

Limen: Six Short Stories

by

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Abstract

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The initial title of my thesis was *Thresholds*, but this brought to mind the idea of a door—perhaps too concrete a word for describing narratives about transition and inertia. I needed a word that would sit well both with the notion of change in the physical sense—spatial relocation and the altered body—and changes of a psychological—often private, more subtle—order.

“Limen” is that word. It shares its meaning with “threshold” but is less familiar, and change is about encountering the unfamiliar, stepping on to foreign territory. Some changes are preceded by fireworks and a blaring fanfare. Others cannot be perceived by the most astute observers. “A Shy Man” may end with Jacques having an epiphany, but his living situation remains mostly the same. This is also true for the characters in “Wayside.” In “Desperately Searching for Coda,” on the other hand, Simon’s life is completely turned around—although it does ultimately come full circle. Invariably, the characters must reach a tipping point before any type of change can take place, but this limit is not always as conspicuous as a doorframe.

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Still Life

“Zach, gimme that,” said Richard. He gestured toward the extinguished doobie between my fingers, lighter at the ready. “Before the next customer comes busting our balls.”

We leaned on the wall at the back of the service station building, which had two large opposing windows and a clear view of the pumps on the other side. The lunch-to-rush hour beat was usually slow but today’s heat had dragged it to a crawl. Richard cupped one hand to the side of his face and flicked the lighter. Sweet wafts of gas and secondhand smoke flirted over the pavement as my mind wandered from one lazy thought to another.

“Richard,” I said, when he passed the joint over, “what’s the deal with cell phones and gas pumps?”

“You mean those stories about cars blowing up when you answer the phone?” Richard snorted. “Fear-mongering corporate media bullshit.”

“Oh. What about cigarettes?”

“Cigarettes are retarded, man—in or out of gas bars,” Richard said, rubbing his beer belly. “Slowest, most expensive suicide I can think of.”

“Isn’t pot worse, though?” I said.

“Chomsky says pot’s alright,” said Richard, not missing a beat.

For a first summer job, I could’ve fared worse. The pay was awful, but high-school graduation was still a year away; any amount of money was better than working for free at home. My father, quoting the dad from *Calvin and Hobbes*, said a menial job would “build my character” and prepare me for the real world. My mother had sighed.

“All I ask of you,” she told me when he wasn’t around, “is that you try and take college more seriously than your father did.”

Granted, my plans for the future were still hazy, but they were clear enough for me to know that the real world lay somewhere beyond GazRobert; I would pocket the easy money until I figured out where that was. In the meantime, I got to hang out with someone older, a significant perk for someone with whom no one hung, young or old. I felt proud of that, as long as I ignored the fact he was paid to talk to me.

“They should replace Health Canada’s warning with instructions on how to tie a hangman’s knot. Save us the cost of their health insurance.”

I liked Richard. He had an opinion about everything but he never made me feel inadequate. He was unashamed of his six-year residency at the gas station. It was a brainless job that gave him time to think about life and take random mental notes: UFO’s were bogus; arrogant people were insecure, but insecure people were usually geniuses; monosodium glutamate was part of a communist conspiracy to make us too fat to defend ourselves; and Zappa was the essence of music.

“He was a genius, man, but so insecure. Why else put out so many records? Insecure people are overachievers.”

We returned inside at the sight of a car pulling in. I couldn’t be sure from this distance, but the driver’s face seemed familiar. As she walked towards the building she took her sunglasses off and a flash of recognition came over me, then panic whipped through my ribcage: Cindy Hampton. Her hair was red now but I could spot those eyes from—

I turned around before she could see me. There suddenly appeared to be several urgent tasks that required I show my back to the cash register.

“Hey Cindy,” said Richard when she came in. “What’s cookin’?”

“Hey Richard. Not much, just on my way to the grocery store. How’s your parents?”

“Good, thanks. How’s your aunt?”

“She’s doing alright. She’s flying in from Vancouver tomorrow so I’m cleaning the place up, you know, so it looks habitable. Stocking the fridge, wiping wine stains from the ceiling, that sort of thing.”

They exchanged a few pleasantries and I was about to run out of imaginary tasks when she started to leave.

“Oh!” she said, halfway through the door. “I almost forgot. Can you give me some DuMaurier?”

“Hey Zach,” said Richard. “Get me a 20 king size light, will ya?”

“Who’s the new guy?” said Cindy, as I turned to hand the cigarettes to Richard.

“Oh. Zach Larue?”

I tried to look surprised.

“You know Cindy?” Richard asked me.

“From high school,” I said weakly. I felt the blood rising to my face.

“Yeah, we ran into each other a couple times,” said Cindy, staring me straight in the eye and looking amused. “He threw up on me once.”

Richard laughed, thinking she was pulling his leg. I looked down at my milky-white hands and it occurred to me that all the blood must have reached my head now.

Why then, I wondered, did it feel like my brain was running on empty? Fortunately Cindy was in a hurry to leave.

“Okay!” She smiled forcefully. “Nice running into you again Zach. Richard? You might want to keep a doggy-bag handy—the new kid looks wobbly.”

“Did you really throw up on Cindy, man?” said Richard as Cindy drove her car away. “Dude, I’m all ears.”

“I really don’t want to tell that story.”

“Come on, Zach. No one’s judging you here.”

“Kindly shut up, Richard.”

He eventually wore me down, so I gave him a watered-down version just to get him off my back. I couldn’t have told him how it really went down.

My first two high school years had been one continuous, agonizing sexual torture. I struggled through interminable school days, trying to focus on my teachers’ mouths and the sounds coming from of them. I stared for hours at the blackboard covered in formulas, conjugations and graphs, but it was no use: everything seemed to evoke the female form. O’s and D’s and V’s turned me on the most—Mrs. Crickshaw’s cursive aroused me no matter what the letters were, or what the words meant. I was too self-conscious about the tent in my pants to follow lectures, and halfway into class a book inevitably found its way into my lap, hiding my happy camper. I found some comfort in observing the books in my peers’ laps; clearly I wasn’t suffering alone. The classroom was a well-populated campsite.

During my second year I started to write poetry, partly to distract myself from my loin-blues, but mostly because I’d heard that bra clasps could not resist verse. This advice

seemed crucial in light of my five-foot restraining order with apparently every member of the opposite sex. Not that any of my poems were especially romantic—in fact, most were quite racy— but they were never addressed to anyone in particular. That is, not until Chris Delvey swiped one of these anonymous poems from my desk, signed my name to it, then planted it in Cindy Hampton’s locker.

Cindy. There was no shortage of information on that girl if you asked around the school grounds, and though every story differed, many of them gravitated towards her preference for older boys and all of them were suspiciously exotic: her mom had run off with a twenty-year-old kid from Peru, leaving her bum of a husband to raise Cindy on his own; ever between jobs, Mr. Hampton had resorted to picking road kill from dirt roads at night to garnish the fridge—this accounted for Cindy’s bad breath, I was told, which she attempted to mask with moldy ginger roots she took out from her pockets to gnaw on. She never washed her genitalia, which according to some people actually explained why her breath stank, though no one knew the scientific name of this unusual medical condition. What everyone seemed to know was that she never washed there because Mr. Hampton—who she was sleeping with— forbade her to, knowing this would keep the younger boys at bay. In fact, claimed Sam Ezrin, Mrs. Hampton had not left them for a Peruvian but out of jealousy after learning one day that Cindy and her father no longer wanted to have threesomes with her. In a fit of rage she packed her dildos and moved to Utah where she married a Mormon fundamentalist, then killed herself.

Naturally I was skeptical of these reports—they were delivered by young girls who were intimidated by Cindy and other girls her age. They took every opportunity they could to undermine her short of direct confrontation. Schoolyard politics die hard,

though, and words have a way of creeping in and festering. Two years of such anecdotes had sullied my already filthy and impressionable mind.

The following day she'd cornered me during recess.

"Do you have any more?"

"More what?"

"Poems, silly" she said. "I usually don't fall for that kind of crap, but yours... they gave me shivers."

"You read one of my poems?" I stammered.

"That line about sitting on your knee reminded me of a dirty Christmas memory." She leaned forward then—eyes twinkling, green hair and various face piercings closing in. "I should thank you for reminding me."

I held my breath to avoid breathing in hers, trying to suppress visions of incestuous fathers and a possibly incestuous uncle dressed as St. Nick, but a storm was brewing in my gut. I imagined road kill stew with ginger roots and the storm slowly began migrating north. Then her nose grazed mine and I couldn't hold it back in any longer—the storm was upon her.

I only told Richard about writing the poem and Cindy trying to kiss me, skipping that whole bit about the rumours.

"But...why did you throw up?" said Richard.

"Something about the cafeteria food that day," I said. "Bad stew, I think."

"Shame you missed that boat. I hear the sex with her is phenomenal," Richard said.

"Dude, she's a minor!"

Richard kept going as though he hadn't heard: "Hey, you know that fifty percent of public health inspectors are corrupt?"

On the very day of the hurling incident, Mr. Hampton had an aneurysm and passed away. Taunts about my weak stomach ended quickly as the sombre news spread over the following days, as did all other rumours about Cindy—not out of respect, I think, but more out of fear. Bereavement followed her like a tainted beast. Awed students kept a safe distance as though they believed that to be acquainted with her was to flirt with death. She walked through the halls unaccompanied, lurked in corners reading books during recess, and was the last to enter the building when the bell rang. I pitied her, and my pity was mixed with guilt; I had, unknowingly but unforgivably, disrespected a bereaved daughter. I had sullied her memory of a terrible and most sacred day. I had added rejection to her moment of loss. Mr. Hampton had maybe died later that day but I still felt like a heartless bastard, and I suspected everyone thought the same way, especially Cindy. We didn't cross paths many times after that but when we did, she glared at me and forced a cold, almost sarcastic smile. I could almost hear the schoolyard banter a year from then: Zach had asked Cindy out on the day her father died and he threw up when she told him. No, no, someone would retort. Zach and Cindy were already going out. He threw up at the funeral. Yes, someone else would add, but not on her. He threw up in Mr. Hampton's casket.

Cindy changed schools the following year.

Now, as I rode my bike back home after work and thought about this, the guilt resurfaced, but this time it was mixed with anger. I was angry at myself for not trying to

talk to Cindy before she left, and angry at Cindy for making it so hard for me to try and make amends, even two years later.

A car rolled to my left, honking twice as it slowed down and matched my pedalling speed. I looked over and almost lost grip on my handlebars. Cindy Hampton waved at me from the driver's seat. I nodded back and smiled uncomfortably. She honked again when I looked away, this time pointing down, not waving. I couldn't understand what she meant, so she leaned over to the passenger seat to roll her window down. Just when she got it open an inch, I was yanked to the ground.

When I woke up, the first thing I saw was a breast. I actually only glimpsed it briefly from behind the loose cleavage of a dress, and the sight was marred by an incredibly searing pain in my head, but it was my first real-life encounter with a breast and hanging on to this fact helped me lessen the pain a bit. As my brain caught up with my senses, I understood I was bruised and that Cindy was checking my scalp for cuts. I groaned. Her dress was dark green. She reached around my neck to feel the nape and her nipple moved in to say hello. Her red hair tickled my nose. I'd played out the possible scenarios of this sexual milestone in my head countless times, but my groaning and our relative positions were the only elements that came close to any of them.

"You're a klutz," she said. "Can you get up?"

"I think so." Cindy helped me up on my wobbling legs.

"Where's my bike?" I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Over there. So's your shoe."

Behind me, my bike lay half on the sidewalk, half in the street. My left shoe hung from the gears by the lace. I stared down at the sock on my left foot, then back at Cindy.

“I tried to warn you.”

“I’m sorry—” I said dizzily. About the poem incident, or maybe, at long last, about failing to offer my condolences. She cut me short.

“It’s okay, I’ve taken first aid lessons. I don’t freak out about blood or anything.”

Cindy drove me to her aunt’s place, a top-floor apartment in a massive building which she owned. We went to the living room, which was spacious and well-lighted. A stuffed kangaroo stood next to one of the couches, half-poking from behind potted foliage. I rubbed my head and felt a small bump.

“Sit here while I get the med kit.” She sat me down and left the room. I studied the kangaroo while she rummaged through the bathroom cabinet. I’d never seen one up close, and this one was strikingly life-like; it looked poised to jump from behind those leaves. In grade school I’d been fascinated with kangaroo and its cousins. My walls had been covered in posters depicting different species: Black-striped, Pretty-faced, and Tammar Wallabies, Antilopine, Red, Western and Eastern Grey Kangaroos; one of the pictures was a medium shot of an Antilopine with a bright pink, worm-like creature hanging on its belly. I remember reading that kangaroos are born twice: they came out of their mother’s vagina after a month of gestation and then climb to the pouch— their second uterus—where they remained for nine months in relative comfort but still partly exposed to the elements. What had amazed me was the trip in-between shelters; the barely-formed marsupial took only five minutes to reach the pouch, but during that brief interval it was frighteningly vulnerable, a lump of flesh the size of a thumb with only its sense of smell and awareness of gravity to guide it to safety.

“What do you think of Pouches?” Cindy was back.

“Is that the kangaroo’s name? He looks great. Where did you get him?”

“Technically he’s from Northern Australia, but he died in a Texan zoo. I’ve always wanted to go to Australia so dad gave it to me, as a kind of motivation. You must think that’s a bit weird.”

“I don’t know...it’s the thought that counts, I guess. How did he die?”

“Aneurysm,” she said.

“Oh. I meant the kangaroo.” There was a long pause. Our eyes drifted around the room momentarily. “I’m sorry. About your dad, I mean.”

“Thanks.” She smiled warmly this time. There was another pause, and I shifted uncomfortably. A drop of water plunked in the kitchen sink and Cindy said: “You should sit down and let me check you.”

