

Past Lives: Stories

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ABSTRACT

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Is it possible to escape the past, or are its consequences inevitable, fate little more than cause and effect? In seeking an answer, *Past Lives* grapples with the inscrutability of the human condition and our experience of time. Each story evokes the intimate relation – sometimes harmonious, just as often dissonant – between the self and its reflection in memory. In this, the collection is an exercise in *anamnesis*, that is, learning as a form of reminiscence, a recollection of the mysterious knowledge that forever eludes us, yet somehow also precedes and informs every facet of our lives. Each of the characters in the collection struggles in their own way to span the gulf that separates their present circumstance from the past that engendered it, though the two often appear so alien from one another as to be irreconcilable. What emerges from this struggle is story, present and past woven together into a narrative fabric that chafes our skin even as it shields us from the elements that threaten us from without. *Past Lives* asserts that we are what we tell ourselves we are, and that all determination is self-determination.

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CAROUSEL MUSIC

I was visiting Vinny at the Rising Spirit Recovery Centre when news of the fires first started coming in. By the time I saw the reports on the communal living room's massive flatscreen, authorities had already shut down the 101, and Paramount Ranch had been evacuated. They kept showing the same clips over and over again, of all the Old West sets from *The Cisco Kid* and *Gunsmoke* going up in flames. It made it seem like it was all something that I'd seen before, like some weird publicity stunt. I kept expecting to see Kevin Costner ride in on horseback from Ventura county to save the day, sponsored by Pepsi.

"Where the fuck's Steve McQueen when you need him?" Vinny said, doing a slow somersault over the back of the sofa and landing next to me. He was wearing his usual flip-flops, board shorts, and a faded tank-top, and had his hair tied back in a messy man-bun. "Y'know he did his own stunts in *Towering Inferno*, right? That scene where he jumps off the helicopter? Now that's some real Hollywood shit."

It had been my idea to check Vinny into rehab. It was all just a gesture of goodwill to the studio bigwigs to help convince them they hadn't made a huge mistake casting a pot-head influencer in a supporting role in their next big superhero franchise. They had already been nervous about the whole social media crossover thing, so when Vinny started posting his video rants, they shit the bed. As always, I was the one who had to come in and fix things. I managed to book a lunch at Mastro's with one of the producers, Pierce Gold, and told him how we'd spin the rehab as a major life event for Vinny, complete with an accompanying series of videos for his followers charting the progress of his transformation.

“I don’t know, Wil,” Pierce had said. He was an industry vet, semi-retired, a Jersey guy who’d been in L.A. for over thirty years. At sixty-two he had a dense head of grey hair, and a deep tan. “If it was just me, I’d say forget about it. But you know how these old-school guys are. They don’t know what to do with this kid. They say it’s bad optics. Reflects poorly.”

“Trust me,” I told him. “This will be good for everyone. You know we have two million followers, right? Imagine how many more we’ll have after all this.”

Pierce swallowed his food, and stared at the bread basket in the middle of the table. He shook his head.

“You think he’ll do it?”

“Absolutely. If I tell him to.”

At first Vinny wasn’t too pleased with the idea, for obvious reasons. He’d spent years building his online brand as a shameless, fun-loving stoner. Now, not only did he have to go straight, he had to give up his iPhone, too. You’d have thought I was asking him to kick heroin. But I knew as well as he did that he would do almost anything to finally get his big break. I picked Rising Spirit because it was just across the Pacific Coast Highway from my place on Escondido beach. They were also the only ones who would let me in with my camera to shoot the testimonials. But what really sold Vinny on the whole thing was the fact that they let him take an hour to go surf every day.

“Just twenty-eight days,” I told him. “We do the videos, you get the piece of paper, and then we’re golden. After that, you can do what you want.”

What I didn’t tell him was I actually believed it would do him some good. His psychedelics habit had gotten a bit out of hand lately. He’d always been a pothead, but that wasn’t the problem, and anyway weed was legal now. It had started with micro-doses of mushrooms –

nothing too controversial – but then it escalated to weekly acid trips, plus the occasional ayahuasca or peyote “retreat”. None of which would have been a big deal, of course, if it hadn’t been for the videos.

It was just handheld shots of him in his room, or at the beach, or sometimes even on his surfboard out in the water, rambling on about being some kind of warrior for Gaia waging secret spiritual battle against evil forces, or something along those lines. It was a subliminal war, Vinny said, and everyone was part of it, even if they didn’t know it. The secret was to open your inner eye to the hidden reality so that you could align yourself with the Earth’s natural energies and defend it from the invading spirits of greed and exploitation. It all sounded suspiciously like Scientology to me, but Vinny assured me he had no interest in anything resembling a centralized religion. “Nah man, all that Abrahamic shit is mad authoritarian, bro,” he said. “What I’m talking about is more shamanistic. Like a one-on-one interface with Pachamama. Kinda like in *Avatar*, right?”

