The Ghost of Fort Dutch, and Other Stories

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis takes the form of a collection of short stories under the title *The Ghost of Fort Dutch, And Other Stories*. The stories are not connected to one-another by character or setting, and do not form a 'story cycle'. They are individual tales, taking place in a variety of settings from the mythic past to the present day to the distant future. Thematically, they are all sketches of isolated people grappling to reconcile their places in the world. The stories are concerned with exploring the ways in which people choose to perceive, or to invent, their individual visions of reality. The characters' journeys are often motivated by a recent personal loss. Although I would not label these stories 'speculative fiction', each does contain an element of the fantastic. Whether it's a curse of invisibility, a picture brought to life, or a broken time machine, they tend to use fantasy elements to raise the stakes of a situation and to untether the narrative from the comfort of reality. Fantastic elements can make a common situation seem fresh, and can act as potent metaphors for a story's thematic concerns. Fantasy also provides a rich soil for dark humour, genre-mixing, and experimental structures; in other words, these stories can address human concerns while yet remaining playful. That is, I believe, the most enduring role of fantastical storytelling in the modern literary landscape.

For Alandra

Yucatan 1677

Donald never learned to read but his brothers did. His brothers were going to be clerks but Donald was only going to be his father's fifth son. His eldest brother married a village girl the week Donald sailed to Yucatan to cut the logwood.

What they did with all that logwood, Donald could not remember now. Standing waist-deep in opaque water, Donald watched his captain. Captain Dampier sat on a dry stump, his leg bare from the knee to the ankle. As Donald stared limply at Captain Dampier little came to mind about him except the look of his glossy cavalry boots, except that he was speaking to his Lieutenant in English, except that his eyes were small and cunning and fixed on the snarled leafy mangroves all around. Donald's own feet were bare. He curled them into the silt, felt something swim against his skin: whether it was a plant drifting in the current or some creature, the question soon passed from Donald's mind. The river was warm; it was always warm. Donald wondered what the captain was saying to his lieutenant in English. Maybe the Celt knew - the Celt seemed to know things he shouldn't know, like the omen he'd given Donald earlier. Donald watched Captain Dampier gesture to his calf and waited for the Celt's omen to materialize.

The captain sat up out of the water with his leg outstretched, revealing a swelling on his calf. The swelling was purple at the centre, turning to orange where it spread across the skin. The Celt had whispered to Donald that all their lives would come down to the swelling on the captain's calf - whether they would return to the coast and live, or stay.

The captain's lieutenant had cleared a space on the stump and laid out a flat leather case. There were all sorts of tools inside the case; Donald saw thin devices

sticking out that looked like expensive pens. Ink, thought Donald. His exhausted thoughts moved slowly in the jungle, but Donald remembered something about the captain: he had led Donald and a dozen other Gaelic men up the river to get rich cutting trees. Inside the logwood trees, there was ink.

The men were all exhausted; they'd been exhausted for a long time. Two weeks ago, under the heavy blanket of heat and the shade of the twisted mangrove branches the Celt had caught Donald staring at the logwood, talking to himself, saying, "Wood floats on water, and water floats on ink, and ink floats on money, and money floats on wood, and wood floats on water," and the Celt had laughed and said that last night he'd dreamt he would find Donald standing there, saying that. Then the two of them had splashed heavily toward twelve logwood trunks that were limbed and bobbing together in a raft, and they had given them a good shove and watched the logs knock against all the other rafts that floated in the wide pool. There were so many logs that Donald pictured himself walking across the water.

Six men had died so far. When the slow-witted farmer was being consumed by fever the Lieutenant had said, "As soon as he's gone float him downstream and sink him so he doesn't dirty our water and if he goes during the night sew him into a bag and wait for dawn." Donald and the others drew lots, and by the time the sixth man went they all knew the job.

In this place water stood in for solid ground and the roots of trees grew huge, cobwebbing above the river. Then it was only the leafy canopy through which the sun pushed weakly like candlelight through imperfect glass. Donald wanted to return to the coast. It was a bodily want that struck him sometimes like lightning through the canopy

and rooted him to his feet, other times like a weight so heavy that it threatened to sink Donald beneath the bathy riverwater; the idea of taking the boats to the coast had become a limp he walked everywhere with. Some of the other workmen, he knew, wanted it more than he did. The workmen starved in the woods and talked.

It had been shady and hot for the duration. There was no change; even the rain made no difference to the half-sunk loggers. Donald had lost track of time until this morning when the Celt told him they'd been cutting logwood in the forest for two hundred days. Their bodies had taken on the look and smell of wet rope.

Despite that they worked with the water up to their waists, only drying themselves to sleep, Donald had never before seen Captain Dampier's bare leg. The captain had his own floating platform and his own canvass tent. He gave orders through the lieutenant and sometimes the cook, because the cook knew Gaelic and English. The workmen had no tents. They slept six to a platform, with their shirts over their faces to keep the flies out of their mouths and nostrils. In this way Donald could sleep for an hour or more without waking; the Celt said it was because he was young, and everyone envied him in a straightforward way.

The stump Dampier sat on bled clear fluid into the water, mingling its sap with the riverwater. Ink? thought Donald.

Captain Dampier’s bare leg was whiter than the stocking of the other, which was gripped with wet fungus. The bruise was clearly visible to all the gathered workmen. Was it only a bruise, Donald wondered? He'd overheard the lieutenant say that it must be, but the Celt had replied gravely that he wasn't so sure. The Celt had said that the only way to be certain was to rub the bruise with white lilies. The lieutenant had laughed when he'd

said it, and he'd told the captain, but the captain hadn't laughed. Instead he sent the lieutenant searching for white lilies. The day's sawing was stopped, and those who didn't collapse on the floating platforms gathered about the stump to watch. Dampier didn't send them away. The cook was now stropping a straight razor with full motions of the arm. The workmen were sunk to their waists, watching and whispering, brushing flies from their backs and shoulders as ink bled into the water.

The ink meant nothing to Donald - he'd never learned to read. During their first nights of lying awake on the platform floating in the river, he'd asked the Celt about the ink. The thin, greyish man had thumped his bare heels softly on the platform and paused. In a low voice he'd said that a country must have ink to lift its limbs the way a man must have water. He told Donald about building armies and bridges, and gallows, records of crimes, marriages, bills of sale and alliances that shook the world, and all of it was written in the steady pump of the logwood's ink. More than written: made certain, somehow, made real. Even tonight, lying here, said the Celt, I could not be sure whether my friend Donald is alive or dead, until I read it in ink. Then the Celt laughed. Donald could not sleep for a time afterward - and not because of the flies. He listened to the terrible ink swirling just beneath his ear, running downstream toward the coast. He thought of home. At home they never knew the sort of heat that hanged in mangrove trees, and they knew who was dead by looking at him.

After that, Donald began collecting things that looked like writing. Inside his oilcloth gunnysack he had three strips of whitish bark and a black plume he'd found on the shore that became green when he turned it in the sunlight. He had a piece of hipbone inscribed with brown grooves. He imagined the grooves were his penmanship, and at

night he touched the bark and imagined he was reading his own thoughts. He thought of the captain's English voice and imagined he could understand it and he imagined he was sitting next to the captain writing down everything he said. Sometimes during the day his head got so hot that he'd sneak away from the work-party and go splashing back to the platforms to stare at the branches of the mangrove trees, and trace lines on his papers with his thumb.

Watching the captain now, sitting on the log with his leg outstretched, Donald suddenly noticed that the man's cavalry boots had score-marks along the cuffs where the creeping mould had been cut away. He wondered if the Captain scraped wet skin off his feet in the evening the way the workmen did. Paper, clothing, even the rough planks of their sleeping-platforms did not last long. Everything dissolved into the river. Donald's own thoughts did not last long.

Suddenly he felt fingers jabbing into his ribs. "The Celt told you something earlier," came the voice of a man standing behind him in the wet underbrush just outside the clearing. Back home, the man had been a herdsman; in Port Royal he'd been a gambler; now he was only hungry and urgent.

"He told me nothing much," whispered Donald. He saw the cook peer along the edge of the razorblade, then return to strobbing.

"Tell me now" came the herdsman.

"No."

"Tell me now," he said, close to the young man's ear.

"The Celt says if the lieutenant finds white lily flowers, and the lilies call up white specks on the bruise, two specks or more," recited the young man, "then it's worms inside

the leg.” The herdsman only grunted.

“And then what?” The herdsman scratched noisily at his beard.

“Nothing else,” said Donald, although he knew what the herdsman really wanted to hear. He felt the man's fingers digging into his ribs again and winced.

The truth was that after he'd sent the lieutenant hunting for white lilies, the Celt had given Donald a secret omen. He didn't want to part with it, but could not muster up the courage to lie. “If it's worms, we'll know soon after."

"About the coast?"

"Yes. If they come out, they'll tell us when we'll sail for the coast."

“I wouldn't spit for his leg. If we stay, I'll wring him." Donald gave no reply when the herdsman talked about wringing necks. "Is that all?" asked the herdsman.

"Yes," said the young man.

"Are you certain?”

"Yes."

Captain Dampier called out in English. His lieutenant was wading out of the mangrove roots toward their clearing. The workmen watched him come, and someone commented to no one about the way he kept his sleeves above the water. The lieutenant held a handful of white lilies. “Doesn't he look like a bride,” said the herdsman, and a few of them laughed. Donald saw one of the men, one who hadn’t laughed, sit down in the water and lean his head back against the roots and open his mouth to breathe.

"Wring them both dry, get ready," muttered the herdsman. Others nodded, and Donald looked away. He was ashamed to hope they would do it.

He watched the lieutenant crush up lily flowers and rub them on the captain's

bruise. It seemed to Donald that the bruise had grown longer and darker since they'd gathered there, and he took a step forward to watch, feeling into the silt with his toes. They all knew there were creatures in the water. He brushed a family of mosquitoes from his neck. They waited, but no white specks appeared on Dampier's bruise.

Stripped of bark and left overnight, the logwood's red flesh turned black and began to stain the water. They worked the axes and saws relentlessly. They'd been at it for too long. The cook whispered about the food-stores in his sleep. Every morning, Donald expected Captain Dampier to order the boats loaded for the coast, but every morning the lieutenant translated into the workmens' Gaelic, “We'll carry on for another day.” In the evenings the lieutenant helped the men to figure up their shares in English pounds. Donald noticed that as the piles of imagined money grew larger, they all came to hate the lieutenant in a way that had nothing to do with his always-shaven face or the nasal way he spoke their language. It was captain Dampier who kept them felling trees among the mosquitoes and wet, but it was the lieutenant's face that Donald had forced under the brown water so many times that the thought had become a habit. The image of the clean-shaven face purpling underwater would fill his mind, escape, and return with every swing of the axe, and he knew he wasn't the only one.

"The Celt says they're talking about the coast," came a voice from behind.

"The Celt doesn't know English," said the herdsman.

The Celt rarely spoke their Gaelic either, and when he did it was to bring up dreams and omens. He wasn't liked by the others. That's why the Celt had told Donald of the sign, earlier. "If he's got worms in the leg, we'll turn for the coast, won't we?" the young man had asked.

"If it's worms, they'll let us know," the Celt had said.

It was worms. Even from where he stood, the young man could see specks within the Captain's bruise. There were two of them, and white, exactly like the lilies.

"The coast," he thought, and the crowd stiffened around him.

The cook wiped the lieutenant's razor against his pants, leaving a grey streak the shape of a knife. The captain grimaced and said what must have been *Don't be a boy* because after a moment the cook made his cut. Blood and fluid spurted out past the log and splashed into the water. Some of the workmen took a step back; others nudged them for doing so. The lieutenant was standing with a boot in one hand frozen in the act of draining it.

"The bride's going to faint," said the herdsman loud enough to be heard.

Dampier's blood now pooled where his heel rested on wood as the cook peered into the wound. The cloth he used to clear blood from the area quickly soaked through. Donald thought that the cut bled more than it should. The cook handed the cloth to the lieutenant, saying something in English and making a rinsing gesture. The lieutenant seemed as though he would help, but then he turned away and they heard him vomit into the water on the far side of the stump. The captain looked into the trees. The workmen began closing in on the captain's stump, inching toward his blood. The herdsman said something under his breath, and Donald's body tensed.

Suddenly the Celt's voice was in the young man's ear. "Go and take that cloth," he said.

"I won't," whispered Donald. He didn't want to interfere, either with the surgery or with the crowd of men closing in.

The cook spoke in a low voice to Dampier. He was probing the glossy bruise with his razor, trying to decide whether to cut again.

"Go on," said the Celt, "or they'll kill him."

"You go," Donald whispered. "I don't know their language."

"They don't trust me. You go," said the Celt.

Donald thought of marriages, deaths, alliances, bridges, bills of sale, his own name, all running downstream toward the coast. He found himself moving forward.

Donald rinsed the cloth. The cook gestured him to sop at the wound while he probed it. The bleeding had lessened as the swelling eased back to reveal two tails protruding from the Captain's calf, just above where it met the ankle. The tails moved in the air.

Now the cook was trying to catch the tails between his thumb and middle finger, but they twitched out of reach as he did. The young man looked up and blinked in the sun. When he looked again, he saw that the worms' movement carried on beneath the skin of the Captain's calf, almost to the knee. The Captain's eyes were shut. The cook pressed against the bruise to reveal more length. Dampier groaned. There was silence as the cook caught hold of first one tail and then the other, and pulled the worms from the leg with two quick motions like drawing a bowstring.

There was a murmur from the workmen. The herdsman whispered, "God help us." He turned to see the cook holding both worms at arm's length, where they hung halfway to the water's surface. They dripped glossy in the sunlight and were the colour of bone, except at three points along the bodies where rings of black hairs grew like beards. Their bodies twisted lazily in the air.

The cook pulled back his arm to throw the worms, but Dampier interrupted him with a motion. The Captain had already tied a bandage around his calf and was replacing his stocking and boot. Donald's stomach finally turned, but he forced himself not to retch. The cook passed the worms to Dampier. Sitting on the stump, the captain peered closely at their lengths. All the workmen watched him closely.

The captain regarded the worms for a long moment. The worms seemed agitated, twisting their bodies to curl in the air like fishing-hooks. Watching them, Donald thought that they would try to coil themselves around the captain's arm. The captain allowed them the chance, once and then twice, but they lacked the strength to reach him. Donald looked at the worms more closely. They were disgusting, but not vicious. Too weak to hold themselves up. Dampier turned his gaze on the workmen. Then with a snap, he sent the worms sailing into the underbrush. Suddenly the circle of men loosened. The danger had passed.

Donald looked at the captain. Dampier spoke to him, and when he did it was in a halting but understandable Gaelic. When he finished, he nodded and jumped down off the stump. Water seeped into his trousers and cavalry boots.