While Cindy nursed my wounds, I held a bag of ice to my head and made a point of staring at my knees. Shamefully, I kept thinking about Cindy’s breast, that milky summit which minutes ago had been just inches away from my face. As Cindy patted the scratches on my head with a cloth, I turned to the stuffed kangaroo. From this angle, his forearms seemed oddly positioned, as if he were reaching out to me.

“Is Pouches creeping you out?”

“No,” I lied. Images of road kill flitted in and out of my mind’s eye. “How did your dad get a hold of one of these?”

“Well, it was a sort of hobby of his.” She twisted the lid back on the antiseptic.

“Actually, it was a hobby first. After a while it became more of a...”

“What?”

Cindy smiled, pleased with my interest. “Can I show you something?”

She led me upstairs, then down a hallway. Cindy opened a door on the far left. We climbed up more stairs, these ones unpolished and creaky, flanked by dirty brick walls. A trace scent of chemicals came over us as we reached the top: varnish remover and formaldehyde perhaps. Tarps covered the windows, but I could make out that this was an attic. The floors were crude wooden planks and the sheetrock had been torn from the walls to reveal the two-by-fours lining them. I felt like a mouse walking into a wooden ribcage. Without a word Cindy flipped a switch.

Two rows of bare light bulbs burst into life, suspended on orange wires. Bed sheets hung from the rafters, spread like sails. Below these was a horde of animals—so many that I started in shock. Cindy had the same look of almost-manic amusement her face as when she'd realized I was working with Richard earlier. Did she know about the stories people said about her all those years ago? I panicked and slowly moved towards the stairs, intending to leave but still taking in the scene: moose, otters, grizzlies, jaguars, zebras, beavers, pandas, chimps, gorillas, sharks. I couldn't tell how many of each or how many in all. The room was huge, spanning an entire floor of the building.

“Oh no. Are you going to throw up?” said Cindy. She must have read my discomfort, even though the question was too spontaneous to be willfully mean-spirited: “I'm sorry, I didn't say that to tease you this time.”

I said I deserved it the first time, and we both chuckled.

“So,” I asked. “These were your dad's?”

Cindy nodded. “My aunt made room for them when I moved in. Would you like to see them up close?”

“I'd love to.”

She led me into the horde. They were randomly arranged, predators and prey standing next to each other, like strangers mingling at a social event. Though the pack was dense, Cindy was able to show me around, expertly slipping in between snouts, furry bellies, hooves, and paws.

“My dad was an embalmer, but he worked as a taxidermist from our house when business was slow,” said Cindy. As we brushed against the dead skins, she went on: years ago, her father was commissioned by a number of natural history museums to prepare the animals that had died in zoos or forests across the continent, and some from other parts of the world. They came to the house by truck, loaded into the basement and kept in a large cooling room until he was ready to work on them. Sometimes he received more animals than the museum had ordered. Sometimes the orders weren’t fully processed for some reason, and he ended up with homeless dead animals and a cramped cooler. Instead of throwing them out, he had stuffed them in his spare time and had grown quite a collection.

Though their number was intimidating, not one of these animals inspired fear. The predators weren’t even remotely aggressive. They all appeared to be lost deep in thought. I shared this with Cindy.

“Dad was often exasperated with some of the customers’ directives,” said Cindy, “especially those who wanted the animals to reflect how they would have behaved in their natural habitat, which usually meant their hunting behaviors.”

“I haven’t seen any claws, now that you mention it.”

“And no teeth, either. Just like for humans’ funerals.”

“Their eyes are open, though.”

“It would’ve been that way for his own funeral too, if he hadn’t donated all his organs. He said the windows of the soul shouldn’t be shut, that closure only really happened when you saw that there wasn’t a soul there anymore.”

“I don’t think I could—” I was interrupted by the mental image of my parents lying in formal clothes, their features stiff. “Did you see his eyes...when your dad...?”

“Lynn and I stayed by his side all the time during his last week. I saw his eyes...change. He wasn’t looking at me though, thank God. I would probably have freaked out,” Cindy said, her voice unsteady. She cleared her throat, and then: “How’s your head feel?”

“It’s all better,” I lied. My head was pounding.

“Good. Here’s what I wanted to show you.”

In the room’s center, the inanimate crowd formed a circle around a smaller group of animals. They appeared to be fighting, which disturbed me. A snake was coiled around a mongoose, a lion stood on hind legs with its paws around a gazelle’s shoulders, a hyena’s snout was buried in a leopard’s neck. As I walked around them, though, it dawned on me that these animals weren’t fighting at all. The lion and the gazelle were immortalized in the midst of slow-dancing, staring intensely into each other’s eyes. The leopard’s head was tilted up, its eyes closed, reveling in the hyena’s affectionate nuzzling. The snake and mongoose were in the throes of a passionate embrace. There were more interspecies couples involved in frozen moments of romance: a skunk and house cat, a chipmunk and a raven, a turtle and a raccoon.

“This was dad’s project for the last two years of his life.”

“Did you work on any of these?” I asked. Cindy nodded.

“I was always hanging around the basement with my dad,” she said. “I worked on pretty much all of these.”

“What about your mom?”

“She died in childbirth,” said Cindy plainly. “It was always just me and dad.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. He always tried to be twice as available for me,” she said. “And he taught me this trade so I would have something to fall back on some day if I needed that.”

She pointed at the snake and mongoose.

“The cobra was a challenge—it’s delicate work as it is, and it was delivered in rough shape,” she said. “What do you think?”

I was still trying to take it in; it was all surreal and a little alienating. I tried to imagine Cindy returning from school and going to her father’s basement to spend the evening with him reviving the dead wild. I suspected the snake alone must have taken at least a dozen hours to complete—how long would they have spent on a bear? How many nights for the animals in this room, let alone all of those now in museums? Not nights but years, I thought.

“It’s beautiful,” I said. “It must be good to know you have something to look forward to, something you care about.”

“I never thought of it that way before,” she said. She was silent for a moment and when I turned to her, I saw that she was crying.

A Shy Man

Jacques placed DVD cases for porn films on the shelves of the video store. The adult section was in the basement, which had the appearance of being permanently under renovation. Metal shelves were screwed into a flimsy-looking sheetrock wall, and threatened to relinquish their grip at any moment. A shy man, Jacques avoided looking directly at the pictures.

A chime rang upstairs. The sound of footsteps. Jacques climbed to the ground floor and found a man leaning on the counter, head in hand, looking as though he were about to fall asleep. Getting closer, Jacques could smell beer on the man's breath. He looked at the time: almost three o'clock in the morning. There would be more drunks coming in soon, to get gum and chips and condoms and, for those whose club hunting had been less successful, porn.

"Winstons," said the man. "Got any?"

"Yes."

The man fumbled for his wallet, threw crumpled bills on the counter.

"What is this, a corner store or a video store?" said the man with a lazy smirk.

"Bit of both, I suppose," said Jacques.

"Haha. That's no good," said the man as he shuffled out of the store. "You gotta be one or the other, my mama always said."

Jacques tried to engage with the night customers as little as possible. As it turned out, they rarely engaged with him. His narrow frame and receding hairline put many of them off, or caused them to look past him. To the properly inebriated, Jacques was practically invisible. Only Corine seemed to really see him.

At six, the morning clerk relieved him and Jacques made his way home, bleary-eyed and exhausted. The sun welcomed the world, but to Jacques it gave only a passing greeting. After a quick shower, he crawled into bed and snuggled up to Corine for an hour. Then Corine left for work, and Jacques slept alone with blinds tightly drawn.

They shared a small apartment. Living room, kitchen/dining room, bedroom. The walk-in closet was almost as big as the bathroom, which wasn't saying much, but could accommodate a small desk and chair. After sleeping for five or six hours, Jacques spent the same amount of time writing from within the confines of this cramped, dark space. The white light from his laptop screen shone on Corine's summer dresses and winter coats.

"Why don't you use the kitchen table?" Corine had asked, once.

"Too many distractions," Jacques had said.

"But you've got the place to yourself most of the time."

"I like the walk-in. It's quiet."

The first few times Corine had opened the door for a change of clothes she'd shrieked, having forgotten Jacques was there. What an unusual place to work in, she had remarked. Jacques told her about Ondaatje, who allegedly asked his wife to lock him up in an abandoned train car which contained only a ream of paper and a typewriter, and Victor Hugo, who wrote naked and whose servants kept his clothes hostage until he had put in his day of work. All serious artists had their eccentricities, even if their eccentricities sometimes made them appear less serious.

Jacques wrote in the walk-in until Corine came home from work. That night, they had a bite to eat and then put on some evening clothes for a party Corine was having with

her staff. Corine worked in television, which from her reports sounded exhausting. She wrote for long hours with a team of writers under considerable pressure from bosses and deadlines and capricious actors. The story took place in a hospital and featured a wizard posing as a doctor and a dog who was also a wizard—and a better one than the undercover wizard, too. But the undercover wizard had an inferiority complex, and to protect the undercover wizard's dignity, the wizard dog performed his magic discreetly, making it look like the undercover wizard was the one performing them. Together, the intrepid pair saved many lives week after week. Corine did not like the show, but she liked the people she worked with, and it was good career experience.

The party was at Justin's, the head writer's apartment. He liked Corine very much. Jacques knew this but tried to be friendly since, as Corine often said, Justin could help her along with her career. There was another show, more popular than the one she was working on, that took place at a high school and had wizards pretending to be teachers and Justin would almost certainly become head writer for this show soon, and when that happened she would join the writers' team for this show and make more money as a result. So when Corine and Justin spoke, huddled together apart from the rest of the people at the party, as they often did, Jacques tried not to look at them, thinking it might make Justin uncomfortable, and perhaps ruin Corine's chance at advancing her career in television. Also, Jacques often did not know what to say to Justin—who was not shy at all, and was friendly in his own way—and leaving him to talk alone with Corine seemed the best way to avoid an embarrassing situation.

Corine and Jacques took the bus back home, and during the ride Corine talked about the future and how it was filled with possibilities, as she often did after these

parties, after her conversations with Justin. Jacques listened and smiled and was happy to see her so full of life and hope, because it gave him hope as well for his own future, as a writer and as her partner.

In the meantime, Jacques continued to write in the walk-in by day and work at the video store by night. Jacques never asked his employer for a raise even though he had been working there for almost three years. He rarely asked for anything, in fact. Once, Jacques had suggested that someone might want to fix the shelves in the adult section downstairs. His employer answered that they weren't broken, and why would anyone want to fix something that wasn't broken? Jacques found it hard to disagree with this: even though the shelves seemed about to break, they weren't yet broken. The request sounded unreasonable when he looked at it this way. His employer laughed.

“That’s my favourite little writer,” he said, “always worrying about a million things that aren’t really happening.”

Jacques thought that this was true. He often noticed details that no one else noticed; it was a good thing he *was* a writer because otherwise he would have nowhere to put them. They would stay inside his head and fester.

But one night when Jacques was placing the porn films in the adult section, the screws holding the shelves against the wall did come loose and the whole metal mess came crashing down on him. The weight of it all was so great that he couldn't move, and Jacques was very distressed that someone might find him this way, trapped under a pile of movies with pictures of naked people on them. Finally, someone did come downstairs and find him there.

“There you are!” said the man. “I was calling you at the counter but you weren’t coming. Are you alright?”

The man helped Jacques out from under the shelves. A friend of the owner, the man called him to explain the situation.

“Yes, I think I’ll take Jacques to the hospital. What? Why not? He might be concussed. Yes, I understand. Just a moment.”

The man handed Jacques the telephone.

“Hey, Jacques! I hear you’ve been fooling around downstairs! Are you trying to tear my video store apart, you rascal? I’m just kidding, buddy. Now tell me, Jacques, do you have any bruises on your head? No? Then why don’t you just go home and take the rest of the night off, okay? Call it a paid vacation. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

When Jacques got home he found the bed empty.

The sound of the shower woke him up at five in the morning. Then he heard Corine’s footsteps approach, stop briefly in the doorway, resume. She slipped into bed. Jacques pretended to be asleep.

It was Corine’s day off, so the two had breakfast together.

“I had to stay at work late,” said Corine. “The producers don’t like where the dog character is going.”

In the walk-in, Jacques wrote. And thought. He had never thought of Corine as a liar. Sure, sometimes she lied, he knew that, but she wasn’t a *liar*. (People could tell right away when *he* wasn’t telling the truth.) He’d always assumed Corine told him the truth; as far as he could remember, Corine’s face had never looked as though she were hiding anything.

Jacques stretched his arms and yawned. He ran his arms along Corine's coats and dresses. One of his hands slipped into a pocket, found something square and serrated on two sides. A condom.

Jacques phoned his employer to tell him he would be going to the hospital.

That evening, Jacques told Corine goodbye. "See you in the morning," he said. "What are you doing tonight?"

"I'll just catch up on some reading," she said.

Jacques waited in an alley across the street. He had never done a stakeout before. It was exciting, in a way, if he didn't think about why he was there. A car pulled up in front of their building. Jacques couldn't make out the driver, but when Corine came out of the apartment building, she stepped right into the car.

Jacques bolted out of the alley as it started leaving. He flagged a taxi cab and jumped in.

"Follow that car!" said Jacques, his blood pumping.

"What?" said the driver.

"That black car, over there, just ahead... Can you follow it?"

The driver turned around to take a good look at Jacques.

"Why?" he asked.

"What?" asked Jacques.

"Why do you want me to follow that car?"

