I clean and prep up nicely for Bryce, who has returned for his shift, and then decide to skip poutine and just go change and have a Tums and get the fuck out of work before I do something stupid. Riley makes me stupid, which isn’t a very difficult descent from the level of idiotic at which I hover. It takes me a while, as when I get down to the change room I can’t remember what I had worn to work and have to sift through the mess of clothing until I can locate mine, which is impressive given that my aesthetic hasn’t changed since Pavement broke up.

By the time I get back upstairs, the night has begun to settle. Riley invites me for a smoke before I leave, so we venture out back and sit on some milk crates as we share a cigarette in relative silence. I like this. I like this moment. I like the quiet. I like the way she drags, the way she exhales. I like the scar on her cheek, the way it erases itself in the twilight. I like the way she brushes away a bit of hair that makes it to her face behind her left ear. I like how I want to do it for her. I like the way she tolerates me. The way she softly pats my leg after handing me the cigarette for the last time. I like this moment. But I have to go home, and she has to go to work, and then she has to go home, and I have to drink Lamb’s Navy rum and be a little girl, and none of those are at the same place at the same time.

RILEY

VI.

He comes with such an awkward ferocity I have to bite the inside of my lip just to keep from laughing. It seems so cartoonish and unnatural that for a moment I think it's him who was faking. When he stops shaking (I kid you not, shaking so hard I thought he'd turn into a martini) he just lies on top of me. I just want him out of me, off of me. Like it counts toward his embarrassing longevity, or lack thereof. But no, he just lies there, and I can feel his none too impressive member getting smaller and smaller. I worry the condom is going to slip off. I try not to move too much. Finally flaccid, he pulls out and starts to get dressed. There are no sheets left on the bed, and I can feel how cold it is in the room. He won't even look at me, which is fine—I hate feigning the satisfaction.

I sit up and pull a cigarette from my silver cigarette case. The same one my grandmother pulled from. The same one her mother pulled from. I've been told it's silver, but I'm not really sure—I can't tell. It's simple, no intricate design or embroidery. At the bottom of the top is delicately stencilled RRS, for Ruth Riley Sutherland, my great grandmother. It's built for slim 100's, and my Belmonts fit somewhat awkwardly. But I like it. I like having something passed down, even if it's a lineage of emphysema. I detest how the cases have made a comeback lately—hipsters carting around their Virginia Slims in them, looking oh so alt.

“Jack, you have a light?” I ask, breaking an hour's silence. Don't let the hour fool you. The lacklustre sex was preceded by forty minutes of mundane chatter. Doesn't he have wife for that? He tosses me a Bic, still avoiding eye contact.

“Thanks.”

Then he's dressed and turns to me for approval. He sports a navy Armani suit and he sports it well. He could have had a successful career as an outlet mall mannequin, or a local

Sears model. His jet black hair, now with slight hints at grey, cut expertly around his oval face. Brown eyes that suggest a mirror of my own, but set back deeply into his face as if to hide some truth. Such a beautiful man, for some reason you wouldn't expect such a small dick. Shouldn't there be a correlation there? I laugh a little and then catch myself.

–What, what is it? What's so funny?” he asks, flustered and perturbed.

–Nothing. When do you have to get back to work?”

–Now.” He comes over and sits next to me on the bed. I kind of wish he'd stay. Wish he'd spend the afternoon watching TV with me, flip through our high school year book, laugh at our hair and Pearl Jam groupie looks.

I force a smile as he runs his hand through my newly cut hair. He didn't even mention it. He still smells of too much cologne, through all of the juices and fluids we'd just lacquered each other in. Where on earth do they make such a vile and strong compound? I want to be sick on him, soil his overpriced suit, forcing him to stay just a while longer. He looks straight into my eyes, and for a moment I think maybe he knows the truth. But his words bring me back to reality, back to whatever it is he has become.

–You like that, you like getting fucked today?” he asks, with unwarranted surety.

He sounds like those Bleu Nuit soft cores all the boys ran home to watch on Saturdays when we were kids. *Emmanuelle en Pairs, en amour*. No, I didn't like it. I've come harder fitting into a pair of jeans. I only tolerate you. Thank your God you have a career and a wife to go home to, because if I have to sit here and lie to you for much longer I might have to kill you. Now take your hand out of my hair, lend me a hundred bucks and go.

–Sure.”

–Are you working to that anniversary thing for the restaurant Hunt keeps complaining about?”

He gets up off the bed.

–Yes, but Mark might come.”

He goes back to the mirror, checking the cuffs on his shirt, straightening his tie, licking his lips.

–Why don't you dump that fucking loser?”

He knows why.

–Why don't you divorce your wife?”

–Because I have a career that involves networking and socialising. I have to be seen as...” he disappears into some pre-recorded message. You're just a waitress and a friend. I'm important. You're expendable. My wife lives in 1952. She knows how to make tuna casserole. But you, you can put your legs behind your head.

–Fuck you.”

–Done.”

He takes some money out of his wallet and tosses it onto the bed.

–You still need to borrow that? Or did Mark win the lottery?”

–Fuck you.” Now I feel an edge of shame. But it comes out as anger. –Get out.”

He fixes his tie one last time in the mirror, but keeps his eyes on me. –Riley, I've known you a long time. I always thought your best quality was knowing your station in life. You are what you are. You're beautiful, you're kind, and you're a decent waitress. Accept those three facts and you'll lead an amicable life. There's nothing else for you to be. The sooner you accept that, the sooner you'll find some degree of happiness.”

Now I'm screaming and throwing whatever I can get my hands on. He calmly picks up his coat and leaves me behind. I palm a tear away. Fuck him. I retrieve his money from the mess my tantrum has made, and start to deal with the mess we've made. The apartment is small: the smell of come, cologne and cigarettes fills it. I light some sage and open all the windows while searching for clues of indiscretion. Mark will be home later. More than likely he will be drunk, and horny. He'll crawl on top of me just as Jack has just done. He'll satisfy himself and then pass out. Ah, love. At least Jack has money.

Truth is he's right, Jack. I am just a waitress. But I like being a waitress. It's not like I work at Denny's. Not like I'm a Hooters girl. *Agharta* is a really nice place, but not pretentious. We have an exceptional wine list, probably the best in the city. The clientele is mostly decent. The food as well. Hunter is the Sous-Chef, and he makes me the most really nice, healthy, loving meals whenever we cross paths between shifts. I like the hours, the people, the cheap drinks, the late nights. In twenty years people will be reading books on electronic tablets, simultaneously online ordering wasabi peas and a new bodum, while having a video conference with their one hundred and twenty year-old mother, but they'll still need a nice, personable, attractive, intelligent *live* woman to bring them Tuna Carpaccio and a Campari and soda. Waitresses have already outlasted analog. We're the last living dinosaurs. The true "oldest profession." But he makes it sound second rate. To me it's a choice. Just as my mother chose to stay home, drink Spitzers laced with Valium, I choose to serve drinks and live out a simple existence. Fuck him for making that sound sad. We don't all need mortgages and tuna casserole. Though I have had Karen's tuna casserole, and I will admit it's good.

The shower pressure is, as usual, temperamental, and I curse my way through most of it. There are three things my “station in life” lacks, and one is consistent water pressure. The other two are a desirable climate and a lover who isn’t a complete dick. I’d accept an occasional dick, or a holiday-dick, or an eleven-drinks-in-dick. The dream, of course, is a gentleman caller absent of dickishness, but I’ve learned to be realistic.

I put on the Handsome Family’s *Milk and Scissors* and let it fill the apartment while I get dressed, and tidy, and make myself a grilled Halloumi and vine ripened tomato sandwich with some products I’ve borrowed from the restaurant for my days off. There are few combinations of the aural and gustatory I love more than “Amelia Earhart vs. The Dancing Bear” and flipping a near-to-perfection tomato-grilled cheese. A Groot Constantia Sauvignon Blanc, fresh baguette, and whomping brick of brie, and Fleetwod Mac’s *Rumours*, comes to mind. Hunter makes this amazing baked peppered goat’s cheese over mixed greens and some kind of fruity vinaigrette, either sweet cherry or raspberry, and pairs it with any Ghemme. A plate of that and Smog’s *Supper*. Devine. God forbid I’ve inherited the late stage lactose intolerance of my mother. I’d be lost then.

The grilled cheese and I plunk ourselves down in front of the TV. I leave it muted, choosing background images of *Friends* with the Handsome Family soundtrack. I like this. It’s the one where Ross and Rachel are falling in and out love. I open a bottle of Landskroon Shiraz/Cinsault and a copy of *The Savage Detectives* I’ve been trying to finish forever.

I guess I had more red than read, because several hours later I wake up to Mark drunkenly fucking me. He’s taken off my pants and is slapping himself against me. In his mind he probably thinks he’s being romantic or charming. I can smell rye and some other girl on his breath as he whispers “you like that” and “I love you” and “how, how, god, what.” I think he

calls me Haley as he increases the barbarity of his actions, the pace of his love. I wonder if I think I deserve better.

I want him to finish. I want him to realise he's home. I want him to stop. I want. I want. Close your eyes and think of the Queen.

HUNTER

VII.

I get home, but I'm unsure how. I'm fully dressed, except for a noticeable lack of pants. I'm half passed out on the couch. There's a destroyed box of Tums and an empty bottle of Jack on my coffee table, floating in what I hope is a puddle of diet ginger ale. My laptop is open to some ex-girlfriend's profile page. *The Last Waltz* is loud. It's four-eleven. There's a bag from a marine supply store next to the couch that holds fifty feet of blue rope, a trawler aficionados' magazine, and an air horn. I question the air horn.

I take the end of the rope and tie it securely to my oven door, then weave it through the apartment towards the balcony, leaving me about twenty feet to play with. I wrap about four feet or thereabouts around my neck, so that it fits tight as a Christmas turtleneck. I grab the bottle of Jack. I swig and swear, and then getting a good start from behind the couch I bolt the distance to the balcony and hurdle the railing in one surprisingly graceful move, sending myself off into what should be a four storey fall. Suddenly the rope pulls taught, and snaps my body like my cousin pulling the Thanksgiving wishbone to victory and I wonder whatever happened to the fat kid from *The Cosby Show*. But, instead of a quick painless end, I'm thrust violently back towards the building, over my downstairs neighbour Mr. Thomas' railing, and through his plate glass balcony door. The blue rope still leads back up to my apartment. I wait for a minute, expecting the oven door to plunge past the window and take me with it, but nothing happens. I realise that I'm standing, somehow landed the manoeuvre, and I'm still holding the whiskey and I'm still not wearing pants and the kid's name was Peter and there's very little blood or bleeding, all things considered. I swig and swear, then sit down on the couch. I'm assuming no one's home, given the racket I've made. Thomas has a nicer place than mine. Looks like a two bedroom. Freshly painted. I wonder if I should leave a note, like when you back into a parked

car. I untie the rope, and throw it out the empty window, grab all the ice trays and frozen corn from the freezer, and let myself out. I don't leave a note.

JACK

VIII.

A few days later I feel badly for ditching Hunter, but he won't answer my calls. I head over to his place, half-afraid of what I might find. I let myself into his apartment with the key he once gave me so that I could "find the body." The boy has always been a drama whore. His friendship, at times, has been like being close with an ex-girlfriend. Except I can't exploit unrequited love for sex. The place is wrecked. Absolutely wrecked. Keith Moon this kid's an eccentric decorator. I normally wouldn't be found dead in this place, this early, on a Tuesday. But Riley called. She was worried about him. And since we're apparently his only two, well, his only two anything left, I drew the short stick. So here I am sorting through his filth, just hoping he's not dead. Or half-dead. Half-dead is messy, and I have a lunch meeting I'd rather not miss.

There's some rock film blaring from on TV. The oven door is missing. There's blue rope everywhere, strung around the place like Christmas lighting. The fridge is open, and it immediately strikes me as odd how immaculate and organized it is. The walls, however, are barren, except for what is gravy or blood or both smeared across one length of the room. The patio door is wide open, letting in a cold that serves to heighten the peculiar smell—one that can best be described as every cold cut ever being left to rot in the sun before being pissed on by John Daly. Or maybe just John Daly.

Hunter, my dear friend, is passed out on his couch wearing nothing but Ray-Bans, a t-shirt, and socks. His hand is covered--and I mean covered--in gravy, as if he tried to cast it in a brown wax. On the coffee table, which in this case is the bedroom door on two milk crates, is an unopened bottle of rye whose radius is littered in cans of Labatt 50 squished in completion, and open bottles of every over-the-counter painkiller imaginable. Aspirin, Tylenol, Advil Cold and

Flu, Robaxacet. There's probably some ginseng in there as well. I imagine he had a fierce night of broken fevers and menstrual cramping, and tried to self-medicate it away.

What's odd, or at least odd to me, is that at one time this was a very nice apartment. My wife Karen and I even lived in the building briefly before I started to make some money. It's mid-60's era, all nice large rooms, tall ceilings, grand and explicit detailing in the wood work. Kind of place you're not ashamed to rent, because it's respectable, accomplished. Adult. How Whisky Charlie here was ever able to fuck his way into tenancy is beyond me. I'm assuming the landlord hasn't been in the apartment in years, or he'd shit blood. In fact, it's a really nice building. I think I'll call that landlord. May be a neat little investment property. I could evict the Poutine Baron here, and use his apartment to entertain. It is much closer to downtown. This day might not be a total loss after all.

I decide to wait a bit and see if he wakes up. I turn off the TV, hoping the change will frighten him awake. I put down the two grande Pike Places I've brought for us, and clear myself a spot on what was probably once a chair. I sit in silence hoping the coldness of the chair is due to the open door and not some discarded poutine soaking through my jacket, and observe my sleeping friend, or what is left of him.

He's a frustrating sort. What I'm looking at now could easily be a facsimile of ten years ago. He hasn't changed—not even aesthetically. He has given up, and I'm forced to watch. Sad. He's one of those guys who are their own worst enemies. Too smart for his own good, but all too aware of it. So many moments of greatness, but way more of failure and self-destruction.

Like in university. It's near the end of first year. Somehow Hunter had already secured a reputation as a pain-in-the-ass student. He's arguing with everybody about everything, anything, as I guess we were supposed to do as kids trying to grow and better ourselves. He's fearless,

confident. Composed. We're in this Intro to Math class I had to take, and which Hunt took for fun and companionship. The class started at 6pm, and Hunt and I would meet at the campus pub for afternoon pints and do our homework before getting to class half-cut. Or in Hunt's case, full-cut. We had successfully gotten through the year hiding in the back of the class anonymously. Then, with like, two classes left, Sideshow Sally decides he needs to make a scene. Someone's talking about some formula that no one cares about and the prof said something, and some student said something else, and the prof said: "Simple as one plus one is two."

"THREE!" belts out Hunter at the top of his lungs. It echoed around the room, startling everyone. I tried to find an escape route, but Hunt preferred the aisle seat.

"Pardon?" asked the equally startled prof, a sober man who had dedicated his life to mathematics, who had uttered a seemingly innocuous phrase and yet unknowingly had awakened a drunken beast.

"H-RE-EE." Hunter repeated the number as he stood up, straightened himself, and gave me a quick "watch this shit" smile out of the corner of his mouth.

"Young man, sit down. We have no time for this."

"One plus one is three. I know it. My buddy here knows it. The jerk-off TA knows it. The hot girl in the second row in the Nirvana t-shirt knows it. How can you not know it?"

"Are you drunk young man? Are you drunk in my class?"

"I'm always drunk in your class, sir. It's fucking math." By now his attentions are split somewhat between the prof and Nirvana-girl, who was becoming more and more enamoured by him with each passing moment.