The Celt approached, carefully avoiding the direction of the worms. "Well? Do we leave for the coast?"

"No," Donald said. "We'll drain this forest of ink, first." The Celt looked sadly at the young man and shook his head.

Donald made for the depths of the jungle and the workmen followed closely behind.

Amateur Planet

I was on an island called Folegandros, one of the lower Cycades. I had gone there after selling the house, looking for a quiet place where I could observe Titan. Picture a small crown of cliffs floating on the Mediterranean. The island was peopled by a few dusty bushes, a few dusty goats, four hundred locals stretched across three towns, myself, the usual strays, and an Asian man and his wife who mostly stayed on their sailboat in the bay. I could enjoy breakfast in the eastern town, start walking and get to the western town on the far side of the island by supper. Folegandros was serviced every other week by ferry and that suited me. I had come across it more or less by accident on the way to Crete. I'd got off the ferry to be away from the toilet smell, and I decided to stay stranded.

Titan is the second biggest moon in the solar system, after Jupiter's Ganymede. It's one-and-a-half times the size of our moon, and it's enveloped by a brownish opaque fog. It’s the only planet in our solar system with a nitrogen-rich atmosphere. I used to ask students, what do you think might lie beneath those clouds? What would you want to be there? They would say things like 'water' and 'fossils'. All that changed some time ago when NASA plunked a spacecraft onto Titan’s surface and began collecting data. This seemed unfortunate to me, in a way, because it meant the secret was out. There was nothing much down there at all.

The town where I stayed, Charos, was not the biggest of the three. There were rooms-to-let, a restaurant where a heavy man served a set meal twice each day, and a butcher, baker, and so forth. The buildings were little concrete blocks with steel rebar poking out like whiskers, and the wind hummed through the buildings and covered

everything with dust. The wind was constant. It blew everything away except for the clouds. The clouds were constant too.

Local men sat out on the restaurant's patio and smoked cigarettes. I avoided the smell of cigarettes in those days because of what had happened. One of the patio men told me there used to be an olive grove barring the wind from entering town, but the soil had given out so now there was only dust. In a particularly Greek way, he could have meant anytime between five years ago and Alexander's day. His English was good, and he never seemed to have anything to do, but he liked to talk and drink whiskey more than I did so I left the men on the patio well alone. My room had a hotplate. There was no television I think; at least I don't remember watching television. Sometimes the wife from the sailboat would join the men on the porch and I could hear them laughing.

I used the second bed to lay out my six-inch refractor for cleaning and so that I wouldn't need to pack it away every morning. It also reminded me of why I was there. Or maybe it kept me from getting itchy feet. Anyway, I had it out. I must have been a sight; taller than the locals, paler by far, wearing a bright orange windbreaker and those pants with many pockets, a front-sack filled with canned oysters, a small thermos of coffee, my little notebook, and of course the telescope slung across my back like a rifle. There I was.

I spent the first afternoon to exploring the town a bit, but when evening came I was already getting eager to be alone with the night sky. The east-facing cliffs down the road seemed like a good bet. Just as I was leaving the perimeter of the town, I encountered three boys on the road. Anyone who goes to the mediterannean will find some eerie in the children, but these three stood out to me. They stood on the lip of the butcher's concrete driveway, and they were wailing in a peculiar way that began low in

their throats and rose in pitch and volume over time. They were poor and shirtless, and skinny. I don't know who they belonged to or how they came to be ignored on such a small island. The patio men didn't seem to notice them - not even when the boys' wail drowned out their talk. The three boys passed a bag back and forth and took turns breathing into it like a person hyperventilating. The other two wailed away, escalating their pitch when someone came near to them, so that the eldest's voice nearly cracked when I walked up. He had thick eyebrows and ropey arms and legs, and his eyes and skin were gold, and there was a ring of silver paint around his mouth and nose. He reminded me of the rusted-out Volkswagens the Greeks like to crash all over their islands. The boys' routine was unsettling, but since the locals didn't pay them any attention I didn't either. I wasn't going to be the only one bothered. I never saw them attack anyone, or hurt anyone, or follow anyone. I'm sure I never did. They just breathed into their bag, and dribbled silver paint into the bag, and wailed on and on.

The streets in town had a pretty good lay of stones, but the road following the eastern cliffs was just dirt. The dirt blew in my eyes as I followed the road. Eventually I discovered a concrete staircase that led down to the black-and-red beach at the base of the cliff. The stairs were about three hundred in total. There was a landing about a third of the way down, but even getting to the landing was a struggle because of the wind and the smooth stones underfoot. It didn't matter to me, but I could imagine kids having trouble. The landing was small enough that if I lay flat my ankles would hang over the next stair down. But it had a strong command of the south and east skies, and so this was where I set up. It wasn't ideal to have the cliffs blocking most of the sky behind me, but the cliff also blocked some of the wind, and that suited me.

The stars were supposed to appear above the vanishing ocean at about six-o'clock; I made miscellaneous trackings for a couple of hours, took a short break to stretch my back and slap my legs, ate a few sardines, then waited for Saturn. I'd always taken pride in being able to keep still for long stretches, by counting up to one thousand and back down to zero, back up to a thousand, back down, and so on. Stillness isn't necessary for observation. Not even to track without the aid of a setting-circle, the way I did. Of course every bump to the eyepiece is a small disaster that sends the picture scattering, but preventing that has more to do with being careful than being perfectly still. Maybe it's like hypnosis for guys like me. Whenever I tracked an object the hours just flew by without any trouble, and that's what I wanted. It's not an easy state of mind to get in to. That night, I stood hunched over the eyepiece counting up and down to one thousand, with the wind tugging at my orange jacket, and one hand jotting steadily in my little notebook, counting up and down. Titan did not appear.

Saturn and Jupiter, and their major moons, are called amateur planets. The old joke goes that Polaris is harder to track. That's why I'd never bothered in the past. There had always been more interesting observations to make. But something about the size of the loss, it was like selling the house and flying halfway around the world wasn't enough to get away from it. I needed to track an object like Titan, an amateur planet. And now, when all I wanted was to lose myself in the long hours of the moon, Titan did not show itself. It was the clouds. In spite of the wind there were no windows in the sky overhead. The clouds blew fast, but constantly. We say that such an observation is 'ripped to pieces' and that's what shows in my notebook for those nights, hour after hour, that the sky was ripped to pieces. So rather than a Mediterranean sky like a tidal-pool each evening, there

were only flukes of grey and black.

I walked back to town at around four. My flashlight revealed sheets of brownflies blowing like flags, and I told myself that tomorrow the clouds would break up. But the next night was no different.

I spent the third day inside my little room. There was not much to do, but I found a novel in English, drank Greek coffee and listened to the voices on the patio. The woman from the sailboat was out there with the men, laughing again and sipping their whiskey. The previous night, I'd seen her beneath the lights of the restaurant on my way out to the cliffs. At first I'd thought she was looking at me, but on second glance her dark eyes looked dense and unfocused. When I nodded to her she just tensed up so there was no reason to think anything about her now. The novel was one I'd read before. I wondered if she spoke Greek or if she muddled through like the rest of us. And where was her husband? I hadn't seen him come off his sailboat, which had the name *Ruby Tuesday* written across its hull in a thick blue script.

I spent that third night on the cliffs and left when the stars were dimming and my watch read 4:32am. The clouds were fast and constant, and I spent most of the time trying not to think about the days running out, and that I would soon have to return home and face a small, unknown condominium. On the road back into town, I was surprised to see the yachtsman's wife leaning in the doorway of the butcher's shop. She was standing where the three boys made their post during the day. I scuffed the dirt with my steps so I wouldn't startle her this time, and when I passed by she looked over and said something in Greek. It was a question. She had a gap between her lower front teeth and her eyes

were wide-set in her face, and threatened to point in opposite directions.

Another week passed, with no change in the sky. I saw the yachtsman's wife everywhere around town. It made me wonder if she had a room here, and whether she bought groceries in the little marketplace and cooked with her husband on the sailboat, or just ate at the restaurant. She seemed increasingly snappish with the patio men, and they started to ignore her.

I wanted Folegandros to be more than a vacation spot. A proper post, my Barbados, an island that would allow me to return to myself after some time away. But now I wished that I had listened to my sister and niece and just gone through to Crete. I could have stayed in a hotel. I could have spent a day at the labyrinth museum and the Knossos palace restoration. I could have met other tourists like myself and quietly mocked the young people on the beaches who were determined to convince themselves that it was summer. That's what I could have done with Greece. That's what Greece was supposed to be for, not traipsing around with a telescope. Now I was in a sort of labyrinth. It was claustrophobic. It was as though I hadn't got away away. I was sick of her hanging around behind everything and blowing her smoke in my eyes. I'm ashamed of it now, but those were my thoughts. I boiled coffee on the hotplate and read the novel I'd read before. I don't remember what it was about, but it was that German author the hippies liked, except it wasn't the one about the buddha. On the tenth evening I almost didn't go to the landing. The sky looked the same as it had every other night. But the coffee and my thoughts had done their work, and it was best to air out.

My spirits picked up as I left town. The woman from the sailboat was still on the patio, drinking whiskey at her own table, and as I passed she gave me a look that made

me wish I had on a dinner jacket instead of that orange windbreaker. And the three boys by the butcher made an amusing scene. The youngest sat on the ground, his knees hugged to his chest and the heels of his hands pressed into his eyes. He was moaning long and low, not in their usual way, as the middle child crouched over him with his elbows on his knees, swaying back and forth and occasionally slapping the younger boy in the face with wide, lazy swings. I guessed they'd both had one too many. The eldest boy stared at the woman on the patio over the lip of his plastic bag. I felt a laugh coming up in me, a really big one from somewhere deep, I don't know why. When I look back now it seems strange. At the time I stopped and laughed, and tried to pass the eldest a few *drachmas* like they were streetside musicians, but he was staring at the people on the patio and didn't seem to notice me at all.

The wind as I walked to the cliff was pressing firmly against my sleeves and filling my coat's hood; even the flags of brownflies had met their match. During my descent I had to stop twice and crouch low as the wind yanked at me. I set up my things on the landing and stood poised with my notebook, but for the first hours even the moon was ripped to pieces. There was no reason to leave, though, and I stayed hunched over the eyepiece until my fingers and backside were numb, trying to count up and down to a thousand and failing, and wishing Titan would appear.

I remember thinking that I was being watched. Maybe the quick sky was watching me keep time, waiting for me to reach some number maybe. Through the eyepiece of the telescope I seemed to be floating in the rippling glass space between the ocean and the fast-moving clouds. The stars did not appear. Then there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs behind. I turned. The woman from the sailboat, of course.

She had followed me, or found me. I don’t know. I hadn't been hiding. I said, “Hello,” and she said, “Good evening,” and I could tell that was most of her English. I paused, not sure what to do, but she sat beside me on the stone landing with her feet on the next stair down. Her body was a black hollow around which her white tennis shoes, white nails, and pale face orbited. I could see her sizing me up, too, as her black hair blew like a whip. She seemed content to sit there, so I returned to my telescope. In the half minute our encounter had taken the clouds began to thin out. I put the woman out of my mind until there was a scraping sound beside me. With some trouble she lit a cigarette. The smell of it! When she saw me stiffen, she rubbed it out on the stone. She began to speak in a language that I didn’t recognize, the sound of it clicking in the wind. When she stopped talking, I explained that magnification is a function of aperture size and the distance between lenses. I offered her the thermos of coffee. She sipped and spoke for a while, long and softly, as I kept my eye on the clouds. Then I described how I’d overlaid the mount’s aligning fixtures with rubber to keep vibrations down. I didn't bother to point out which fixtures, because I could tell she wasn't looking. I described a few constellations that she probably knew already. She finished the thermos. I told her the history of the Galilean moons, and then Christiaan Huygens' discovery of Titan. I talked about teaching science in a classroom. Finally, I aired my dirty laundry. She listened in silence. After a long silence I picked up her hand and showed her how to find Polaris, and then I returned to the telescope. When the clouds finally broke, she pressed my shoulder with three fingers to signal she was leaving. I watched her white shoes disappear up the stairs. Saturn came piercingly into view, and I began to count upward. Behind me, the woman paused on the stairs for forty seconds. The wind howled on and on, and there was

Titan, in silhouette, a tiny gurgling dot against Jupiter. I could see it now, the amateur planet, as clear as day.

The sound of the wailing wind didn't let up, and for a while I thought it was coming from a point above me instead of the ocean. I kept still and I thought, if I get to one thousand I'll go up and take a look. The sound stopped around three hundred and forty. The wind pulled at my orange jacket, but the wailing had stopped.

I got my observations that night and left Folegandros on the ferry two days later. The wind had once again covered the town with dust. In the grey morning light it looked like ash. Nobody spoke to me. The woman was not on the patio - why would she be? - or at the butcher, or at the shallow concrete dock. Her husband walked past me in the street. I'd never seen him up close before. He had a nervous shake in his left hand and his skin smelled toxic. I heated up a tin of coffee on my hotplate and wished his wife well, wherever she was. When the ferry came in, the three shirtless boys leaned over the pier's railing and watched me carry down my things. They lined up and I pressed a few *drachmans* into each of their hands, thinking to myself, what's this for? The eldest grinned at me. For now, they were quiet. When I returned home I tried to think of a way to write to them, to get them off that island, but nothing ever came of it.

The Death of Pegasus

It was impossible to hang the *pegasus*. All three ape-children heaved until their muscles shook, but could barely lift the beast's head up off the deck. They spread their toes to steady themselves against the ship's lurch. In the candlelight, their ape-father cut deeply into the tissues of her neck. The beast's tongue hung almost to the floor. The children whimpered under the weight of *pegasus's* head as their father quickly sawed a ring through the muscle and tendon. They were hungry, he knew. He counted as he sawed: one-two-one-two, and tapped his toes upon the deck of the ship: one, two, one, two. His hairy arm was slick to the shoulder with *pegasus* blood. The ape-father's mate sopped at the blood pooling on the deck. She moaned quietly. It was impossible to hang the *pegasus*, the ape-father thought, because his family had been given the ship's lower hold to make their butcher-house, and the deck's clearance was barely three handspans above his own stooped shoulders. One, two, three handspans.

The *pegasus* was chosen over the *equus ferus*, the flightless horse, when Noah had noticed her similarity to the pair of *hydrotherikornis* that the ape-family had plucked and spitted the night before; that is, she offered breast meat. She had been chosen over the cows because the cows were thin and feeble. Noah was very wise, the apes knew. Noah's youngest daughter, Suzy, had explained that her father's name meant *repose*, which the apes agreed was a very wise name. It described the way Noah would sit gently upon the sill of the great window and gaze out over the endless sea. The ape-father often wondered what wisdom occurred to Noah there. He hoped that someday he might discover a wise thought for himself.