It was hard to tell how serious Vinny was. He’d always been a joker, ever since we were kids back in Irvine. Always pushing the envelope of the believable, trying to get a rise out of anyone who would listen. But something told me that this latest story wasn’t a joke. And while it seemed harmless enough, I still hadn’t wanted to take the chance that he might post something online that would get him cancelled once and for all.

“... struggling to control the blaze as it spreads rapidly through Malibu Creek State Park toward the coast, where authorities are asking residents to evacuate their homes as soon as possible...”

“I don’t care,” I heard another resident say. “I’m not going anywhere. I’d rather burn in here than go back out there. At least I’ll die sober.”

I thought I recognized the guy, but I couldn't quite pin down from where. It often seemed that everyone in L.A. was somehow familiar to me. When I thought of all the movies and TV I'd watched growing up, I figured I must've seen close to a million different faces in my life. At this point, it was like they all blended together. Surely the human brain wasn't built to remember that many people.

"Hey isn't that the guy from that show?" I asked Vinny.

Vinny shrugged and changed the channel on the TV to an old episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

"So what'd the studio guys say?" he asked "You see Pierce? You give him my notes?"

"Gimme a break with the notes already."

"You didn't give them to him?"

"Trust me. Nobody cares about your notes. They didn't even send you the whole script. You think they want your opinion? Please."

"You saying I don't have good ideas?"

"I'm saying you should pick your battles."

"I have excellent ideas."

"Sure you do."

"It's called vision, Wil."

"Fine. Just please keep your vision to yourself."

Vinny shook his head.

"Man, fuck you."

Ever since the deal had gone through, I had had to deal with Vinny's steadily inflating ego. There had always been a healthy dose of brotherly banter between us, but lately Vinny had

begun to get snarky. At times, he was downright aggressive, which was ironic given his carefully curated hippy-beach-bum aesthetic. So far, I'd mostly let it slide, but I kept a tally of the offences, and told myself I would set things straight if Vinny kept it up.

A staff member suddenly appeared in front of us, directly between Vinny and the screen.

"Chrissakes, Vinny," she said. "How many times I told you? No changing the channel without group consensus."

Vinny locked eyes with the woman and forced a smile.

"Your democracy is a charade, Olivia."

He dropped the remote onto the table, rose to his feet, and walked away. I followed him outside to the building's fuchsia-laden interior courtyard, where a handful of residents lay sunbathing by the pool in various states of undress. I smelled the smoke as soon as I stepped out, and saw dark brown clouds pouring into the sky from the east, casting dirty streaks across the sun, a fact to which the sunbathers seemed oblivious. Vinny kicked off his sandals, sat down on the edge of the pool, and began kicking the water.

"I'm just saying you gotta keep things in perspective, man," I said, talking to Vinny's back. "Right now, we need them more than they need us. Get that through your head."

"Speak for yourself, bro. I don't need anybody."

"Nice. Guess I can go home then."

"You know what I need? A fucking blunt."

"Wonderful."

"This place sucks."

"No, really. That's brilliant."

This had always been the job: putting out fires. It was as much about managing egos, impulses, and expectations as it was contracts, waivers, and NDAs. I'd been at it for so long I'd forgotten what I ever did before. As soon as I moved into the city, I'd gone to work at one of the agencies downtown as an assistant. Meanwhile, Vinny had still been in high school, making videos online – pranks, unboxings, game reviews – and slowly building a following. I saw it happen, the viral blooming of Vinny's online celebrity, his pseudo-brand spreading like lightning through the dark clouds of the global social networks. And all of it effortless, unconscious. By the time he was twenty-one, Vinny was making more from ads and sponsorships than I was after three years at the agency. But I had what Vinny didn't: a plan. I knew that if we played our cards right, we could live like kings for the rest of our days. Vinny was already a known value; with my knowledge and industry connections, nothing could stand between us and ubiquity.

So why was it that lately, after half a decade of shuffling our pieces around the industry chessboard, I had begun feeling the irrepressible urge to throw it all away? To take everything we'd amassed – the contacts, the reputation, the clout – and set it ablaze?

Vinny stood up and walked barefoot back into the building, leaving his sandals behind, and again I followed him as he crossed the living room, then down the hall, past the in-house Kundalini yoga studio, and up a flight of stairs to Vinny's room. There, Vinny began emptying the drawers and stuffing his clothes into a suitcase, while I stood watching from the door.

“What do you think you're doing?”

“Gettin the fuck outta dodge, man. What's it look like?”