"Does it matter?" said Jacques. Then, seeing that the driver seemed to think that it did, said: "Haven't you ever wanted to know how it feels to push down on the gas pedal and just speed down the road in pursuit of another car? Or haven't you ever wished you

could tail someone discreetly, knowing that at every turn, you risked getting made by your target if you didn't keep just the right distance? You know, it's like... we see this kind of thing in movies all the time, but never in real life. Never in real life do I ever see anything else than cop cars doing eighty in a fifty lane, and they never seem to be chasing anybody anyways, they only look like they're in a great rush to get somewhere where there's already something happening, and that something is usually too far from where you are, it's out of the path of your daily routine. There's never any time to find out what's at the other end of that straight line they're speeding along! Don't you ever want to know the thrill of a chase? Don't you ever wish you were already there, sometimes, at the end of that pursuit, to find the culprit out? You're a driver, you've been all over this city, know it like the back of your hand, don't you ever want to make a sharp left turn and just tail someone to show a fare just how good you really are when they ask you: 'Quick! Follow that car!'"

Jacques was out of breath, and his heart was knocking as it never had before. He could still see the black car three blocks ahead. If they started now, they could catch up with it. The driver's face had not changed since he had turned around, and now he seemed to be sifting through all these ideas Jacques had thrown at him.

"No," said the driver. He scratched his chin. "Can't say I've ever really wanted to do any of that."

"But... but... aren't you tired of living out your life like this sometimes?" The black car was almost five blocks away now, waiting on a red light. "Don't you wish you could just do something to change it, or make it more exciting at least?"

"Like in the movies, you mean?"

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying!” Jacques could feel himself becoming impatient with this driver. The black car was getting away—it would certainly be out of sight in a few moments.

“My friend,” the driver said, as the black car made a right turn, far away, although it could have been another car, Jacques was no longer certain. “That’s why there are movies! So we don’t go out and run into things like idiots with fast cars. We can just go to the theatre and watch other people pretend to do dangerous things and eat popcorn and live a good life! Why would I want to get hurt? Why would you want to get hurt? Don’t you know anything about the world my friend?”

Jacques stepped out of the cab and, before slamming the door shut, said: “Of all the fucking cabbies in this city, I had to get the one who fancies himself a philosopher!”

“No charge!” the driver said.

Desperately Searching for Coda

Simon closed the refrigerator door with one foot, carefully balancing a plastic container filled with produce. He dropped a cauliflower, cursed, and plopped it back in the container, blowing and dusting it clean. He climbed two steep flights of stairs as fast as he could and reached the kitchen doors, breaking a thin sweat. The first thing to greet him as he shouldered his way through the flapping door was the intense heat: humid, acrid, clinging. The second was the chef's booming baritone.

"About fucking time! Get that crate over here!"

As soon as Simon had set the container down, Ralph, the chef, told him to clean some fucking dishes already. In the few minutes he'd left for his errand, a messy pile had accumulated in and around the deep sink. He only had time to fill one dishwasher crate before chef bellowed at him again.

"Where's the Christ-shit asparagus?"

Back down Simon went, past two dining-room floors buzzing with mouthfuls of conversations. The rooms seemed like long corridors packed with tables. In the evening, when the lights were dimmed, Simon barely discerned the bay windows at the other end as he rushed back and forth between errands. Waitresses hardly acknowledged him as they whisked by, smiles pasted on and shoulders back to better display their breasts, holding plates between their fingers as effortlessly as they would a poker hand.

At the kitchen sink, Simon hunched down and scraped plates clean—crusted cheese, soggy spinach leaves, half-eaten burgers, congealed béchamel clinging to clumps of linguini and rigatoni. There constantly rose from the open garbage can a violent symphony of odors.

Tension increased in the kitchen as the second wave of evening diners sent out their orders. Ralph dealt out more abuse, not all of it directed at Simon. Waitresses tapped their feet by the overhead warmers, asking about their orders, never answered with words, only plates. The floor manager peeped in whenever service slowed down, his frown implying it was the dishwasher's fault.

When the orders trickled down to coffees and desserts, all but two of the cooks left. As he tossed his apron in the laundry basket, the chef told Simon to wipe the vents down and clean behind the fryers.

By the time Simon was done, the restaurant was empty except for a waitress and the floor manager who tore his gaze from her cleavage only long enough to grunt at the dishwasher as he punched out.

Simon's cramped quarters were furnished with the basic commodities. Some artful planning had gone into organizing a half-oven, compact refrigerator, single bed and coffee table in a way that left him room to move around. It could have been bigger, but after a day's work, he was grateful for a communal washroom, which was the landlord's duty to keep clean.

After a quick shower Simon lay in the dark, thinking of his guitar. He used to play it softly at night to forget the dumb things he'd done with his life so far. Now it sat in a pawnshop where several other impulse buys gathered dust. For the first few days he'd stopped outside there on his way to work to see whether his acoustic six-string was still leaning on its stand in the grimy bay window, but after a while the idea of wood slowly warping in the sun tortured him and he used another route. He closed his eyes and

imagined himself strumming a few chords, wondering what song Robert Johnson might have written in his place.

The following day, one of the morning dishwashers quit, and Simon offered to fill in. Ralph seemed dubious at first: "You'll be working sixty hours. You can barely keep up as it is." But there had been no two-week notice and therefore no time to train a new morning dishwasher. In the following weeks energy drinks were added to Simon's diet of coffee and soft drinks. He got three hours' sleep twice a day, in between shifts, and soon felt his heart fluttering at nearly every waking moment. They paid him the extra hours in cash, which invariably got sucked into interest payments on his credit card, but at least he kept his head above water financially. Just.

**

It was on a Monday, Simon's day off, that he saw the advertisement. He was sitting at a rotting picnic table in the park across the street, drinking coffee out of a paper cup, unshowered and disheveled, when an older couple passed by.

"Such a young boy," the woman said, her eyes brimming with pity. She took in his messy auburn mop and wiry frame. "My youngest grandson looks just like you. Same green eyes, too."

She rummaged through one of her plastic bags while her husband stood in silence, absorbed by a distant, vacant spot in the park, a newspaper wedged firmly in one of his armpits. The woman produced a chicken-salad Kaiser from one of the bags and set it gingerly on the table's edge. Simon started to protest but she interrupted him with a "God bless you, boy." She said he should get in touch with a loved one, that there was no shame in asking for a little help, especially at such a young age.

Her husband pulled her away and a few yards further on they stopped to argue for a moment. He held the newspaper above a nearby garbage can. She yanked it from his hand, then her other arm from his grip. Feisty old biddy, Simon thought, as she retraced her steps alone, husband fuming in the background.

"Here you go," she said, setting the paper on the table in much the same way she had the sandwich. "For reading, of course," she added before scuttling off again.

What else for? he thought. Then it occurred to him, once he started flipping the pages, that she probably believed she'd prevented her husband from throwing out street-grade linen. Simon was unoffended. The sandwich was quite good.

The advertisement was near the end of the paper, just before the classifieds. "Are you depressed? Feeling overwhelmed? Find there aren't enough hours in a day? Do you enjoy/tolerate classical music? We're **breaking new ground** in musical therapy that could **change your life!** *Integrated Music Therapy* is currently looking for test subjects, 20-35 years old, non-smoking, preferably with no history of mental illness.

Remunerated experimental **treatment** is waiting for **you** around the corner!"

Simon thought about the CD player he'd pawned last month, followed by his CD collection a week later. He pictured his guitar, untouched, uselessly facing a window, the lacquer on its brown fretboard melting in the sun. He thought of his credit card, his silent burden which kept growing, never satiated, but he kept feeding it—wasn't that what you were supposed to do, feed it until it was no longer hungry? He thought of the old lady, whose generosity, amusing a moment ago, now felt ominous, foreboding. The chicken salad lurched in his gut and Simon willed it to sit still. He glanced again at the paper and moments later was on a westbound train.

**

The low-ceilinged waiting room was filled to capacity. A few people were flipping magazines, others looked up briefly before they resumed texting. Simon checked in with the receptionist then browsed through a few weeklies and saw that a good portion of the room was following him intently. A few of them were smiling as they did, as though they were all in on some private joke. He pretended not to notice as he found a seat next to a young man his age.

"You in for your medical?"

"No," said Simon. "I don't know, actually."

"First time," the young man nodded, smirking. "I'm Josh."

"Simon. Listen, do you know what kind of treatment they do here?"

"Haven't you seen their website?" Josh rocked forward and shook one leg as he spoke. "Dude, are you in for a ride."

"What do you mean?"

"You wonder what it would be like to have your own soundtrack, like in the movies?"

"I guess...." Simon hadn't.

"Well, this is what they do here," Josh smiled.

"What, they have an orchestra following you around?"

"No, man. It comes from inside here," Josh said, tapping a finger against his temple. "Tiny chip. They wire it to your brain in ten minutes, don't even leave a trace."

He removed his cap and lifted the hair behind his left ear where there was indeed a faint scar.

"I've been jacked in for three months now," Josh said, putting his cap back on. "Best thing that ever happened to me. Clean flat, new girlfriend, eating better, exercising again. Started my own business last week."

"Come on," said Simon, eyeing the corridor past reception. "You work for the company or something? It can't be that good."

"No man, I swear. Well, one of my buddies does work here, he's the one who told me about this place. But listen, I don't work for nobody—I get paid the same as anyone walks through door."

"It just sounds a little too... magical, is all I'm saying."

"Man, I hear you," said Josh. "All I can say is, if you'd known me last year it probably would've been in a fistfight, not a pleasant little conversation like we're having right now. If there was a God, I don't think he'd work that fast, you know what I mean? Anyways, this shit's better than religion—you know how many lying sons of bitches say they've heard God's voice answer their prayers? That's bullshit, they're just trying to get attention, or they're schizophrenic. Me, I'm no schizo, but I can hear music all the time. That's what I call divine, man."

"I just don't understand how it works."

"I have no idea either and I don't care as long as it works. Lady in a white suit spent an hour talking to me about all this technical bullshit and I was like 'Woman, just hook me up!' you know? Look, all I know is that it changed my life, man," Josh said. "It's like having a best bud who's always there to pick you up when you're down—like a motivator working twenty-four seven."

A woman across from them had been listening for a while. She wore neat dark blue slacks and a pinstripe vest. She leaned in and spoke softly.

"He's right, you know. I got the chip six months ago and I was promoted twice since at work. I can't believe they're paying us to do this! When it hits the market, this thing...it's going to be *huge*."

"Does it hurt at all?" said Simon. "I mean, the operation."

The woman leaned in closer, whispering now. Simon noticed now that there was no music playing in the room. "I have to admit, I was a bit worried at first. Even when the operation turned out to be painless, I thought: 'What if my body rejects this? What if the electronics fries my brains? Or worse yet, what if this is a scam? Maybe there isn't even a chip, maybe you go in every month and one day they put you under and you find yourself in a ditch somewhere with a botched stitch job on your side and a kidney missing.'" The woman leaned back a bit and spread her hands theatrically. "And then the music started." Her eyes shone, fixed on a point beyond Simon, transfixed by her own recollections. Maybe she was hearing something right now. Josh chuckled.

"That's what I'm talking about, man," he said. "It's a trip. No pills required."

Simon's name came up on roll-call. He looked at the woman, not entirely convinced by her argument. Knowing he had little to lose, though, he followed a nurse out of the waiting room.

The procedure was indeed quick and painless. It was the interview on his mental and medical histories that were unbearably long and unpleasant. One of the nurses said it was important to be thorough, but he was sure a prostate exam was pushing it a bit far. The psychological exam was also invasive.

"How many sexual thoughts do you have in the course of a day?" asked a middle-aged man who looked like a turtle. "Do any of them involve animal husbandry?"

Before the operation, Dr. Sheila Pleats met him in a cramped office.

"Well, Mr. Benedict," she said. "Looks like you passed the physical with flying colours. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

"Yes. I was wondering how experimental this treatment is."

"At this point we've long been testing on human subjects, if that's what's making you hesitate. The IMT electronic module I'm about to administer to you is the fruit of ten years of research—past the experimental and well into the fine-tuning phase."

"What kind of music, by the way, am I going to hear? Do I get to make a playlist, with some Zeppelin, maybe?"

"Unfortunately, current copyright constraints prevent us from offering our patients any popular music," said Dr. Pleats. "For the moment, the module is programmed to improvise with different classical styles and jazz standards. Do you enjoy classical music?"

"I guess."

"Don't worry," she said. "The module is quite adaptive, you'll find out. It will take into consideration your existing musical tastes and attempt to translate them into something as palatable to you as the occasion allows."

"Sort of like Robert Plant and Jimmy Page with an Egyptian orchestra," Simon offered.

"Something like that, yes," said Dr. Pleats. "Shall we begin?"

The doctor opened a drawer and produced an apparatus from behind her desk that seemed a cross between Terry Fox's metal brace, an oxygen tank and an automatic rifle.

"Just sit still," she said as she walked around the desk and came to stand to his left. "This will only hurt a little."

Something stung behind his ear and made a hissing noise and the doctor was back in her seat.

"So," she said. "When would be a good time to schedule our first follow-up examination?"

**

Simon was told it would take a day or two for the module to activate. First it had to gather some data, measure heart rates and chemical levels during waking and sleeping states. It would most likely be discreet at first, then peak for a very short while. Soon after it would find its middle ground and begin working its art.

"There's an orchestra inside your head, now, and you're the composer," said Dr. Pleats before he left. "I'm sure you'll write a memorable symphony."

But after a week Simon hadn't heard anything, and was close to desperation. The long hours were wearing him down, and more than ever he wanted to quit his job and be done with all the noise, the pain in his shoulders, the shouted orders. Exhaustion made him forgetful and careless; he returned to the basement more often to retrieve missing ingredients, plates came back to his sink that he hadn't washed correctly the first time around, the floors were never swept well enough and customers complained that they found bits of old food at their feet. Simon worked a little longer still to get everything done right, even though the owner said he couldn't afford to pay him more than sixty

hours. He probably could have scaled back the hours with the money he would be making with IMT, but he was afraid that asking for fewer hours would be grounds enough to get fired and where would that leave him then? With no significant job experience and debts too great to consider going back to school, he would probably have to fall on welfare, and by the time his first check came in, he would be too late on payments to ever make ends meet anyways. There was nothing else to do but to keep his head down and hope this storm would pass.