"I'll ask you to leave class at once, or I'll send for campus security." The prof was red and his anger was building exponentially, but Hunt remained calm and cocksure.

“I’ll prove it.” He marches down the aisle, and by now has the full attentions of the room. He passes by the prof, paying him little mind, and cleans himself a space on the white board at the front of the room. He turns to the class.

“Ok, who here has seen *Roadside Prophets*?”

A scattering of hands go up.

“Who here has read *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*?”

More hands, more excitement.

“Who here loves *From the Muddy Banks of the Wishkah*?”

Nirvana-girl blushes.

“Ok, well, all of those things are awesome. And so is this.”

He proceeds into a fifteen minute production of scribbles and formulas, references to successors and predecessors and Edward Tufte and mathematic fallacy and binary and by the end we’re all lost but enthralled and had he been trying to prove that the earth was flat we would have walked of its edge with him.

The class erupted into applause. Later, Nirvana-girl fucked him. Hell, I would have fucked him. It was ridiculous. And this is a guy who today couldn’t make change for a ten if he was holding two fives and a calculator.

But those moments are now few and far between. I mean, this guy fell out of the limo at my wedding. Often calls my wife Steve instead of Karen, which is either meant to be funny, or he’s covering for forgetting her name. He’ll call anyone, at any hour. And if you’re stupid enough to answer he’ll talk endlessly about faith, and forgiveness, and righteousness. And he longs. Boy does this kid long. Longs for something that likely never existed.

I briefly consider allowing him to continue his sleep, let him be peaceful as he has so little of that. I weigh my options, and instead open the bottle of rye, top up my coffee, and pour the rest on his head.

HUNTER

IX.

I awake to what stings and tastes like whiskey being poured on my face. I'm back on the couch, and Jack is standing above me emptying the end of the bottle on me.

–Fucker, what the fuck?”

–Long night?” he asks, setting down the whiskey and handing me a large coffee.

–Ya, I uh, got this trawler magazine...”

Jack takes a sip of his coffee, and takes a long hard consideration of the apartment. The rope, the whiskey, the oven door, the furniture in disarray, the stains upon stains, the lack of cat and lover, The Band.

–Jesus, what did you do?”

–Well, I was at work late, and I saw Ry-”

–So you got drunk.” Jack knows me well. Maybe better than anyone. When I see Riley, I need to drink. When I think of Riley, I need to drink. When I hear a word that rhymes with Riley, I need to drink. And when I need to drink, I drink because I'm a problem solver. The rise to fame of Miley Cyrus has been very hard on my liver. Also, I once punched a Guy Smiley doll at The Bay, but whatever, The Bay sucks.

–So I got drunk, and then-”

–You came home and you were sad and drank more, and then you ran out of whatever discounted poison you were working on and you went and bought whiskey and then everything turns angry and black. Ya, Hunt, that far I can manage. But the rope, and the, well, let's start with the rope.”

–I don't have any exposed beams.”

He looks at me, disappointed, and then laughs.

–And I bet you don't even know how to tie a fucking noose.”

–No. Do you?”

–No, but the internet has those answers.”

–Ya, I looked. It's still fucking hard. Like double windsor hard.”

–You know, kid, there's wonderful irony in the fact you keep trying to kill yourself, and yet you seem to have a kind of immortality thing going. You're like a depressed Clark Kent without a job or a razor. Or pants.”

–You have no idea.”

–No, no I don't. C'mon, I'll buy you breakfast. Put on some pants though. Seriously, I don't want a repeat of Christmas.”

–That's what Jesus said.”

–Easter?”

–Whatever.”

–PANTS!”

I find my pants, which interestingly are in the oven that now has no door which kind of provides me and Sylvia Plath plans for the evening. I'm a little nervous leaving my building, in case I run into a neighbour but we make it out to Jack's black Saab without incident. The light is hard on my eyes. The time of year finds it lying low, skimming the pavement, and piercing the space between my aviators and my cheeks. I realize, here, that it must be really early. The Saab's clock reads 7:42.

We don't speak much on the ride. I plant my head against the window, allowing the speeding images to refract off the glass creating an intoxicating and calming flow of barrelling urbania. I love Jack, in a way that makes me hate him a bit. Jack is attractive, and vain.

Confident, and conceited. Righteous, and right. Married, but not committed. He's good to me. And I keep his secrets. It's a mutually parasitic dependency that we've both enjoyed since we were twelve.

At the diner, Jack orders the Hungry Man special, and a large orange juice with more coffee. I don't really feel like eating, as my throat feels like it's been raped by a gang of lonely inmates with flails for cocks, but Jack's paying and who am I to pass up free even if I'm going to vomit it up in the parking lot afterwards. So I order the Hangover Special which is fittingly two eggs any style with poutine, more coffee and as much ice water as the diner will provide. The gravy acts as a lozenge, and before long I don't feel mouth raped at all, which is a wonderful way to start any day.

–What about a gun?” Jack asks thoughtfully through his eggs and home fries.

–Seriously? With your mouthful? What are you, four? Good thing you wear a condom and pull-out. Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. God forbid you procreate. Bunch of little rude kids in suits slobbering food all over the fucking place.” He promptly pushes my coffee, spilling it all over my lap. I barely move.

–Could my retarded special Olympian here get more coffee please,” he asks of no one in particular. –No, but isn't it hard to fuck up with a gun?”

–Ask my cousin Marv that question.”

–You don't have a cousin Marv.”

–Exactly.”

–That doesn't make any sense.”

–No it doesn't. Ever tried to buy a gun? How does that even happen? We don't live in Detroit.”

–Rock City,” we say in unison.

–Riley has a gun,” he offers.

This isn't helpful information. –No she doesn't.”

–Fuck she does. Her stepdad gave her one. She's white trash, man. Through and through.”

–Doesn't matter. She wouldn't lend it to me. And besides, she won't tell me where she lives.”

–Because you get stalky?”

–Yeah; I get stalky.”

There's a brief pause as we consider this, finish our eggs, long at the waitress, scan the headlines, wonder what song is playing, stare at the bald woman in the booth beside us, wait for more coffee, sop up stains, ask ourselves when winter will arrive, feel the discouraging pangs of yolk and gravy, check the time, plan our days, and dismiss tomorrow. Jack pays the bill, and tips handsomely. I nod some measure of appreciation.

–You need a ride to work?” he asks.

–I've got the day off.”

–Nice. You want me to hit you with my car?”

–Naw, man. I'm good. Thanks, though.”

I puke up my eggs next to a Dodge Caravan, and then head home.

X.

Problem with sober moments with Jack is that I am prone to bouts of nostalgia. The whole way home I can't stop thinking about better days, about youth and promise, which naturally leads to thoughts of adulthood and failure. I stop in a few places that are serving early, to drown a few and kill my thought process. But it doesn't work. It rarely does.

When we were in university, I dated a girl that I probably thought I loved. She was beautiful, exciting, strange in a way that arouses, and yet disguises. She read Proust and Graham Greene, and would walk around saying things like: "In human relationships, kindness and lies are worth a thousand truths," and "Morality comes with the sad wisdom of age, when the sense of curiosity has withered." She wore Nirvana t-shirts and listened to The Smiths. I was also unfortunately really into the Dave Matthews Band, which seems less distressing now.

The thing about this girl is that she had Klüver-Bucy syndrome. For those not dreaming of writing episodes of *House* one day, Klüver-Bucy syndrome is a very rare infliction that occasionally appears in, among others, those with serious cases of herpes. The list of symptoms differs somewhat by source and rumour. Generally, though, the included are the following:

Docility. Characterized by exhibiting diminished fear responses or reacting with unusually low aggression. This has also been termed "placidity" or "tameness." She liked doing weird and scary shit. When you're nineteen that's exciting. And that's a generally fearless age anyway, so this didn't present itself as a telltale sign. Also, she didn't move much during vaginal intercourse, but that could have just been my own afflictions. Also, I'm not a diagnostician. Also, I fucking hate The Smiths.

Dietary changes. Characterized by eating inappropriate objects and/or overeating (e.g. bulimia). Right, what undergrad doesn't have some sort of an eating disorder? Sure, she ate a toy fire engine, but we had been huffing gas and doing shrooms, so who's to know?

Hyperorality, or an oral tendency, or compulsion to examine objects by mouth. She loved giving head and I wasn't about to put an end to that.

Altered sexuality. Characterized by a heightened sex drive or a tendency to seek sexual stimulation from unusual or inappropriate objects. This is where the relationship took a bad turn. At first she just liked having weird shit put inside her during sex. Cucumbers, stuffed animals, my Victorian lit paper, Dave Matthews CDs. But then the list went on to include my roommate, his girlfriend, the guy across the hall with bad acne who collected plastic horses, plastic horses, my Victorian lit prof, and apparently, once, Pat Mastroianni. This was just about enough for me to break up with her, but, you know, she loved giving head.

Visual agnosia. Characterized by an inability to recognize familiar objects or people. This was the kicker. I would go to meet up with her at parties, and she would claim to not know who I was. Which I thought was total drunken bullshit. But then she had problems remembering who most people were. One night she examined a door as if it was the embodiment of wonder itself. We broke up, because I thought she was batshit crazy, and I had started listening to Uncle Tupelo.

Klüver-Bucy could have gone undiagnosed given the vast psychopathic abnormalities of undergraduate life. Then, one night towards the end of first year there was a roof top party. I wasn't there and neither was Pat Mastroianni, but apparently while blowing some poor kid this girl freaked and bit down on him. She didn't bite it right off, but he freaked and shoved her and she went ass-over-tea-kettle off the roof. She only fell two storeys, but broke her right leg and

fractured her clavicle. In the ensuing investigation, her symptoms came to light and she was properly diagnosed. Not sure what happened to her. She's not on Facebook.

I make note of this as I recently got my hands on some Tegretol which coincidentally is the trade name for Carbamazepine which very quick innerweb research explained is the one prescribed treatment that can manage Klüver-Bucy. Mixed with whiskey it brings all sounds down an octave or two and makes me kind of itchy. It also greatly reduces alcohol tolerance, which quite frankly I believe to be financially responsible, and helpful as I'm running low on whisky and cash and it's not quite next Thursday. Controls my shakes. too. Sometimes I shake.

I make note of it because it all may be bullshit. Maybe she didn't have Klüver-Bucy. Maybe I left her, because I was drunk enough then. Maybe I left her under the false notion that Riley loved me. Maybe 11:30am whiskey lies to me, confuses me, tells me what I want to hear, tells me what I want to think.

Of course, this could just be the Tegretol talking.

After the pills and whisky take over, I go home. I turn on the oven full bore. I'm alone. Ted Hughes wasn't coming over, I was hiding from Thomas, and Dr. Corder had not been notified by any means. I sit on the couch, and await some kind end.

I wake up a few hours later. I guess I had passed out, because when I went to check the oven there was no gas. Thing about gas is, you have to pay the bill in order to receive it.

RILEY

XI.

The body lying next to me came as a surprise. Mark is away until late tonight, so it was not my ever-loving boyfriend. I try to find last night in my head, but it's not there. Shit. Another day starts in error.

Whatever it is, it's naked, and hiding its face beneath all of my pillows, snoring the sounds of thunder eating teeth. I look around my room. It's a mess. There's nothing left on the walls, except my meagre attempt at painting a Matisse hanging above the headboard. The two bedside tables were covered with half finished drinks and cigarettes. Clothes and possessions thrown to every corner. Whatever happened, it was drunk and nasty. I hope I enjoyed it.

I see over the body that the clock radio reads nine thirty, so I decide to get up and get out. I figure I'll go out for a few hours, and when I come back the mystery guest will be gone. I dress quickly and quietly so as to not wake the mistake, and sneak out of the bedroom. I find the bathroom to be in similar disarray. A bottle of Ghemme floats sadly in the toilet bowl. On one side of the sink and part of the mirror was what could only be dried semen, on the other Joanna Newsom's *Ys* smeared in trails of something illicit and powdered. Oh, God. I wash my face and put on a toque, sunglasses, and a hoodie. The world could not see me today.

It's a typically overcast day for the time of year, the wind gusting out of the North, blowing me down to an adjacent neighbourhood. I stop in at the last of the independent coffee shops to get caffeine. The question of the day on their gleeful bulletin board read: *Who wrote the Diviners?* The day was looking up.

—Margaret Laurence,” I offer the young dropout behind the counter.

—Whu? Oh, ya good for you. Free medium coffee. That's a dollar seventy five right into your pocket.”

–Just a green tea please.” As I wait for junior to figure out tea, I look at an ever present –Karma Cup” on the counter. These bitches. I've been coming here for years, when it was *grabba java* then *cuppa joe* then *latteas* or something, and they've always had this –Karma Cup”. First of all you don't deserve gratuity, you're not servers. You pour coffee and walk three feet with it. Sometimes you have to steam milk. On a really challenging afternoon you might have to figure out that soy milk and whole milk are two separate entities. Fuck you. I walk sixteen kilometres a day for my tips while fat middle aged men proposition me. –You did just tip me 18%, but I don't think that means I should come blow you in the back of your Dodge Caravan.” And karma has nothing to do with money, so that makes me angry on a whole other level. But today I'm not fighting the stupid. Today my karma's screwed: a kitty in a kennel.

I find myself a spot on the empty patio. I am happier here, where I can just watch. The wind is cool, but the tea warms me up. I think of *The Diviners*. I must have read it three times since being forced to read it in grade eleven. At every stage in my life I've found it. I've dreamt of being Morag: of being free to loving who I wanted, and when, of a small place to call my own at the edge of some lake, of a quiet group of kind friends to last with, of a vocation that provides if not great reward, at least artistic expression, of a route to discovery. In grade eleven, it was Jules I wanted, to take a wild noble savage, a troubled handsome boy to my warmth. Years later, in first year Can Lit, it was Morag's first husband I loved, and then hated. At first it seemed he was the perfect man. Smarter and more mature than the spoiled WASP boys that surrounded me. But by the end of first semester, I realised they were the same animal. I wanted to hurt him the way Morag did, for suffocating her will. Instead I slept with the prof. I read it again this summer. Mark would tease me about reading the same book again, and for reading at all. By the end of this read I hated all men, save for Christie. He served a purpose and he was

non-threatening. He was simply Morag's friend. Where were these people in my life? Where were the diviners?

Yuppies flow from their overpriced Victorians to the downtown core to pay for it all. High schoolers funnel up the street and drift down to the Collegiate. University students pour in and out of coffee shops, looking for any fuel to power their day. Young nannies and au pairs crawl out from the weight of their captors and meet each other in caffeine coves to trade secrets. Tinted windowed Hondas fighting bass bounce past, bus upon bus followed, leading unhappy people to unhappy places.

Time begins to ease to a manageable pace, like it's telling me something, like it wants some consideration. The day slowly rolls by as I await an appropriate hour to return to my room. Ugh. What a mess. A complete stranger. It could have killed me for all I know. I feel the guilt creeping around my body, and I try to suppress it with tea and seventeen cigarettes. I could have AIDS, or Hep C or B or whatever the one is that Pam Anderson gives fading rock stars. I don't remember seeing any empty condom packages, or filled condoms. I hope to find condom evidence. That's not like me. I don't want to die for that sin.

I try to think of the good times, happiness, Hunter, anything to keep the weakness from flowing. But it's fall, a time of change, of reflection, of death and rebirth, of hope and pending darkness. The weight of all of this finds me, and for the first time in a long time I cry. I close my eyes. I taste salt and frailty. In the wet shadows I pray to an absent God for forgiveness. But the sun does not come, and the clouds remain shut. My tea and time emptying, I decide to make my way back home, to clean up my fuck up. The wind is still unrelenting. I have never known a longer, colder walk home.