“You have to finish the treatment.”

“Bro, didn't you see on the news? This whole place is about to go Cheech'n'Chong on our ass.”

“It’s in your contract, Vinny.”

“Get it?”

“You have to finish the treatment.”

“Up in Smoke! Come on!”

Vinny reached deep into the bottom of a drawer and took out a small zipper case that looked like a grooming kit. He opened the zip and pulled out a long brown joint, which he placed gently between his lips. He produced a lighter, flicked it, and carried the flame to his face. Then he took a long haul from the joint, and blew a cloud of smoke into the air between us.

It happened quickly. A reflex, a short circuit. Before I knew what had happened, I felt the sting of my hand against Vinny’s face, and heard a dry sound like a snapped twig. The joint flew from Vinny’s mouth onto the bed, where it burned a small hole into the comforter before fizzling out. Then Vinny was on me, over me, kicking my shins, and pummeling his fists into my outstretched arms.

“Motherfucker! You think I need you, you fucking piece of shit? I don’t need anybody!”

I can’t remember how long the skirmish went on before two Rising Spirit staff members pulled Vinny off me, kicking and screaming. I rose slowly to my feet, and brushed myself off.

“Good luck, Vinny. You’re gonna need it.”

It was the last thing I said – the last time I saw my brother. I limped down the hall, down the stairs, and out to my car. Then I drove across the road to my condo and started drinking.

* * *

I woke four days later to the retro synth stabs of my cell’s ringtone.

“Wil, hi. Samantha, second AD. Bit of an issue here. We’re looking for Vinny. Heard from him?”

A young voice, its breezy Hollywood-professional tone barely concealing a garrote wire of urgency. I immediately pictured Vinny's body lying on a beach somewhere, swollen with rot, waves lapping at its toes.

"He's not on set?"

"We sent a driver to pick him up, but he's not home. And his phone goes straight to voicemail."

The room was spinning. I felt acid churning in my gut, burning my throat. I clenched my eyes shut and tried to comprehend what I was hearing.

"This is a problem, Wil. Vinny's supposed to be in hair and make-up in forty-five minutes. He didn't mention anything to you?"

I scanned my memory. It was Wednesday. I'd last seen Vinny on Friday.

"You know it's day one of the big battle scene, right? Three hundred extras, two choppers, three camera cars, pyro up the fucking wazoo – you get the picture. We're on a very tight schedule here. It is a major, *major* fucking setback if we have to cancel any of this. The studio will *not* be pleased."

I could tell she was loving this. I'd seen it a million times before: that special satisfaction – after years of groveling your way up the cut-throat back ranks of the entertainment-industrial complex – of finally finding someone else to blame. She had probably rehearsed the speech in her head.

"Can't you shoot around him?"

"You better hope it doesn't come to that, Wil."

"They do it all the time. Just stall them."

"How about you do your fucking job, and I'll do mine. Sound fair?"

I opened my eyes, and the room came into focus. This was the job: damage control. Keep everyone happy. It was what I'd always been best at, ever since I was a kid.

"You tell anyone yet?"

"Not exactly eager to be the bearer of bad news on this one."

I heard the hint of a Midwest accent, and smiled sadly. Poor Samantha. She was probably from Kansas, or Missouri, or – heaven forbid – Nebraska. Only been in town a year. Used to stay up late with her folks to watch the Oscars. Had dreams of being an actress, before deciding she was too smart for that. Went the pragmatic route instead. Enrolled in film school, only to realize that most of the alumni ended up on the faculty, or worse, at the local TV station. Dropped out. Left her family behind, maybe a high-school sweetheart or two, all to come make big shiny movies in Tinseltown. But it turned out the movies weren't so shiny on the inside, and now it was her job on the line because some drug-addict influencer-turned-actor decided to flake off from work today.

They shoot messengers, don't they? I thought, and found I suddenly wanted to give her a hug.

"Don't worry, Sam. Everything'll be fine. Trust me."

"This is on you, Wil. You better fix this."

"I'll see what I can do."

After hanging up with Samantha, I tried calling Vinny, and got his voicemail. I sent a text: *where tf r u*. Then I took a cold shower, got dressed, hopped in the Tesla, and raced up the hill to Rising Spirit. I didn't know what I expected to find; the whole area had been evacuated on Friday, and most people still hadn't returned. When the fire had started, the L.A. County fire department had sent almost all their manpower up into the mountains to try to contain the spread, but the brush was so dry, and the winds so high, that containment was a lost cause. When the

order to evacuate the coast had come in, all of Malibu had piled onto the southbound PCH at the same time, causing a traffic jam two miles long, and stranding people in their cars for hours while the fire closed in around them. Only a few die-hard locals stayed behind to try to protect their houses with buckets and garden hoses. Meanwhile, those who lived on the beach, like me, were mostly spared.