On the eighth day it did. On a particularly busy Friday evening, Simon was down in the basement to load a crate with some fresh vegetables and cuts of meat. Ralph wasn't sending him out on useless errands tonight but he was keeping an eye on him and criticized him at every turn. Anxious to make it to the kitchen as fast as possible but dreading yet another run up two flights of stairs, he massaged his aching calves briefly before starting to climb.

Perhaps he was clutching the crate too tightly, or his attention was focused too far ahead, but Simon missed a step and scraped an elbow, just barely keeping the food from catapulting out. Still, a single lemon toppled out and down on a stair, which almost stopped his heart from beating. Not because of the fall itself, but because of the sound it made as it did. He imagined the composer for a cartoon in the 50's would have written something quite similar to it. When the lemon popped out of the crate, half a dozen violins plucked a single note in unison from invisible strings. For a moment the lemon seemed to hang in mid-air and no other sound emerged but, having reached its peak, the fruit then descended, accompanied by a flutter of flutes playing down a major scale. Cellos hummed on their lowest strings as the lemon slowly rolled across the stair and

dropped with another pluck from the violins, then resumed its humming again until the lemon dropped on the next stair and started tumbling faster to the sound of alto violins playfully skidding downwards. Rolling across the basement floor it finally came to a stop against a far wall, earning it a single sharp ring from a triangle.

Simon thought this was already a little too intrusive when the music started playing to his every move. The first two steps down were played by a bassoon's comical spurts, and the rest of the flight to the basement was accompanied by a sizeable reed section. The effects of the module were so intense that Simon wondered how he would make it through the evening shift; his every move was paired with an orchestral flourish which, added to the kitchen din, was almost unbearable. Pleats had urged him to take a few days off to let the module get warmed up but he hadn't even considered it. He just couldn't afford to take that chance.

Now he was overwhelmed, regretting everything he'd ever done: the cruel things he'd told his parents; leaving his hometown; taking this job; letting himself become gradually estranged from everyone he'd known; and going to IMT with vague hopes of making it better somehow. He was reconsidering the option of taking the night off, whatever the consequences, when a rhythmic xylophone melody ignited, its wooden timbre smooth and reassuring. Simon decided to stay.

Then something happened that changed everything. In the kitchen, one of the junior cooks, Adam, was cutting a tomato with a blunt knife. When Simon came in, Ralph barked at him about his speed and Adam looked up just long enough to smirk. Had he paused while doing this, he would not have lost his finger among slices of ripe

Campari tomato. Adam squealed as his blood shot out two yards, painting Simon, another helper and Ralph in artistic streaks of crimson, like the first layer of a Pollock triptych.

Everyone was too stunned to move—except for a flailing, sans-index Adam—but Simon snapped to action, music exploding in his head. Contrabasses huffed rhythmically as he stepped out of the kitchen to scoop a pail of ice from the dispenser and plopped the lone finger in a plastic bag. A string section streaked at irregular intervals as he bandaged Adam, now white-faced. Reed pipes played up and down an atonal scale as he whipped off everyone's bloody aprons and threw them all crisp ones. A harp strummed icily as he wiped every surface clean. He was already finishing Adam's salad when the floor manager bustled in to ask what the screaming was about. Ralph watched Simon as he pulled fresh orders from the printer, slipped them into their clips above the counter, and started chopping some chives.

"I've just promoted the dishwasher to junior cook," the chef said gruffly.

"Fine time to be making staff changes," said the manager. He pointed to the bandaged boy gripping the counter with his good hand. "You! Stop standing around and clean those dishes!"

Ralph behaved differently with Simon after that. No more cruel jokes, no more diatribes. For years Simon had taken this in silence, as wordlessly as he'd salvaged the evening rush just minutes ago. But when he picked up that knife, Simon spoke a language that Ralph could probably understand better than English, and he spoke it with a fluency that surprised even him.

"Why don't you all stop prattling and get to work," said Ralph, returning to his pans with one last look at Simon, who hacked and sliced on his wooden surface to a concerto reminiscent of Vivaldi's "La Primavera."

**

Over the next few months, Simon's head was often filled with such uplifting music. Much of it was in the Dixieland genre, which he became quite fond of. Weeks flashed by and Simon's life improved drastically. He continued as junior cook at the restaurant in the evening and attended a culinary arts school during the day. At IMT, he always passed the monthly examinations with flying colours, and the staff there looked to him with great hopes for the future. His, of course, but theirs as well, since a few of their main investors were especially impatient about monetizing this research. He ran into Josh again and they became fast friends. He had been busy, successfully expanding a snowboard equipment business out west and looking to venture into real estate with the profits he'd raked in. They spent a lot of time together going out, meeting women, talking about the future. Months turned into years. Simon met a woman, Candace, started dating her, moved out, bought a new guitar, got back in touch with his parents, graduated as a chef, went on vacation down south with Candace one winter and married her one night on a drunken dare, returned to the city with plans to open his own restaurant, partnered up with Ralph and Josh, who took care of the first down payment—"Sure, I'll spot the twenty grand!"—had a lucrative first month after the grand opening and even more lucrative quarters afterwards. Word got out that the old restaurant where Simon and Ralph used to work might be going under, and so the three partners bought it before it did. Candace gave birth to a baby boy, then a girl, then another girl. Simon released his

first recipe book, sold millions, released another one, sold tens of millions. Meanwhile Josh bought out Vans and Burton, had four kids of his own with his trophy wife, Shoshanna, launched the Josh Warped Tour, bought a mansion in every country of coastal Europe. Simon, after designing an affordable-yet-reliable line of kitchenware to which he'd recently added the Pocket Pesto Maker, became the poster boy for IMT, who saw the sales of its Adaptive Symphony MicroUnits skyrocket so fast as to render amphetamines obsolete within the year.

**

One afternoon, as they sat on the front porch of Josh's Los Angeles mansion and reflected on their fruitful lives so far, Josh's phone rang. When he hung up, Simon asked him why he looked so suddenly gloomy.

"Simon," he said, seriously. "Remember when I told you one of my buddies worked with IMT?"

Simon shook his head.

"Well, that was him. He just called to tell me that a lot of the beta-testers have been doing poorly in recent weeks. How long has it been since your last exam?"

"I've been so busy lately, I can't even remember. More than a year, for sure."

"Well, I think we should check in again, maybe get those chips removed. It's not like we really need them anymore, right?"

Simon stared into the landscape, across the highways, through the skyscrapers and the hills beyond. It was strange... he'd admired this view dozens of times before but in this moment it seemed completely foreign to him. He wasn't even sure he knew how he'd gotten to Josh's place. "I hope you're right."

**

Simon's tight schedule meant his next visit at IMT would be a month from now. During this interval he went to bed thinking more often about what a blur his life had been. How had he reached this point in life? How had he ended up living in a place that had enough room for five small families? He couldn't remember ever even wanting half the things he now possessed. He just knew that once, all that had mattered was to see the day when he could finally pay off that damned credit card. So many things can get in the way of simple plans, he thought. Even good fortune.

The music was still with him, but these days it played far less often. Or perhaps he was so used to it now that it had become second nature to him, like the sound of his breath. In any case, its initial purpose had been to motivate him and he supposed motivation was no longer a necessity. What could he possibly need that he didn't already have, anyways? He decided it made no difference if, from now on, he would have to turn on the radio to hear a tune. Just like that, his mind was made up.

It was on the morning following that decision that the music started playing again in his head. At first it was soft, a melody heard from another room. He was having breakfast. The kids were playing video games. He figured the music came from there. But as he put his plate in the sink and walked upstairs to change, he experienced a flashing moment of déjà-vu. He heard a melody again. With the door closed, this time it had to be coming from inside his room.

For the moment it was faint, though, and as soon as he left the room it was drowned out by all other sounds. A few days later at a book launch he heard it again. Now there was no denying it, he'd heard the melody before. He'd never really taken an

interest in classical music, though, so he sang part of the melody to the next person standing in the book-signing queue to find out what it was.

"Well that's Ravel's 'Bolero,' of course," said an older man. "Why, are you fond of it?"

"I don't know."

"Most horrendous crime to humanity ever committed, if you ask me," said the man as he shuffled off. Watching him walk away, Simon noticed something like the distant beat of a military drum, slow and steady.

A week later, in an Italian studio where he was the guest cook for a television program called *La Prova del Cuoco*, the Bolero noticeably increased in intensity. It happened that this particular edition of the show was airing live, and an interpreter was there to translate the host's questions to Simon in English. Simon was about to chop some tomatoes for a Valencian paella when a full string section leaped into the melody he had sung to the man at the book signing, and he hesitated for a moment.

"Antonella asks if this is your first time on Italian television," said the interpreter.

"No, as a matter of fact," he said. "But it is my first time doing a live reality television show."

Antonella and the interpreter laughed pleasantly.

"Miss Clerici says that with all these book signings, perhaps you haven't had the opportunity to spend much time in the kitchen?" He gestured towards the counter, which was still littered with all its untouched ingredients.

"Oh, I cook every day," said Simon a bit tersely as he gripped the tomato and began swiftly slicing, then chopping it. "I'm just not used to being interviewed in another language when I do."

The interpreter translated for Antonella, but she took a bit longer than Simon had, and Antonella responded with something that both seemed to find hilarious. The interpreter didn't relay the joke, however, and only gave Simon a furtive sideways glance as he snickered.

Just then, the brass section blared into existence as Simon was looking away, which coincided with two significant events: the first time someone cursed in English live on Italian national television, and the loss of part of Simon's index finger, both of which went viral the following day.

Simon did not wait a month to meet with Dr. Pleats. He obtained an appointment as soon as he left the hospital where they succeeded in getting his finger reattached to his hand. By the time he was in her office, the music had become so loud he had to ask her to shout to him.

"Mr. Benedict. A few new glitches in the beta modules have come to our attention recently."

"Glitches!" shouted Simon.

"Glitches, yes."

"That sounds a little weak to me, doc," he bellowed as he held up his bandaged hand.

"Well, let's try and turn down that volume, if we can, shall we?"

Pleats pushed some keys on a laptop and tapped enter. Simon brought his hands up to his ears and screeched. The doctor frantically pushed some more keys, to no avail. Simon wept.

"Make it stop!"

Dr. Pleats saw only one possible option, but recommended they wait. Perhaps the song would end at some point?

"It's been playing for weeks, night and day! Take the module out!"

"Well, we've taken a look at the scans from this morning and it appears the module has..." Here she cleared her throat, but the drums were too loud for Simon to hear. "The module has attached itself to your brain, Mr. Benedict, in a way that would make extraction impossible without taking a piece of tissue out with it."

Since he didn't seem to catch that last phrase, she had to write it down for him, clearly embarrassed.

"Do it!" he shouted. "I don't care what waivers I have to sign! Just do it or I'll rip that fucking thing out myself!"

**

Part of Simon's brain left him a week later, and with it a lot of what made Simon who he was; or at least, who he had become. After convalescence, he was able to walk again, but there were many things he couldn't do anymore like: appear on television; write a cookbook (or sign one); make love to Candace; remember the names of his children; remember Josh's face. He did have a strong reaction when Ralph visited, though, which they all thought was a good sign. For a long time, though, all that Simon seemed eager to do was clean the dishes at home. In the morning, he poured things on

them so they would get dirty and then set himself at the sink all afternoon to carefully soak and wipe them clean. The knives were kept at a safe distance.

As the weeks passed with no improvement, Candace began to find him thoroughly depressing and decided it was time Simon got out of the house. She phoned the old restaurant he used to work at and now owned, and arranged for him to meet with Ralph, who'd taken over the management. Simon was immediately drawn to the kitchen sink and asked, in the non-verbal way that they were now all accustomed to, whether he could work there. Much to his chagrin, Ralph had to decline, knowing that in his state Simon would be unable to cope with even the morning rush. But when he saw how devastated his old friend was, he told him they'd figure something out.

That night, before closing time, Simon slipped into the first restaurant that had ever hired him and shuffled to the back, where he slipped on an apron and rubbed his hands.

"Hey, what are you doing in here, creep?" said the evening dishwasher. "We're closed."

"Watch your tone, boy," said Ralph, coming into the kitchen. "That's your boss you're talking to."

The dishwasher shook his head as he tossed his dirty apron and headed out the door, too weary to argue.

Spare Parts

On a clear spring afternoon, in the kitchen of her two-bedroom house in Union Heights, one of several suburban sectors reserved for childless couples north of New Montreal, Helen Roobs decided she'd had enough. Enough, especially, of the Man in White, but also enough of the long hours at the Corrections of Historical Facts Agency, the state-mandated segregation of infertile communities, and the numbness that lingered despite an uninterrupted string of evening parties with other aging, childless couples. Enough of Daniel, the heedless man whom, nowadays, she referred to as her husband mostly for tax purposes, and also as a means of discouraging her many persistent suitors.

Not that all of these men were undesirable—far from it, in fact. True, nearly every man who approached her was more handsome than her disproportionately wiry-and-pot-bellied waste of a husband, but many were more than conventionally handsome. And so was Helen. At thirty-seven, she was as attractive as in her college years, with jaw-length auburn hair, a petite frame, and a round, perfectly symmetrical face. In the city, she had turned heads everywhere she went and frequently accepted men's advances. Even after meeting Daniel, she'd found it impossible to turn them all down. Since moving to Union Heights, however, she found she could no longer do it. In the city, strangers had regularly called her sugar, darling, honey. But out here, she was Mrs. Roobs. Looking good, Mrs. Roobs! Been working out, Mrs. Roobs? Laura and I would love to have you over at our place this evening, Mrs. Roobs.