I pass by legions of young couples, skipping school no doubt to go fuck on their parent's beds. I hate them. Their hope, their buoyant glow. Holding hands, necking at bus stops, embossed in a Hallmark lacquer. I stop at a payphone and call home. There's no answer. Not quite sure who I was expecting. I pass by a man in his fifties. Our eyes note some familiarity in their brief moment together. Where? Maybe he dated my mum.

HUNTER

XII.

The day started as any other. I got up, fell over my oven door, turned off *The Last Waltz*, got in the shower, vomited bile, had some Tums, and left for work. I walked the same route, bought smokes at the same gas station, strolled past the same silly servants, caught the same lights at the same time. Two and a half cigarette walk.

But today was a little different. Instead of nodding hello to Bryce, who was in for Day, I told him to fuck off and come out of the closet already. Instead of signing in on the computer, I took a black sharpie and crossed my name and phone number off the staff list. Instead of fixing myself a cup of coffee, I grabbed a case of 50 from the walk-in. Instead of putting on my kitchen shoes, I covered them in Sambuca and lit them on fire in the prep sink. Instead of changing into my whites I charged out the front door and headed back home. Three cigarettes with the extra weight. I throw most of the 50 in the fridge, take one for breakfast and some pills that suggest sleep, and get back into the couch for the rest of the day with hopeful plans to end all days later. When I come to I decide to go meet the Manitoba Man Whore for a drink at McCabe's, justify my decision and celebrate my independence. His nickname has negative connotation, but it's meant to be affectionate. I admire him, in a way. He takes loneliness as a chore, as an occupation. He collects women like hockey cards, a natural progression from adolescence.

I arrive and he's already pickled to normalcy, sitting at the bar ogling some poor waitress nearly ten years his junior. He turns to me and seems genuinely surprised by my presence, though we had spoken only a few minutes earlier. I had smoked a joint on my way down, hoping I could somehow catch up to his anticipated state of heavy inebriation, and to counter an afternoon of 50, whiskey, and Tegretol. But what made me light and free on my walk makes me weak and insulated in this room. The Whore's eyes are already stained red with drink. His faux

military cap resting in a crooked fashion on his nearly shaved head, in direct contrast to his twice broken nose. It made him look dated, dangerous, predatory.

–Sit down bitch, have a drink.”

–Strongbow,” I urge of the waitress, who by her cold reception tells me that the Manitoba had been here for some time, making lewd suggestions about their immediate future. The bathroom, the backroom, under the bar. Poor girl, just trying to save tuition, and some fuck like the Whore is going to keep her here forever. Slopping drinks, selling answers to heathens. Legalised taxation of sin. Minimum wage and a short skirt. The dream killer. Upon receiving my cider I lean over and offer her some help.

–Get out while you still can. It's not worth it. I've seen it happen, to better women in lesser bars.”

–Fuck you, Hunter.”

–This life is lies. LIES! Go west child, like Horatio Alger, across the plains, over the mountains and to the Ocean on the left. Gratuity is a lower sin. Judgment early from lesser gods.”

–What are you talking about Hunter?”

–The skirt is a leash, the apron a collar. Don't waste a life on this.” I motion to an ever-dying room, my hands spread out, palms to the heavens, foot to the floor. I guess I was more fucked than I thought. What was that I ate earlier? Was there poutine today? I take a few Tums and Tegretol from my pocket and throw them down with half the cider, and continue. ~~It~~ gets worse. The guys hitting on you get fatter and cheaper, pretty soon the only smells you know are expired deep fryer oil and vomit. Too many Jager bombs one night at the staff party and some

guy like this..." I motion to Manitoba. He takes this as a compliment. Maybe it is. "...is the father of your children. Pretty soon you live in the suburbs, in Burnaby, in Etobicoke..."

"Scarborough," corrects a parishioner.

"Laval," adds another. I laugh and continue.

"...with his parents and his eighteen year old brother. Who you end up fucking in the bathroom one Thanksgiving and bear him twins." I drop dramatically to my knees, the Whore now in hysterics. He's such an appreciative audience; maybe that's the connection. I should have gone into the theatre. I missed my calling. I tell myself lies. There is little talent, there is but substance. Substances, rather. "Please, for me, a dying man's last wish, get out while you're beautiful and light and untouched by men such as us. These are but the humble suggestions of a mirror to the future."

She suggests we move to a table, saving ourselves an unnecessary incident." I thought that was an incident. I must not have gone far enough, a poor performance in the twilight of a less than brilliant run. We slide across the room, through the sea of drunk, to a table in the back where we go and tell each other lies.

"Quite the little show there Sea Hunt."

"Just something special for the kids." I didn't mind the attention, even if it was from drunks and miscreants and Manitoba.

"You got her good, you're so fucking cruel."

"How'd she know my name? I don't recognize her."

"You took her home the other night, douche."

"Oh, shit."

I survey the room. A beast of a woman sat two tables over, staring at us with cougar's chardonnay-laced smile. Her eyes beg for sodomy, her crooked and calloused lips promised sloppy, lazy, sorry head and inside I cry and scream so loudly I think she hears because she promptly douses me in what was left in her drink and flees the room.

A vagrant I recognize from late night stumbles home unassumingly from empty table to empty table filling his pint glass with the dregs of discarded evenings. Under his right arm is a colostomy bag slowly being filled through the tube that leads frighteningly into his open zipper. He dances the room, filling and filling, and no one notices. No one cares. Perhaps pity keeps us all quiet. There but for the grace of God. No scream, no matter how audible, could scare this man away. Another cider, or three.

The waitress looks our way and no doubt detailing to the very large bartender the rude and suspect way Manitoba and I have been treating her. How my dick is small. How my bed smells like goat semen and whiskey. How I called her by another name. How I cried like a little girl after I came. How she ran away as soon as I passed out. In my mind I absolve no blame. I hate being here, for leaving behind the friends of the past, for this annotated life

Where did everybody go? Slowly, one by one, they disappear with *the sad wisdom of age, when the sense of curiosity has withered*. Flickering lights on the far side of October's lake, higher education and concentrated lives. Women rich in shoes flock to each, like predatory birds. They land in the cafes, shops, parks and the bars in search of prey. Coffee and beer spill everywhere, mix on the floor with blood and come. Friends are consumed. Off to the suburbs where they're told to cut out starch, and cut their hair and stop hanging around with me. They're busy with mortgages and barbecues and family vacations. They masturbate shamefully late at night to high speed internet porn featuring Asian teens and girls that look like people they loved

in high school. They golf every spare minute of every day. They are tied to the same bed forever with cell phones and bleeding ulcers. The holidays double in responsibility. Where once the bars were full of known faces, they are now full of fiends. Fat women with disappearing figures and cellulite tattoos rely on call display and withholding sex to rid their partners of an unnecessary past. Where once we travelled in vast and diverse groups fuelled by passion and promise, we've separated into couples drained by responsibility and duty and loss.

I didn't divide properly. I am a shabbily dressed fraction. I held onto what I thought we all would, and I came up empty. I came here. To sit in stupor with the Man Whore and watch helplessly as life passes by in minivans. Text message this motherfucker: 2morow feels so fucking far away 2day I drink.

We've sat here for nearly two hours without really having a conversation. The room shifts ever so slightly from side to side. The Whore's ever reddening eyes are beginning to shut on each occasion of his head bobbing from side to side, he is finding the water a little rougher than I. I'm nearly caught up to him, and my stomach is pained with cider. I pop a few Tums, and another pill found in my pocket.

-So why'd you quit?" he asks, like we've just sat down.

-Fucking sick of it. Plus the suicide is beginning to take up more of my time."

-But I thought you were immortality, kinda."

-Soon enough, it'll work out."

-Better nowt go home then," he slurs.

-Gotta go sometime."

-How?"

–How what?”

–How you gonna kill yourself next?”

–If I can find a gun, I'm gonna blow my head off.”

–With *what?* You don't have a gun.” This was true, a minor technicality.

–With a fucking tuba.”

–I don't get it. I need a drink. That's so fucking lame, man. You gotta go out rock star styling. OD on something, or, or choke to death on your own vomit. Or, no, wait-” and he pauses as if he has some great solution on the tip of his yellowed tongue, or he has to puke a little. The conversation has somehow managed to wake him up, like my grief was speed and now he's interested in our evening. –Hang yourself, no I mean, like the way the INXS guy did it. I know a chick who's totally into that shit, she'll help you out.”

–Into what shit? Assisted suicide? Asphyxiation? That's a fucked up girl.”

–Ya.” He smiles like a child who's just peed in the pool. He rests for a moment in the warmth before swimming away.

–I think I've got it sorted thanks.”

–Alright, just trying to help. Let's fuck off.”

The Whore suggests we head to an afterhours a friend of his runs in a house around the corner. I have nothing better to do other than die or sign up for Employment Insurance, and both can wait until I'm out of cash, so I agree. We leave to a slew of obscenities from the waitress. Another reminder that it's better to leave in style.

–How did she know my name again?” I ask the Whore when we make it outside and our laughter has subsided.

It turns out to be more of a house party with cover than an afterhours, because when we get inside there's no bar. Manitoba puts something in my palm and I swallow it. I find a beer somewhere and set off from the Whore to find a seat. The wind of the night, the storm in my head, pick up; the sea churning violently. Coast guard? Finally a life preserver, an armchair floating in the distance. I make it through the swarms and crawl out of the water into the safety of the buoyant chair. I can hardly move. Tegretol? Really? It's hard to tell because of the drink, and I've been pretty fucked up for about a week. The world around me has slowed to a jazz-like pace. My head swings to a distant beat.

The Whore has disappeared, likely with some young thing who's not afraid of syphilis. What do you fear most? asks the sea. Of me, of me. Is there nothing that makes you afraid? I'm not afraid. I'm afraid. Angry whispers from the shore, the storm continues. Heavier, heavier. Here I go, here we go. I feel the bass heavy in my head, faceless creatures surround me. The ceiling opens up to a nightless sky. Clouds lit by half-moonlight burst with warm rain. I'm alone on the water, on the sea; *O God, thy sea is so great, and my boat is so small*. I can taste the salt as I caress a school of fish with an extra arm. My inflatable throne sinks, leaking air like song, to the sandy bottom and I'm thrown into the murk. High above the surface beckons, a malleable window of light and promise. Something holds me back, holds me down. The colourful fish and sea creatures have tied me with plants to the wreck of some ship. A ship I know, from where? From there? From there.

The fish grow larger and larger, the surface further and further away. I want to panic, but a weight on my chest keeps me from screaming. I taste sea salt and tangerine and my mouth opens for more, only to be filled with water. I expect to drown and a calm fills me, like being cast in wax. My reins break free and I slowly start to float towards the surface. Bass, bass, bass.

Thundering rhythms stunt my rise, pillows of other seas beckon, the surface looks hopeful, the surface, the surface. Again the salt and tangerine, again the armchair. I am above water, I am dry. The fish still in my mouth. I cannot see, I can only feel. Bass, bass, bass. The fish drops a pebble into my throat. I fear I will choke, but the fish strokes my neck with its fins and the pebble drops to the pit of my stomach with a resounding thud. It echoes longingly across the calm. I feel its quiet explosion, and I am surrounded by white light. I can feel many fish now, all of them nibbling at my shrinking skin. I feel light and restless. Bass, bass, bass. The touch of the fish has become soothing, and they lift me high up into the white light. I reach for them, but I can't find their touch, I can only feel. I go to speak, but I have no voice. The light is bright and hot and for a moment I think that I'll meet God, but instead the light blissfully explodes, and the rain falls, and the fish swim off, and I fall to the bottom, and everything is dark, and everything is night.

XIII.

I awake. I am not in my bed. I am naked. I am sweating like the guilty. The toxins want out. I open my eyes to a stranger's room. The futon is familiar, but the surroundings are not. I have my back to the other half of the bed, fearful of what may be there. Man, woman, child. The bedside table is covered in ash and ashtray, glasses of brown liquid full of cigarette buoys, and a sticky clock radio that tells me it's one-thirty. The day's anyone's guess. The room stinks of smoke, and whisky, and stale sex. A small window in the corner begs to be opened further. I slowly roll over and am relieved to find the rest of the bed empty. I sit up and survey my surroundings. There are two chests of drawers at either end of the room. The walls are scantily decorated, adorned only in a small sketch of what appears to be a naked blue woman hanging unframed above the bed, and a mirror over one of the chest of drawers. The bedding is neutral, absent of gender. My head is heavy, and sitting up has made me a tad nauseous. I can hear the tattered screeching of construction outside, and my nausea worsens. I puke into a wastepaper basket, strategically placed next to the bed. Feeling much better, I light what may or may not be a joint from one of the ashtrays. It's a joint, and a rush of calm flows through my beaten body. I get up and go to one of the chests of drawers, opening the top drawer finding men's boxers and socks hastily stuffed into unorganized piles. I try to listen through the door for any sounds of life, a shower running, coffee percolating, daytime television. But there is nothing but silence.

I open the closet, again a mix of familiar scents. I poke around on the top shelf, pulling randomly at discarded papers, shoeboxes of receipts, outdated wardrobes being kept prisoner in case someday the fashion cycle would bring them back. My clumsy curiosity stirs the closets contents, and underneath what could best be described as a muumuu the pattern of my grandmother's couch, is a small revolver. God is playful on this day. I put it in my pocket.

Moving around has awoken the substances, and I feel lighter, dizzy almost. I dress slowly and leave the room cautiously. Opening the door I still find no evidence of company, no signs of life or fright. I find a door out and make my exit.

RILEY

XIV.

One of the many men who served time as my ~~father~~,” Jim, gave me a gun on the occasion of my thirteenth birthday. What strange boat he was. My mother in her ever semi-inebriated state met Jim on a singles’ cruise in the Caribbean. Jim and she were married on some island where stupidity and Las Vegas had bastard child. The news was an unwelcome shock to an otherwise normalizing life we had carved out for ourselves in the five years since my father had taken off across the country with my brother Tim and promised to call as soon as he got there. I like to joke that I’m still waiting. Jim looked as if on the brink of vagrancy, but loved my mother the way the two of them loved gin and ire: unapologetically and with a fierce dependence. They would drink and fight and fuck all day and all night. My mother was on some kind of undiscussed disability. They made quite the pair. For the six years that Jim was around the house, I seldom was.

The gun. Yes, the gun. A night to remember, that was. I was waiting for the two merry marriages to pass out so that I could sneak out with Jill Edwards to make out with Paul Barker, or Miller or something. Some guy the high school population decided was cool who had his dad’s Buick for a few hours. Just before eleven I thought it was safe to make a dash for it. The volume of cursives and Tom Jones and sex had been quelled for a reasonable distance. But as I got to the back door in the kitchen Barney was waiting for me. He seemed lecherous; not seductive but threatening. He reeked of Tanqueray and Rothman’s. And Mum.

—Where you goin’ Riley Jane?” Jane was not my middle name; I think that it just made the inbred freak feel more at home if his new kin had coupled names.

—Just out with Jill,” I was encapsulated in fear, a feeling I hadn’t known much of but understood thoroughly. I added quickly: —She’s got a present for me.”

–She ain't the only one with a present for you.” Fuck I thought to myself, the nightmare is going to come true. Some of my mum's boyfriends had leered, some touched a little, but nothing I couldn't run away from. But here, frozen by an unknown emotion in my kitchen, I thought he was going to...I don't know. Something bad. Instead he handed me a small gun. There's a third year Psych paper for you.