The ape-father, whom Suzy had named Little Noah, regretted that because the

pegasus could not be hung, she would not loosen and tenderize. After the *mesohippus* banquet, the humans had warned the ape-father against tough meat. Tough meat, they said, was tough to digest. Never mind: what mattered was to be quick. The sun drooped in the sky, and the humans would be hungry.

"Huff!" said Little Noah. His stomach rumbled and lurched.

Pegasus's silver haunches climbed to the ape-father's collarbone. The children had her head fall. Now he sawed across the upper neck, avoiding the spine, while the ape-mother continued to fuss over the pool of blood that was spreading outward from the carcass. Half-squatting, she used her thin fingers to direct its flow into a crack between the deck-boards. Little Noah noticed that she often leaned on her elbows. Now he pressed his knife's tip into the easy space between *pegasus's* second and third vertebrae. First, second, second-and-a-half, he tapped. He rocked the handle back and forth until, satisfied, he and his mate positioned themselves on either side of her head, gripping teeth, eyes, and mane. The ape-mother's coat was lank, thought Little Noah. Working together, they twisted off the beast's head with a creak.

Noah, the wise Noah, didn't care for the way Suzy taught the apes to count, or that his daughter had named the ape-father Little Noah, which meant *little rest*.

The ship had run out of food and so the apes were taught to slaughter, bleed, gralloch, and portion. Noah forbade the humans to do so themselves. It was important for Noah's family to keep their hands clean, he explained, and not to stoop. Suzy had suggested the apes for butchers, because, she said, they learned pretty quick and were silly anyway and they had the right number of fingers and things.

Every morning, an animal was picked for the humans' meal; every evening, Suzy escorted the meat-laden apes up to the banquet-hall. It amused Suzy to see Little Noah hurrying about with his butcher's knife and no pocket or belt to keep it in. Noah rejected Suzy's suggestion of eating all the animals in alphabetical order, so it was only by coincidence that the ape-father's first kill had been the gawky *archaeophasianus*.

Meanwhile, the beasts of the great ship licked the decks and the hull. They licked their fence-posts and each-other, except for the female *titanobia cerrejonensis*, who slithered out of her corral and swallowed both *cypriot* mice.

Little Noah notched the hide for the ape-children to pull from the carcass in long, dramatic strips. Quickly, quickly. From a generous slit across her belly he removed the noble heart and lungs, the mirror-like liver, and fifteen feet of intestines. His mate piled these on the deck. When the children finished with her silver hide, the ape-family rolled *pegasus* over and started in on the far flank. The family's stomachs rumbled as they worked with the meat. One, two, three, four, five purring wildcats. It seemed a large number to Little Noah. But then, he knew almost nothing. He had learned to count, to write the names of things; Suzy had taught him to shave. But the humans were many times more wise, and the humans must be fed: he knew that much. The humans ate hugely.

The job was nearly finished. Little Noah hacked steaks from the carcass as the children plucked her wings. *Pegasus* down filled the air; the butchery became littered with luminous feathers scattered across the deck and stuck into the pitchy hull, where they glowed like stars - no time to count them. The ape-mother sneezed. In the

candlelight, she appeared shaky and weak. Little Noah told her as much.

"Ugh," she replied.

The ape-father tossed her cuts of meat, spinning them through the air to amuse their children. Belly, flank, plow steak, round steak, shoulder roast, stew meat, wing, and the rest. She made piles on the deck, arranged precisely. The family had been quick, thought the ape-father. Wise Noah would be pleased. He would be pleased, and he would offer the apes some of the meat. A few steaks, a rack of ribs, even. Wouldn't he? Fair is fair. Little Noah was surprised by the thought. He became enchanted by it. Was this a wise thought, he wondered? His tongue slackened and his eyes closed.

They had barely finished the job when wise Noah stooped into the room, propelled from behind by Suzy. The ape-family eyed one-another nervously. Noah glanced around their makeshift butcher-house. He had never been down here before.

"Hrm," he rumbled. "Now, what did you want to show me?"

"Look, Papa!" cried Suzy. "Look how clever the apes are. They've cut up the meat and stacked it in piles, the clever apes. They've alphabetized the piles of meat. I taught them all that. Look how Little Noah holds that knife. Look how his mate drains blood into the bilge. Aren't they just clever?"

Little Noah watched his namesake regard *pegasus*. Candlelight glowed in the tall man's robes while his eyes darted from *pegasus* to the ape-children to the sparkling hull and blood-gutter. He doesn't like the carcass, thought Little Noah. He doesn't want to look at it. Why should that be, he wondered?

"Hah, yes, oh. Clever," breathed Noah.

The ape-children grunted happily.

"Smart monkeys, hum, smart homo sapiens," said Noah. He leaned into the pitchy wall. He looked at the silver head, the rolling tongue, the bulging eyes and piles of unrecognizable flesh near his feet. A feather stuck to his sleeve, and his own eyes bulged. "Isn't this a mess, though?" he said. "Such a shameful mess. Such a shame." The tall man drooped. Little Noah thought he must be dizzy. But why should he, who was so tall and so wise and so clean, be dizzy?

"Papa?" asked Suzy.

The ape-family leaned in, watching.

Suddenly, Noah raised himself up powerfully. He seemed about to say something, no doubt something very wise - but then he shook his head and slouched out into the corridor.

The ape-children began to sniffle and wail. Little Noah stroked his smooth underlip. He furrowed his brow. He looked at the piles of *pegasus*, and at his mate who stood panting, and over the scene of his blood-slick bawling children, and said, "Hmm."

That evening, the apes climbed the ship's many ladders and slunk toward the banquet. They piled meat on the long, clean tables. They filled goblets and platters. From the corners of the hall, they watched the human-family devour *pegasus*. And there, in the corners, Little Noah tapped his knife upon the deck of the ship and counted: one, two, three, Suzy, five, six, Noah, eight, nine, ten, eleven.

When the ark landed at last and the door swung open, Noah's mate found a place on the mountaintop to make their banquet, selecting a roast from among the surviving species of *recurvirostridae*. She didn’t stoop, and didn’t tremble. Together with their children they watched the thrashing sea. Noah lived for a few years after, and taught his children what little he knew, and loved them, and then he died.

Garbage

When the panic attack finished, I stood up and toweled the sweat off my face and neck, pulled on a sweater and headed down the twelve flights of stairs to the parking lot out back. Outside, the night air was cool against my skin and I stood puffing on a cigarette and watching a girl who struggled to shove a cardboard box into a big, black dumpster. The box was about two-thirds her own height, and she didn't seem able to hold up the metal lid and push with any force at the same time. I stood staring until she let the box drop and walked toward me.

"I could use a hand," she said.

She was exotic in the harsh yellow light of the streetlamp. She had skin like soft plastic and her hair was long, black and tangled. I flicked the butt of my cigarette and then shuffled toward the dumpster. The original black paint had mostly boiled away to rust, and someone had sprayed 'ambulance' across its face in hellish red letters. After a minute of wheezing and baring our teeth, we had maneuvered the heavy box to the lip of the dumpster's mouth and with some satisfaction sent the whole thing sliding down inside. I smiled and lit another cigarette and told her my name: she held out her hand and said, "You're a wreck."

"Oh," I said. "I don't sleep well."

She nodded and seemed about to probe the subject, so I quickly asked her what had been inside the box that had needed dumping at three-thirty in the morning. She told me she was surprised that I hadn't noticed the bright labels plastered across it. It was a big TV, she said, one of the new flat ones. And it was heavy as a bitch.

"Something wrong with it?" I asked.

"Beats me," she said. "I never opened it." She scowled when she saw the look on my face. "Don't even think about it. It's mine – I bought it with my own money, and it wasn't cheap either. Anyway, you'll look stupid trying to haul it back out by yourself."

After she had gone, I went upstairs and lay on the clammy sheets while the run rose behind the off-white drapes.

***

Next night, I awoke right on time with both hands pressed against my pounding heart and a feeling in my stomach like when an elevator suddenly drops and you're not sure how far away your feet are. "Oh shit," I gasped. "Oh shit oh god oh please no god shit shit shit." Pretty soon the words slurred together into one long, low moan.

When it was over, I toweled off and made my way uneasily down the twelve flights of stairs. I stepped out into the cool night air and was surprised to see the girl from the night before. She was sitting cross-legged on the pavement, waiting for me. I ran a hand through my hair and tried to smile. She had a black plastic garbage bag laying next to her. When I approached, she slowly rose to her feet and then rattled the bag triumphantly. She smiled with conspiracy and said, "I figured you were a regular. Come on - you can join me tonight." I followed her and my thoughts followed after me.

Before long, we were standing side-by-side, tossing the bag's contents into the waiting mouth of the dumpster.

"Did you know there's a new continent forming in the middle of the Pacific?" she

asked. “It’s true.”

The big plastic bag was filled with cosmetics. Shampoo in smooth, off-white bottles; twist-sticks of makeup; transparent jugs filled with fluorescent mouthwashes; hard flat tubs of skin cream; tubes of blister salve; rolls of toilet-paper individually wrapped; sheets of disposable razor blades; each item had its ingredients and instructions running in tiny letters along the packaging, and everything was wrapped with blaring labels and softly crinkling plastic. None of it had been opened, and she didn’t seem to want to open anything before tossing it in the bin.

“The ocean currents collect all the trash into one place, swirling round and round. It’s mostly bags, the kind you get for free at the store.” Her bare shoulder brushed against mine. “It’s bigger than Texas and thick enough to stand on – you’d only sink up to your waist.” She sent the final item - package of nail files - arching into the void. Then she followed up with the big sack itself. “Think of it,” she said. “A new continent to explore, a stake to claim – a place where you could build a house and raise some kids.”

“Nobody owns it?” I asked.

She turned and looked at me. She was chewing her lip like a pencil, considering something. Then she yawned and said, “Tomorrow let’s do bags. Just bags.” Then she walked off toward the far entrance of the apartment building which stood looming above us in silhouette. Over her shoulder she called, “And bring your own bags. This isn’t a free lunch.”

***

Next day, the attack began as I was looking for bags in the drug store. I stood at the mouth of a aisle, gazing at the shelves crammed with pharmaceuticals, when something caught my eye. It was a bottle of pain medication. It was lighter than I thought possible. I held it in my cupped hands, rolled it back and forth, listened to the pills rattle around inside. The sound reminded me of the ocean. Without thinking, I began reading the label. There were hundreds of words: sharp words like 'fast-acting' and 'acetylsalicylic', homely words like 'precaution', 'dosage', cluttered words like 'headache'. I counted that word six times: now a stark warning, now a colourful promise. There were grooves in the bottom of the bottle and hard notches on the top. As my fingers traced them, I looked up at the shelf in front of me. The labels made me squint – thousands of them stretched across hundreds of bottles hiding even more behind. Looking at them made my heart lose its rhythm and my feet drop through the floor. I tried not to think of the next aisle over, or the one after that, or the next store over, or the next block, or the next city, all filled with tiny bottles and boxes and trucks loaded with boxes or the factories around the world with their belts that rumbled for sixteen hours every day, but it was too late. The bottle was rattling loudly in my hand and my breath was coming in noisy gasps. My eyes searched for something quiet to land on but found nothing, and then I was out in the street and running for home.

***

That night, as we opened packages of bags and tossed them one-by-one into the ambulance's gaping mouth, I told her what had happened. When I was finished, she spoke in a soft voice. "Ancient gurus used to test the limits of their wisdom by trying to number the stars in the sky. Some of them claimed to reach enlightenment, but most just

went batshit crazy." She crumpled an orange twenty-gallon leaf bag between her fists and tossed it like a basketball. "Eventually, they warned people not to try wrapping their heads around the universe, and that became part of most religions. Leave the big numbers to God, focus on the small stuff. Try not to look up."

I craned my face toward the sky, but there were no stars. I felt like she was fooling me, and found out that I didn't mind. "I've never heard any of that," I said. My voice echoed tinny off the apartment building behind us.

She continued as if I hadn't spoken. "Nowadays, some psychologists say the problem is we've got a universe all around us, made of things we can read and touch and track. Products, data, raw materials. Not distant points of light, but galaxies up to your neck. It's hard not to think about. I mean, it's hard not to look up."

We talked about other things until I'd run out of bags, then we sat on the pavement and I asked her whether any of what she'd said about the gurus had been true.

"Probably," she replied, and tossed her long tangles.

***

It became a ritual. I would stumble out into the night air, steaming and slurring my words. She would be waiting with bags full of new clothes wrapped in tissue paper, or a four-piece stereo, or spools of blank laserdiscs. I would bring a set of metal folding chairs, or boxes of red and blue Christmas lights neatly arranged over cardboard. I brought music albums I'd always wanted to own, and they still shone in their vacuum wrap as they sailed into the bin. We would stand shoulder-to-shoulder, my smoke

mingling with her words, naming as we dumped. “This is my favourite new blouse,” she would say. “These are my best stockings.” She loved packaging. She told me that she ordered all her stuff off the internet just so there would be more of it: bubble-wrap, Styrofoam, greasy cardboard boxes with thick green staples.

The ritual continued for a long time. I kept buying and dumping. When I ran out of money, I switched to credit. It became a habit. Gradually, the things I dumped became a strange, private collection. I owned all the best things, even if I never saw them. My collection was no less real for existing only in my mind. The secret of it grew over me like a thick skin, and the attacks began to subside.

“What’s it like, when it happens?” she asked one night.

I thought for a moment, grasping at straws, then answered with the comfort of borrowed words. “The book describes it as an unfocused feeling of terror with no discernible source, along with associated physical symptoms, lasting from minutes to an hour,” I said. It sounded like instructions for a recommended dosage. “There’s not much I can add to that, except it wipes you right out.”

The next time we met, she greeted me with three hundred get-well cards in shiny paper envelopes, and we read the sentiments aloud to one-another as we threw them away.

Food was my idea. Cans of soup and beans banged loudly off the sides of the bin, always seeming to fall for too long and never meet the bottom. We fed the insatiable void feast after feast. Sealed sacks of ready-made rice, wrapped sandwiches, and one night a banquet of thirteen roasted chickens. The stench was powerful enough to attract animals

from all over the neighbourhood. That night, we began locking the bin.

"It's important that nothing is stolen," she later told me as she dropped bouquets of carefully-arranged flowers into the mouth. "It's got to be ours. We worked for it, paid for it, and it's ours. No loser bum or thief will get his grubby hands on it."