So what if she could still sleep around? Polyamory in the Heights was not only condoned but encouraged, and that was the rub: how damned acceptable it all was. There was just no enjoying it.

Later that day, in a pub downtown, two couples sat around their drinks: Helen and Daniel Roobs; Carl and Brea Baker. The women seemed excited to be there, especially Brea.

“The Man in White!” She squirmed in her seat, combing back a lock of brown hair behind her ear. Her eyes sparkled and her warm, round face was slightly flushed. “How exciting! He’s finally in our sights!”

“Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” said Carl. Brea’s husband shared her enthusiasm in most things, but today his allegiances were divided. He tried to remain placid behind that rugged chunk of a face, maintain an engineer’s composure as he measured the tension between the Roobs from across the table. “We still need to read more of the data.”

“Are they alright, though? Where are my…” Daniel Roobs, a lanky man with wide green eyes, shot a nervous glance at his wife: “Where are *the* boys?”

“I told you not to call them that!” said Helen. None of them would likely be here right now if it weren’t for her. She rounded on Carl and asked: “Those critters still tailing the Man in White?”

Carl smiled thinly. Perhaps Helen was being hard on Daniel, but she was right not to call them boys. Infertility was a burden for all of them, yet he could only imagine how women coped with it. The prospect of never fulfilling a mother’s role, the shame of being relocated to a special part of town, the gradual change from confused but hopeful adolescent to social pariah. All this in the name of assisting in nature’s so-called plan to control human population. Daniel had his heart in the right place, but he was a fool to think Helen would ever have adopted his mechanical creations. She was too scarred, and

too proud. If he'd told her about his inventions beforehand instead of showing her half-finished child-robots, her reaction might have been milder. At least they were on talking terms again. Although if this was their public face, he'd hate to see what life was like for them behind closed doors.

Brea had told Helen to be grateful Daniel wasn't doing anything sinister down in that basement. In a neighborhood where only childless couples lived, people sometimes fell into strange habits. Helen wondered briefly whether the Bakers had hit that kind of knot and, after a short consideration, decided they hadn't. They looked too damned happy. She'd read the research on how infertile individuals could cause a reduction in well-being for the fertile members of their communities and believed it was crap. Carl and Brea were the living proof that not all infertiles were sad and dour. They reinforced Helen's notion that these statistics were a fabrication of the government. Population control was simply easier to manage when you separated the withered fruit from the fresh ones. Family inspectors had less territory to cover, which meant less government spending and more money in the taxpayers' pockets. In theory at least. She hadn't figured it all out yet. But she knew there had to be something ominous behind all of this, and she was certain the Man in White had something to do with it. If she hadn't asked Daniel to destroy those critters, it was only because she thought they might get her closer to the truth.

"I wish you wouldn't call them that," said Daniel. He turned to Carl. "Where are Victor and Hector now?"

“We know they’re further uptown, but for some reason Victor isn’t sending text feeds anymore.” Carl produced a screen from his pocket and showed it to the couple.

Helen snatched it and made her fingers dance on the surface.

“Why didn’t we use a video feed?” She scrolled through pages of text.

“Not enough battery life in them for that,” said Carl.

“I’m sorry,” said Daniel, unnerved by Helen’s reproving glare. “They were built to stay inside the house! I never expected them to go this far.”

Besides, this hurdle had given Carl and Daniel an opportunity to pool resources and share each other’s knowledge of mechanical engineering. Since building robots without a license could incur a hefty fine, and building robots that looked like children was outright illegal, there had been a great deal of sneaking around. But breaking some rules had been part of the fun. Carl had to swipe a few articles from work in order to build an encrypted communications link that could span a few dozen miles. Most of the groundwork had been Daniel’s, though. Carl was constantly in awe of his colleague’s ability to make so much out of so little. Years of painstaking labour and stealthy accounting tricks (that is, stealing parts from work) to build two robots that, while short of meeting commercial standards by a long shot, were impressive in their own respect, and a tribute to the man’s patience.

“Text feed is actually better,” said Carl. “A video feed is more resource-hungry, and more fragile.”

Daniel hunched down to peer into the screen with Helen, who tilted it ever so slightly in his direction. Brea flashed a smile at Carl, who squeezed his wife’s hand and hoped this was a sign the Roobs’ marriage was not past saving.

“What’s this?” Helen’s brow was tightly knit.

Carl craned his neck to get a look at the screen and said: “That’s Hector’s feed. The text in grey is peripheral information—cars, trees, buildings, non-target human movement—anything that comes into their field of vision that isn’t critical. Black text is target-sensitive information.”

“There’s much less of it,” said Helen.

“Ergo, much more time-effective, which is why we’re better off without video. We might have wasted eight hours just sitting here, waiting for something to happen.”

“Or gotten wasted for eight hours,” said Brea, signalling the waiter for another round of drinks.

“It looks like they got onto a bus,” said Daniel. He peered at the screen, grazing Helen’s hand as he flipped through the windows in search of Victor’s feed. Most of that text was grey, which was to be expected—Victor was travelling blind, propping Hector up on his shoulders, both of them inside one pair of overalls. Together, they were meant to be disguised as a human adult; Victor was the legs, Hector the arms and face. Because both were built to look like seven year-olds, Daniel had had to put an older face on Hector, and lengthen his arms. The disguise wasn’t perfect, but it was all they’d had time for, and as long as no one looked too closely, they looked human. If no one talked to them, they would even pass as an adult. He fingered his green shirt as he read Hector’s text feed, which indicated the Man in White was still in sight.

**

Hector wanted to hug the Man in White very badly. It wasn’t his fault; this was what he’d been programmed to do. He wanted to hug a man in green when he’d first been

built, and then someone in navy blue, but this was non-critical information for the moment. His new target was a male human shape with white garments, standing five feet away, staring out the window of the bus they were travelling on, though Hector wouldn't have known to call it a bus. His main interest was with the color white. Sweet, gentle, nurturing white. His head was filled with the color, and he had to resist the urge to walk over to the man and touch him right away. The yearning was built into him, but so was a warning, which told him to observe the target from a distance. The objectives were to follow, wait, and look. So, from behind a pair of black sunglasses—which, along with a green cap and matching green overalls, helped mask his age—he looked. Underneath, Victor held his legs, completely hidden from view except for his feet sticking out from the overalls. Between the two of them, they looked like an adult human.

Between two buttons, Victor could see a human shape sitting across the aisle, wearing green pants. What a lovely color, green. How he yearned to see that human shape again—the one that wore green—and wrap his arms around it. He was further away from the green human shape than he'd ever been—humming, soothing, gentle green—but he was to return soon. The bus halted, and he clung to Hector's legs to keep them both from toppling over. Then he felt his companion's knees squeeze his neck, which meant he was supposed to stand up. Victor pushed forward and up, nearly falling over, then regained balance. Just like the two male human shapes had taught him a few days earlier, the green one and the one with a bigger face—that one had installed a text feed so Victor could talk to them from far away. Hector signalled him, and Victor walked.

**

“They got off the bus,” said Helen. “Door almost caught Victor’s foot.”

Daniel smiled cautiously. Could Helen be warming to them the slightest bit? Perhaps this Man in White was a blessing in disguise, after all. For a while, he’d believed the man’s appearance had signalled the end of their marriage. Helen had first spotted him early one morning, just before heading out to work—a middle-aged man in a pristine white suit, carrying a black garbage bag. When she’d gone out to take a look, the man was already gone. Daniel was away, and she’d decided to keep this to herself until, the following week, the man had reappeared around the same time, just before work. She saw him through the kitchen window as he approached the curb in an almost regal gait and dropped a large garbage bag ceremoniously down among a neat pile left by the neighbours. Again, the man had slipped away from her before she got the chance to see where he was headed. Over dinner that night, Helen had told Daniel, but he’d written off the event as trivial. He failed to see why she would fuss over such a small thing.

“Don’t you want to know who this man is, she asked? Don’t you want to know why this man is leaving trash on our street?”

“What difference does it make?” asked Daniel. “Why should I care if someone else’s trash mixes with mine? It’s all headed to the same place anyways.”

“So why is he leaving trash in someone else’s neighborhood, if it all ends up in the same dump?”

“How do you know this man isn’t from this part of town?” he retorted.

“He was old enough to be from the retirees’ neighborhood. I swear I’ve never seen this man before.”

Daniel had shrugged.

“It’s only trash.”

Helen’s interest in this mysterious man had gradually turned into an obsession. She waited by their doorstep before leaving for work every day, standing there until the last possible moment, fingering the car keys. She arrived late for work several times, and even took two days of sick leave. Evenings, she sat in the living room with the lights turned off, staring out the window into the street, flinching minutely every time someone walked underneath a streetlamp. All this time, Daniel was working tirelessly in the basement, building for his wife something he believed, more and more, would make her happy again. He’d sought Carl’s advice about this, shown him the basement when their wives were out together. He’d been crushed by Carl’s reaction. These are amazing pieces of work, he’d said but he wasn’t sure they’d make Helen any happier. Why didn’t he spend more time with his wife?

“Because I won’t nurture this obsession over some man she may or may not have seen. She needs a more positive distraction. She wanted children so much. Think of what a difference this could make.”

“How... human could these little tykes ever be?” Carl had wondered out loud.

Daniel whipped out a small screen from his pocket and asked: “What color would you say your shirt is, Carl?”

“Navy blue.”

Daniel tapped away at the screen and returned it to his pocket. One of the robots began walking towards Carl, who took a few steps back, then stopped when his friend motioned to him not to be alarmed. The child-robot, only partially covered with synthetic skin, reached its target and, opening its arms wide, hugged him gently, sighing with

contentment. Navy blue was what Victor had thought—had just been programmed to think. Warm, caring, navy blue.

“Victor’s text feed just went out,” said Helen, pulling her husband out of his reverie.

“Lord, what happened?” The couple attempted to decipher the text from the moment when Hector and Victor had left the bus leading up to the last few minutes of Victor’s feed. Hector had been following his target for hours, walking in circles around the city, without pause. An hour ago, Hector’s target had entered a building. Hector, intent on maintaining visual contact, had abandoned his disguise and rushed behind the closing door.

“So Victor is heading back to home base, right?” Hands clasped, Brea leaned forward to hear the rest.

“He was, until just a few minutes ago,” said Daniel. He pointed to a map on the screen. “Something happened here, in what looks like an alley. He’s not moving anymore, and he’s not sending a text feed.”

“Neither is Hector,” said Helen, biting her fingernails.

“We should go,” said Carl. “Daniel, Brea, you find Victor. Helen and I will take Hector’s trail.”

It was all Brea could do to suppress a scream of delight. Helen was equally agitated, but there was a hint of fear in her now.

Daniel and Brea soon found the alley. In the waning light of day, it was difficult to see clearly what was hiding in that narrow corridor between buildings. They ventured in, cautiously, calling out Victor’s name. After a spell, they were answered by a deep,

sustained growl. A hulk of a mongrel was sitting next to a vent, chewing the remains of Victor's left arm. The two crept slowly back, clasping each other's arms.

"What now?" Brea looked at Daniel, concern washing over her face. "That was mighty frightening, wasn't it?"

Daniel moaned: "Oh, why did I ever agree to do this?"

"You've got your wife, still. You've got that much to be grateful for."

"Of course I'm grateful! I was doing this for her all along!" Daniel was pulling at his hair, eyes tearing up. "I spent years preparing this gift for her, and now I've just watched it blow away in the space of a day."

Brea looked back into the alley, frowning. "I didn't see the rest of Victor in there. That was some big mutt over there, Daniel, but I doubt that he'd be able to swallow a seven year-old boy's weight in metal." That seemed to calm Daniel down.

"If you're right," he said, "he might just make it back. The tracker that led us here was in that arm."

"But how will he find his way without the tracker?"

"That was just for us to find him. He finds me simply by retracing his steps," said Daniel.

"But he walked for hours without being able to see anything!"

"Well, if I asked you to close your eyes and take five steps forward, would you be able to find your way back to where you started?"

"Of course, dummy," said Brea, hands on hips.

“And if you took five steps, turned left, then took another ten, you’d still be able to retrace that path?” Brea nodded. “Well, Victor’s memory can retrace thousands, perhaps even millions more steps than that.”

“That’s a hell of a trek, Dan,” said Brea. “But what about the bus? Wouldn’t that throw Victor off?”

Daniel smiled. “Without his tremor sensors, it would.”

“What are tremor sensors?”

“Try to imagine that your skin is very sensitive.”

“No need to imagine that, Dan. This gal uses hypoallergenic soap.”

“Yes, yes, but suppose for a moment that your skin is so sensitive that you could count the rotations of a wheel just by feeling its vibration through the seat of a bus.”

“I’d say Carl would be a very grateful man indeed.”

Daniel rolled his eyes.

“OK, so you’re telling me—what—that Victor can retrace his steps back thanks to simple math and sensitive skin?”

“In a nutshell. Though I’ve got your husband to thank for the tremor sensors. That was his idea.”

“Well, Carl may have given you a hand, but he hasn’t stopped talking about what a great mechanic you are,” said Brea.

He smiled weakly. “Well, I appreciate that, but what I’ve been trying to be is a good husband.”

Four miles away, in the affluent part of town, Helen and Carl stood by the gates of an ancient-looking villa. Helen pushed the buzzer for the fourth time, fuming. Carl stood quietly by, peering through the ornately-crafted bars at the gardens beyond.

“Figure they’ve got kids?” Helen spoke to Carl, but she was staring straight ahead. “Big place like this is bound to have at least a dozen kids running around.”