–Boys are evil fucks,” he began to explain, in a calming tone that he had never used with me. –Your're thirteen now, an' they're gonna wanna fuck.” He looked. A little too long. –Don't you ever hesitate to use this, it'll save your life one day. No court'll convict a cute little thing like you if you cry rape. _Member; use it on enone who puts you in a place you can't get out of.”

–I will, Jim. Thanks.” I went to walk past him. He grabbed me by the arm and threw me against the door, the gun wedged between us. I was petrified, his eyes locked with mine.

–Anyone.” He stared at me for what seemed like forever. Even to this day, I have nightmares that end in that stare. –Anyone.”

I considered shooting. But somewhere, in the dark hollows of those eyes was a twinkle of goodness. There was caring, however twisted and beaten. I knew from that point on Jim was, if not on my side, then at least not against me. It is this twinkle I look for in Mark the nights he doesn't remember. I have yet to find it again in any man, any man I could let myself care about. Some nights, when I'm alone, when Mark's passed out, when my cell rings incessantly with Hunter's tales of stupidity, when Jack's gone, I dream about it.

I mention this because when I return home to clean the apartment before Mark gets home, I can't find the gun.

GEORGE

XV.

It was all so very strange. It was just a day. Breakfast: coffee, with toast and marmalade. There must be marmalade here somewhere, I kept saying to myself. Ah, yes, here it is, I said to myself. You had put it down on the second shelf with the mustards, I don't know how many times I can tell you that a refrigerator has a place for everything, and everything has its place. Can't start the day without marmalade. Rose's Seville Orange marmalade and a rich Kenyan blend that your brother brought us back last winter.

We were all ready for that conference out east, the meeting of Assistants to the Administrative Directors from around the country. Promised to be so very interesting. So very, very interesting.

Yes, I'm getting to that, but a story is not all climax, dear. It's about exposition, narrative arc and such things. Oh sure dear, I could just blurt out the ending to you, but what fun would that be for either of us? My God, do you know nothing about a good anecdote? This is a marvellous and horrible day I've had and you just want me to get to the finish line without running the darned race, or telling you about the course as it were. Can I continue? Thank you.

I had my breakfast, well you were there you know that, so I had my breakfast and off to the office. A beautiful day for the season. It looked for a minute once I got there that the whole trip may be cancelled, which would have been such a shame because I had just bought that brand new carry-all and had yet to have an opportunity to use it. We really should travel more, dear. Anyway, it looked as if the trip might not go on which would have meant the day had never happened and I would never have seen it and wouldn't be telling you. Isn't that strange? Do you find that strange, dear? I certainly do. But the trip was on so I had Barbara order a car for me

for just after noon. Oh, the way things work. If I had ordered the car for two like you suggested I would never have seen it. It was all so very strange.

RILEY

XVI.

The phones rang all night. Messages from Hunter going on about the restaurant with some story about quitting and flaming shoes. I get out of bed, reluctantly, worrying about the gun, and the mistake, and Mark, and Jack. It's too early for the world, definitely too early for Hunter. I'm too groggy to absorb the information, promise myself I'll call him later. Mark is passed out next to me, still fully dressed, though his pants are halfway off. The alarm clock on his side table is covered in what was likely urine. He stinks of cigarettes, scotch, and busgirls. He won't be conscious for hours, and I decide to take advantage of the alone time.

I make myself a cup of tea, and curl up on the couch. I flip through channels, teasing myself with flirting images of newborns, travel destinations, beautiful people with beautiful lives. I like to humble myself in the morning, so that when I finally do greet the world I'm less likely to despise it. This is not always a flawless plan. Sometimes the beautiful people bring me to tears. Only here though, only on my own. I wouldn't cry in front of anyone, not even Mark.

There is only about four minutes of hot water that spits in competing directions, and I have to finish my shower in the cold. I blame Mark for this. I like a focused hate, it's a timesaver. I've left for work long before Mark will rise. At first I attempted a loud morning in hopes of waking him up and having a good argument before work. I banged pots, played The Replacements' *Let it be* really loudly, and even screamed my love for other men's genitals into his ear, but to no avail. He was passed right out, as usual. This was our quality time. His memory of the previous night will be non-existent. He will wake around four thirty, jerk off, go for breakfast and slowly make his way to work for seven. Nowhere in this day will he find the time for guilt. His life is lived in a comfortable oblivion, where guilt, compassion, and morality are as invisible as I am. I will get back at him in my own way. A week of silence, an

unexplained night out, a lazy blow job. Before I leave I hide his keys in a pint of Häagen-Dazs and pour some apple juice into his Adidas.

I try not to let the morning get to me. The walk is peaceful. Today it's my time alone, my time to think, to be myself. I don't often work the day shifts, and I enjoy the opportunity to see the earliness of the world. I choose to avoid the main streets having left enough time so that I can make a long, lazy walk out of what is usually a hasty and quickened late afternoon stroll. The fall leaves are fading into the season dotting the late autumn with the promise of winter. I wish I had been an artist. I envision myself making beautiful recreations of this morning, to hang on every wall I'll ever know. I could have been an artist, I used to paint. No one ever cared. Why is it every girl I've ever known used to be an artist. Show me a fifteen-year-old girl's bedroom and I'll find you a sketchbook, a canvas, a charcoal set, choose your poison. Five years later show me the same girls room and I'll find you a jar of change, six condoms and a pack of cigarettes, choose your poison.

Not all girls mind you. The women have moved on. They've married or found a calling, a career. Had children with bald men named Stan with large stomachs and larger chequebooks. Join book clubs, watch *Oprah*, join Oprah's book club. Had affairs with bald men named Tom with smaller stomachs and bigger chequebooks. Yes, the women are long gone, surfing the malls with two and a half kids and a Dodge Caravan. Reminding the world at every opportunity that "homemaker" is a career too. It's just us girls left. Grrrls. But where did they all go? The ones. The group you hung out with only four or five years ago like they were oxygen. The girls you shoplifted lip balm from Zellers with. The girls you compared nipples with. (Oh my god they look like little pigs.) The girls you traded everything with. (Isn't that my top?) The girls you watched *Dawson's Creek* with over the phone (Carrie knows a girl who went to school with

Josh Jackson). The girls whose house you told your parents were sleeping over at when you were really giving Paul Markham a hand job behind Shauna Stevens' garage. (Tell me when). The girls whose boyfriends you gave head to when they weren't looking. (You cunt). The girls who stopped calling. (Omigod, I've been so busy). The girls you ditched to go to Lollapalooza with some guy you just met. Twice. And forever. The humility of answering one's own questions.

I'm working a double shift today. The dirty double. Eleven till eleven with an hour off from four to five to have half an eight-dollar salad, six cigarettes, and a quick cry and a line in the staff washroom. I shouldn't complain really, it really is a nice enough place. Better than most. Bryce, the Head Chef lets me in the back door. Bryce is six foot four, two twenty. A large man even among large men. I like him. Not that way, but genuinely. He doesn't ever hit on me, or make me feel like I owe him something for a stray salad slid my way. At first I thought he was gay, but Hunter swears that he's straight, just weird. Still, I wonder.

~~–Morning bitch.~~” I mean c'mon. That's a gay man's greeting if ever there was one.

~~–Morning cooker.~~”

~~–Give us a kiss,~~” he demands as he flashes his large jowl at my smiling face. I give him a small peck and he flushes red. Adorable. ~~–What're you doing here during the day?~~”

~~–I'm doing a double for Brie. Why are you here during the day?~~”

~~–Your boyfriend set his shoes on fire and quit on me.~~”

~~–Oh, God. Can we not talk about Hunter and his shoes. I've had enough of that boy for one week.~~”

–The two of you should just get married and solve each other’s problems. Or at least start sleeping together. You could fix that boy.”

–I don’t want to fix him.”

–Because then he’d be perfect for you?”

–I said I didn’t want to talk about Hunter. Change of subject please.”

–Okay. I *love* your hair. You told me you wanted layers, but it’s way more fabulous than I expected.”

–Thanks.” Gay, gay, gay.

–You go to the little place up by Morello’s?”

–Ya. Stephen. Such a sweetheart.”

–Sweetheart? He’s a genius. He does a friend of mine.”

I bet.

–Come join us for a tea and a smoke.” Tea? Gay.

To my surprise no one else is at the restaurant yet and I note by the kitchen clock that it's only quarter to ten. I wonder how I got here so early. And then I remember home. Bryce leads the way through the kitchen to the front of the house. He sits himself at the bar with the newspaper as I make us the tea.

–How are we today?” he asks.

–Fine,” but my eyes look away, and my voice can barely afford the syllable.

–Oh dear, tell us what's wrong.” He sets the paper aside.

–I’ve been sleeping with Jack.”

–Jack Jack? Like Hunter’s best friend Jack? Oh, sweetie. Why don’t you just go back into the kitchen and stab the boy with a boning knife?”

–Shit, is he here?” For a brief moment I feel like what I’ve done is wrong. Like I’ve done something unforgiveable. Like I’ve actually stabbed Hunter with the boning knife. He wouldn’t deserve that.

–No, Ry. Flaming Sambuca? Shoes? Hello?”

–Right,” I breathe huge sigh of relief. I don’t owe Hunter, but I don’t want to hurt him either. –Well, Jack isn’t the worst thing I’ve done this week.”

I go into way too much detail about the days before. I share with him like one of these girls I miss. He is my best girlfriend, which is wonderful and sad at the same time. He hangs on my every word, and his jaw drops in disbelief at all the right spots. He only interrupts occasionally with an animated –Oh. My. God,” prompting him to light us each another smoke.

–How've you been?” I ask feeling guilty for monopolising the pity.

–Well last night...” and he goes on about the dinner rush the night before, and the blind date he went on, and who fucked who over the weekend.

–Well, I blacked out the other night, and when I woke up there was someone in my bed who was not Mark.”

–Where’s Mark?”

–He’s back now.”

–Who was it?”

–I don’t know, I got up and left and when I got back they were gone.”

–You left some stranger in your house? The house you share with your boyfriend?”

–It sounds bad the way you say it.”

–Is there a way it can sound good?”

–I suppose not.” Although I am telling him horrible tales of my silly little life, I’m not sad telling them to him. Maybe because he listens. Maybe because when I say them aloud, I realise how trivial I am. Maybe because he doesn’t want head when I stop talking.

–They’re all assholes. Dump the whole lot of them. You should take some classes this year.” He’s my mother, my girlfriend, my shrink. Gay.

On the Beach comes on, and we both get lost in Neil. Bryce returns to the paper, occasionally reading sections aloud as they amuse him. I go about my brief managerial duties, and Bryce continues to read. I laugh at all the right places even though I’m ignoring him.

More staff start to drift in. That new cook whose name I can never remember. Scott, Pete, Vladimir, whatever. The faces change so frequently it’s silly to try and match them all with names. The Filipino Mormon dishwasher who I watch mop the floor with a guilty satisfaction. Poor man has eight kids, a wife who’d make Satan blush and he makes a fraction of what I do, and they make him clean the floors that I will make a mess of in less than an hour. Every restaurant has a guy like this. You feel sorry for him, but not enough to do anything about it. –Fight your own battles,” my mother used to tell me. –The world’s not going to do you any favours, so don’t do it any.” Not quite as practical as –Close your eyes and think of the Queen,” but, hey, I was eight and she was on whatever preceded Prozac.

Sara, today’s other waitress, comes flying through the door with a smile that says she’s way too happy, as per usual.

–Morning Ry,” she chirps and hugs me like I care. Happy as God now, but will be crying like a four-year-old girl without a pony by noon. What can make someone that happy all the time? I’ve seen her boyfriend, he’s not hot or wealthy or cool. And she’s a little, no, no, a fair lot on the hefty side. I heard that some prep cook, Jimmy, once screwed her in the walk in during a

raucous Friday night. Slow Jimmy they used to call him. Anyway, Slow Jimmy takes her in the fridge this Friday night after countless rounds of Jagermeister. Afterwards, Bryce finds him sitting outside the walk-in slowly devouring a smoke and laughing himself stupid. He tells Bryce that she kept the same smile the whole time he was doing her. Even when she went down on him.

–She's gobblin' my knob and smilin' away,” he tells him, –I nearly lost my wood. I turned her around but it didn't help. I could see the damn thing's smiling reflection in the damn sweet peppers.”

Al, the quasi-owner comes in. I like Al. He doesn't leer so much as to make my days awkward. His wife, the true owner and a horror of a woman—now that bitch makes my days awkward. Working for men in a restaurant can difficult at the best of times. When I was nineteen I worked at an Italian bistro. My boss was a beastly horror of a little man named Paulo. One afternoon he asked me to change a light bulb at the back of the dining room. Because of his hernia, he explained, he couldn't climb the foot ladder. The uniform was a relatively short skirt that made me a fair amount of tips. Now, I'm not one for underwear, but it was a small ladder so naïve as I was I obliged. Two steps up and he shoves his gross fat fucking finger where it shouldn't be. I don't know if he was off on his aim, or just an exceptionally lewd man, but I fell out of fright and he fired me on the spot. Al doesn't do that, or at least hasn't yet.

Bryce senses the abundance of oestrogen and the hours turning and heads back into the kitchen before someone questions his work ethic or sexuality. I unlock the front door and wait for the dreaded public to come in and make me their bitch.

XVII.

Lunch was a fucking nightmare. The customers were all assholes instead of just the standard eighty percent. Tips were well below fifteen percent. The kitchen was slow, turns out the cook whose name I couldn't remember, who came in to replace Hunter, was actually new and his resume was full of lies. He won't be back tomorrow. Sara was in tears by eleven forty three, something about a lost order of grilled prawns and Haitian orphans. The convection oven and the line fridge stopped working at the same time, making hot things cold and cold things hot. I told a customer we were out of the New Zealand Wairu River Sauvignon Blanc, and then served two bottles to the table right next to him, prompting an outrage that I would find embarrassing to describe. One of our regulars, Stan (your fat wife's sleeping with Tom), offered me two thousand dollars to leave my boyfriend, leading me to resolve to talk less about myself with strangers. I should probably resolve to do less blow, but why wear a cast when you can suffer with a Band-Aid, right?

Bryce lost his temper half way through a roasted pumpkin seed curry dish and threw a pan across the kitchen that nearly hit the Filipino Mormon dishwasher in the head. Panic and chaos ensued and Bryce and Al spent the better part of the afternoon trying to convince to poor man that it was an accident and pleading with him not to quit. Of course no one would offer him an increase in his minimum wage. Another day in paradise.

The night shift begins with the five o'clock changing of the guard, so to speak. Sara and Bryce are done for the day. Bryce saddles up to the bar to drown his stresses, which I find horribly annoying because I have at least six more hours of this before I can get drunk. Visibly drunk anyway. Must be nice for him to be on salary. I'll never know. I might do all the books and cash drops, the scheduling and manage this zoo all goddamn night six times a week, but I'll

be measured hourly, quantified in sixty-minute tests the rest of my life. The moments before the second part of a twelve-hour day can be humbly reflective.

The night shift brings out the nocturnal beasts of the service industry. Tired waitresses. Ten years after their looks have gone. They only come out at night. So as to hide from the bags under their eyes. The bruises under their aprons. And their greying hair styled five years ago in the comfortable darkness of the dinner rush, weighed down in coffee heavily laden with Bailey's. Beware the server with a coffee mug, the transparent glass reveals too many secrets. Here comes Cheryl now. Even her name is dated. Slipping out from the horrible fluorescent spotlight of the kitchen into the cold comfort of the dining room, she nods hello to Bryce, and then flashes me a toothy grin that looks more like a snarl, and perhaps is meant as one.