In the harsh yellow light, her black hair reminded me of the ropes of metallic Halloween tinsel I'd dumped a week earlier. She was wearing sleek clothes that hugged her body, and her sneakers squeaked against the pavement as she twisted to throw a bottle of mid-range champagne. She jumped when the bottle sailed clean into the void. There was no sound of it breaking. Watching her, I was intoxicated. She became still and seemed to stare through the darkness of the bin's big mouth, toward something far away.

"I can see it," she said. "All of it, swirling round and round." She closed her eyes. "It's all out there, all our garbage, still perfectly wrapped up. All my things. My own island, all mine." She turned her eyes to me. "I can see yours, too."

***

Then one night, I emerged to find her empty-handed. It took me a moment to notice that the dumpster was gone. She sat cross-legged, head propped up on her folded hands, facing the hollow space where it had stood. I dropped an armload of children's science kits and sat down beside her. I could make out the stark rusted outline of the great bin, the imprint it had left from standing still for so long. I was surprised by how much I missed its blood-red spray paint and yawning mouth. When she looked at me, her eyes recalled a set of glossy green-handled knives I'd tossed away, near the beginning.

“What going on?” I finally asked.

She cleared her throat. “Tonight, we’re taking a trip.”

My heart began to thump loudly in the hollow cave behind my ribs. The thought of travel terrified me. “I can’t,” said. “I can’t go anywhere.”

“Close your eyes.”

I obeyed. Already, I could feel a sheen of sweat dampening my face and neck.

“Now fill your mind with water. Lots of water, as far as the horizon on every side. You’re floating in the water, and the sun is beating down on you. There aren’t any clouds at all.”

My thoughts were too sluggish to resist the simple images, and too tired to wander. The ocean surrounded me. I tasted its salt in my nostrils. I was sinking. My feet dropped away into the pavement beneath me and my hands trembled in my lap as I struggled to swim.

“Keep them closed,” she said. “Follow my voice.”

There was nothing but the ocean at first. Even knowing I would drown, I liked the place. The world was made of three things; there was the sky, there was the ocean, and there was me. Then something appeared on the horizon and drifted slowly toward me. As it came closer, I saw that it was an island. I could make out spires of cans and bottles, gleaming like skyscrapers in the white light of the sun. I swam toward it. Everything that had disappeared into the bin’s mouth was there, floating on great sheets of plastic bottles

bound together with ropes of bags and streamers and stockings. I saw stiff, waxed-cardboard pantries filled with roasted chickens and bottles of champagne. Bouquets of flowers decorated the terraces. She was standing on the island, looking down at me. She held out her hand, and as she pulled me onto the smooth shore I saw that the water had rubbed away all the bright labels and all the tiny words. My heart beat quietly and my breath came deep and full. Hand in hand, we made our way across the island as it floated through the sea.

The Fade

According to the notice he had read twice already, Don would be completely invisible by the early hours of tomorrow morning. It always happened top-to-bottom. He stood barefoot in his living room clutching the thick envelope, trying to deal with it. There was his job as the manager of a pool of database-engineers: tomorrow he would be laid off with generous compensation. You couldn't have a transparent manager, he knew. Psychologists had shown that workplace stress was increased by the introduction of fades. He checked his watch. The thought of losing his job wasn't what made his teeth scrape together. There were other papers in the envelope, Don noticed. It was stuffed.

He read the notice again, which began along the lines of 'regret to inform' and ended along the lines of 'deepest sympathies', then crossed the small condo, heading for the bathroom. Along the way he tried to give the coffee table a good kick, but connected accidentally with his shin. It was a glass table on a metal frame. Tears sprang up. Maybe it was those damned deepest sympathies that made his hands ball into fists. It must be so, he thought; but it wasn't. He tugged his hair and checked his watch. He grimaced.

Don had known others to turn invisible, of course. They usually didn't get out much afterward. Nobody liked fades - can't tell who they're looking at, can't tell them apart except by their clothes. He thought of the floating toques and snow-jackets that stood next to him on streetcars, the grotesquely gesturing mittens. Hats and gloves were necessary by law. Fair's fair. Invisible men and women mumbled around the city in cheap dollar-store scarves, collecting their pensions. He would have to buy a toque, airport orange like his father's had been. Don shouted 'Damn it!' but the carefully-decorated

apartment had few flat surfaces, and that the sound didn't carry the way he'd hoped.

In the bathroom mirror he saw that the smooth curve of his haircut had been lopped flat. So it's true, he realized. His heart raced unevenly - for an instant he saw pin-pricks of swirling lights. How long until he was nothing but legs, shins, ankles, toes? It always happened top-to-bottom. Nobody knew why. He touched the invisible hairs, felt them with his fingertips. It could happen to anyone. He flung open the cabinet, tossed aside his electric razor to reveal a host of bottles, most of which he didn't recognize: hers. He picked one up at random, hoping to do something clever with it, but after lathering the sticky foam into his hair for a few moments he had to give up. Light glossing on invisible hair was unsettling. He balled up a towel and hurled it into the bathtub. The foamy stuff was stupid and made him look stupid. He carefully replaced the bottle inside the cabinet, then slammed the mirror shut. It rebounded and hung open.

Don paced the living room, watching his feet brush circles around the glass coffee table. His arms pumped. On a wall hung their black-and-white photo of an alleyway in Milan, brought to life again by the January afternoon sun that now poured down the skylight. The air in the concrete living room was chilly. He watched his bare feet make circles. They would be the last to go.

The envelope that lay on the glass table was still stuffed with inserts. He paused to glance at it, then resumed pacing. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction. What was left to say? He'd buy his dollar-store gloves and orange toque and shuffle around the city collecting pension and glances. Fair's fair. Their patronizing attitude made him sick,

sending all those colourful inserts. That's what was bothering him, he thought, their patronizing attitude; they figured he couldn't deal with it. But that wasn't it.
He would have to dig out his sunglasses. He would have to pull up his socks. Would it help? Young mothers would take their children's hands as he passed. He checked his watch and scowled. By now his forehead must be fading, and he wondered vaguely whether he might tilt his head just so to view the interior of his skull; but he didn't let himself glance at the glass tabletop, or at the mirror-like picture frame. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

As he circled past the windowsill Don noticed dead leaves on the potted fern; ugly, brown ringlets. He stopped because she had told him to keep an eye on that. Keeping the fern alive was important to her. As he plucked at the ringlets, he told himself that this happened to people all the time. A gym teacher in the fifth grade, Mr. Tierbach, had been replaced midway through the year by a nervous young woman. Don remembered the principal's announcement at assembly. You couldn't have an invisible rugby coach. It set a bad example. But it could happen to anybody, the principal insisted - it was just something you dealt with. Don picked up the envelope and sat down on the sofa, leafing through it. He would read them in order, and he would keep his cool.

A pale tan pamphlet, 'Adjusting to Your Invisible Life'. Ten useful tips. Number two restated the law of gloves and a hat. Number six suggested reducing strangers' anxiety with *ABCD*: Announce yourself, use Body-language, and Create Distance. Number eight discouraged breaking the news to family members in person: use the telephone, it insisted, and give them time. He crumpled up the page and threw it hard, but

it only traveled to the far end of the tabletop: the stiff paper didn't ball up well.
A lavender sheet listing inspirational celebrities who had faded. Don set it aside with a scowl.

A powder-blue brochure titled 'Popular Myths and Misconceptions'. He recognized this one. It began, "Popular-culture portrayals of photoreflectively-impaired persons often showcase criminal activity, mental instability, and generally anti-social behaviour. Studies suggest, however, that most such persons live quiet but fulfilling lives, and many remark that they come to prefer their retreat from the public sphere."

"*Horse*shit!" Don's father had said, slapping the fir post that stood next to him. Father and son sat in armchairs before a wood-stove. Don's father leafed through his envelope. Only his ankles were now visible, and Don noticed that they were bonier than he'd expected, covered over with crooked white hairs. "Liberal city horseshit," he barked; each word sounded equally damning. "Retreat from the public? In Wells, a man is *seen*. He is *known*."

Don rolled his eyes. "It can happen to anyone, dad. Need me to get you anything, or anything for the house?" It was a small home that Don's father had built on three wooded acres hugging a bend in the Wells river.

"This morning I had to sell off the gaspumps," came his father's disembodied voice. "Whole rest of the store won't be long now, either. Pat Berkin took them off my hands, and I had the pleasure of watching him pay through his teeth. Almost double what he should have." Don heard his father again slap the slapped-smooth beam. "Well, what

else *could* he do?"

Don stood up. "Look, I flew down to see if you were okay. Okay? So let's deal with this. You got enough wood for the winter? You need me to bring some in?"

"Tell you something, though," his father muttered. "Once it's gotten me for keeps, I'm gonna be the worst invisible man they ever saw." Don crossed his arms as his father rumbled on. "They want me to disappear? Forget it. Scabby bandages, real grubbers, and that old black coat your mother said made me look like a grave-digger-"

"'Undertakerish'," corrected Don. “You need any groceries?"

"That's right, too. Undertakerish,” the voice mused, “I'll stand at the corner in town, by the new Chinese joint. Spook up the place – they’ll buy it, too. And when the weather breaks, I can go out buck-naked, and then…" The glow of the fireplace tightened the room around the two men as Don listened impatiently to his father's ambitions for raising hell.

But the next time Don visited, they spent the week watching police dramas and playing gin rummy. "I don't like going out there," his father whimpered. "Everyone's half-watching, waiting for somebody to bump into me or the bank-teller to forget me in line. No. I won’t let them have the satisfaction. And when I tried to go naked, Donny, the *breeze*." Don’s father took to stoking the wood-stove until it blazed enough that he could move about invisibly, on tiptoes. He whimpered from room to room. He began sitting quietly for long periods in strange places, down behind the bed or wedged between the stairs and the kindling-basket, so that when he passed away the family was presented

with an uncomfortable problem finally resolved by the recollection of his silver fillings and a rented metal-detector.

Now Don finished the 'Myths and Misconceptions' brochure and glanced at himself in the glass tabletop: his eyebrows were long gone. "Screw it!" he shouted, but his voice squealed unexpectedly. His father had deluded himself. Pranks? Childish. It's not how you dealt with it. He checked his watch and scowled. He punched the sofa. His fist bounced back. The memory of his father must still be irking him, he thought. But that wasn't it.

There was only one more slip of paper. Don resolved not to read it. He took the envelope and all of its contents and tore them to pieces, then threw the pieces about the room - confetti. He picked up the pieces and tore them into smaller pieces and threw them again. Some scraps lodged in the black-and-white photograph's frame, and as he gingerly plucked them out he saw in the glass that his eyes were beginning to fade, top-to-bottom. He clenched his bare toes and tugged his hair. It could happen to anyone, he reminded himself. But then, why me?

Don shook his head. He wondered what the last brochure had been. His nostrils stretched as he imagined an advertisement for the sort of peer-counseling workshops he'd tried to get his father to attend. He scowled as he pictured himself sitting with six other invisible men and women, all audibly slouched, probably in a high-school classroom with parts of the human anatomy labeled on a blackboard. He and the others wouldn't exchange knowing glances. Their conversation would be stiff and rhythmic, the way

speeches are made to a large audience. A perky thirty-something facilitator with hair falling over her shoulders would pace concentric circles, and talk about dealing with it. Her only qualification would be a practiced way of guessing eye-contact, and Don would have nowhere else to look but at her, and perhaps he would come to her after the sessions and she would say, "Should we?" with big frightened eyes and he would take her from behind, on one of the desks that was scrawled-on by yesterday's teens.

Don checked his watch. He sat down on the sofa, then stood up. His heart was racing unevenly. The evening sun poured down the skylight. In the glass of the coffee-table, he saw that there was nothing left above his lower jaw. Molars poked out of soft pink gums, the root of his tongue glistened in the light, like mousse on invisible hair. He plucked at paper-scraps, mechanically tearing smaller and smaller pieces - snuff. His driftless anger had retreated to a place in his lower guts, swollen and difficult to breathe around. He unclenched his toes. It must be those 'deepest sympathies' were still bothering him, he thought. But that wasn't it.

In fact, what was bothering Don was simplicity itself. In less than an hour she would open the door and kick her boots off onto the carpet, and when she did there would be nothing left of Don above the collar and she would realize they'd already exchanged their last long glance, and he would realize he’d gazed at her until she blushed for the last time.

Figure Eight

Just as Denise Bosnan was about to reach for the two white tablets that would kill her, the phone rang. The tablets were an over-the-counter painkiller that came in a soft plastic bottle labelled ‘fast acting’. It would be fast, she hoped, but not too fast in case she decided at the last minute to trigger the Sleeping Dog, which now sat next to the sofa where a technician from Figur8 had installed it. Denise had told the technician that she’d been estranged from her mother ever since her father had passed away when she was sixteen, and now, on the evening of her fortieth birthday, she wanted to call her mother and make amends but she couldn’t predict how the conversation would play out and that’s why she needed a time machine. Except that tonight was her fortieth birthday the story was a complete fabrication. The technician had installed the time machine, explained its simple-to-use lever, and on his way out the door wished her a sincere happy birthday. She wondered what she must look like to him. Blotchy, with dark eyes peering limply from beneath her thick brow. Tired, hunted. The two of them paused in the doorway for a moment to listen to the sound of an orchestra tuning up down by the water.

As the phone rang for a second time the orchestra launched into its first piece of the evening - a brawny tune that might have been Tchaikovsky - and the first thump of fireworks could be heard between the brass.

When Denise was six years old Dr. MacLean had taken two identical white tablets out of a soft plastic bottle and knelt down to where Denise gripped her mother’s jeans, saying,

--Now I know you’re a smart girl who can read very well. Read this bottle and promise to remember the words. For mommy and daddy and me, these tablets are

medicine that makes us feel better, but for you they will close your throat and stop you from breathing.

Then Dr. MacLean had croaked horribly with big wide eyes and even managed to turn his face an impressive shade of burgundy. After the performance he'd said,

--That's what will happen to you if you eat these tablets, and we don't want that, do we?

With the certainty of a terrified six-year-old Denise had shook her black braids and answered, no. We don't want that.

Five years before she spent her fortieth birthday seated alone at the kitchen countertop reaching for two white tablets that would kill her even as the phone made its third ring, Denise had been sure she didn't want it. She'd been a stable self-preservationist. Why wouldn't she be? She had been in her mid-thirties, then, finishing a second and more practical degree in pharmaceutical medicine, and she was engaged to Max. Max, with whom she felt comfortable on any evening either rewatching tapes of punk music concerts or matter-of-factly exploring kink fantasies in the bedroom, or discussing the possibility of having children before it was too late or of adopting children if it was already too late. She loved Max. She lived with Max and allowed herself to be domestic, even as she anxiously debated the merit of domesticity and the biological determinants of love. In other words she had led a normal and happy life. Then, at an undefined moment about five years before the phone rang for its fourth time as she palmed the two white tablets, some invisible fingers, slippery and unknown, had reached inside Denise and pulled a plug. This caused all of her feelings and her personality to spill out of her body and form a dribbly pool on the floor. What was left over looked like

Denise Bosnan, and even sometimes acted like Denise Bosnan, but inside was hollow and transformed. At least that's how she pictured it. At first she had thought her slight lethargy and irritability were signs of age. Twice, Max was convinced she was pregnant. But as time went on it seemed to Denise that the world around her had become dull, unfocused, and out of reach - or maybe it was her. She was just incapable of feeling much of anything. She had zero interest in kink and punk music. She was doomed to purgatory.