Helen’s persistence had paid off twice in just two weeks. She wasn’t about to back off now, not when she was this close to finding out about this goddamn white trash-man. Just two weeks ago, she’d seen him again on their street. Oh, the waiting had paid off, yes it had. The Man in White had been carrying—dragging, actually—a large garbage bag across the pavement. She hadn’t had the courage to walk up to him and ask what his deal was; Daniel was right, though she was loathe to admit it. It was probably only trash. Or was it? She’d run outside and dragged the bag into the house before scooting off to work, then took the afternoon off and spent hours digging through that trash, sorting its contents out on the kitchen floor: grapefruit rinds, apple seeds, tea leaves, a shrivelled plant, and receipts, receipts, receipts. She’d made a special stack for those. A stench had filled the Roobs’ house, but Helen had paid no mind to this. Then she’d come upon a folded diaper—a used diaper—and held it up for a long time, boiling with anger. Oh, the nerve, she’d thought! What right did these people have? *Are they trying to rub it in our faces? Do they think they need to remind us of our condition?* Daniel had walked in then and she’d run to him, holding the diaper to his face like a trophy: physical and undeniable proof that something was amiss in this neighborhood. Something was terribly amiss. Could he see that now?

If there had been a right moment to reveal his project to his wife, Daniel felt it was right there and then. I know, he'd said. It's unfair. We should be allowed to have some happiness, too. She didn't understand. I have something to show you, he'd said. She had followed Daniel down the basement stairs. Her stony expression compelled him to explain: he was trying to build them a family. This would make them happier. Yes, it was against regulations. Yes, they were going to have to be discreet. But they could have a semblance of a family at least, even if neither society nor nature would allow it.

This had sent Helen over the edge. Were it not for the Bakers, she would probably have left her husband. They had got together a few times after this, trying to sort things through. Brea and Helen had a number of heart-to-hearts and, upon hearing Helen's story about the Man in White, it became clear to Brea that she needed to draw Helen's anger away from Daniel and back to this. They discussed these mysterious circumstances for hours until Helen gradually let go of her resentment against Daniel and had a marvellous idea: what if the "critters" tailed the Man in White? Both of them were too busy with work and they couldn't afford a private eye, but those little critters could surely be put to some use? Carl suggested that Daniel go along with it. If he still cared about his marriage, this might save it.

Presently, Helen buzzed the gate yet again. To both their amazement, the massive doors of the villa opened up, and out came the Man in White. He walked down to the gates with measured steps.

"Yes?"

Helen was too stunned to promptly respond.

"How may I help you?" said the Man in White, with slight disdain.

“You work here?” said Helen.

“That’s correct,” the man answered. “Do you have an appointment with Mr. Sheldon?”

“Yeah,” said Helen. “Tell him his mistress is here.”

The Man in White left and Carl turned to her wearing a frown.

“I panicked,” Helen said. “I improvised.”

“Well, if you ever get in, I’m sure you’ll have other occasions to panic,” said Carl. “But it’s worth a shot.”

The Man in White came back out and opened the gate.

“Be careful in there,” said Carl.

He waited half an hour. Growing worried, he was beginning to entertain the idea of jumping over the gate, when Helen finally came out.

“What took you so long?” said Carl.

“Man offered me a cup of tea,” said Helen. “Would’ve been impolite to turn him down.”

They walked a few blocks in silence until Carl couldn’t hold back any longer.

“So what happened?”

“The Man in White’s a robot,” said Helen.

“Really?” said Carl. “He seemed so human. I’ve never seen one that realistic.”

Helen had been able to tell, though. Despite that subtle condescension, she’d known. Each time he’d asked a question his eyebrows had shifted up, his voice appropriately modulating, then trailing off at the end in waiting for a response.

“I know,” she said. “Turns out Mr. Sheldon is a tinkerer just like Daniel. A better one, I think, but an amateur nonetheless.”

“So, the trash bags...”

“Just a programming error,” said Helen. “Disappointing, isn’t it?”

**

Months later, Helen was washing up the dinner dishes as Daniel brooded in the basement. He seemed to have given up hope of seeing Victor return, but that hadn’t yet driven him to get rid of his tools. Helen sighed. On the outside, they had started getting back to a semblance of a normal marriage. Brea was especially enthusiastic about this turn of events, telling her that Daniel was a sensitive man, and that sensitive men were few and far between. Best to hang on to this one, and to remember she was no spring chicken. Helen resented the implication but followed her advice. The following day, she went out and had sex with the first man who paid her a compliment.

She thought about paying Mr. Sheldon another visit, perhaps try her luck with him. He hadn’t been indifferent to her charms. So what if he was a dead-end case like her husband? At least the man had money—perhaps enough money to buy her way back into the city, where she belonged. A few romantic evenings with him might be all she needed.

She hadn’t told Carl the whole story, of course. For example, she’d omitted to mention that the Man in White was partly Daniel’s invention. The GPS in the servant’s head was from a toy helicopter Daniel had made and lost—something he’d never bothered to tell anyone. Mr. Sheldon had found Daniel’s flying engine, which bore the initials D.R., in an alley a few years back. He’d trashed most of the parts but kept the GPS, which was hard to come by for unlicensed tinkerers—even ones as rich as he was.

One of his better robot-servant prototypes, which looked human enough to send out on errands beyond the walls of his residence, had eventually inherited this part to ensure its safe return to Sheldon should it ever get lost. The trouble was that Sheldon had messed up some of the code, and somehow hadn't entirely wiped the memory out of the GPS. The Man in White had begun retracing the helicopter's path on occasion, unbeknownst to either Sheldon or Daniel. Helen had noticed him, though.

The news of this had angered her. Daniel's hobby had almost pushed her over the edge. He was responsible for all of this, the dunce. He was responsible for her unhappiness.

**

Outside, Victor walked very slowly towards the familiar rectangular shape, the one with the human shape inside: the male one who wore green. He was so close to hugging him again that his wires nearly melted the plastic casing around them. Green, green, green, thought Victor. So near. He could almost feel where his arm used to be. Inside the brown rectangular shape there was a familiar human shape, but not the male one wearing labour blue. No. He had seen this human shape once, after leaving the basement, and she had not spoken to him. She had also never been a target, but she was in the same box as the target and Victor knew she must be to Daniel what Hector had been to himself—an ally. If she was there, the target was near. Green. Warm, luminescent green.

Victor halted as the female human shape came out of the rectangular shape. The human shape smiled. In both hands, she held an open-ended cylinder, inside of which she was inviting him to step. This was some sort of transportation device, probably. No time

to decide, she decided for him. There was a bit of tossing about, and then he was moving. Victor counted the rotations the wheels made.

“I was planning to pay a visit to Mr. Sheldon again, but not so soon,” said Helen from the front seat. “He’ll be delighted to get some new spare parts, I bet!”

Word of Oliver

Magdelaine lit a seventh cigarette and watched her husband pace up and down the living room, cutting through the smoke and uselessly trying to wave it away with his arms.

“How long’s he staying?” Hank asked.

“He’s just sleeping over a couple of days,” said Magdelaine.

She blew her first drag out in the same deliberate, measured breath they taught in yoga. Her instructor said you had to visualize your breath in order to truly experience it. She wanted to roll her eyes every time people used absolute terms like “truly.” Truly, you have to read this book, Maggie; this truly is the best paella I’ve ever tasted, Mag; having a child truly changed my life. Magdelaine feared their son might grow up without a sufficiently varied vocabulary, and so was always careful to speak to him as she would an adult. Hank feared worse: that Shawn might one day grow up into a version of his uncle Ollie. This sentiment was behind the gift he’d chosen for his eight birthday—a pocket thesaurus.

“Sleeping over? I was just on the phone with him, he never told me!”

“Well, I’m telling you now, aren’t I?” Magdelaine answered.

“You know how that always goes,” said Hank. “First Oliver is just sleeping over, and the next thing you know it’s four weeks later and he’s oversleeping.”

“That’s very clever, honey.”

“Don’t patronize me, Mag.”

“Then stop taking cheap shots at my brother.”

The other thing that bothered Magdelaine was her yoga instructor's insistence on making them visualize abstract things. Picture yourself as a solitary dot in the universe, Theo would say, and try to visualize your breath as the only active thing in that space. Such esoteric nonsense distracted rather than centered her, and it never helped her breath to seem more tangible. If Theo wanted them to see their breath, he should hold his sessions in a meat locker, or make them smoke.

"I'm just saying your brother tends to overstay his welcome. Last time Oliver left this house," said Hank, "I had to explain to Shawn why his uncle wasn't going to live with us anymore!"

"So? He likes Ollie!" Magdelaine said. "Our son can't bond with family?"

"He's a bad example, Maggie!"

"Give him a break, Hank! So, he needs a little help from us once in a while. He's just in a difficult financial situation right now. It's not like he's a nutcase or a drug-addict!"

"If he were, that would at least give him a reason for being such a freeloader. So what, if he's sober? That just means it's in his nature to go through life expecting hand-outs. What kind of an example is that for Shawn?"

Usually, Oliver's arrival put an end to Hank's diatribes, dissipating most of the tensions between the couple. A strange sight to see her husband turn so docile, and quite a leap from the Hank with whom, ten years before, she'd fallen in love—witty, always thinking on his feet, and maybe a little too proud. During his early years as a political science teacher, he had a great thirst for knowledge. He always craved having his opinions challenged to see whether they held water, and he also thrived on the heated

arguments his hard-headedness inevitably caused. At first this seemed like a healthy competitive streak, but victory made him cocky, and it became apparent he took too much pleasure in this pursuit.

Hank's intellect was a sword he brandished all too often. And not only on his academic peers (mostly because they tended to avoid him, or stick to small talk). In the absence of like-minded opponents, he would chip away at his wife's social circles, tolerating the drudgery of making new acquaintances only because he relished the anticipation of their intellectual defeat, the inescapable fate of which he was the author.

Magdelaine tried to reason with him, but to no avail. A great deal of his meanness went unchallenged, although she sympathized with the depth of his insecurity. And yet she couldn't stand idly by as Hank committed social suicide and yanked her off the cliff with him; she retaliated with full force. At social functions, whenever she spied her husband preparing for a kill, she floated through the crowd, flanked his prey and then, with practiced grace and feigned ignorance, proceeded to dismantle Hank's arguments. Three years of debate clubs during her undergraduate days turned out to be more of an asset than she would have imagined. She took no pleasure in doing this, but he'd left her no choice.

Eventually Hank took the hint and desisted, embarrassed by so many successive defeats. This didn't mean he was spared the company of his wife's friends and family. They were, after all, married. Over the years she had honed her conversational skills in a way that insured her brooding husband kept to himself without appearing too antisocial. She led most discussions and called on Hank's contribution only when superficial subjects were under discussion: how he liked the wine she'd picked out for dinner; what

the weather in Spain had been like during their last trip there. In short, she learned to out-talk him. She still loved the man, but he needed to keep his mouth shut.

“No, really!” Hank went on when he felt his wife’s mind wandering. “Last year Ollie spent five weeks here, during three of which he barely left his room even to sit at the dinner table with us. Was he grieving over someone then as well, or was he just lazy?”

“Hank, now’s not the time for a showdown with Oliver.”

Magdelaine said this half-heartedly. She sometimes regretted that Hank had become so tame. In moments like these, when her body vibrated with the excitement of a verbal battle, she was reminded how electric it had once been to talk with this man. For Shawn’s sake, though, she preferred Hank mute rather than bellicose. While his behaviour around Ollie sometimes threatened to veer into passive-aggression, he seldom initiated exchanges, avoiding conflict more out of spite than a desire to comply with her. To Hank, Ollie just wasn’t worth the effort it cost to talk to him. The truth was that Ollie bored Hank out of his mind. Any exchange between them could only further entrench his belief that Ollie was a dilettante and a parasite. There was nothing more to it. Funny, Magdelaine thought, that only when he was absent did Ollie bring out the worse in Hank.

“What are synonyms for lazy, Shawn?”

Magdelaine hadn’t even noticed the boy had come in. He stood in the doorway between the dining room and living room, looking absorbed by their argument, clutching his thesaurus in both hands. He carried it with him everywhere he went, per his father’s instructions.

“You’re going to be a man of letters,” Hank had said on his birthday. “No matter what you do, I promise you’ll do better if you can master your mother tongue.”

“What if I become a plumber?”

Hank had almost choked on his own spit.

“I think it’s a little early for you to make a definite career choice,” was Hank’s answer. “For plumbers to practice their trade, someone needs to tell them when and how to use the proper tools. Even plumbers have to be literate, whether their language is English, French or Farsi. Otherwise, how would they know they’re doing it right? How would teachers explain plumbing to their students? How would plumbers explain plumbing to their customers?”

Magdelaine, whose previous encounter with a plumber offered little to support her husband’s claim, had opted not to put in her two cents on the matter. Her policy was to avoid disagreeing openly with Hank as much as she could, especially when Shawn was around. But now her son had apparently heard a good portion of their argument; had witnessed his mother lighting cigarette upon cigarette—something she usually did in the downstairs bathroom, if in the house at all—and had probably heard his father bad-mouthing his favourite uncle Ollie.

“I thought you were over at Carl’s place, honey!” said Magdelaine. “How long have you been back?”

“Carl had soccer practice,” said Shawn. “He forgot about it, so I only stayed for a bit.”

Shawn’s fingers were almost white from holding the thesaurus shut. His father was still waiting for the synonym he’d ordered, but since Shawn was obviously

concerned that complying involved taking sides, this meant he'd indeed been there long enough. If the book wasn't already open, it might also mean that he hadn't yet heard an unfamiliar word. Magdelaine quickly replayed the argument in her head. She had to admit her debate team would have been thoroughly unimpressed with the lexicon she and Hank had used.

“Quick exercise, Shawn,” said Hank, clapping his hands. “We’re going to look up the word ‘lazy.’”