The bartender is certainly the most tried and true character of restaurant life. Beast and burden all at once. Lives on cocaine and vodka, feeds on the souls of young women who fall to quickly for his transparent personality and free drinks. He holds all the power, for he manages the booze. He is the wake that separates the drowning and the life line. He tells tired stories about other bars, in other places, where people just like you were more interesting. He comes cloaked in lycra-tight black dress-shirts stained ever so lightly in a white dust complexion of baby powder, to avoid chafing. I can feel his presence even before he feels me. The Manitoba Man Whore has arrived.

“Hey there sweetness,” the tone of his voice suggests that he might actually be reptilian, and I cringe at his touch.

“Hi,” and I flash him a fuck-me smile, knowing that my drinks will come up quickly all night.

–“Watchya doing after work?” he asks. He's been here for a minute and a half and he's already sexually harassed me. This is life in service of service. I lean into him, and I can smell an afternoon of drink on his breath.

–“Why, you, I imagine.” He smiles at this of course, and whistles his way through setting up the bar. The dude literally whistles.

The sight of the day shift getting drunk and the Manitoba Man Whore getting turned on scare me into the kitchen where the night crew is heads down hard at work. Day is covering for all the post-Hunter shift switching. Day's a hardened veteran cooker. Tattooed. Big. Muscled. Sweet in his own guarded way. He's got, like, four hundred kids. He's chopping something with vigour and passion as Metallica blares through the kitchen stereo. He looks up and nods a hello. Straight, yes, but oddly not interested in me at all. Maybe because he knows I'm out of his league, maybe because he's loyal to Hunter.

Amy, the evening's second line cook, ignores my presence. She's an anomaly of cookers. Female, straight, attractive. I tried to get her into bed with Mark and I one night when he was hell bent on a threesome. She laughed me off like I was retarded. Amy doesn't like me much, probably because I'm floor and she's kitchen, maybe because I get the attention she craves.

–“Hey, Ame,” I offer, but she just grunts something about being busy and walks off. Even some new eighteen-year-old dishwasher (Tim? Raoul? Sharon?) is busily ignoring my presence. Screw all of them; I go out back for a smoke.

The evening goes as most of them do. Bryce was loaded by eight and left soon thereafter. It was slow so I cut Cheryl early, much to her dismay, leaving just me on the floor but there were enough tables to stay happily busy. Manitoba and I kept energy up with vodka and Jäger and a few trips to the staff washroom to powder our stamina. A couple of underage girls came and sat

at the bar, keeping Manitoba's attention for the better part of the evening. The tips were decent, as they should be since I'm wearing a tight pair of black pants and no underwear, and an equally tight top cut off just above my belly button. Around eleven we begin to shut it down, and I'm thankful the young girls are still here, saving me from Manitoba for this night. Maybe I can actually make it home before one o'clock.

XVIII.

I was polishing cutlery in the kitchen and chatting with Amy when the Man Whore interrupted an otherwise tolerable evening.

–Your boyfriend's here.” Manitoba warns with a smirk. Fucking Mark. After the shit he put me through last night he has the balls to come to see me at work. He never comes in here, he must need money. Or a free drink. My eyes begin to well up with emotion and bite down hard on my tongue to keep a tear from scarring my face. Amy notices this and smiles as she turns from my sight. Bitch. She used to have a huge crush on Mark when they both worked at a club few years back. He probably fucked her.

–Tell him I'm just doing my cash and I'll be right out.”

I hurry through my close out procedures and run downstairs to change clothes. I wish I hadn't dressed down so much today. I want Mark to see me at my best when he should feel at his worst. I want him to want to fuck me while I flirt with Manitoba and get stupid drunk. I'll giggle and snarl and bite and hiss and be a burden. I will shame him into staying sober. I will use a week's worth of blow by myself and I'll be so vile and helpless at the end of the night he'll have to carry me home, and put me to bed. He'll have to care for me, tend to me, maybe hold my head above the toilet. Fuck him. Fuck him. Fuck him for forcing me to behave in this way. I dive into the staff washroom for a quick check in the mirror and a very small line. No more than an aspirin really. Looking good, feeling good, running on salad.

It's not Mark. For all that bullshit. A waste of fear, waste of hope, a waste of energy. It's not Mark.

Hunter is sitting at the end of the bar doing his best not to look drunk. The effect however is the opposite, and he is the embarrassment that I wanted to be to Mark. Irony. Go

figure. The Man Whore is boring him with stories of sexual conquest and in the moments he isn't trying to look sober, Hunter's trying to look interested. I consider running out the back door. But my conscience won't let me. I may have loved him once, in some way I guess, so don't I owe that memory some degree of debt? Friendship is where we've settled, for better or worse, richer or poorer, till death do us part. Hunter loves me desperately, and hides it poorly. Maybe I still love him too, too much to let him know, too much to hurt him. He is a creature of hurt, of habit. He holds it as a barometer against the rest of his days.

–Hey babe,” I greet him with a peck on the cheek. He turns and at first glance looks at me like a stranger. Perhaps he's forgotten why he came in here. Maybe he's forgotten me. But more likely than not he can't see very well. His eyes are glazed thick like algae on a pond. His eyes, they once made me laugh and cry with subtle dispositions. Now, they remind me of the past, of innocence, of hurt. I look deep into him for some sign of what I once knew. As always, and without fail I find him. His sad, hopeful eyes. He notices this and smiles thoughtfully.

–Ry,” he slurs through one syllable, throwing his head back as if his eyes lack the ability of motion. He's fucked right up. Probably been drinking whiskey, popping pills and Tums, and smoking stale pot all day. I fish my purse for my coke. I covertly portion a gram or so into a small flap and stuff it into his hand.

–You look like shit and you're fucking embarrassing me,” I sternly whisper into his ear, making sure that no matter what state he's in, he'll understand that I'm not kidding around, –take this and go to the fucking bathroom and fix yourself up. If you can't get your shit together leave through the kitchen, and go right the fuck home.”

He looks at me with a nearly paralyzing indifference, and falls right off his barstool. Luckily it's only me, the sluts, Hunter and the Man Whore left in the restaurant. He pops right

back up on to his feet and staggers off to the washroom like nothing's happened. The whore and the sluts are laughing nearly uncontrollably, so much so it looks fake, and I cast them an angry glance to cut it out. They couldn't care a less. I see Hunter fall through the washroom door. The women's.

–“Could I get a gin and tonic, please.”

Twenty minutes later he returns, and the coke-levelled transformation is apparent. He has his strut back, a falsely confident gait once described aptly as jaunty. His eyes are like saucers but, at least they're open. As regains the barstool I notice a small nugget of coke nestled in the perpetual five day growth on his top lip. Without thinking I lean over and give him a soft kiss to conceal the evidence. Obviously startled, but remaining composed, Hunter contains his confusion. I move back quickly to avoid incident or misunderstanding.

–“What the fuck was that?” he offers, with a bit of a smile that suggests he's the Hunter of old.

–“You had coke in your beard, loser, buy me a drink.” Nothing like the truth.

–“You could have just told me instead of raping me with your tongue. God it was awful.”

–“Shut up,” he's got me giggling now, and I'm reminded of that Hunter of another time, of another place.

–“Hey Hunt, you've got blow in yer stache eh?” Now he mocks me. –“Just let me git it fer ya with my big nasty tongue. Fack, who knows where that whore mouth of your has been today. Oh, God, do I smell semen? I smell semen.”

–“Shut up loser.” He buys us each a White Russian, and we head out back for a smoke. It occurs to me that I haven't seen him since he quit. He tells me he's been binging pretty hard

since his theatrical retirement, which explains his condition somewhat. I can feel a confessional coming on, he's got that need emitting from his every pore. I don't share the pain like Hunter does. Don't feel the need to burden others with facts. Who would I tell? Who would care? Take care of yourself. Take care. Take.

HUNTER

XIX.

Somehow I'm behind the restaurant, and I have no idea how I got there. But Riley's there. I'm saying something to her, but she doesn't seem to care. She might be yelling. I throw back the White Russian that is somehow in my hand, and light a smoke. We stand in silence her eyes never leaving mine. Finally she speaks, not that it had been her obligation.

–Fuck you.”

What? Wait, what did I say?

–Fuck you you selfish prick. You come here, and lay this shit on me. I have my own fucking problems. You miserable fuck. I can't believe you. You don't lay this shit on people. You horrible fucking dickless fucking fuck.”

She throws the remnants of her White Russian at me, covering me in a milky paste. She's standing up now and screaming so that only the dogs can hear. She tosses a coffee tin ashtray at me, which reacts at my expense with the White Russian. I'm covered in her anger and she won't stop.

–We all have bad days. We all have bad days. We all have bad days.” I don't know what I have said. She just kept repeating it louder and louder and hitting me with her purse and her fists and lighters and chairs. The Manitoba Man Whore must have heard the commotion, because he comes charging out the back door, figures that I've done something bad to Riley, and just starts laying me a beating. It's all happened so fast, and the coke has lost its power in the drama, and out of the corner of what's left of my vision I can see Riley sitting on the concrete, her eyes never leaving mine. Why don't you stop him? Why don't you stop him Ry? I don't even think I tried to defend myself, like it was the second most important detail of the moment. Ry, tell him it's a misunderstanding. And then it stopped. I looked up at the Man Whore, and he

was looking at her. My head rolls awkwardly to its right and I see Riley, still her eyes never leaving mine, as long as I came back. Tell him now Riley. But she doesn't. She doesn't cry. She doesn't scream. She just stares. Why?

And then she gets up and leaves. And then there's darkness.

When I wake up I'm in my bed, and there's dried blood everywhere. I stumble off the bed and to the bathroom. I try to find myself in the mirror. I'm not there. I'm just not fucking there. Instead there is an unshaven vagrant who's been beaten stupid for stealing a bottle of rice wine. I step into the shower, as hot as I can manage. I am dizzy and nauseous and I puke bile into the already formidable sea of blood, gravel and hair spinning down the drain. I try to jerk off, to remind my body of life, to feel something other than this, but I am flaccid and weak. I stand there, for an hour, until I am sure that there is no trace of red in the water.

Back in the mirror, I don't look too bad. Black eye and a small laceration that could use stitches. I decide to spend the day at home, make polite conversation with the gun, maybe watch a movie. Hoping that Riley might have called to explain, or just for a coffee, but the magic message light blinks not for thee. I take three pills of something from a dish on the kitchen table, and chase them down with a fresh bottle of Jack. I have not had poutine in three days. I indulge in four Tums and six cups of Irish coffee. And a little nap. And a Tegretol. And why didn't she tell him to stop.

RILEY

XX.

The lights are impossibly bright here. I've chosen a pharmacy as far away from home as possible. Don't need to run into anyone today. Not that I'm ever that excited to run into an acquaintance here, in this horrible city. I grab a blue plastic shopping basket to fill with shit I don't need. A loofa, some Aveda Control Paste, Aveeno firming moisturizer, a Caramilk, a can opener. I stop at the condom aisle. The selection is laughable. When did such a variety of condoms hit the market? And moreover, when did they become so readily available at the local pharmacy? I remember buying my first pack of condoms, full of misplaced shame when I should have felt pride. Some little pharmacy, the bitch at the counter judging me, patronizing me, hating me. She should have praised my maturity, my sense of safety and responsibility. I wonder where that went. Shouldn't that grow as you age? I bought a twelve pack; I thought I was in love. Geoff Markham. Wonder what ever happened to him. I let him fuck me at a party at my mum's place. Mum and Jim were in Tweed, looking for Elvis. It was my second time. Three hours later I found him using condom number two in my laundry room with Nikki Patterson. I used three through twelve on as many of his friends as I could find in the next few weeks. I came out looking like the whore. This is what I learnt in high school, not trig or Canadian History, or religion. No, I learnt about the double standard, the ease of infidelity, the non-existence of love, the power of sex, and vengeance.

The condoms here seem to promise more joy than I tend to associate with them. Ribbed, flavoured, glow in the dark (who the fuck would be in there to see it glow, except perhaps, oh never mind), vibrating, lubricated (okay, those are familiar), scented (why?), endurance promoting (shouldn't they all be?) and magnums. So many condoms and yet here I am, moving slowly, gracefully, yet full of disgrace, to the pregnancy test kit aisle. I take considerably less

time here, just grab the most effective, the most commercially known, First Response. Not a time to go for generic savings. At the cash, the cashier looks at the box then to my naked ring finger and then gives me that same bitch fuelled look of shame I seem to deserve during all of my pharmacy trips this seems anachronistic. I bought a loofa too, you want to give me shit for exfoliating?

Back at home, I lock myself in the bathroom. There is still a small semen marking on the mirror, which I find somewhat amusing, despite my situation. I open the First Response box. The instructions are frighteningly simple, not that I haven't done this fourteen thousand three hundred and sixteen times before. But same as when I make Kraft dinner, I always double check just in case something has changed. Nothing ever changes. You just pee on the little stick. Almost every girl I knew from sixteen to twenty-two had an abortion. I've always tried to be as safe, responsible and careful as possible, but some nights, well. Sometimes it's five thirty and you're fucked on E in the bathroom of an afterhours and, well, shit happens. My fear here is not so much the being pregnant, though that would certainly be a slight problem for me, as who the father is. Jack, thank his God, always wears a condom. He is paranoid about the spreading of his seed. He speaks about heirs and illegitimate will claims. Mark, interestingly, is sterile. This is probably best for eighteen year old busgirls the world over. I have no idea how he knows he's sterile, and frankly I don't want to. It was how he picked me up actually. We were at some bar around Christmas one year and he bought me a shot of Jäger. I introduced myself and he told me he was sterile. Three weeks later he moved in. We've been together (if you can use that term with the loosest possible parameters) ever since. It's enough to bring me to tears.

But I'm saving my tears for the result of my little test here. If it's two lines, I'm screwed. That would mean daddy is mystery man from the other night. Then what? Off to the clinic like

the other girls? I have no right to be a mother, but the company would be nice. The absolute and required love and affection. It would be a career killer, if you can call what I do a career. Nobody tips the preggio. I'd assume anyway, I'd be fired as soon as I started showing. My body is my vocation, I know that. Oh hell, what kind of a selfish bitch am I? To force my life on an innocent child. Maybe Hunter would help. Marry me and take me away from all of this. Disappear to some tropical paradise. I'm sure he jerks off to that exact fantasy. Poor soul. I shouldn't have allowed Manitoba to beat him like that, but self-pity is so unattractive. I wonder how much he has left. It could never happen; then I'd be raising two kids.

The result is how I expected. How else would this go? Oh Mum, this is the dream.

HUNTER

XXI.

I was trying to figure out where my ephemeral artery was when the doorbell rang. I nearly sliced off my thumb, again, as the sound shook the apartment. I didn't know what Riley was doing there, I just knew I was happy to have her there. I didn't even realise she knew where I lived.

–Hey.”

–Hi. You know there's a very nasty note about poutine on your door, eh?” says Riley.

–Ya, I've got delivery debts. Come in.”

She comes in, and I cleared off a respectable spot for her on the couch, and I sit in the chair across from her. We remain there, quietly inspecting each other.

–Nasty cut. Sorry.”

–Don't apologize. It's all good.”

–I'm pregnant.”

Not sure how you're supposed to react to that, or how adults with some level of maturity react to that, but I grab whatever bottle I can get my hands on and swig as best I can. For some reason I have a lot of red wine around. Who is selling me liquor that I can't even remember buying?

–Do you know who the father is?”

–I just know it's not Mark.”

–Because he's sterile.”

–Because he's sterile.”

–It's so weird you found that attractive.”

–It's so weird you know.”

–What are you going to do?”

–I don't know. This is as far as I got.”

–Really? My place? That's not a good sign.”