Max tried to be supportive despite not understanding. It must be your diet, he said, or maybe you would feel better if you took up painting again. She took up painting and changed her diet. It made no difference. She was fired from work at the pharmacy and took a job working the night shift at a retailer warehouse where she had to learn six hundred invoice codes and how to drive a forklift. She didn't mind it.

Maybe you need a jolt, said Max. This made sense to Denise. They planned to take a honeymoon but couldn't decide where.

--Just pick anyplace you want to go, said Max. We'll throw caution to the wind financially speaking.

--It doesn't matter to me in the slightest where we go, said Denise, or if we go anywhere at all. It makes no difference, don't you see?

They ended up not planning a wedding and not taking a honeymoon. Instead of to the Grand Canyon or Paris, Max went out in the evenings to punk rock bars and left Denise staring numbly at the floorboards. He always invited her, and she always said,

--Maybe next time.

He returned to find her unmoved.

It came as no surprise when, two years before the telephone's fifth ring, Max had

promised to remain supportive of Denise even as he revealed his feelings for a student at the graphics college where he taught. He still loved Denise, he loved who Denise was, but Denise was no longer the woman he knew and loved, Max had said. Denise had replied,

--Fair enough. Goodbye, Max.

Now, on the evening of her fortieth birthday, it was simply time to go. It was the right of any person, she believed, to decide when it was time to go. It wasn't that she was fat. It wasn't that her job required her to sleep through the daylight or that her salary was barely keeping pace with rent. It wasn't that she'd never had children with Max or with anyone. It was just that since it made no difference whether she stayed or went, she would prefer to leave before the majority of her memories were of staring at the walls with a folded pillow squeezed over her ears. The orchestra had finished tuning. Once, years ago, Denise had enjoyed the sound. It seemed like a shapeless mass of music about to be sculpted. Now she felt indifferent toward it. Not annoyed with it, just indifferent.

Even now, though, Denise wasn't sure she wanted to swallow the white tablets that would close her throat for good. That's why she had withdrawn her meagre savings, her dwindling inheritance, and as many small loans as she could haggle from relatives and credit cards to rent the Sleeping Dog.

The time machine looked a little bit like a boxer with its square head resting on forepaws, napping next to her grey sectional. It wasn't lifelike, but its shape had personality. As the first whiff of gunpowder entered through the window Denise almost expected the Sleeping Dog to sniff the air.

During the weeks leading up to her fortieth birthday she had learned all about

time machines. She had read, for instance, that the limitation of sending a person backward a single hour was more or less an insurmountable technical problem, having to do with the maximum rotational speed of a quantum funnel at its stem relative to its mouth - whatever that meant. On the other hand, the limitation of each machine being usable once was completely artificial. The time machine industry had been collared early on with single-use legislation. The courts ruled that timeline-alteration was a legitimate form of entrepreneurship, but that any machine providing such a service must be limited in order for the market and individuals to remain competitive. Time machines that could be fired over and over could result in unknown economic - not to say existential - problems.

She'd read other things. A federal politician had earned himself a public scandal when it came out that he'd used a time machine during a televised debate. He maintained that while he did have a time machine present at the debate, he had not fired it. The reporters said it was impossible to know if the candidate had revised the timeline or not, or to what extent. However, a schoolteacher was quoted saying, "I wanted to ask the candidate about his fiscal policy with regard to rising incidents of special-needs children in the classroom, but he kept ignoring me. I had to wonder: was he ignoring me because I'd asked the question in another timeline, and he hadn't had a good answer? The doubt will always be there." This had been one of the earliest cases of public blowback regarding time machines.

Denise had also read about a half-dozen pop musicians who admitted to using time machines at concerts. The act's manager would have a Figur8 technician install the machine in the dressing room or onstage behind some amplifiers. If the musician felt the

set wasn't coming together or the crowd wasn't responding, she'd pull the lever. Zap! Back she went. At first, managers prohibited their acts from admitting the use of time machines, but eventually it became clear that audiences didn't mind one bit. In fact, most came to prefer knowing their concert-going experience was the better of two possible timelines. Wasn't that what they were paying for?

It was not long before Denise had read about the controversial ruling made by the Supreme Court that any activity committed in an altered timeline was not prosecutable. That is, a person could commit any action whatsoever, trigger a time machine, and be legally inculpable. Denise had then read an editorial about a technician who claimed to suffer post-traumatic stress after three years of installation time machines outside the front doors of clients' ex-wives, or in the trunks of cars. The technician never saw anything, of course. The machine would click. Its indicator would turn from green to red to show that it had been fired, that the timeline had been changed. Then the technician would stand by as the client walked off, in the technician's words, "completely satisfied." It had become too much for this technician. He now fronted an ethical-timetravel investigative NGO.

But in her research, Denise had never found reference to someone using a time machine the way she was using it. She had wondered vaguely what that technician would make of her case.

Outside, the orchestra down on the beach was launching into the first brash notes of a tune Denise didn't recognize. It sounded to her like the theme to a film, like maybe she'd heard it once, but she couldn't be sure. Denise glanced over at the Sleeping Dog again. It was about the size of a canister vacuum cleaner. During her research it had never

occurred to her that a time machine would run on internal batteries. Surely something that ripped a person's consciousness out of her head and piped it backward through a quantum funnel - whatever that was - should at least be plugged into the wall.

She had had misgivings about the Sleeping Dog model. She groaned at its byline, *When your big day comes - who will be standing by your side?* and at all those smiling faces. But the Sleeping Dog was a few years old and that made it affordable. The model's advantage over its predecessor was that a rearrangement of the internal engine gave it no chance of starting a fire even if the upper vents were blocked. It was also smaller. These facts told Denise that concealment was a main concern of most time machine clientele, which made sense to her. Its main disadvantage over Figur8's next model was that users described experiencing an uncomfortable feeling of eternity, timelesness, between firing the machine and returning to the previous hour. It seemed to go on forever, they said, just being alone with no feelings, or thoughts, or anything, on and on.

The phone was on its eleventh ring now, and Denise Bosnan finally noticed it. Who would be calling at this hour, she wondered? What time was it, for that matter? At around the time Max had left her alone in the evenings while he went out to punk rock bars, she had begun to feel that all hours of the day were basically interchangeable.

Now she pressed her fingers into the top of her thigh, making dimples in the fabric of her navy-blue bathrobe. She lifted the hand and watched the fabric reassert itself. She look the Sleeping Dog's lever in one hand and thought to herself:

-Any minute now, my other hand will reach for those tablets and I'll swallow them and then I can decide. Until then, I don't have to. It seemed to her like the inevitable outcome to a film she'd seen many times before.

The phone stopped ringing. Before Denise could relax, it started up again. She summoned up the energy to reach over and mute it. Then it lay on the coffee table and vibrated against the glass. Denise shook her head. No. It wouldn't do to have that buzzing be the last sound she heard. She hadn't bothered to orchestrate this moment beyond changing into a bathrobe so the paramedics would have less trouble. She hadn't bothered to write a letter because she didn't trust herself to say the right thing and, anyway, there was no right thing to say. But she would not swallow those tablets with the phone buzzing away.

The voice on the other end was a woman who identified herself as a manager at Figur8. The voice was urgent and wanted to know,

"Ms. Bosnan, have you triggered the time machine?"

"Why?" said Denise.

"Listen to me. This is very important," said the voice. "Have you thrown the switch or not?"

"Do you mean the on-off switch, or the big lever?"

"For God's sake Ms. Bosnan, the lever. The lever that fires the machine."

"No. Not yet."

"Are you sure? I see that you rented the Sleeping Dog model. There should be a light on the back of the machine, near the vents. Can you tell me what colour the light is?"

Denise looked over at the idle machine. The light was green. The technician had told her that when she activated the machine and arrived sixty minutes earlier, the only difference in the timeline would be the light on the back of the machine. It would have

turned from green to red.

"Green," said Denise.

"And you're positive about that, that the light on the back of the machine is green."

"Yes," said Denise again. The woman sounded strained and upset, really upset. What could make this manager care so much?

The woman's voice broke. "Thank God, oh thank God - thank God," she gushed. After a moment the woman collected herself and said, "I just need to ask you one more time, just to be sure. You haven't fired the machine, or attempted to activate the machine, and the light on the back near the vents is still green. Is that correct?"

Denise found they were going in circles. "I already told you that. Yes. Now will you tell me what's going on?"

"We're sending Adrian - the technician who installed your machine - back to your apartment now. In the meantime, you must not touch that machine. No matter what. Am I correct in assuming you're still at your home?"

Denise was getting irritated, and liking it. She stood up and took a few steps toward the machine, cramming the phone against her ear. "Maybe you better tell me what's going on," she said. "I rented this machine for a lot of money and--"

"There's a technical problem with the machine," said the woman. "A glitch, or a possible glitch. I'm afraid I can't elaborate, but it's sufficient to say it's a danger to you and others."

This was reasonable, but Denise was enjoying getting mad. "Tell you what. If you don't level with me about this dangerous machine that your technician Adrian was happy

enough to install in my home, then I might start pushing buttons. Which I'm entitled to do because I paid a lot - a lot - for the stupid thing."

"Whatever happens, don't do that," said the woman.

"I've got the lever in my hand," said Denise. Outside her apartment she could hear the last notes of the film theme. She glanced at her watch. Had it only been three minutes since her phone had first begun to ring? She looked over at the tablets now, and they stared seedily up at her from the table.

"We have reason to believe the machine is defective."

"Your technician didn't say--"

"He didn't know at the time." The woman's voice hesitated. "Normally when a user pulls a lever and is transmitted backward in time, sixty minutes backward, the only thing that remains from the altered timeline is the person's memory. That way the user can do things differently. Right?"

"Yes, of course. That's the whole point."

"Right. And there's one other thing that changes. The machine itself. A signal is piped backward along with the user's memories, a signal that instructs the machine's engine to burn itself out so it can't be used again. Does that make sense?"

Denise was beginning to guess. "Not this one," she said.

"No," said the woman. "The machine in your home might - might - have a faulty transmitter. There's a chance that neither the user's memories nor the signal will be sent back at all."

"So it doesn't work," said Denise. She felt strangely disappointed. Just another flatline.

"No. It's not that it just doesn't work. The engine itself might work perfectly, but if no memories and no signals are transmitted back then…" the woman's voice trailed off.

"I think I understand. There would be no way to know you'd thrown the switch," Denise finished.

"It could create an infinite loop," said the woman.

Denise sat down. None of this made any sense. She'd spent all her money in order to be, finally, sure of herself. Now she was just confused.

"Are you still there, Ms. Bosnan?"

Denise thought about the company's name and their stylish infinity logo. It had never occurred to her before how wrong that picture was. "What would that mean - an infinite loop?"

"We don't know."

"Would just I be looped, or everyone?"

"This has never happened before."

"I mean, would the world just stop turning - or what?"

"Honestly, we don't know."

"What should I do?" asked Denise finally. The woman on the other end told her to wait for Adrian and just stay calm, and not to touch the machine no matter what. "How dangerous is this thing, exactly?" asked Denise after a pause.

"This is just my opinion," answered the manager, "but I've been talking to the tech guys, and it seems right. If you had to put them side-by-side I'd guess it's far more dangerous than an atom bomb."

"Okay," said Denise. "I have to go." And she hung up the phone.

An atom bomb. Denise felt like she'd been kicked in the stomach. Her hands were already shaking in a way that they had when, at age twenty-two, she'd eaten bad seafood in a New York hostel and thrown up for thirty hours straight.

She moved toward the machine and leaned over it, hands shivering in the pockets of her navy-blue nightgown. It had the suggestion of a dog's face without quite looking like one - the way the front of a car had a facial expression without quite having a face. She reached out and touched the machine's plastic shell with her fingertips. It felt cold. She spread her palm against it but felt no pulse or motion. An atom bomb, she thought. Denise Bosnan's atom bomb.

Suddenly she was taken aback by a great rush of energy inside her. It came from nowhere, as if she was a string on an instrument and some invisible fingers had decided right now to start winding her key. She paced the apartment from the bathroom door to the front door, then lengthwise from the stovetop to the balcony. The apartment was tiny, she realized. It was a small squeezed space and the walls were beige, and dirty. And the closet door was still crooked on its hinges after two years even though Max had offered to fix it for her. She should fix it now. That's what she would do while she waited for Adrian the technician to ring the buzzer, but first she would get dressed into some proper clothes. As she threw on sweatpants and an old college hoodie she wondered: Do I even have a screwdriver? Denise rushed to the closet and began searching for a screwdriver to fix the closet hinges. She had to shove aside an old canning kit she hadn't used for ten years and the luggage she'd bought for her honeymoon with Max. The screwdriver must be deeper, she thought frantically. She couldn't find it.

Denise sprung out of the closet and returned to pacing around the apartment that felt smaller by the second. She checked her watch. How long would it taken the technician, Adrian, to drive here? It had been nine minutes since she'd hung up the phone, eighteen since it had first rung. She could wait. She paced past the countertop and without thinking flicked the white tablets off onto the carpet, then she crossed over to the Sleeping Dog. The woman from Figur8 had said it was more dangerous than an atom bomb. An atom bomb! She still couldn't believe it ran on batteries. She wondered what the batteries looked like. She wondered if she could open it and look at the batteries or see if anything was obviously wrong with the machine, but of course she couldn't find her screwdriver. Outside the window came a great popcorn rattling of a dozen fireworks exploding one after the other. Denise paused to inhale the smell of gunpowder. It was a good smell. She wished it was stronger, and she bet it was stronger down by the beach. She wanted to see the fireworks. With the festival on, she realized, Adrian could take an hour or more to arrive. She could walk down to the beach and be back before he arrived and nobody would know the difference.

What was happening to her?

Before she could answer the question, Denise had packed the Sleeping Dog into her honeymoon luggage and was trundling it down the staircase.

Down on the street, a chilly wind carried the sounds of the symphony from the water. Hitching up her collar she began walking toward it, rattling the broken time-machine behind her. It took her twenty minutes to reach the outskirts of the crowd that had gathered for the fireworks festival - along the way she stopped several times to breathe the air.