“Hank.”

The boy reluctantly began flipping through the “L” section. Idle, Shawn told his father, who shook his head. Slothful? No. Indolent, fainéant, otiose, sluggish.

“What was that last one? Not sluggish, the other one.”

“Otiose.”

Hank walked briskly across the room and pulled a large dictionary from one of the shelves.

“Define ‘otiose,’” he said, holding the book out in front of him.

Shawn shot a glance at his mother, who rolled her eyes, green lighting him to proceed. He took the dictionary and opened it at the middle, holding it with his left hand and turning the pages with the right, but it was too heavy for those small arms, so he sat down cross-legged and resumed flipping through until he found the word.

“Um, it means ‘disinclined to work or exertion.’”

“Kind of similar to what lazy means—keep going.”

“...used to describe something—”

“—or someone—”

“—or someone...who produces no result or effect. Someone who serves no useful purpose.”

Shawn could also have added, “has no excuse for being,” but “lack of purpose” seemed to quench his father’s thirst. Anyhow, it was at this point that Magdelaine decided to step up in defence of her brother.

“How about you define another word for me, Hank? Try ‘empathy.’ It’s a quality Oliver has that you should strive for.”

“Empathy’s for children and...”

“Children and what? The weak? Fools? Dunces?”

“Take your pick.”

“He isn’t uneducated, Hank. He’s been to school long enough.”

“Yes, but never quite long enough to get a degree,” said Hank. “Then again, I’m sure plenty of employers will hire him on the merits of three partial B.A.’s.”

“I’m going to stop you right there before you start spewing that elitist bullshit—”

“Maggie,” said Hank, looking meaningfully in Shawn’s direction. Magdelaine, however, barely lost a beat and jumped right back in:

“Stop using him as an excuse to get the upper hand, Hank! So what, I said ‘bullshit’—it’s in the goddamned dictionary!”

Shawn’s head was dug deep in both books now, hands moving swiftly across them.

“All I’m saying, Hank, is that not everyone has been as fortunate as you—”

“—please, not the silver spoon speech—”

“—you were sent to a good school—”

“—*great* school—”

“—some people just don’t get those opportunities in life—”

“—at which I worked very hard in order to maintain those grades—”

“—I mean, just the fact you got to study abroad, for crying out loud! He never had that opportunity—”

“—I only knew enough to seize the opportunities when they came. But your brother couldn’t do that—”

Magdelaine finished the sentence for him: “Yeah, yeah, because he wouldn’t recognize an opportunity if it came up and bit him in the ass.”

Hank was only momentarily thrown off: “OK, but let me ask you this, Maggie—how could anything bite his ass if he’s sitting on it?”

At this point Maggie got up from the couch and started dragging it across the living room.

“Maggie, what are you doing with that couch?”

“I’m moving it to your office! Oliver can’t very well sleep in the living room.”

“Oh, I see. So now he can sleep till noon *and* prevent me from working!”

The doorbell rang. On the floor, Shawn hardly noticed, absorbed as he was with his research. He hadn’t yet caught up with the argument, but was reading synonyms for fortunate: healthy, happy, prosperous, affluent, fortuitous.

Wayside

The country was supposed to be a place of peace and quiet but the mailman was ruining it for Tobias. The insects, the crumbling pavement, the gamut of shit-odours wafting from nearby farms. None of these were things he ever expected to become endeared to, but if living with his mother required him to endure them, Tobias was ready to make that sacrifice. He would take his morning jog outdoors for as long as was necessary. Then, when Laure got back on her feet and became financially solvent enough to buy them an indoor training set, the frequency of that sacrifice would be reduced to occasional trips to the grocery store, made from the safe confines of their air-conditioned hatchback. These inconveniences seemed perfectly tolerable given the one great advantage of living out in Birnham, which was the fact that it required little, if any, human interaction. Perfectly tolerable, that is, until one factored in the mailman.

From mid-spring to mid-summer, Tobias' communications had been blissfully limited to meal chats with his mother, occasional phone updates from his father (he received a late, inebriated call on his twenty-fifth birthday), and the occasional nod to the mailman if he was unlucky enough to pass him by during his morning run. For three days a week since April, Tobias had seen the stocky man churn his way toward him on that long stretch of a country road, painstakingly dragging a bike trailer filled with mail, his fat legs stretching to capacity variously loud and repulsively-colored spandex shorts.

The man's salute, which had initially started out as a bashful grin and a twitch of the head, gradually became more earnest and confident every time they reached speaking distance. Last week, Tobias even thought he'd detected the man's back straightening when they came into one another's sight, like a dog excitedly picking up a familiar scent. The man had even pushed the intrusion to its tipping point and said hello.

Fortunately his headphones were on, so Tobias had only mouthed a response back, which seemed like a polite way to acknowledge the man's presence and also let him know what the parameters of their relationship were going to be. Upon reflection, though, he didn't expect to pull this off more than a few times—if harmless nods had emboldened the mailman to open his mouth, who knew what a silent hello might provoke? One day soon, the enthusiastic simpleton would slow down, climb off of his rickety mountain bike and shove a sweaty palm at him. The idea alone of a conversation with this man made Tobias' heartbeat quicken. He slowed his pace down to compensate just as he was passing by a sign with "Birnam Wild Goose Observatory" written across it.

Migration season was still months away, which meant no birds and more importantly no people. The average distance between houses out here could be measured by smacking a baseball as hard as you could, running over to pick it up, and then smacking it again. The road was his—almost. You'd think a mailman would have the sense to load his hatchback and breeze through that distance, yet this one delivered on a bike as though this were World War II. Besides a handful of break-neck bicycle couriers in the cities, who else carried envelopes on two wheels anymore? Tobias was willing to bet that no one from Canada Post knew about this. Otherwise there would surely be a special-edition stamp with the fool's face printed across it. This was the sort of antiquated provincial bullshit that kept retirees sending actual birthday and holiday cards, letters to long-lost college friends and erratum notices to their local newspaper. The sort of bullshit that might prompt even more rural mailmen to abandon their cars and cycle through their

long, sparsely-populated routes in an attempt to show that kid from Birnham how much meat their calves packed.

Speaking of calves, Tobias thought.

In a grazing field across the road stood a fat cow, offspring sucking at its teat. That was something else he could have done without: all those the farms. The smell of manure made him gag every time he ran by one—and there were several in that five-kilometer stretch from his house—forcing him to take shorter breaths and throwing his rhythm off. On a good spring day the wind was strong enough to carry most of the stench away. But as the summer heat gradually asserted itself, notes of pungent, fertile earth blended with the sting of tractor exhaust, violating his nose whenever the wind lessened in the slightest. The first few hours after sunup, before the muck really started to heat up, were the least daunting for Tobias' senses. He wasn't likely to run for very long if he started past nine o'clock.

Tobias could have chosen to run at night, like he'd done in Longueil before the move. He'd have avoided the short but uncomfortable encounter with the mailman and most of the agricultural stench. The trouble was that unlike the neighbourhood he'd grown up in, this country road was unlit, if one dismissed the occasional bulbs that bathed the facades of solitary houses in shades of piss yellow. Besides, most vehicles roared through this road as though it were the highway, and an early-evening run had taught him that the encroaching darkness hardly slowed them down.

He didn't want to risk those conditions, especially when he saw how badly mangled the road kill was the following morning; skunks severed in half, frogs smashed flat, and masses of indistinguishable pulp—probably caused by a speeding truck—were

scattered along the way of Tobias' run. The occasional skid marks showed that not all night drivers were heartless or lacking reflexes, but the skidmarks also often ended with a dead animal. On a road with no stop signs for kilometers at a time and a speed limit of seventy, night runs were simply out of the question.

**

"Why don't you just head in the other direction?" Laure had asked her son one morning, during his usual pre-run airing of grievances about the road south of the house.

"The pavement is shitty for about five kilometers in the other direction," Tobias answered. "I'd break an ankle or something. I'm screwed either way."

"I guess that's what they mean by 'a rock and a hard place,'" she teased.

"Yeah, a rock and a hard place drowning under tons of crap."

"Slithering with bugs," she added, theatrically.

"Riddled with rusty razor blades," said Tobias, catching on.

"And broken syringes."

"Millions of unknown diseases hatching by the minute."

"Life is one big Petri dish of misery, isn't it?"

"Mom, lighten up," he said as he finished lacing his shoes. "You're bumming me out."

"Don't forget your biohazard suit," added Laure, as her son shut the front door behind him.

Laure returned to her breakfast, reminiscing. This little routine had been a favourite of his once. Andre, Tobias' father, had started the game. Whenever someone started complaining you were supposed to try and best their plight with a bleaker one.

The complainer had to retaliate with double force, and so on, until the made-up plights were so dark they made the real ones seem light in comparison. Andre's penchant for sarcasm and storytelling had often come in handy when their whiny kid had needed to be distracted—this was before the days of video games and portable DVD players—and once during a long drive to the cottage, a young and impatient Tobias had discovered the reach of his father's craft.

“How far to the cottage?”

“Not far, I hope,” Andre had said casually. “We've just entered wolf-country and I forgot to fill the tank at the last station.”

Laure had clicked her mouth at that. She'd hated it when he tried to scare the kid. But at eight years old Tobias already had a sharp and dark sense of humour.

“I'd rather be eaten by wolves than sit in this car,” he'd retorted.

“And I'd rather be eaten by wolves than hear you complain for another hour.”

“Another hour? Stop the car and let me out,” said Tobias.

“I'll tell you what,” said Andre. “Everyone unbuckle their seatbelts and I'll make a sharp turn into that tree. We'll all be out of the car much faster that way.”

The two boys had ended up jousting until they'd reached the cottage. Although Laure never enjoyed their game that much, she was the one to coin it “Plight-Off.”
Whose situation is most dire? I don't know, let's have a Plight-Off and find out!

Tobias had never grown out of that little boy—he'd only learned more words to express displeasure. Did he think moving out here was her first choice? She was a city girl at heart, but after the divorce she hadn't wanted to go back to renting and she couldn't afford a house anywhere near Montreal. When they heard, her parents offered

her the family house, which served as a cottage now that they had moved out into a smaller and more conveniently-located apartment.

Laure's childhood home was a centennial construction, but her father had always kept it in shape. When it was Pop's turn to be out of shape, her brothers had come in a few times a year to change the piping in the bathroom or lay down a new hardwood floor. From the inside, the place looked like it was ten years old at most. She expected many of her in-laws had thought of moving in before, yet there had been no need to Plight anyone off in the family to earn the right to occupy it—they knew her situation and had always looked out for each other. Besides, who really wanted to be stranded in the middle of nowhere to save on mortgage?

Many of the renovations had taken place after she'd left, which made moving back into the place she had grown up in somewhat easier. Seeing it again after so many years had depressed her at first, but the fact that the inside was mostly unfamiliar made her feel less like a troubled teen trying to figure out her next move. Some days driving up to the house, she still felt echoes of her initial embarrassment at the sight of familiar landmarks and faces. People waved, although she doubted they recognized her; they were probably just being neighbourly. She pretended not to recognize them, anyway. She was forty-two; too young to be at that point in life where one comes full circle. Making contact with the locals would mean making peace with the idea that she might end her days here.

Laure knew where these musings were headed and she tried to change their course by looking out the window to see whether Tobias had gone around the curb and behind the trees yet. But she was too late. The question was staring her down again: what

was she doing with her life? Avoiding that question had been easy when they first moved in. There were boxes to open, clothes to take out and arrange neatly into the wardrobe and dresser, floors to vacuum and walls to dust and wash. But settling in only took a couple of weeks and soon she was out of things to do.

At first she had counted her blessings that the house was already fully furnished. She wouldn't have been able to afford a set of chairs with the alimony she'd managed to squeeze out of her stingy ex, and shopping for large objects always made her uneasy, anyways. Each time she'd gone out with Andre for a washing machine or a new bed frame, she'd left the showroom before him. Those warehouses were meant to look like posh lofts, spacious and inundated with harsh lighting, but the pervasiveness of merchandise destroyed that bachelor's-pad allure. Everywhere she looked there were hundreds upon hundreds of bulky wares, impossible to lift, yet somehow not in the least way permanent, all of them shiny and improved, designed to replace an ever-growing mountain of earlier disposable versions of themselves.

Once the boxes had been folded up and stored in the basement, rearranging the furniture had seemed like the next logical step to keep idleness at bay. She wasn't delaying making life decisions—she was taking charge of her life! By moving the furniture around instead of replacing it, she was resisting the capitalist system. She was anti-conformist. Maybe even an anarchist. She was glad she kept most thoughts to herself.

**

When Tobias saw the mailman lying in a heap over his bike, he let out an irritated sigh. Anyone who couldn't steer clear of an accident at on a calm country road at this

man's slow speed shouldn't be allowed to ride on two wheels. How had he fallen, anyway? There was hardly any traffic to speak of this early in the morning, and while there wasn't a bike path, the road was still wide enough for a car to drive by without either of them needing to take the wayside. There were potholes, of course, but at the lurching pace he was going, even this moron couldn't possibly have hit one of them.

From where Tobias was standing it was impossible to tell how badly the man was hurt, but he looked unconscious. Should he go over and help? He couldn't just leave him there, of course, but he debated whether direct intervention was necessary, or even wise. He'd heard somewhere that moving an unconscious person could result in serious injury, though he couldn't remember whether this meant the person being moved or the one doing the moving. Perhaps it was both. It would be a shame to aggravate someone's condition and pull a muscle while doing so.

No, he should phone the accident in and resume his morning jog. It was bad for his cardio to make abrupt stops mid-run, anyway. Surely the mailman wouldn't hold it against him that he hadn't held his hand until the ambulance came. He wasn't a doctor, after all.