–Fuck you,” and she hits me, playfully.

After a long pause, she finally offers a thought. –If I just had, like, a bit of cash, like twenty grand, you know? I dunno.”

Years of bitching and fucking and bitterness and hate could be swept clean for the price of a four year old Tercel. How hard could that be to find?

–What about sharing thirty?” She laughs at my question. But my eyes stand their ground, desperately trying to emit sincerity. Her laughter wanes and her attention perks. I finish consuming everything I can reach.

–Who'd I have to share it with?”

–Funny.” I have to instill confidence here, I need to sound right. I need a drink. Really, I need more than a drink; a line perhaps, some Tegretol, a strong Makers Mark, a little false courage. But lucky fuckin ye of little hope I find the leftover stash of 50 in the crisper that I took from work. I return to Riley, choosing this time to sit next to her on the couch. She seems conscious of the change, but indifferent. Sometimes indifference is all I get and sometimes it's all I need. I open us each a beer.

–Are you serious?”

–Right, because you're with child.”

–You really are a fucking idiot, eh?”

–You really want to compare this week's fuckups?”

We pause, and she smiles at me. The way only that girl can smile at you.

–I could get us 20K.” I continue, –Maybe thirty.”

–How?”

–Could you cure whatever you've become for fifteen thousand dollars? Because I think I could cure me.”

She looks longingly and thoughtfully, as if she's solving. I sit there in a purgatorial daze sipping lottery beer and churning the only good idea I've ever had into a dangerous butter. Please.

–Cure? I'm not ill.”

–We're all ill.”

–Please. How?”

A deep hopeful breath. –*Agharta* is about to celebrate its 5th anniversary with a weeklong celebration. There are to be bands and booze and cougars and cocksuckers everywhere eating, drinking and pissing all of their money away. In a conservative estimate, based on a normal week at this time of year over the past four years, our sales should be about fifteen thousand dollars a day. With additions for slightly heavier volume and allowances for cash incidentals (i.e. the bands are paid nightly in from the till, theft by staff other than us) the take for the week should be about ninety thousand dollars. Estimate that two thirds of that take is credit cards, debit cards, and promos. That leaves thirty thousand dollars over the week in cash that usually gets deposited nightly by the night manager, who lucky fucking us just happens to be Riley. Instead Riley just brings that deposit home with her and is thirty thousand dollars richer.

Until Monday morning. Monday morning, after being closed on Sundays, the ever trusting Al comes into his restaurant at 10:30 like he always does because he is clockwork, and checks his messages at 10:42 after getting himself a coffee at 10:36, because he is clockwork. Except today turns to total shit because there are seven horrible messages on his voicemail. Each

message proves to be slightly more damaging than its predecessor. The first six are from the good people at his bank. Seem cheques were written, bill withdrawals scheduled and the usual nightly deposits were never made. Al is furious. How could this happen? Riley that drunk slut, he thinks to himself, I'll fucking kill her. And then Al checks his last of seven messages that fateful morning. It's the ugliest of them all. It's a rather cheery and cheekish message from yours truly:

Al, it's Hunter. Don't call the cops. Slow down, have a sip of that coffee in your right hand, light a smoke, take a deep breath and listen to what I have to say. I have the week's deposits. I'm going to keep them. You're a nice enough guy Al, I didn't know you well enough to hate you, but I needed the cash. Could've been anyone pal, don't feel bad. Best to put that coffee down for a sec now, and open your email. I'll give you a minute.

Ah there it is, the message from Aghartamail@gmail.com, with the subject AL IT'S OK. You'll note that there's no text, but there is an interesting attachment.

Here he opens his attachment which turns out to be a thirty second mpeg of Al fucking Riley late Saturday night.

Easy boy. Easy. I know what yer thinking. How? When? Who? These are all incidental details Albert. Never you sweat the lil stuff buddy. You'll lose sleep. It's a simple arrangement. Pretend the money never existed. Pretend we never met, and this never happened. Make the problem go away Al, and your wife never gets an email such as this. Divorce is a lot heftier a fine sir, in a few weeks you'll forget that thirty grand all together. And plus, it's not like you didn't get anything in return. Ye got to tap some fine ass Alimo, when's the last time ye plugged something that tight? Frankly, I think you owe her money. I know I do."

I stop. I chug the remainder of my beer and go grab another. I'm trying to bask in the glory of simplicity, but when I return to the couch Riley seems lost.

–And then?” She asks.

–And then nothing. And then we have thirty thousand dollars. Fifteen each, I mean. You said you...”

–I know what I said asshole. But I don't remember saying that I'd fuck my fat gross boss for fifteen grand. You sick fuck.” She slaps me again, more of a punch actually. My beer spills all over my jeans. I'm tired of wearing my drinks.

–What's your fucking problem?” We're standing now. The energy in the room has drastically changed. It makes me dizzy, panicked. Where did I go wrong here? Too late, the room loses its doors and windows, there is no escape. We are trapped, confined to confront. I feel small, I have erred. What to blame? What to blame? What'd I say?

–What's my fucking problem? What's *my* fucking problem? You want me to be a prostitute, you dumb motherfucker. How do you think that makes me feel? What do you think that makes me feel? What the fuck do you think of me?”

–That's your qualm, that's your moral dilemma? Not the thievery, but the sex? You're a fucking hypocrite. When have you ever turned down a fuck? I offer you fifteen grand to do it and all of a sudden you find a moral. Bullshit, you don't have any right to take offence. You're a fuckin Sunday morning Christian. Which one of us is pregnant right now, raise your hand.” The room spins and crashes with every sentence, our words spitting gasoline on the fire.

–Fucking and getting fucked are two completely different things.”

“I love you.” I still couldn't find the nerve. The statement lacked the confidence, the surety that I'm constantly in search of. Oh for a line, for that energy, for that fearless commitment to words. Shit.

“I can't be part of you anymore. I can't handle it.”

And with that she leaves.

I proceed to get very drunk. By the end of the night I'm chasing prescription pain killers I stole from Manitoba with vanilla extract. I am filthy; my skin feels like a bacterial experiment. I can feel the dried blood clinging to my face, fresh wounds mixing with old wounds. My chest feels like an open sore, my legs weak in drug and drink. My eyes are heavy, my heart has sunk. More. More. I need more.

I fill the bathtub with warm water and undress. I climb in and am slightly surprised to find a chef's knife in my left hand, a bottle of red wine in my right. When did I pick it up, how long have I been carrying it? I get in. I hold the knife to my wrist. I try to talk myself out of it.

Ry. Her face used to save me from these moments, the memory of something better. I thought I could save us both. Dreams of better days. The blade slices, like it's made the decision for me. I expect pain, but I feel nothing. So this is numb. The blood pools like an exploding cloud. The tub is red so quickly. How? I wait. If this is death, it lacks drama. I expected calm, but I feel the same. Maybe I need more holes in me. I try to find the knife, but the tub is a murky sea of polluted blood.

And then the door opens, and she is there, like an angel, as an angel. Am I dead? Is she the light? She closes the door behind her. I feel as if I'm watching it from afar. She grabs a towel from the rack. Am I dead? Am I DEAD? Why hasn't she spoken? Or panicked? I try to

speak, but I've no voice. Did I ever? I must be dead. She steps into the tub, and sits around me, fully dressed. She takes my arm from the darkened water. How'd she know which one I'd cut? She wraps the towel around it, and lifts it high into the air. I think she's too late. I'm already dead. I must be. She is crying, and wet, and slowly being dyed crimson me. I'm cold. I think I must go.

She thinks I should stay.

XXII.

In the morning I decide to leave her there. Why do I leave her there? I decide to leave her there. Peaceful. Content. Left to dreams and not the curse of wake. I feel guilty enough for last night. Her eyes would break me like morning. Words could never embody what her presence does to me. If she is in the room, I am weak. And now I've offered up her body for a chance at peace. I leave her there.

Outside I find a cold day inviting an inevitable winter. It blankets the city in a grey flannel quality, like an old jacket your mum forced you to wear as a kid. I head uptown, desperately in need of caffeine. A bus passes by and stops, charging the air with a symphony of brake noise. As it continues on up the street it scores the morning in a down tempo beat suiting October's mood.

I try to stop at many a coffee shop, but something keeps me out of each one. An old acquaintance I don't want to see; a crowd too large and drowned in drone; the shame of Starbucks. All I want is caffeine. Well, that's not all I want. I can't find it here. I can't find it anywhere.

I'm on a bus, riding the soundtrack away from the downtown core, escaping the mouth of the sleeping beast. A humble Chinatown fills in as background, each intersection outlined in distant hills as they ready to catch the burgeoning sky. I am reminded of when I rode these buses daily, dutifully, to and from high school. How easy the world was then.

The incessant chatter of teenage girls takes the place of lyrics, surrounding me with an unwanted language I don't care to ever understand. So young, untouched, uncorrupted, virginal

in their manner and existence. I consider every aspect of my day with anger and resentment. I envy their insulation.

It occurs to me that I am staring with a pedophile's gaze that comes from excess and lack of coffee. They notice, and I smile whatever I pass off as a smile these long days, defensively and hoping they ignore me and that I can slip back into anonymity. But it's too late and they point and giggle and retreat to whispers and youthful lies. Look at the freak, the creepy old man, the loser. I am all and none of these things. I am nothing. The bus is getting smaller. I must escape. I must always escape.

The bus leaves me safely in the neighbourhood where I grew up. Gone are the landmarks, gone are the staples of my youth. The canvas remains, but the painting has changed. The little pub where we found drunk and lived in it for many years: gone. How can something so important to my youth cease to exist? It serves as a small reminder of my mortality. Mortality. I can't even get that right.

I find a coffee shop, something that barely existed in the urban village of my youth. I pull my hat down as far as it'll go so as to hide from strangers. Hide, hide. The girl wiping down the tables stares hopefully and asks me if I'm so-and-so's brother. I curtly respond no, she scurries away from the open handed slap of my tone. I hadn't even listened. Maybe I am so-and-so's brother. I pull the hat down further, so that I am blind to the room, to the world. Insulation.

The third cup has me awake enough to walk again, but instead of going back downtown I decide to take a stroll through my adolescence. Downtown and its demons can wait the afternoon; a vacation from the noise may do me well. I head down a bike path, past a war memorial, past open doors and welcome mats, past well-manicured dogs on modern leashes, past

early suburbia. I know where I'm going, even though I pretend to surprise myself when I get there. The park. Ghosts of laughter flow from the trees, spilling out memories like the falling leaves, of endless summer nights and immortality. But they are just that: ghosts. Now gone. Gone. The basketball court empty as we left it, beaten by the same ghosts. The twisting greys of the cold sky serve to extenuate the pristine greens of the park. It's like a suburban postcard of extended cities before row housing and homogenized living. Before beauty gave way to simplicity. I feel too young for these thoughts, but too old for the memories.

I find the fieldhouse unlocked, a strange tribute to simpler times. I let myself downstairs, like a visit to a family property long ignored but always cherished. Anxiety starts to peel layers from the moment, a moment of calm I've somehow found again and fear losing. I light a cigarette, as I always seem to when the melancholy starts to give way to the fear. Graffiti adorns the walls and benches, singing childhood songs of new love and hockey dreams. I search for a familiar etching, but they're all familiar. I can still feel the cold winter nights on my cheeks, the lights like unknown gods, skates never tight enough, evenings that I had hoped would last forever, and a childhood that had to. I feel guilty for corrupting the ballads of my youth with brash arrogance and salted mourn of adulthood.

We're going to do this. We're going to leave this all behind. We can fix this.

Back outside I feel like a stranger.

XXIII.

I'm in McCabe's waiting for Jack. This time I need something more tangible, more than cash, or sex, or drink, or job. This time the favour is more illicit, more desperate, every bit me and yet not me at all. The mirror behind the bar, why won't it leave me alone? I'm tired of my reflection, always poking its head out from between the JD and SoCo. Twisted and tired, knowing. The bartender I know, yet can't place a name with the face. He knows me, doesn't seem to want to though. I am all too familiar with this awkward tension. The patron and the proprietor, the weak and the willing.

–Hey Hunt, need another?”

–Ya. Please.”

–How's things?” he doesn't care as he pours out a single rail scotch and tops up my glass of ice water.

–Rather suicidal to tell you the truth. Been walking around with this little revolver I found in some chick's apartment, just haven't found the right place to use it.”

–Well, we're rather slow until four thirty or so, I imagine if you wanted to use the second floor washroom no one would find you till maybe seven...seven fifteen.”

–You really feel like cleaning bits of my brain off your washroom floor later this evening?”

–Oh, I'm off at four. Besides we have a super lil' Malaysian dishwasher who's does the washrooms for us.”

Maybe I'm suicidal still, maybe I'm not. Tell you the truth I can't tell the fucking difference anymore. Perhaps this little scam, this pick pocketing of the haves, maybe it'll keep me going. Riley seems game. She has her own demons, her own need to rid herself of this

place, of all places. One last horrific act of self sacrifice. One last mistake. But this one pays off; this one has an end to the mean. Problem is neither of us has a digital camera. Which brings me to the favour. Which brings me to Jack.

He struts in, with that swagger and confidence that I hate, pity, and desire. A quick joke with the bartender. Jack can see me, but he doesn't acknowledge me. He knows I need something and he's making me wait, stretching it out. Control is his drug of choice. Power. He gives me a hug.

—Hunter is that a gun in your pocket or are you just happy to see me.”

—It's a gun,” says the bartender, —he's suicidal. I offered the upstairs washroom, but he refused.”

—Oh, Hunter, still suicidal? Christ boy do it or get a new pity hobby. Hell at this point I'd do it for you.”

Jack reaches into my pocket and pulls out the revolver.

—E'mon let's find a quiet spot. You better not splatter, this is a new jacket, and as you can see it is marvellous. Quick quick boy, no time like the present. Are we still suicidal or not, let's make some hard and fast decisions here.”

He was right. It was a marvellous jacket.

—I'm good for a while thanks, Angel of Death. Perhaps we could quickly discuss what I mentioned on the phone and kill me later.”

—Well it's up to you Charlie, you're the failure.”

The bartender drops two pints of dark brown sludge in front of us.

—What the fuck are those?” I ask, as there is hardly I drink I don't immediately recognize by sight or smell.

–Dr. Kevorkians, in honour of your death wish, on the house, an early Christmas present, considering you‘ll be missing the yuletide this year and on.”

–And what‘s in a Dr. Kevorkian pray tell?”

–You‘ve heard of a Dr. Pepper I‘d assume?”

–Ya, ya. Shot of amaretto in a three quarter pint.”

–Christ, the useless shit you know Hunt.”

–Thanks Jack. What‘s in the Kevorkian now?”

–Three quarter Guinness with a shot of Jager.” The bar fucker seems too proud of this concoction. One night in *Agharta* a few of us invented the Loose Corn Daiquiri. Now that‘s an original. Bourbon, fresh lemon juice and frozen kernelled corn.

–You‘re thinking about Loose Corn Daiquiris aren‘t you?” asks Jack.

–Yeah; I‘m thinking about Loose Corn Daiquiris, ass.”

–I like being an ass Hunt. The hours are flexible, six weeks a year of vacation, bowling trophy wife, imported car. Now why don‘t you ask me what you need to ask me and let me get back to my day.”

Jack gives me his Kevorkian and gets himself a San Pellegrino. We grab ourselves a table and I get right to the point. I layout the plan for him, in vivid detail. He pauses a long time before breaking out into hysterics. His girlish laugh is at once infuriating and grating, insulting and humbling. But I must contain my anger here. I need him for this. Without him this doesn‘t work, it never happens, and I‘m stuck here with nothing, without Riley, waiting for some poor Southeast-Asian dishwasher to clean me up off a well-tiled bathroom floor.