The crowd was thicker than she'd expected. They blocked Denise's view of the beach and the orchestra, but not of the clear sky made deep by a quarter moon. She began to elbow her way through the crowd and eventually found a place near the beach to stop and watch.

As showers and fountains rained through the sky to songs she sometimes recognized, Denise Bosnan gripped the handle of her brand-new suitcase and felt its atomic energy electrify her guts. She wanted to shriek at the explosions, but she felt it was important to keep the energy bottled up. Before long she was glancing at the woman standing to her left, trying to make eye-contact. Denise had not felt anything for a long time, and she wanted someone to see her doing it. If someone could see her, it might last. But the woman's shoulders were hunched and she was glaring downward at the grass, and she took no notice. Denise wondered if that's how she herself had looked only - could it be? - thirty-six minutes ago. What would this woman do with the broken time-machine, she wondered. Her attention was pulled back to the pounding sky as the orchestra reached its eighth or ninth crescendo. She stared upward and lost track of time.

"They'll never top the Chinese," said a voice. Denise became aware of a small man in his early forties with most of his hair intact and pulled back in the kind of ponytail that nobody wore these days.

"I'm sorry - but who was this?" said Denise, gesturing to the fading lights above.

The small man's eyebrows drifted toward his hairline. "That was us. Our guys can put on a show, but most years it's the same story." He was smiling shyly at her now. She flashed a too-big grin back at him. And you, she thought. At what hour would you freeze the world with the Sleeping Dog? She pictured him serving her an ambitious stuffed duck

with the machine hidden under the kitchen table, watching closely her reaction. The vanity of it made her laugh out loud. “Here - the next group is starting!” he said. The orchestra struck the first notes of an awkward jazz medley. The ponytailed man shifted his weight and seemed like he was about to say something else over the cacophony of music and gunpowder, but suddenly it was all too much for Denise. She had to keep moving, she couldn’t stand still. Pretending to spot someone in the distance, she shrugged her shoulders and drifted off, suitcase handle firmly in hand.

Faces were glimpsed in the sporadic light. There was the bearded and pointedly neutral face of father whose twin boys leaned almost at right angles off his arms. If he knew what Denise had zipped up behind her, would he be terrified at the thought of the boys never growing an hour older - or relieved? Beyond him was a teenager leaning against a bicycle rack, looking drunk and annoyed with himself. His mind would drift to sex, of course. Denise envied him. There was the glacial face of a woman some years older than Denise. The face was severe and appeared to have suffered a great deal, and she did not want to imagine what its owner might do with a broken time machine. There were so many people here. The fireworks continued to explode overhead, raining down smoke and images, and Denise quickened her pace. She pushed all the way through the jazz medley until, eventually, the crowd parted to reveal a small duck pond ringed with families who huddled into themselves and pointed up at particular lights. Standing nearest to herself were four children with gaping, upturned faces.

And my own face? thought Denise. If I could see it for the first time, what would I think of it? Blotchy, with darkly-circled eyes peering from beneath a heavy brow - but I bet it doesn’t look limp or hunted now. She thought of calling Max. She thought of telling

him what she nearly did tonight, and telling him she missed him as a way of telling him that she wouldn't do it again. Maybe that would be a good hour to lock in time and the world be damned. The wind rippled on the concrete duck pond and broke apart the scene above.

Denise noticed that the children beside her didn't have anyone with them. They must have wandered away from their parents. The eldest was a girl about twelve, and the rest bore enough of her features to be siblings or cousins. The rapt postures of connoisseurs. If these children had lost their pack, they didn't seem the least bit bothered by it. Denise stood back and watched them, and gripped the handle of the suitcase in her hand, and then sat down on the case.

Her elation petered out at the same time the music ended and the last of the explosions coloured the night sky. She realized for the first time that she'd left with a jacket and the wind was really starting to bite. Oh, well. She checked her watch. It was almost an hour since the manager from Figur8 had called to tell her she wouldn't be making that particular choice tonight. Adrian, the technician, would be anxiously buzzing her doorbell. She stood up. She'd had her fun, and it was time to go home.

But before she could turn her back on the pond, the eldest girl, the one with dark eyes, took a few quick steps toward her. She walked right up, and the others slowly followed behind. They formed a circle around Denise. Denise looked down at them, surprised.

"Ms. Bosnan," said the girl matter-of-factly.

"Yes?"

The girl took two steps to the left, turning Denise away from the crowd.

"I just wanted to thank you."

"What for?"

“Once, a long time ago, when we were still children, you gave us this machine,” said the girl. “You opened the bag and told us what was inside. You told us it would be better for us if we pulled the lever. And you were right. You won’t remember this - you never do. but these days I like to thank you anyway. I think it's important, for some reason, to thank you.”

Denise felt a tug on the suitcase behind her. She turned to see that one of the younger boys had unzipped the case and was reaching inside.

Please, she thought, but it was too late. The wheels of the suitcase rose slightly off the ground as the boy found the Sleeping Dog's lever with both hands and pulled downward.

The Ghost of Fort Dutch

Morris measured and sliced plastic sheeting to cover the last empty windowsill. It was mid-November, and the bunkhouse was punctured all over. The cold breeze carried pine needles through the absent front door and stovepipe, and it moved inside Morris's cable-knit sweater. The sweater had fit snugly when he'd first arrived. Outside in the clearing, Morris thought he heard a horse's quick exhale. He scratched at his throat and began stapling shut the hole. Ghosts moved near the edges of the clearing.

It had been late July when he'd read about the groundskeeping job. He was staying with his sister after the funeral. He'd always liked abandoned places, he realized. He remembered a picture book about ghost towns he'd read at school. He used to stand in his father's bedroom and wonder what it would look like a hundred years after they were all dead. Even as an adult, he liked pictures in the news of cities evacuated for floods or war. He liked the idea of the moon, with its limp flag and few dozen footprints.

After their father died, he showed the job clipping to his sister. He whispered to her that he must take his ears far away from the hum of thirty-watt fluorescent overheads, his nostrils from the smell of ammonia and crisp linens. He would find a place where nobody lived.

But Fort Dutch was barely a place. Eight clapboard bunkhouses, once blue, shipped to Dease Lake by rail, then trucked into the mountains on a newly-felled road; an empty warehouse; a flat cinderblock building with three laundry sinks forming a sort of trough against the far wall; and a community-hall at the centre of town. In one of the bunkhouses, a mother skunk had dug through the carpeted floor to make her nest.

It had seemed to Morris like the sketch of a town. These few buildings were huddled together within an overgrown clearing deep inside the grey, tinder forest. When Morris had arrived, the road through the clearing was unpaved, ungraveled, submerged beneath bracken and grass gone to seed. An aborted place, he thought, just like the Millionaire's assistant had said.

The Fort was five hours from its nearest neighbour, and when he'd arrived it was late afternoon. In his pickup's cab, Morris had exhaled all of the air in his lungs, looked at the overgrown clearing, and at the ruins, and wondered, who could live here?

He discovered a five-pin bowling lane in the community-hall, along with a warren kitchenette - earwigs and loose earth covered the countertops. The hall's other room was an office just wide enough to fit his cot and card-table. He moved in. On the first night, Morris bowled alone. His scores were middling, but he enjoyed the suspense of the roll.

"Try not to think of it as a ghost town," the Millionaire's assistant had said. "There are lots of those in the North. But my theory is this isn't one of them." Morris had met the Millionaire's assistant at a deli in Gas Town, and watched him quarter and eat his sandwich like a series of problems. The younger man's hair reminded Morris of the shiny end of a grease pen. "Nobody ever lived there, so it was never *abandoned*. Instead, think of it like a still-born." Morris had skated a chunk of blackened cheddar around his plate as the assistant told him how, decades earlier, the Fort had been tossed together on the dollar of a Dutch mining company that found silver in the mountains. The company named it Fort Dutch because they weren't allowed to give it a Dutch name, and because they couldn't pronounce the Salish word for the area. But legal battles put the project in

limbo before any surveyors or miners could arrive. Then the company went bankrupt, and the Millionaire - the assistant's boss - had bought the town at an assets-auction because it was cheap, and because he didn't have one yet. Maybe someday a pipeline would shoot through the area, pumping in natural gas and dollars, until Fort Dutch would swell up and burst, drizzling prefab homes and box-stores down the mountainside to pool in suburbs at its foot. In the meantime, the place lay abandoned in the woods, and it needed the hint of a pulse to be legally alive. The assistant had clipped through the Fort's history as though reading from an appointment-book, then said:

"You just have to live there. Don't bother doing anything, okay?"

"I won't," said Morris.

"Because if it ever gets developed, all those crapped-on shacks will get torn out anyway. So take a trailer, or find one - a shack or something - that meets code, and hole up. Walk the perimeter. Keep an eye out. And that, my friend - that's the whole job."

Then he nodded to say: we're finished. After signing the contract, Morris had left the city without speaking to the man again.

For nearly two weeks, Morris kept his word. He wandered the beetle-killed forests during the day; he slept on his cot at night. He read novels and magazines. As the days passed, he kept expecting Fort Dutch to impress something on him, to imprint its old and haunting wisdom. Then, one afternoon in August, as he dragged a fallen branch off the community-hall's roof, he realized that the town had no lessons to offer. He broke up the branch and burned it.

Morris spent the next days hunting for damage, the next weeks planning repairs.

The grass was cut and the community-hall cleared of bracken and animals. He blocked the front door with an overturned table, but he didn't seal the windows. He thought it was only fair to bring up the whole town at the same time. Fair for whom? he asked himself. At night when the wind blew, the place seemed to breathe.

He checked the cisterns beneath the community-hall for leakage, then scraped out fungus and animal leavings. He refitted the sinks in the cinderblock building. When he tried the taps, they released a slick of sewage and a smell that made his nose run. The roof of one bunkhouse was collapsed under a fallen spruce, and the water damage inside made the place grey and misshapen, like the result of a fire. The other houses reeked of guano. Inside them, floorboards had shrunk from one-another like the teeth in dying gums. Morris stepped carefully through each building, making notes with a carpenter's pencil. Only three houses were salvageable, three of the eight.

Morris knew that his grandfather had been a carpenter. It was all he knew about him.

He attacked the buildings with industrial solvents and a twelve-pound sledge, ripped away soft drywall loaves and flooring, and stacked them near the warehouse. He tore out the nickel-wire fences and two cast-iron stoves so rusted that his grip punched holes. He tore the trim off of walls. He attacked electrical outlets and light switches, linoleum flooring and baseboard heaters, until the bunkhouses were empty wooden shells. He spent an afternoon walking through the empty shells, thinking, who could live here?

Boards, cables, pink insulation, aluminum sheeting - the heap grew taller as days and loads crossed the clearing. A cough began to develop deep in his lungs. He found he

was rarely hungry, so he rarely ate. He poured cement from a hand-mixer, smoothed cracked stairs and patios, slathering the mixture with a trowel and catching spills with his fingers. He planed new floorboards and fitted them with long, iron nails. Coughing, back stooped, thinking, *stand up*, he carved a granite slab to fit the warehouse with a new foundation stone. Months passed in Fort Dutch. Morris's hands cracked and his skin blistered. Then he began making furniture.

"No one could die like Brando," Morris's father had said, "because Brando was the best - but Richard Harris wouldn't do the death scene with Brando." Morris's father had been the supervising paramedic of the sawmill in the town where'd he'd grown up. He'd spent most of that time reading magazines, and now he lay dying of leukemia in his daughter's guest bed. *Mutiny on the Bounty* had played on the TV during the afternoon, part of a station's run of classics.

Morris had asked: are you comfortable?

His father had said, "Marlon Brando was a big baby. He had his food delivered from L.A., all the way to Tahiti by plane. Catered food. Jesus."

Morris had asked: is there anything you want to do? Is there anything you want to talk about?

With his low voice and proudly-rounded vowels, his father had said, "Richard Harris acted the scene to a sawed log, because he said the log inspired more pity, and because Marlon Brando was drunk."

Morris asked: what was it like, growing up with grandpa and grandma? What was it like, growing up after the war?

"Oh, there were the straight kids and the long-hair kids. I don't mean the hippies yet, I just mean the ones that wanted to be like James Dean. Then Elvis grew his hair long. There's a show coming on about Elvis's daughters, if you want to watch it."

So they talked about the things his father had read in magazines while overseeing the safety of the sawmill. Morris didn't have much to add, but his father seemed comforted by his presence, and by watching movies and talking about them. They watched Disney movies and murder mysteries. When his father died, he did it comfortably in the hospital, with his children nearby and opiates filling his bloodstream.

By September, Fort Dutch was unrecognizable. He had sanded and whitewashed the bunkhouses, while his forearms and shoulder blades knotted and hurt. He had sanded away the smell of skunk and mould. He had fitted tables, chairs, empty bookshelves, a crib, new doors. His workshop in the cinderblock building was a sight to behold.

His cough grew worse, and his spit yellowed. Morris painted lines of yellow caulk into empty window frames and fitted them with glass. As the sun lowered in the sky, the trees turned from grey to cherry red, and the glass would shine and move like moving eyes. Morris would sit for long stretches in the cab of his pick-up, massaging his shoulder blades and coughing into his elbow, watching the glass, feeling watched.

One night in October, he lay dead still on his cot, willing his raw lungs not to itch. His back hurt. His lips were chapped. The whites of his eyes, he'd noticed, had gained a jaundiced hue. He rubbed his chapped lips with a finger, feeling the bristle. His teeth were white as pearls - so white they were nearly blue - and dark circles had appeared around his eyes. He looked like a man in a two-tone photograph. Fort Dutch made him

feel like a man in a photograph, too, a small man standing inside a palm-sized photo against an unfocused background he couldn't yet see. Lying on the bed, he smelled goose down and kerosene. He allowed himself to breathe it in. After a long fit of coughing, he asked out loud: who's there? Who could live in this place? He breathed unsteadily, and the town filled him in. He felt the clearing outside his window. Each building and road sounded a tone that he could feel, somehow, pricking his scalp, just above his hearing. He felt each place in his aches, and calloused hands. He was close to something, he knew.

The place seemed older than it was. Fort Dutch should have been haunted, he suddenly thought. He said it aloud to the muffling October night. It had a right to be haunted. In fact, he thought, it was haunted. It was. The assistant's theory was crap. The town wasn't stillborn: it just needed a thump to start it breathing.

Morris slept naked with his clothing folded on the card-table. His socks were tacked to a peg-board for air. He woke with the dawn and did not remember his dreams.

The next day, Morris fitted and finished the last bunkhouse window. The last door was screwed without trouble into its brass hinges, and there was still daylight in the sky. He strolled through the unfilled depths of the warehouse, smelling grains and preserves that had never arrived. He wheeled the diesel generator out into the clearing, and left it beside the road. He unwound long electrical cables, and ran them into the houses and the community-hall.