Tobias looked up and down the road—tall trees on either side and a corn field further north. The road curved slightly a few hundred feet in the other direction. Not a house in sight, so no chance that a good Samaritan might spot the mailman while taking out the trash. Southbound vehicles would see him from a good distance, but those driving north would barely have time to steer away once they cleared the bend. The man had to be moved, he supposed.

He started walking over and then stopped a few paces away. Wait a second; how did he know the mailman was unconscious? Inertia could mean any number of things; what if he was dead? Or worse, what if he was pretending to be out so he could mug Tobias? Sure, the man had always smiled and appeared friendly, but Tobias had paid none of that back—all he'd offered were curt nods behind his mirror shades.

What if the mailman had grown tired of his un-neighbourly attitude and decided to teach him a lesson? Movies about rural places often had these pivotal moments: restless country types took smug city boy for a ride one night in an alcohol-fuelled rage. A pickup truck, a parade of men wearing short-sleeved checkered shirts, baseball caps and hunting knives. Sure, they were only trying to get their kicks from scaring the shit out of that city boy, but somehow the booze and country music always got to their heads and things spiralled out of control. That one really crazy guy in the group would finally take things too far but no one would see it coming. There'd be a tense moment with all the hicks standing around the city boy's body, their hulky shapes backlit by headlights, the pickup's engine idling. Crazy guy would be saying "Shit, shit, shit!" until cool-headed hick told him to shut up and load the body in the truck. The following morning there'd be a hundred-fifty-pound mound of fresh earth above-ground somewhere in a nearby forest.

Tobias bit his lip, shifting nervously and stealing glances at a bush a few feet away from the mailman. For all he knew, his accomplices were squatting behind there right now, waiting for the right moment to pounce. Every course of action seemed fraught with danger. If he helped the man, he risked getting mugged. If he turned his back and walked away, he was equally exposed to a mugging. Birds and crickets chatted all around him, ominously.

**

The tire marks were like brush strokes. Frederic liked to follow them with his eyes sometimes during those long stretches of road where all he could see was fields, and the effort to keep pedalling became more demanding in a suddenly uneventful landscape. He sometimes imagined the road as one long canvas on which a painter worked during the darkest hours of the night, blindly brushing the surface with a giant bristle as he ran, guided only by the urine-coloured lights of farmhouses. Those skid marks were rarely seen without their complementary mess of flesh, though, and his fantasy was still ambiguous about whether the artist was a demented, sadistic man or simply distracted, omitting to look back on his work come morning. Still, in those moments, the weight of the bike trailer and its squeaky wheels almost faded, and his legs moved the pedals effortlessly, as though they were made of air.

He had to be careful not to get carried away in contemplation, however—he'd done that one too many times back in Montreal. Luckily he had a few friends at the post office's Human Resources, without whom transferring to Birnham might not have been an option. He hated to think what he would have lived on if they hadn't agreed to send such a pathologically absentminded postman to a safer, more sparsely-populated area. Not his paintings, that was for sure. He might as well have tried to sell his fat for soap on a street corner before putting his hopes into those. He could probably scam someone into selling them a piece of sky before he could burden them with one of his paintings. Especially a sky as beautiful as today's: crisp, fresh, blue, with clouds spread thinly out across it; like silk drapes carelessly thrown in the air and frozen mid-trajectory. If they moved at all it was hardly perceptible, although it was difficult to tell without any sort of

fixed point to relate with, like the edge of a forest, or a telephone pole. All he could see was sky.

“You banged your head,” someone said.

All he could see was sky—why was that?

“Are you okay?”

Frederic understood that he was lying on his back. He tried angling his body toward the voice, but his arms protested, stinging when he bent or moved them.

“Watch it, you’ve got cuts all over,” the voice went on. “You don’t seem too badly hurt, otherwise. I mean, you’re alive, and everything.”

“I don’t know that I deserve to be.”

“I found you in the middle of the road, you know,” continued the voice, apparently not hearing him. “If a car had turned that curb I don’t think it could’ve swerved in time. It beats me how you got there. I didn’t think you could topple a bike over that’s got two wheels trailing behind.”

Frederic tried to lift himself up again and this time he managed. They were on a farmer’s dirt road a few feet away from where it intersected with the paved one. His self-proclaimed rescuer was probably five years younger than him: well-groomed, muscular, gloomy demeanour. A small pile of blades of grass lay at his feet where he stood, torn into small pieces. He must have been waiting a while for him to come around. His rescuer promptly wiped them sideways with his shoe when he noticed the direction of Frederic’s stare.

“Thanks for your trouble. I’m Frederic.”

Tobias nodded and seemed not to notice that Frederic wanted to shake his hand.

“Sure. So listen, how did you manage to hurt yourself?”

“There’s something wrong with my chain. I’ve been meaning to fix it. It makes the gears skip every time this part goes round.”

Frederic’s bike lay on its side. He reached out to it to demonstrate. He turned the pedal, and every fifth turn or so, a rusted part of the chain caused the gears to start shifting then settle back, making a clicking-thumping sound—ker-klunk.

“I was pedalling hard at one point and I must have flown over my bike or something.”

Ker-klunk.

“No wonder you got knocked out,” said Tobias.

Frederic didn’t answer right away.

“I’m not sure I was unconscious, though.”

“I dragged you across the street,” said Tobias. “I think you would have noticed that.”

“I can be pretty good at shutting things out,” said Frederic. “I know this is going to sound weird, but...sometimes when I’m lying down I get so peaceful I don’t want to get up, wherever I am.”

“So you’re saying you were just lying in the middle of road and you weren’t even unconscious?” Tobias said. “I had to drag you and your bike all the way to the side of the road! Are you suicidal or something?”

“No, it’s not like that,” said Frederic. “Look, I’m really sorry. I’m sure you had better things to do than to haul my sorry carcass around. How can I make it up to you?”

“My mother’s coming to pick us up. You can make it up to *her* by getting back on that bike and saving her the trouble of driving you around.”

“That sounds reasonable,” said Frederic, slowly getting up. “By the way, why didn’t you call an ambulance?”

He went on quickly when he saw Tobias’ face change: “I mean, I don’t think I need one, it’s just what people normally do, you know.”

“I don’t have the number on my phone,” Tobias said, a bit bashfully. “This dumb town doesn’t have 911 yet, if you can believe that. Had to phone my mom for the number and she insisted on coming herself, said the ambulance would take longer anyways.”

“Perfect,” said Frederic. “I’ll get going, then. Still have to deliver this mail.”

**

Just as Frederic was dusting himself off and painstakingly getting one leg over his bike, Tobias spotted his mother’s hatchback driving toward them. She didn’t give Frederic a chance to put his ass on the seat.

“Your skin is raw,” Laure said. “You’re not riding that thing in the state you’re in!”

And that was that. She helped them load the bike and trailer into the hatchback and turned the car round toward their place. Neither Frederic nor Tobias could protest. Frederic sat in the front with Laure with Tobias was stuck in the back seat, part of which had been collapsed to accommodate the bike. Tobias listened, peeved, as his mother showered the man with questions, all the while warily eyeing the bike’s front wheel and hugging the door to avoid contact with the filth that clung to it.

Tobias was bewildered. Why was his mother being so friendly? Ever since they'd moved in, she hadn't shown the least shred of interest in any of the locals. She even screened all house calls in case one of them might want to check in on them. In the city, she had plenty of friends who'd loved to call on her every day of the week, and their apartment had been regularly filled with the clink of afternoon drinks and high-key chatter of women. His father, who'd rarely ever returned home from work in time for dinner, had been spared those endless hours of white noise, but not Tobias. Even in the confines of his room, their words always reached him, garbled and incessant. Moving to the countryside had fortunately changed that. His mother was a city creature, and she fared poorly in farmers' circles.

Back at the house she chatted Frederic's ears off for an hour as she dabbed him with alcohol, letting him speak only long enough to signify agreement. Then, learning he was a painter—"in Birnham, of all places!"—she took out a few art books from the shelves and began picking his brains about all sorts of things: which movements he preferred, what mediums he was interested in, what he did for inspiration. It was bad enough she'd let him in their house and cleaned his wounds—but now this? Frederic seemed aware of how uncomfortable this was making Tobias, and to his credit he did try a few white lies on Laure, but they were no match for her newly-recovered social skills. She just wouldn't let him go. Finally, Frederic tried appealing to her sense of duty; he had a bag half-filled with envelopes still waiting to be delivered and couldn't possibly stay any longer without "getting into serious trouble."

Here Laure couldn't argue with him, work was indeed important. But he was still bruised from that nasty fall! He couldn't possibly consider finishing that mail route on his

bike, not in the state it was in, and so declared she would drive him. Tobias was not offered to tag along. Not that he would have accepted. Laure returned a copy of *Dorian Gray* to the shelves, which she'd apparently been poised to quote before the change of plans, and in less time than it took to fall off a bike, she whisked her guest out the door. Frederic barely had time to thank Tobias. When she returned two hours later, she announced that Frederic was coming over for dinner next week.

“You’re kidding,” said Tobias.

“If you get the chance, you should really spend a little time with him between now and then,” Laure said. “He’s a fascinating fellow.”

“You’re kidding,” he repeated, just to make sure she’d heard him.

**

Laure’s interest in Frederic was purely amicable, she told Tobias. When he asked sarcastically whether she might not be attracted to Frederic, she had to pause for a moment before denying this. There was the age difference, of course; he was thirty. Then there were good looks, which the young man had few traces of. It seemed superficial, but there it was—Andre may have had more faults than she could deal with, but admittedly he was an attractive man, and charismatic. Frederic had a certain kind of magnetic charm as well, though. Underneath his boyish timidity, which a chunky build and unkempt beard partially concealed, there hid a ferociously passionate and articulate man. Throughout their long and stimulating conversation over a slowly-depleting mailbag, during which they shared what they missed most about living in the city, an idea had planted itself inside her head that she could help this man somehow. She knew he was more than willing to come out of his shell; the problem was simply that he lacked

occasions to socialize, which were few and far between out here. No one this solitary could hope to discover their full potential. This was what prompted her to extend the dinner invitation to Frederic, just as he'd finished unloading the bike from her car and thanked her.

“For the ride and for the chat,” he'd said.

“My pleasure,” Laure had answered, warmly shaking his hand. “A fellow Montrealer knows how lonely Birnham can get at times.”

“I've been here long enough to start feeling like a Birnhamer, to be honest.”

**

Dinner was heading toward disaster. Tobias had been especially gloomy this morning, barely nodding when she spoke to him, and his mood hadn't improved since. Now he was taking it out on their guest. Upon Laure's request, Frederic had brought samples of his work with him, and the three of them had examined it before sitting down at the table. Tobias' comments were wry. “Do you have an unsteady hand or is this abstract art?” or, “I was told that using too many colours was a sign of poor artistic judgement, but you proved them wrong here.”

Frederic tried his best to take it all in stride, laughing politely at the insults as though they were friendly jokes. Laure intervened as subtly as possible whenever she felt Tobias was crossing the line, which happened more and more as the evening progressed. She felt partly responsible—she'd let him drink too much. She'd offered him a beer before Frederic arrived, hoping it would loosen him up and make him more sociable. Two beers and three glasses of wine later he was uncomfortably loquacious, and if he didn't start downing coffee soon he'd be an embarrassment.

Laure wondered what her parents would have done in her place. They were congenial enough people but had never had anyone over whose temperament was even close to artistic. She couldn't remember many awkward situations ever taking over their dinner table; someone always diffused them before things got out of hand. Were he here, her father probably would have taken Tobias' wine away, loudly teasing his grandson about how poorly he handled the drink.

"This'll set you straight!" he'd have said, and poured him a tall glass of water.

As Frederic nervously tried to lead the conversation away from his work and on to the subject of Tobias' interests, Laure tried to think when was the last time she'd seen her parents, or even spoken on the phone with them. One phone call since she'd moved in here, maybe two. And she hadn't visited in months. How ungrateful could a daughter be? She wanted to tell her son that, tell him that she was a spoiled child, and felt unworthy of her parents' love. She wanted to tell him that no matter how badly she acted or how many times she messed up, they'd been there for her, and that she'd pay it forward to him as long as she had to. Then Tobias suddenly erupted:

"Enough with the interrogation, already!"

"I'm sorry," stuttered Frederic. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"I'm clueless, okay? That's what you want to hear?"

"Please," said Frederic, turning to Laure then turning back to Tobias. "All I meant was that your interests seem to cover a wide... a wide range of subjects."

"In other words, I don't know what the fuck I'm doing with my life, right?"

"I'm sure that isn't what he means," said Laure.

“No, it’s okay,” said Tobias. “That’s exactly what he’s saying, and it’s fucking bull’s eye! I’m twenty-five and I’m completely clueless.”

“Well, join the club!” said Laure. “Do you think my life’s so great?”

They sat in silence. Tobias wore a look of drunken surprise.

“I mean, I failed at marriage and I moved back into my parents’ house to dodge rent because I can’t provide for my son. How’s that for clueless?”

More silence.

“And I hate living out here,” she added.

Frederic cleared his throat, probably to excuse himself from the table, when Tobias added:

“I cheated on my high school finals.”

Laure smiled a little at that.

“I broke a taillight on your father’s car and blamed the neighbour for it,” she said.

“I used to smoke pot in the bathroom back in Montreal,” said Tobias.

“I knew it!” said Laure. “I used to smoke pot in your room when you were at summer camp.”

“I lie on surveys,” said Frederic, catching on. “About my age, my salary. Even my gender, sometimes.”

“I’ve cheated on almost every one of my boyfriends before Andre,” said Laure.

“I’ve been single for six years,” said Frederic.

“I’ve always been single,” said Tobias.

“You’d better have better plights than those in your arsenals, boys,” said Laure, as she uncorked another bottle of wine. “If you want to pass the first round, that is.”