–Aw shit Hunt, are you serious?”

–Serious as syphilis.”

—You would know. Alright, fine. And Riley is willing in this little plan of yours?”

—Yes.” Shame. My emotion here is filthy unadulterated shame.

—Okay, well, where do I come into your twisted little reindeer games? Besides, of course, witness for the prosecution. And bail. I assume I pay the bail.”

—Well, I need to borrow your digital camera—” I pause and then am overcome with a moment of inspired avarice, —and ten grand.”

Now, all I really need from Jack is his camera. The ten grand just popped into my head. It’ll come in handy down south or wherever the fuck we go, and would serve as a contingency plan should anything go wrong. I’ve never been a greedy man, perhaps it’s why have I have so little. I’m going big _cause I won’t be able to fucking go home.

—The camera is yours, in fact keep the fucking thing, I have several...” he pauses for a minute to let his opulence sink in. —...but why in the same of sweet fucking Christ would I ever give you ten grand.”

—Because if you don’t I’ll show Karen pictures I have of you fucking Riley. Want that Kevorkian or is that Pellegrino gonna do you?”

Complete fucking guess on my part.

JACK

XXIV.

I don't think the little prick even noticed the fact that I didn't give the pistol back. Don't know why I've been carrying it with me everywhere in the days since. Little pity pussy, walking around with a fucking pistol. I should have shot him in the fucking head, become part of the process, put him out of everlasting misery. The balls on this one, asking me for ten large. I'll give him some credit though; at least for once he's taking some initiative. I'd almost pay ten just for that. Maybe eight and half. Jew him down a bit. Hell, if he'd just asked I might have given it to him. The whole spectacle is very intriguing; it's like being in a B movie. His little heist, his little girlfriend, his little porn. It's all very sweet. Fuck it's not going to work, but watching it all unfold will be very amusing. But extorting the ten? That will come back to haunt the motherfucker.

The loft is warm and perfect. I smell tuna casserole from the oven. My mother sent Karen a copy of all her recipes a few years back. I love my mother, always looking out for me. The table is set, the Denby looks brilliant. A bottle of Wolf Blass Shiraz is breathing nicely. Ryan Adams fluttering out of the Boston Acoustics.

–Karen?" Perhaps wifey is waiting in the bedroom. I don't know if I have the stamina though, it has been a long day. She's not in the bedroom.

–Karen?" I wonder if Hunter really knows about Riley and yours truly. He had an odd glint in his fucked up eyes today. That might explain how he'd have pictures of the two of us. But when would, could she have taken them? I'm not that stupid. Could they have set me up? No, they're not that smart, they haven't thought this through.

–Karen, sweetie? You’ve put the knife next to the fork; you know I hate that doll. Is this Shiraz corked? Hon, I think it’s corked. Shit, how many times do I have to show you how to open a bottle of wine? Karen?”

The tuna casserole is browning a little too much, so I turn off the oven. If we don’t eat soon the mayonnaise will turn bitter.

–Karen? KAREN, where are you, it’s 6:30 already. Sweetie?”

I go to the bathroom, where a note is taped to the mirror.

Jack:

I’ve left, I’m not coming back. I don’t want anything from you other than what I deserve for being your bitch for five years.

Make sure the casserole doesn’t brown too much, or the mayonnaise will go bitter.

Karen

PS: Go fuck yourself, or one of your whores. Frankly, I don’t care anymore.

It is here that I realise that I have the pistol in my pocket. I’m light headed. I make a note to check our marriage contract. She can’t leave. She’s not allowed. This doesn’t fit into the plan at all. The pistol feels warm. Shit, I wonder what the alimony is going to cost me. This

is all I need, alimony before forty. I wonder if she's talked to Hunter. The pictures. No, no, he needs them for the ten. This couldn't be all her, could it? It's that goddamn book club I tell you, all of those nagging sad husbandless bitches reading Margaret Atwood, drinking Chardonnay and talking about their feelings. The pistol is oddly comforting. Or maybe it was that real estate agent. They did look a little too fucking close when we took that last walk through. Fucking cocksucker, I'll ruin his little house-selling business by noon, who the fuck does he think he's dealing with? Its grip seems meant for my hand, customized. Or her fucking mother, goddamn Gloria Steinem feminazi cunt. She never liked me. Oh she liked the Benz for Christmas and the promise of beautiful grandkids, that's for goddamn sure.

This was not the plan Karen, that contract is airtight. I'll castrate myself with a butter knife before you get a motherfucking nickel. The gun. It's oddly beautiful, such a simple contraption, ancient mechanics. I cock it. I feel powerful. I should have bought one of these years ago. The barrel fits perfectly in my mouth. The feeling is erotic, exciting. I look at myself in the mirror, next to the note. I look like a fucking pansy. I take the barrel from my mouth and uncock it. I'm just not that guy. I'm more vengeance than pity. All of these fuckers will pay. Not me.

XXV.

From the street beneath his window, I can see Hunter scurrying about his apartment. In my blazer I've got a flask of bourbon wrapped in Karen's note in one pocket, and the pistol in the other. I've got the digital camera too. He'll need that. Hunter. For his project.

It's raining a bit, but I've left my jacket somewhere. I'm not sure what's keeping me from going up. Not sure why I'm delaying. The pleasure he's been taking in his plan. The confidence that has returned. It doesn't suit him. It's not his role. Not his place.

Not sure why my wife left. She had everything she asked for, and more. Clothes, cars, homes. We vacationed on white beaches. We dined in the best restaurants. We kept the best company. We had the best postal code. We drank the best wine. And it wasn't enough for her.

Finally, I make my way to the front door of the building, and I'm met there by a small Middle Eastern man who appears from nowhere.

—You. You know poo-tin man in 12A. You are his friend. You must pay eight-fifty or Tina Fey.” He barks at me, as if these are normal terms. Only in the world of Hunter could this appear as normal. Only in the web of his chaos, could this appear ok.

—Why do you not answer? I have nice blazer. You have volleyballs. Eight-fifty.”

I want to kill this little man. I want to pull the pistol from my pocket and fire a hole through his mangy little immigrant head. I want to douse him with the rest of my bourbon and light him in an expensive fire. I want to piss out the fire and fuck the vacant bullet hole in his worthless little nothing head. And I want to film the whole thing on the digital camera, make it a viral sensation, and profit from it immensely.

Instead I pull out my wallet, which has the double the GDP of this fucker's homeland spilling out of it. His eyes widen with greed and excitement.

–You like that don‘t you Babu?”

–Eight-fifty,” but it has no heart. No commitment behind it. No air of authority. He just stares hopefully at my bills. I pull out about a thousand dollars.

–I tell you what Apu, I‘m going to give you this, and you tell no one what you‘ve seen in this apartment ever. No poutine. No volleyball. No Tina Fey. Nothing.”

–Eight-fifty.” I muddle a few bills into his outstretched palm, and push past him into the building. He yells something after me, which is either –thank you” or –fuck you.”

–Go home Sanjaya. Nothing to see here.”

Up the stairs I trudge, past what used to be the floor Karen and I lived on. Nice little place. Quiet. Cosy. Sunday morning commercial type setting. Coffee and crossword puzzles. We used to call in sick, get stoned and fuck all day. Order pizza when we could barely afford it. Celebrate when we had enough empties for another six-pack, or a cheap bottle of red. Try to grow herbs on the balcony, and laugh as the squirrels delighted their palettes. Bitch. She wanted more. She needed more.

I can hear –The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” playing from the other side of Hunter‘‘s door. That means he‘‘s content. That means his little plan is in action. That means he is succeeding. I knock.

–Hey,” he greets me with what is almost a smile.

–Hey.” I hand over the bag with the camera and the cash. I linger a bit on the pistol before I pull it from my pocket and hand it to him. He doesn‘t seem surprised, or no longer has the ability to be surprised. We embrace, and I give him a kiss on the cheek, hold his head in my hands a little too long before I turn away and head for the stairs. It‘‘s not quite goodbye, not yet.

HUNTER

XXVI.

Tomorrow is Sunday. The Lord's day. First day of Sabbath. The day of rest. But there is no rest here, only the wicked. There is no God here, only heathens and mercenaries, beggars and whores, the meek awaiting their inheritance. I'm getting an advance on mine. I haven't seen Riley, Manitoba or Jack, as I've been steering clear of the restaurant, clear of suspicion. I know I must wear the guilt on my face, like Jack without his suit, without his possessions. I'm a little worried about Jack, because I need the camera, and I need to know that he's not going to fuck with me for shits and giggles. Manitoba I can count on. He's that stupid. Riley. Riley I'm worried about because of what I've asked her to do, because she has to sneak out of her life with Mark, because she's been manning the restaurant all week, trying to look innocent, which is hard for her on the best of days. Riley. Riley I'm worried about.

I've been getting updates on the cash flow by text. We're right about where I predicted, maybe a little short, but we'll make up for that with what Jack's giving us. I hope Jack is giving us. As for drugging Al, well, this could prove slightly problematic. First of all, he's a horrible drunk, a thick Ukrainian fuck whose drink of choice is a large glass of vodka, no ice. Slipping him the roofies will be easy enough, though we're somewhat worried that he may not be able to get it up enough to commit the lurid act of adultery upon the girl of my dreams. Our solution, by way of Manitoba (who is a horrible sick fuck in a completely different manner) is to slip him a Viagra as well. The problem here is that the combination may well give the man a heart attack. Now I may be, as I've mentioned, a suicidal lovelorn sick fuck, but I'm not a murderer. Only Jack has that kind of heart.

My job, besides planning this little heist, and not getting too drunk to participate (which is already causing problems), is going to the restaurant and plying Al with more drink than

perhaps he wants after a busy celebratory week, and getting the camera to Manitoba and making sure Riley goes through with it. Whoever thought that leaving me in charge of so many responsibilities is an idiot. And that idiot is me. I need to calm myself. I have drink. I have another. I smoke incessantly. I have some Tegretol. These tire me out. But I can't nap. Too much to do. I have a vodka and Redbull. That's better. Much better. There's a knock at the door. Jack. Or poutine. Shit, where's that eight-fifty. Plus tip. Better be Jack. Better right well fucking be Jack. It's Jack. He looks like me, on a good day, which is to say he looks like shit. We exchange angry stares. He hands me a bag. Like a loot bag, full of possibility, mystery, hope. It's heavy. I don't know if it's a digital-cam-and-ten-grand heavy, because I have no idea what they'd weigh, but his eyes, always the eyes, his eyes tell me it's there. It's all there. He reaches into his pocket, and pulls out the gun. He fondles it for a bit, with an affection that makes me uncomfortable. I'm the deer and he's the goddamn headlights. He holds it up, puts it in my face. I'm stuck, struck by fear and a sense of relief, which scares me on many levels. Pull it motherfucker, do it, fix us all, fucking do it. I wonder if I've said this out loud. I wonder if he can hear me regardless. I need to break the moment.

–How's Steve?"

–She's great Hunt. Great."

He reaches out and grabs my head, then gently kisses me on the cheek. He puts the gun in my hand and leaves.

XXVII.

Agharta is packed. I don't fit in. Anywhere really, but especially here. Everything is slowed to a dull pace, except for me. My heart races. I try deep breaths. Doesn't work. Manitoba spots me, motions to the bathrooms. The lighting is too low. I worry about making it across the room without incident. I wade through the crowd. They can tell, they know, I can see it in their eyes, don't look in their eyes, their slow scotch burn martini sucking eyes. I can hear them commenting, knowing. Who's the vagrant with the loot bag? I get to the bathrooms. Manitoba says something but all I can hear is bad jazz and bass that's blocking my eardrums. I give him the camera. He looks at me with a malice and conviction that reminds me that we were never friends, never acquaintances, just parasites, living off each other's weakness and insecurities.

I reach for my wallet, and pull out five crisp one hundred dollar bills. He smiles, the way only a Manitoba Man Whore can, takes the cash, says something else I can't hear, points to Al, who's holding court at the bar, large glass of vodka swinging around violently as he entertains the masses around him, who suckle at his every word in hopes of a free drink or a moment of importance, something to hold on to, keep them above the water as this sea takes us all under.

I shake Manitoba's hand and start my way over to Al. He looks at me at first like he has no idea who I am. Then he smiles, and for a moment I filled with guilt. He motions for drinks from Manitoba. We drink. We talk. He tells me stories I've heard so many times they may as well be mine. We drink. The room gets smaller. Somewhere in the room is Riley. Showing off her body, flirting with men double, triple her age, for five more dollars, for three more hours. I haven't seen her but I know she's there. I can feel her in the room. I feel ill. I rush off to the bathroom. A quick line. My heart is ready to break open my chest cavity and escape for a better life. In good time friend, in good time. Al keeps buying us drinks. We drink. The crowd thins,

slowly, as the fiends get down onto their bellies and slither home. I'm having problems seeing, standing, talking, hearing, breathing. Al excuses himself, says he'll be right back, has to go talk to someone more important than me, but he says it with a smile so that I can't take offense. Manitoba's staring at me. I know. I know. I've got to give him the drugs. It's late. At least two. Which gives me little in the way of time. Maybe another quick line, to keep me fresh. I'm off to the bathroom. It's here that I notice I'm still wearing my jacket, which might explain why I'm sweating so profusely. The gun's in my pocket. I take it out. I hold it under my chin. Maybe. Maybe this is best. I look at myself in the mirror. Some desperate fuck looks back. The door opens. It's Al. He waddles his way to the urinal.

—Watcha got there Mr. Hunter?" He asks, as he stumbles his way through opening his fly, which does not bode well for later.

—Just a little handgun Al. You know me, suicidal and whatnot."

—Ya, you've always been your own biggest problem." He finishes up and does not wash his hands. I think about those hands. Those filthy lecherous mitten sausage fingers on Riley. I am not well. I am not well. —If you don't mind doing that somewhere else though, we've already sent the dishwasher home, and fuck if I'm cleaning your brains off the wall tonight. There's a nice little bathroom in the Shawarma place next door. Don't think they'll mind."

And he leaves.

I follow him out to the bar. He returns to the important people. Manitoba's waiting. There's a large drink in his hands. I reach for it.

—Not for you fucknuts. For Al."

Oh, yes, the plan, the purpose, the out, the salvation. I pull the pills out of my pocket, but I've been careless, and now they're all mixed up with a bit of blow, Tums, Tegretol, pocket

lint and spare change. Manitoba is laughing. He hands me a pestle and mortar from behind the bar that he uses to make special cocktails. I throw the mix from my pocket in and crush the shit out of them. Added to the vodka, they make a cloudy mess, and a chalky film rests around the rim. I make my way over to Al, and try to get his attention. He doesn't care to acknowledge me. Someone grabs my waist from behind. It's Riley. I can't speak. She takes the glass of potion from my hand, steps past me, gets Al's attention by gently running her hand down his back which makes me want to fucking scream and cry and kill and I have the ability to do all three but all I can do is stare. She whispers something into his ear. He laughs. She giggles. God she's good. God she's evil. God she's beautiful. God she's going to do something horrible. Al knocks back the drink. The room empties, but I can't leave the spot I'm standing in. I'm frozen. I have no measure of time. I have to leave. My thought? No, Manitoba is telling me to leave, to go to the after party at Bryce's, because I probably need to drink more, rail more, fondle the gun more. He shuffles me out the back, through the kitchen. Al's voice can be heard echoing around the basement where the prep kitchen and the offices are. Riley stands at the top of the stairs. Her eyes. Her eyes.

"I'm sorry." It's all I can offer.