Then Morris shoveled gravel in the direction of the sunset. Someday, he would lay paving stones. He would fit shutters over the windows.

As the road inched farther, he adopted its steadiness. His mind's eye looked

outward in all directions. He began to see Fort Dutch the way a bird would, or a mouse, or a young girl playing with jacks in the road. A girl with a small blue dress, he thought, and old-fashioned curls in her hair. He could see her now, playing in his mind's eye. That's who lived in Fort Dutch.

The wind picked up as evening wore, and he shot billiards in the community-hall. The balls left long, white roadways in the moth-eaten felt.

When night fell, Morris dragged a ten-gallon gas can across the clearing, and all around him the forests loomed tall. Fort Dutch's six buildings stood silent. Diesel sloshed noisily in the can. Somewhere above the clouds, Orion was lifting his bow. For an instant, Morris thought he heard low voices carried by the shushing wind. Low voices with rounded vowels, he thought.

Morris struggled the gas can across the road. Gravel rumbled under its edge. Both arms shaking, chest spasming with a suppressed cough, Morris lifted the can's lip to the generator's mouth and poured. He coughed into his elbow as the fluid poured in, leaving his sleeve slick with coloured phlegm. When the can was empty, he fired the generator. There were lights in Fort Dutch. Morris covered his ears against the sound, hitched up his coat, and strolled toward the edge of the clearing.

The wind cut. So far north, there was no undergrowth. The pines stretched up like rocket-trails - thin and disappearing - and beneath his boots a blanket of needles covered the earth. He leaned wearily and watched the town. On either side of the road stood the small houses, silhouetted by the downtown lights. The three he'd saved stood straight and tall, fresh paint and tin chimneys, clear yards, taut rail fences. The road was uncluttered.

Barely illuminated by the yellow wash of his office window loomed the warehouse at the far end. It might have been a barn. Morris sighed heavily. People could live in this town. From a distance, it looked like a real place.

Suddenly there were footsteps on the road behind him. Morris allowed himself a moment's satisfaction before turning to look. Out of the darkness walked a trio of tall men in overalls. They were invested in hushed conversation. Morris couldn't make out their words. He stepped off the road, and they passed him, and taking no notice. Their faces were undefined in the dim.

"Who are you?" he called. But they strolled toward town, keeping to themselves.

Morris smelled sweat and sawdust. The men must be loggers, but without tools in their hands or belts. Idiot. They'd be left at a worksite, in the woods somewhere, covered with a brown, waxed tarp. He hadn't made out their faces. But then, they wouldn't want to be stared at, anyway. He wondered where they were walking. Which house did they live in? But of course, they wouldn't live together; each must belong to one of the three bunkhouses, and they were now returning home for dinner, to see their families. Their families, Morris thought dizzily. Sure enough, he heard the men call goodnight, then a series of doors swung open and shut. Morris had only glimpsed them before they disappeared. He walked back toward town, toward the closest house.

There were lights on inside, and for a moment the voices of a man and woman. He could hear the clatter of cookware. Morris put his hands on the fence and leaned into the yard, closer to the house. The wind picked up and shrieked in his ears. He couldn't hear anything over it. Holding his breath, he hoisted himself up and stepped carefully over the fence. He crept toward the house. Yellow light spilled into the yard, but he

stepped around it, approached slowly, and pressed his ear to the wall.

When the voices spoke, it was like another language. The sounds were intact but alien to him. He heard snatches of words - he thought he heard *post*, *mile*, *graveyard*, *page* - but he could not make any sense of it. Instead, Morris listened to the voices' low and high melodies, and was comforted by them, and when he couldn't contain his cough any more he slunk away. He hacked gruesomely in the road. That night, he slept soundly and awoke in the morning to the sound of laughter.

At Christmas, the men of Fort Dutch were happy to see their children and animals arrive. A few dogs and a pair of oxen - even horses. More men came as well, loggers and builders. A gang of children snow-shoed through the woods, calling each other's names. Smoke rose cheerily across town, carrying the smell of pork pies and clove. Rocking chairs appeared on the porches, and the warehouse was converted to a stable. Bales of hay were rolled inside. The logging men disappeared into the woods for a week at a time, returning tired but well paid. They drank rum and fought in the road. One of the logger's wives talked about hosting school in her living room. Raising children is hard work, she said. There was no need to do it alone. The air was bright with snow.

At school, the children crowded around a shy girl in a blue dress. She sported a black eye. Who knocked you down? they asked. Nobody, she said. She fell over a stone while running from the ghost; she ripped her blue dress in the road. The ghost? they whispered. The ghost. Really the ghost? What did he look like? He was hunched and yellow, with big awful teeth. He dragged his feet, and the wind seemed to blow right through him. But worst of all, she said, was his cough. His cough, it rattled in the road

and rattled in the trees outside her window at night. So it's all true, whispered the schoolchildren. Yes, yes, said the girl excitedly. Yes, it's all true.

Picture of a Killing

Samuel came down off the fort's wall thirty minutes late and immediately began hunting for his servant. The Chipewayans and Northern Cree were already down in the courtyard. The noise of men's voices making small, private trades mingled with the wind that sidled up the stone walls and tugged at his jacket. He didn't see the boy anywhere in the sea of hair and faces.

He had been expecting his old traveling companion, Matonabbee, to arrive sometime in Spring and be followed by a few families carrying enough pelts to put a dent in the fort's trade wares and fill its larders for the winter. Instead, he'd arrived in the tailwinds of August with an entourage of more Indians than anyone in the Fort had ever seen in one place; at least three hundred men and women. They had walked proudly through the main gate and Matonabbee had introduced the head of each family by name and association to himself. They'd come carrying baskets and hauling sledges. The first clerk's fingers had gleefully flitted through the air until he finally gave Samuel a loose estimate of over four thousand beavers' worth of pelts, with perhaps seven thousand pounds of meat. The factory crew had been scrambling since their midmorning to accomodate them. Samuel had lost his office to an always-frowning trader who insisted they needed all available space to make trades and store the goods. A small closet connected to a larder was being outfitted with a temporary desk and chairs to act as Samuel's temporary office. Samuel wasn't happy about his place of business being filled with animal skins, and told the trader so, but he relented when he smelled the closet. It had once been a pantry for dried apples.

Samuel had already made his speeches, welcoming Matonabbee and his group into the Fort and thanking them for their continuing loyalty to their mutual father King

George, &c. To which Matonabbee, whose looks and enormous voice dwarfed Samuel in every aspect, replied that he was happy to visit Fort Prince of Wales, the place of his birth, and that when Samuel finally returned to England and saw his father King George he should ask him to come visit Hudson's Bay where Matonabbee would welcome him with royal treatment. The factory men's applause tapered off in the silence of their four hundred guests. Few of them spoke English.

The two leaders had then exchanged gifts. Samuel gifted the Chipewayan a small cask of butter, two barrels of black powder, a tin of finer-grain powder, and an old Captain's jacket with insignia of the Royal Navy. He'd received in exchange several arctic fox pelts - he estimated twenty beavers' worth - and a new pair of snowshoes. He received the shoes with a flush of happy embarrassment.

Now it was late afternoon. Samuel had taken a moment to collect his thoughts, which meant reading a column from last October's *London Gazette* about the international price of corn. He'd read this column three times already, and had no interest in it, but he had no choice. The Fort had never been properly equipped with books, and it had been twenty months since the a ship had anchored in the bay outside Fort Prince of Wales. Despite limiting himself to one column per day he'd long-since eaten through the stack of papers the captain had brought him from Halifax. Samuel had cut the columns out of the papers with a knife, the better to keep hidden in his breast pocket. When the silence of the Fort and its twenty-seven faces weighed on him, it was his ritual to climb the wall's staircase, smooth a column out on the stone parapet, and read - or reread - while overlooking the endless waters of the Hudson's Bay. But his servant was supposed to call him down after an hour.

His servant wasn't attending Matonabbee or his three hundred follows, and he wasn't helping move Samuel's big desk into the apple closet. When Samuel - by now quite red in the face from traipsing around the courtyard looking for his own misplaced servant - asked Mr. Bird where the boy might be, Mr. Bird couldn't say where he'd gone. He didn't know where Mr. Baker had gone either, for that matter, but that if he were the governor he might undertake a thorough search of the entire Fort, beginning, for example, with the woodstack along the northeast wall.

"The northeast wall?" asked Samuel. "Why not the southwest?"

"No particular reason at all," replied Mr. Bird with a shrug. Then he looked up at the sky, winced dramatically and shrugged, saying, "I'd guess the only reason at all might be to keep the sun out of your eyes."

Samuel said goodbye to Mr. Bird and made his way toward the northeast wall, parting the courtyard's thick congregation like underbrush as he went. As he approached, he took a moment to frown at several holes in the wall's broad face. The curtain wall broke the constant wind coming off the bay, so at this time of summer the blackflies were thick inside the courtyard. But the Fort's original masonry had been shoddily done (what idiot decided to build a star fort in Canada, anyway? Were they expecting French men-of-war to sail up the Chuchill river?). When a stone fell out, as happened from time to time, there wasn't a decent mason within a year's walk in any direction to perform the delicate task of replacing it. This led to the northwest wall looking a bit like Samuel's cousin's smile - the one who made his money by enlisting in army units to represent them in fistfights when a feud broke out. It also led to wind sucking noisily through the gaps, which amused the fort's three hundred visitors, which annoyed the factory men. Samuel

was particularly annoyed to think that Matonabbee, his old companion and friend, might think less of Samuel's governorship with the place in such disrepair. But what could he do with twenty-six men, more than half working far from the Fort on any given day, and supplies arriving once every other year? He hardly had the manpower to refit the fifty absurd cannons - fifty! - nested along the ramparts and falling to rust in the sea air.

The northeast length of the twenty-foot-tall wall was taken up by a silvering woodstack that climbed halfway up. It was an impressive stack that would need to be doubled before autumn. Every day, two men were assigned to collect, split, and stack, and this included Samuel himself. It was a device he used to stress the importance of the fuel and of self-reliance. The daily exercise also kept everyone in health and company. The arrival of the traders had, of course, made today an exception. The stack was unattended - then why did he see crouched backs beyond its edge? Samuel discovered his young servant between the woodstack's edge and the narrow avenue which led to one of the star's four points. He and Mr. Baker, the third clerk, were hunched over something Samuel couldn't see, and when he cleared his throat they both jumped to their feet. A newspaper in the young man's right hand fled behind his back.

"Now then," began the governor. "I'd like to know why you've stopped your work, when there's a lot to still get finished before nightfall. Then he added, "I'm also curious what's come into your hands that you just couldn't wait to look at." When neither answered, Hearne said again, "What are you doing back here, and why have you stopped your work?"

Mr. Baker cleared his throat and said simply, "The boy was reading to me because

I asked him to."

It was probably true - the evidence was still visible behind the boy's right leg. Strange. After eighteen months without contact from beyond the Bay, what was there to read? Mattonnabbee's men could not have brought books with them, Hearne reasoned. Even Mattonnabbee, who had been raised until the age of seven inside the walls of this Fort and who spoke English quite well, even he had no interest whatsoever in reading. So Hearne naturally wanted to know what the two of them had found themselves to read. Mr. Baker, though, was having none of it. He told his governor in clear terms that they'd admitted guilt, and were ready to receive punishment for laxing in their duties - but how could the subject of their reading play any part at all? So Samuel backed off on that point.

Samuel's young servant looked at his feet. Mr. Baker kept Hearne's eye, and did not attempt to hide the newspaper - but neither did he offer them to the governor. He had to do something. Even if the crime was unsevere, a punishment must follow, if for no other reason than it was expected. The north had taught Samuel the high value of predictability. An unpredictable elk, storm, or man was dangerous.

"Baker," he said, "as the senior man, this injunc - this lapse, or infraction, falls on you. You'll work alone for the remainder of the afternoon. I expect you to keep up. You'll have no break this evening." Although he could not meet Samuel's eye, the youth seemed about to find his tongue again - but Baker beat him to it, saying, "The punishment is fair. I accept it."

Samuel nodded curtly and was about to return to the courtyard when his curiosity got the better of him. He had been reading the same article about corn prices for days. He considered revoking the newspaper, but thought the better of it. He had already passed his

judgement. Still, though, the papers from home were one of the only distractions he allowed himself - along with sketching - and the Fort hadn't been supplied since Spring of the previous year.

He addressed his servant directly. “I'll be curious to see what distracted you both. Perhaps you'll show it to me sometime.” Then he added, “Whenever is convenient for you.” Baker gave the servant a wry look as Samuel turned on his heel and stalked off into the summer heat.

He was soon stopped short by a figure which melted out of the crowd; it was Matonabbee. Without saying a word, Matonabbee took Samuel's elbow in his hand and, like savvy politician, led him away from the courtyard. On the way, Samuel sized up his old companion and noted that although his long hair was more or less the same shade of charcoal as when they'd met fifteen years earlier, and although his six-foot-and-then-some frame still loomed impressively over the sea of hatted and unhatted heads in the coutyard, he could not deny that Matonabbee had got a bit fat in the middle. But then, who was he to talk? The company had once called Samuel 'the fastest white man on snowshoes'; he doubted very much they'd be so generous now.

Matonabbee stopped in the doorway of a storehouse that smelled exclusively of weathered onions. Ducking to speak, he said to Samuel, “I will come to your office when things have settled in. I will ask you a question.” Samuel was surprised to notice concern in the man's face. “Between now and then, you should prepare to give me a good answer.” And without saying another word, Matonabbee walked off.

Well, thought Samuel. What do you make of that?

Up on the wall - the northeast, this time - Samuel thought through this

development. What could the chief have to ask him, and why was it a secret? Also, how can a person reasonably prepare a good answer, when he didn't know the question, or even the topic? Samuel watched for gulls flashing about the grey water, but they did not appear. Perhaps they were nesting against the cold wind, or they'd gone farther afield to hunt. Why had Matonabbee spoken to him so mysteriously? The chief's tone bothered Samuel in a way he couldn't explain. After feeling for a moment in his jacket pocket, he once again smoothed out the corn price article on the wall, but his eyes would not anchor to the words. What was going on, he wondered? Maybe it had something to do with Matonabbee's unexpected arrival. Had the politics in the area changed? Was Matonabbee under attack, and if so, was Fort Prince of Wales ready to fight? No. The chief's group included women, and the men carried baskets and pulled sledges; it wasn't a war party.