She says nothing, turns and heads down, down, down. I leave.

Back outside I feel like a stranger.

RILEY

XXVIII.

It's the first time I've seen Hunter since he left me alone in his apartment. He's still an idiot. But I suppose he's my idiot now. There he was the other night. Sitting in a bathtub of red wine. A scratch from a dull knife on his wrist. To put faith in him is a risk, but it will get me out. Get us out. And yet here he is, falling around the restaurant, all Hunter and eyes as wide as satellite dishes, trying to get Al's attention. I can do this. We can do this. This is about to happen.

I walk up behind Hunter, put my hand gently on his back. He shivers, slightly, and I think that must be love. I take the drink, the concoction to mend all concoctions, from his hand and transfer it to Al's hand. Hunter slips away, disappears into what's left of the crowd, disappears into what's left of us, of here. Al thanks me, and pulls away as well. Allow the drink time to take effect. I can do this. This is about to happen.

Manitoba is counting out his cash, closing down the night. The way he's looking at me, with devious eyes and a hollowness so pervading, unnerving. I don't want to see that look ever again, from anyone. The crowd continues to thin. Al's wife has left. I saw her take Day's hand and slip away into the night. The crowd continues to thin. Manitoba is fiddling with the camera. I can do this. This is about to happen.

Al is half-slumped into a chair towards the back of the room. All that's left is a few stragglers, and the Filipino. I don't know where Hunter is. I don't want to know. I walk up to Al, the way I've walked up to many men before him. I whisper what it is I whisper. He struggles to his feet and follows me like a child to his doom. We go back through the kitchen where Manitoba is at the back door. He's saying goodbye to someone. It's Hunter. I motion for Al, who is seemingly oblivious to all of this, to head downstairs.

Hunter looks at me.

“I’m sorry,” he says. And I believe him.

I head downstairs to find Al, to find an end. Manitoba skulks behind me. Al is leaning on a prep table. Waiting. Manitoba heads to a spot of darkness by the walk-in. I go up to Al, take the top button of his shirt in between my thumb and index finger. I twist it, like I’ve done a thousand times, to the shirts of dozens of men. Some who cared, many who didn’t. I close my eyes and think of the Queen. This is about to happen.

Suddenly, it all comes rushing back. Rushing over me. Like a nightmare. Like a furious reverie. Hunter, and Jack, and hopeful parks, and long nights, and vicious mistakes, the bellowing cries of lost friends and misplaced years. Somewhere there is a beach. Somewhere a child. Somewhere a love I’m hesitant to know, or need, or understand. And I’m numb. And I recall a shiver. And I shiver. And I feel something, something I’ve never felt. And it feels good, and right. And I don’t know what it is, but I want it. I want it. I want to hold it, and wrap myself in it, and lay with it in the arms of God. I want to shiver.

And all of a sudden I’m crying. I’m crying and I can’t stop. And as if touched by the hand of that same God, Al sobers up. And he’s holding me. And I’m telling him everything. It’s okay, he says, it’s okay.

“I would’ve given you the money, Riley,” he says as I finally pull from his embrace.

“What? Why?”

“Go Riley,” and he pats my stomach, like he knows, like he knew. “Go.”

And so I go to the office, and grab the rest of the cash from the night. On the way out I see Manitoba. And I expect him to laugh, or to mock me, or try to extort the cash from me. Instead he reaches out, and takes my hand.

—Let's got to Bryce's. I won't tell anyone. Let's just go to Bryce's," he says. His humanity scares me and I don't really know if I should trust it, but in this moment I'll take it.

I pull out about a thousand dollars from my stuffed purse, and put in his other hand. Then I grab his face, gently, and find his eyes.

—Not even Hunter," I say until he knows I mean it. He can't ever know. He needs this win.

Oh, Mum. Is this the dream?

HUNTER

XXIX.

Afterparty. Bryce's. Packed with an odd assortment of employees and regulars. I find a chair in the corner where I can be left alone. My head is heavy. The room is slow. I'm absolutely fucked. The sounds blur into one. Where? Faces all blend into one. Where? Time passes. How long? How long? Conversations come by in intervals, I just yell obscenities until the fiends and motherfuckers are too weary to get close to me. All of a sudden Manitoba. Smile. Fucker. Something in his hand. What? What? That. From where? From where? From there. He says something. Pulls me up. Ushers me through the crowd. The fiends and their fins reaching out and touching me. I don't want to be touched. We're in a bedroom. There's a computer. Wires get attached. Screen comes on. I can't watch. I don't watch. I just upload and send. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. Press a button. It's done. It's done. Where is she?

Room too small. They all know. They don't know. They all know. They don't know. Room too small. Water. What? Five am. Five am. Maybe Mark? Maybe Jack? Manitoba? Al? In my pocket. There's something in my pocket. What is it? Purpose? Some kind end? Don't do it. Do it. I am not.

Eyes. Her eyes. There's a bag in her hand. Another loot bag of sorts. She slides across the room with a grace I don't deserve. She kisses my cheek. Whispers something. I smile. Have I ever smiled? It hurts. She takes my hand. Has she ever taken my hand? It hurts. She leads me upstairs. Is it real? I don't know anymore. I don't care anymore. She leads me into the bathroom. Everything seems to happen in bathrooms. Will a dishwasher be able to clean this up?

We kiss. Angry, sad, full of passion and hate and love and understanding. It is less a kiss than was a conversation between two mouths with no space for words or breath or reason. A

staged argument between a fractured couple. The gun rests uneasily at my hip, always there, always baiting. She feels its presence and at once moves down me to an unbuckling so eager, wanting and yet frail, vacant so that it felt new, virginal. She takes me in her mouth and for an all too brief moment, like all moments, I forget that I hurt, that I hate, that I had loved and lost and sacrificed so much of both of these weary bodies. I am not well. I am not well. I wear guilt like a reptile's skin. It crawls around my skeletal frame like a child finding its first steps. I look down at her. Our eyes meet, perhaps for the first time. Brown pools of warm promise. What have I done to those eyes? I delicately slide the gun under her chin and with the ease and manner of a man greater than me I pull those eyes up to mine. Promise that it's all going to stop. She takes the barrel in her mouth, her eyes locked on mine like they were sewn together. With an easy force I push her up on to the sink, the barrel still beckoning for an existence from deep inside of her mouth. She welcomes it, arousing and disturbing, loving and unnerving. With my free hand I pull her skirt up to her waist. I cock the trigger, and a single lonely and solitary tear rolls down her cheek. I close my eyes as I push inside her, warm and inviting and needing and wanting. Our rhythm sways with the troubled room. I pull the gun from her mouth; I have to taste her again. She responds with lust and tears. Silent cries of love and need flow off our tongues and deep into each other's throats. The passion and the rhythm became quick and angry and with each thrust, my hand still clenching the cocked revolver, I smash it with uneasy lust against the mirror. I come in a fit of love and blood and eager hatred, she screams to match my cries, and digs her nails so deep into the small of my neck my wrist cringed in jealousy. My hand, bloodied and threatening, wipes the tears from her cheek, smearing its soft fruit texture in bits of us.

She reaches out and grabs my head, then gently kisses me on the cheek.

XXX.

–What time is it?” she asks with a simplicity that befits any Sunday morning couple. The kind of rolling good morning that invited *The New York Times* and Maxwell House to bed. The kind of question that tens of thousands of complete partners ask of each other on tempered mornings, on honest mornings, on virtuous mornings.

–It's six thirty,” I say, and for a minute I, we, are normal. Then her eyes open and find themselves in mine. And yesterday and all days come flowing back in a violent sobering rage. –We better get to the airport just in case Al decides to call the cops.”

I don't tell her about the fifteen angry messages from Mark on my answering machine. Threatening, disturbing messages. His tone suggests he knows. What he knows or thinks he does remain a mystery. Is he angry that his girlfriend is gone or does he want a piece of the thirty grand? These are questions I don't want to be around for.

–I thought the flight wasn't till noon?”

–Shit Ry, let's just get the fuck out of here OK? I'd rather be sweating at the airport than here.”

–What are you afraid of?”

Everything.

She gets out of bed reluctantly, and she is beautiful. I wonder if I ever really noticed before. Maybe it's just finally having her, realising what I've only dreamt. She slowly, silently undresses and continues her soft glide into the bathroom. I hear the shower come on and then an unexpected voice, an unexpected invitation that solidifies the realisation, that answers the dream. Everything's gonna be alright. For the first time, maybe, I don't hate, I don't fear, I don't care about anything except what is in my shower.

“You coming in here or what?”

The cab ride is slow, quiet. An odd feeling of comfort feels so close, like it's tapping on the windshield, unable to get in. Riley is nuzzled into me. Her fingers run slowly around mine. This is all the communication we share, all we need to say. The city rushes past us for the last time. The carbon copy houses wave goodbye, the city quickly disappears and we're in the safe comfort of the greenbelt. Soon the airport. Soon freedom from all of this, from all I've ever been, from all I was never supposed to be.

We were carrying a lot of money. It made me nervous, and Riley could tell, so she hid it in various spots in her luggage and carry-on, and on her person. This way if I got stopped, drenched in sweat and crying, she'd breeze through unnoticed. We had somewhere around 30K. It was enough. It was everything. Riley packed a bag quickly before Mark got home from wherever it is that fiends go. We had very little with us. What we needed we would buy.

The airport is crowded and surly. We get in the line for Delta Airlines where we'll catch a flight to Dulles in Washington and then on to San Jose, Costa Rica. I'm sweating booze and sin. I wonder if they know. I wonder if we'll make it. We'll make it. There is no one to stop us now. If Al had wanted to call the cops we'd of been caught by now. We're home free. Everything's going to be all right. For the first time I can remember, I'm going to win.

The ticket agent passes us along with little fanfare. We decide to get a coffee in the common area before heading to the gates, as we have about an hour to kill. We sit and stare longingly at the planes taxiing outside on the brisk endless runway. I look at Riley; her eyes are huge, hopeful. She looks constantly on the verge of saying something, but she's holding back.

Let it go Hunter. Don't ruin this moment with jealousy. Don't be the fuck you've been your whole life. Not now. Not when you're so close. So goddamn close.

"I love you, you know that right?" She has broken the day's silence. I don't know what to say back. I just stare, hopefully, like a schoolboy holding the red ball, caught in the glare of oncoming traffic. "Hunter?"

"I know Ry. I love you too." My whole life was waiting for that moment, and I let it slip by without the celebration I had envisioned. I hold her gaze, like if I let it go everything would stop, and the clocks would slowly charge backwards, and it would be my yesteryear, and I would still be the sad fuck that cringes and smirks at me from my mirror. "We should go to the gate."

"I know, let me just pee first. I'll be right back." I look out at the tarmac, as I'm unable to follow her seep into the vast crowd of travelers. And as she walks away a part of me, a part of me I hate with great conviction and a fierce and uncompromising lack of grace, looks back at the grizzled hopelessness from my reflection in the window, smiles, and tells me I've seen the last of the only thing I'll ever love.

HUNTER

XXXI.

She didn't come back. She took her bag with her. She took it all with her. I should have known. It was all a scam. I should have known. I wonder who it was. Mark? Manitoba? Karen? Jack? Maybe just Riley. Maybe I am that sad. That small. I know better than to look for her. She was gone. It was over. The ocean was too far away now. Everything was too far away.

The past few hours, days, years raced through my mind. When did the set up begin? Fuck. Fuck. This is how it ends. I tasted the finish line, but I never got there. It's a horrible thing to be in love with someone who will always disappoint you.

I start towards the bank of revolving doors. Down to my left there is some commotion. An ambulance's bright lights reflect endlessly throughout the glassed airport.

RILEY

XXXII.

I shouldn't have left him there. But I had to pee. I wonder how much worse it can get, this thing pushing on my bladder, likely only in my mind, still so small, this creature inside me, this unknowing little offspring. I smile for the first time in a long time. Hunter has shown that there is still something left of himself of late. He'll be an okay dad. He has so much to give; he has always just needed something to give it to. I wish it was his. That would be perfect. We could be perfect.

I shouldn't have left him alone. He'll fill his head with bad thoughts. He doesn't do well on his own, never has. He can handle five minutes though for chrissakes. I can't hold his hand every second of every day, as much as he'd like that. At least now, with the two of us, he'll never be lonely again for long.

I check myself in the mirror. I look worn out. The equator will do me well. I can't wait to tan, wipe this horrific Canadian complexion clean in copper tones. I look at my belly, at first saddened by the thought of my flat stomach disappearing, but then kind of tickled with the thought of motherhood. I wonder if this is the glow they talk about, the natural female instinct. Nine months, I can handle being fat for nine months. It'll be like grade nine all over again.

I see Mark immediately upon leaving the bathroom. He's charging towards me, red with anger. I search my mind hastily for excuses, but I have none. I check to see if I can see Hunter, but he is several hundred feet away, around modern corners, through seas of tourists and travelers and well-to-do airline industry employees. I should run, or scream, or both. But I do neither. I do nothing. I resign myself to my sin, to its sentence.

–Mark, I...” But I have no time to finish. Without slowing down, without stopping for excuses or explanation Mark hits me, hard, with a backhand that knocks me to the clean shining airport floor. I want to scream, but time slows, and everything seems animated, like it’s all happening to someone else, in some horribly twisted cartoon. He starts kicking me in the stomach, and screaming about money and hate and whores. With each hard boot I wonder where security is, where Hunter is, where that God is, where reason is, where hope is, where virtue is, where sanity is, where right is, where my baby is. People have gotten a hold of Mark, and they pull him off of me. Blood, for once mine, comes from somewhere and stains the flooring. I roll over, my eyes twisted and salted with tears and blood. I stare up at the seemingly endless ceiling. The rafters appear so safe, so sturdy. Faces fill in my periphery; clog my eye line with helpful pleas. Are you all right child? I wonder why I can’t hear the planes. Why can’t I hear the planes?

JACK

XXXIII.

The rest comes in strange bursts of memory. I'm in a park. I'm drinking from the flask. There's no more. There's more. A big bottle of Jack. A big bottle of me. I'm in front of *Agharta*. Everyone inside seems happy. There's Riley. She's beautiful. Never noticed that before. There's Hunter. He's ugly. Never noticed that before. Everyone's dancing. Everyone's laughing.

I'm back at the loft. It's late. Or early. I'm not sure. Karen's still gone. More Jack. More me. I find my phone. I scroll down to a number marked "Riley Home." I press send. It rings. The sun suddenly breaks through the day, sharply separating the room into light and dark. I fall over onto the couch, into the darkness, as a male voice wearily answers the phone. I tell the voice the truth, and will let God sort through the lies and the fallout. Goodbye, friend.

GEORGE

XXXIV.

The airport security was all the way down the parkway, holding back traffic. The air was cold, too cold for the season. Down the way a bit an ambulance sat anxiously, and then bolted from the airport towards the rest of us stuck in our taxis, with eager tickets in hand. Then, I turned to look directly across from me. I could see this ragged young man at the side of the parkway, looking straight at me. His stance was deliberate, if weary. He looked as if he had been beaten, and often, and he wore a dishevelled beard. He must have seen the ambulance start to accelerate from down the way. Airport security and the local police were holding people back on the other side, just like they were us. He must have seen the lights. But this man, he, he just strolled right through the line, right towards me. He must have heard the siren. But he kept walking, and BANG. The ambulance hit him, and he was thrown at least twenty feet in the air, his body twisted and tangled like a child playing solitary catch with a rag doll. And when he landed, he landed with authority, with a horrifying thud. His head, his head seemed somewhat detached, and it rolled across his body, and rested on its side. And his eyes. They stared right at me. Right at me.