Before he could formulate any kind of guess, the small voice of his servant interrupted him. The boy was standing half-sunk to his waist in the stairwell. The servant's face was red when he addressed his governor. As the boy's superior and mentor, Samuel was a beater. He had never been much of a fighter, was certainly not a sadist, but when it came to the boy he surprised himself. Samuel himself had been interned to the navy at thirteen - about the boy's age - and had grown up in the violence of the Seven Years War before getting more or less sold by the Navy to the company to hunt blackfish in Hudson's Bay. He was a man who had never been a boy, and he disliked boyishness. He would later punish the boy for, say, speaking out of turn at the table.

With one hand his servant held out a bundle of papers, saying, “Governor Hearne, here is a newsheet Mr. Baker has been using as an instruction to continue my education at this post. Having completed his lesson of this day, I wonder if you'd like it to read in your

spare time, although Mr. Baker told me to tell you about its being, the paper, two years old and having little in it except ads."

Samuel took the paper appreciatively, at which point the boy vanished back down the stairs. He immediately spread the paper out on the wall and leaned on its edges against the wind, telling himself that he really should save the fresh paper for later. Perhaps mix it in with his usual rotation to draw out its life. Anyway he had absolutely no time to read at the moment anyway. He squinted at the paper.

The majority of the page was taken up with a cartoon of a dark-skinned man hunched under the weight of a bindle. The accompanying text read, *Five Pounds Reward. Run Away from his Master at Westmorland, a Negro Man named N-E-R-O, about 27 Year of Age, supposed to have come this way. Any Person securing said Run-away so that his Master can get him again shall be entitled to the above Reward, by applying to the printer hereof.*

Samuel folded the paper and tucked it inside his breast-pocket. What a thing, he thought to himself. The picture in particular stayed in his mind as he leaned out, over the wall. The little fellow hunched over by the weight of his thin clothing, going forward at an unhurried pace. Was it an accurate drawing of the man, he wondered? If he saw the escaped slave walking through the streets of Fort York, would he recognize him? The man in the drawing appeared to walk slowly. Samuel didn't imagine he'd waste time shuffling about if their roles were reversed. "And speaking of which," he muttered to himself, and quickly made his way back down to the courtyard.

The evening turned to night, and Samuel returned to his office. Samuel's servant had finally cleared out and swept the closet, and when it became clear the big desk

wouldn't fit he'd taken a door off its hinges and laid it across two barrels. Samuel sat at the desk, trying to make sense of the extraordinary day's books. He could hear the sounds outside of men feasting like they'd walked six hundred miles across tundra and through scruffy marshland to trade furs for gunpowder, tools, and liquor. He smiled as the noise brought back his own journey with Matonabbee from the icy wasteland of his early years in the North. Samuel himself was by now well into his gin.

Hearne's servant appeared, coughing in the doorway. The governor looked up from his work. "Matonabbee wants to see you, sir."

"Very well," grumbled Samuel. "Give me a moment, then bring him in." Then he straightened his wig in the reflection of a copper washbasin. The smell of ash and preserves was strong in the air. The lamp spilled black smoke. As he waited for the servant to return with Matonabbee, he drank gin and water and grimaced. Since leaving the wall, he hadn't devoted much thought to Matonabbee's strange remarks earlier.

Matonabbee stooped through the low doorway. His dark height filled the room. The two leaders sat opposite one-another across the table and poured gin and water while the servant sat by the door and tried to be inconspicuous. Minutes stretched on. Samuel wouldn't break the silence, even if his curiosity threatened to break him. Matonabbee was the first to speak.

"Sam," he said. "You welcomed me in style. Thanks for that. It's a fine feeling to get the royal treatment in the same place I had to flee, with my little neck all covered with bruises, at the age of seven."

Samuel refilled their glasses and said, "You're welcome."

Matonabbee regarded his old traveling companion carefully, then waved his hand. "Now, listen, I don't mean to complain."

"Yes?"

Matonabbee whistled a low, drawn-out tone, and said, "Two barrels and a jacket?"

"Yes?"

"And some butter."

Samuel felt himself sag. "Yes."

Matonabbee shrugged, eyeing the governor slantwise.

"Not enough?" asked Hearne.

"Well," said his companion. "What do you think?"

Samuel's heart sank. He asked Matonabbee to name a fair figure. Matonabbee named a figure. Samuel halved the figure, calling Matonabbee unreasonable, impossible, insane. Matonabbee implied that, you know, maybe one of the newer companies farther south wouldn't think so. Samuel knew he was cornered. They settled on eight barrels of powder, twenty iron knives, five steel hatchets, six lieutenants' jackets for Matonabbee's top men, and some other extravagances for which Samuel knew the company would

never forgive him. The company was cocky after a hundred years of playing the Northern tribes against one-another; but Hearne knew that if he lost Matonabbee, the company lost the Northwest. Plus, he admired the man and wanted to please him - and even, he admitted, to impress him.

By now it was dark, and Samuel were fairly drunk. Matonabbee sipped his drink only occasionally. The lamp burned low. The servant pretended to sleep on a barrel in the corner, his left foot slowly numbing. Men outside in the courtyard laughed and shouted. A brief fight broke out to the sound of shouts and scuffling stone.

Inside the apple-smelling office, the two men smoked tobacco and traded news and old stories; whatever Matonabbee had hinted at earlier, he wasn't bringing it up. Samuel was an early riser, and by now his curiosity was waning and was rubbing his eyes. At last Matonabbee lifted himself up, and Hearne said, "It's been good to have you, to see you again. How long are you staying for? You can stay as long as you want - even a week, if you need to."

Matonabbee silenced him. He glanced over his shoulder at the servant, then began speaking in a low voice. "You know I'm not a superstitious man," he said. "I find all religions - Christian and otherwise - equally and completely dull."

Samuel crossed himself instinctively. He did know that, but he tried not to think about it. It was an uncomfortable reminder of the gulf between the two of them.

"Nevertheless," Matonabbee continued, "something compelled me to wait until

dark before coming to our most important business. I also wanted to wait for your lanky kid to fall asleep."

In the corner, the youth's face reddened, but he remained still.

Samuel rose up unsteadily. He wanted to ask what this was about, what had come over his old traveling companion, and most importantly whether it could wait until morning. But he stayed quiet. Matonabbee leaned in close to his face, and said, "I have an enemy."

Samuel nodded. “That figures with what I was thinking. Which tribe is it?”

“Not a tribe, Sam. A person - a man.” Matonabbee named the man.

Samuel covered a yawn. After all this mystery, was this all it was? “You must have a few of those, Matonabbee,” he said.

Matonabbee brushed the words away. "This one is a particularly mean son of a bitch."

Hearne yawned openly now. He was tired, only mildly curious, and unconvinced that this had anything to do with him. "What's he done?" he asked.

Matonabbee listed the man's crimes. Theft, disturbing the peace. Treason. Dishonouring agreements. Unlawful marriages to several women. Samuel nodded slowly. The servant willed himself to keep still despite both legs, and now his backside, having

fallen asleep.

Matonabbee sipped his gin. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Are you going to offer to kill him for me?"

Samuel blinked. "Kill him?"

"As a favour."

"Me? Kill this man?"

"As a favour, yes."

"But - me?" Samuel had barely lifted a gun since being promoted to governor of the Fort six years earlier, and even then it was usually to shoot at the seagulls.

"Yes," said Matonabbee again. "Yes, damn it. Yes. You."

Samuel sat down in a heap. The servant took the opportunity to shift ever so slightly, which he instantly regretted as bolts of pain shot up both legs. He winced and tears welled up.

"I'm not an assassin," said the governor.

Matonabbee, still looming over the table, shrugged his big shoulders. "You've

killed men before, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Samuel quickly. "I mean, I think so. Probably. But in a war, and not since I was a kid."

"Well then." Matonabbee proceeded to describe the man. Short, with shoulder-length hair, a flattened nose, accompanied by two limping dogs.

Samuel poured himself gin and drank it raw. He settled the glass in his hand. "Are you sure he has to be - you know?"

"I wouldn't ask," said Matonabbee.

"The company wouldn't like their officers - especially their advanced officers - to go off shooting Indians at the request, or the behest, of other Indians," said Samuel.

"I wouldn't ask."

Samuel took a deep breath and resisted the impulse to walk out into the night. He was hot and lightheaded. He had never noticed how irritating the wind sounded, whistling through the walls at all hours. Someone should fix those walls, he thought. This place is falling to pieces; it looked weak and uncared-for, we look like a pack of people-shaped rats in a rock burrow. A long walk would suit him, he thought, or even more. To chase a moose through all the hours of daylight and then overnight, wearing it down with distance. To live off rockmoss seasoned with gunpowder. To walk on snowshoes across the plains. He sighed. "I can, perhaps, represent the King's justice. I guess that includes

punishing crimes against the King's subjects." Matonabbee scowled at the word. "As a favour to you, okay. I can hear his crimes read in an official, um, way, and I'll carry out a sentence of death if I need to in that capacity. Did you bring him with you? Is he here, now, in the fort?"

"No." A ghost of a smile crept across the chief's face. “Sam, if I had him with me now, don't you think I'd kill him myself?

"Where is he, then?"

Matonabbee described in which part of the tundra he'd last encountered the man's small family.

"That's five hundred miles at least!" cried Hearne.

"I guess so."

"It's nearly winter, for God's sake."

Matonabbee shrugged again. "Sam, you're starting to sound like a kid," he said. In the corner of the larder, the servant suppressed a smile.

"I just can't.”

"You can," replied Matonabbee. "After all, let's remember our journey some years ago. Didn't I keep you alive? Didn't I walk for two years through foreign countries to show you the Copper River, which will one day make your company rich? Didn't I?

Good grief, man. You were like baggage on that trip. Not much of a hunter, no languages at all. And now, here you are, governor of the stone fort."

It was true, of course. Samuel knew it. But he also knew he couldn't strap on snowshoes and go assassinate a man somewhere in the Arctic, two seasons' march away. He struggled to think. He drank gin, hoping it would help, and struggled to think. Outside, most of the men and women had fallen asleep on the cobblestones. Matonabbee poked his head out the door and shouted some words into the night, then returned to watch his companion with amusement. Samuel was still stunned. There was no way out. Was there? He felt like the picture of the escaped slave, Nero, who was known and damned wherever he turned. He wondered what had happened to the slave in the two years since the advertisement was printed. Nero, hunched over, scrawny and fatigued, slowly making his way across the newspage.

"Alright," he said at last. Matonabbee nodded - with nothing left to say, he made to leave. But he stopped when he saw the governor reach for the pen and paper that lay openly on a box of iron nails. Samuel placed a yellowing sheet flat on the table, then dipped the pen and began to draw a line. He had to steady himself with one hand, and he blinked slowly as he went.

“What are you doing, Sam? Your word is good enough for me.”

"Here, Matonabbee. Look. It's a man. Do you see him?"

Matonabbee squinted at the inkmarks. He'd seen Samuel draw with ink before,

but to him it always looked dull and meaningless.

"He's standing on the tundra," Samuel continued. "It's your enemy, standing in the snow. See the snow? It must be winter. Here's your enemy's right hand. And here's his left hand. He's holding something. See what he's holding? Seasoned rockmoss, that awful-tasting stuff. It's all he's got to eat. It's all he's got to eat because he's your enemy, and nobody will trade with him."

Matonabbee shook his head. "What is this? What are you doing?" After a moment he looked closer at the page. "I don't see anything," he said.

Samuel carried on. "Boy, he's ugly. See these ugly wrinkles on his face? A real brute, just like you said. And let's not forget that flattened nose of his."

Matonabbee leaned his closer. The youth on the barrel sat up straight, trying to peek over the man's shoulder. The pain in his legs was gone. "It's nothing," said Matonabbee.

"Now another man appears," continued Samuel. "See him? He's walking across the tundra, toward your enemy. He's shielding his eyes from the glare of the snow, and he's got a wig on his head. All these curls - see them? - and he's holding a bayonet in his hand. Do you see me? There I am. It's me."

Matonabbee said, "No. What? No, there's nothing."

"You know it's me from my wig and my navy jacket. Here's the jacket. See, I'm

not creeping up on the man. I'm walking right up to him with my bayonet."

Matonabbee said, "Sam, will you cut the crap? I'm not a superstitious man, but the way you're talking is giving me shivers."

"Look now!" Samuel shouted. The teenager started, rocking the barrel noisily. Neither man noticed. "I'm stabbing him!" he cried. "My blade plunges into his heart! It punctures through his back, and the blood! Streaming out of your enemy's chest and pooling in the snow, melting the snow. See the blood? I'm killing him, Matonabbee - see it? You don't want to miss this; he's dying in front of your eyes. He's almost dead!"

The three men froze as if they'd heard gunshots outside the door. The larder sharpened around them. Samuel slowly stabbed his pen into the paper, then drew its point close to his companion's eyes, then stabbed again. The inkwell lay on its side, knocked over, ink flowing down the tabletop's gutters. He suddenly felt certain, somehow, that his future and the company's future depended on this. Not only that. The future of the company, the fort, the twenty-seven men under his protection, yes. But not only that. Something else, too. The oil lamp that sputtered low. Something within himself was close to snuffing out. He felt it in his temples and chest, the uneasiness of falling from a height. He could not comprehend it except as an explosion of memory - matchsmoke, a city on fire, several shades of the colour red - which he struggled to put out of his mind.

"I see it!" cried Matonabbee. "I do see it, just like you said!"

Samuel inhaled. The teenaged servant, forgetting himself completely, stood up

and peeked around Matonabbee at the page. The governor returned to the paper and said, “Now. This is a tree. See it?" Matonabbee nodded. "This tree is not just a tree - it's the woods, the whole woods, and the tundra, from here to the Copper River, and above the tree is an eye. It's my eye. Your enemy can't hide from me." Matonabbee traced the eye with his finger and grinned. "And here is a hand growing out of the tree's branches, holding a knife. Wherever he goes, I'll get him." Samuel flicked ink from the pen's tip and placed it firmly on the desk, avoiding the pooling ink. "Do you see, now, how I've killed your enemy?"

The great Chipewayan leader nodded. "Thank you, Sam. I was worried for a minute."

Something in the air had changed. It was as if the three men had fought a battle, and were now ready to collapse. Samuel gave Matonabbee the paper and told him to show it wherever he went.

Before retiring to the barracks for the night, Samuel's servant, speaking meekly, congratulated his governor for deceiving the Chipewyan leader in such a clever way. He would not have expected it would work, but, he said, his experience with Indians was not much. This speech earned him a glare from Samuel, and a severe beating three days later when he mistabulated a record. After nine days of feverish trading, Matonabbee and his people departed the fort.

A year later, Matonabbee returned to the fort and told Samuel that he'd shown the killing picture to all of his people, and to all of the roaming families they met in the

North. By the time he encountered his enemy again, the man was very ill. Upon seeing the drawing, Matonabbee's enemy had nodded wearily and, a few days later, coughed up fluids until he died.