I inched my car up the hill past clumps of blackened trees, and under power lines that sagged across the street from leaning utility poles. The Rising Spirit Recovery Centre – an imposing, white-stucco, Spanish Colonial-style villa – appeared at first sight to have been spared from the blaze, but as I pulled up to the central building and parked my car in the drop-off area, I saw glass and ashes littering the ground outside, then looked up and saw that a tree had come crashing down onto the complex's southernmost wing, shattering a window, and destroying a section of terra cotta roof tiles. A sooty stain ran down the outside wall, and the tree's charred branches curled over the eaves and jutted into the air like an arthritic hand cursing the sky.

I walked slowly up the cobblestone path to the main entrance, pushed open the unlocked doors, and strode through the empty reception area into the main hall where I'd watched the news reports coming in. The room's high ceilings and open floor-plan were designed to be as calming and inoffensive as humanly possible, but without any people its proportions seemed absurd, and the emptiness of the place gave it an uncanny quality, a feeling only emphasized by the beams of sunlight cutting through the smoky room at odd angles.

I crossed the room, walked down the hall, and went upstairs to Vinny's room. For some reason, a part of me expected to find him there, but the room was empty. I stood staring at the burn mark on the bed where the joint had fallen. It was the only evidence that anyone had ever been here. I looked out the window at the ocean. Somewhere inland, the fires still burned. A

thick veil of smoke swept down from the hills and out over the grey slate of the Pacific. It had been four days since the blaze had torn through the valley, carried by high winds across the Santa Monica Mountains all the way to Point Dume. You would think the fire would be dead by now. Surely the flames had run out of fuel.

I left the room, and went back to my car. My phone rang as I was turning onto the highway. It was Pierce Gold. I tapped my earpiece.

“Pierce.”

“Hi, Wil. Got a minute?”

“Not really.”

“What’s the news?”

“Same old.”

“Listen, I heard about Vinny.”

I said nothing. What was there to hear?

“You realize this puts us in a tight spot.”

“He’ll turn up.”

“Breach of contract. Means we have to replace him.”

“Trust me. I’m working on it.”

“We have options. Guys who could be here within the hour.”

“I said I’m working on it.”

“Just saying. You make your bed.”

“I hear you.”

“Still. I want you to know that I’m on your side.”

I clenched the steering wheel.

“Thanks.”

“I want this to work out. We all do. For Vinny’s sake.”

“Me too.”

Traffic started to coagulate around me as I made my way into the city, that same constant L.A. rush hour, as if the fire had never happened. I couldn’t decide if it was resilience, ignorance, or just plain apathy that allowed people to keep going about their days like this in the wake of a natural disaster. Didn’t they know their days were limited? Didn’t they care?

When I pulled up in front of Vinny’s house in Beverly Hills, I found a minivan parked out front. A man in his fifties was sitting cross-legged on the hood, in sunglasses and a faded Panavision baseball cap, smoking a cigarette.

“You the brother?” The man had a voice like a car wreck.

“Who’s asking?”

“I’m Rob.” He held out his hand. “Production driver.”

I walked past the van to the gate, and pressed the buzzer.

“Tried that,” Rob said. “No answer. Been here all morning.”

“I’ll take it from here, thanks.”

“They say wait, I wait. Got nowhere to go anyway.”

I looked again at the man. For some reason, he reminded me of my father. He was unshaven, and had the grizzled, sun-baked look of a war vet.

“Bum one of those?”

Rob smiled. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his breast pocket and tossed it to me.

“Light?”

I walked back to the van, and Rob, without moving from his monk's pose on the hood, passed me an old, beat-up Zippo.

"You been up in the burn zone?"

I lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and felt as if someone had opened a valve in the back of my skull to let the pressure out. I passed the pack and Zippo back to Rob.

"On the coast, yeah."

Rob nodded slowly, seeming to glean some deeper meaning from my response than I myself was aware of.

"Time is the fire in which we burn. Delmore Schwartz."

I began to feel dizzy. The cigarette was stronger than what I was used to.

"You like poetry?"

"I don't know."

Rob leaned his head back and seemed to address himself to the hazy sky.

"What is the self amid this blaze?"

Again, I said nothing. A vague aura of déjà-vu began to bathe my perception of the scene. I had met this man before, I was certain of it. We had had this exact conversation, word for word.

"... each minute bursts in the burning room, the great globe reels in the solar fire..."

What came next? I would scale the fence and get into the house somehow. Vinny would be there, watching a movie, stoned off his ass.

"How all things flash!"

I would apologize. I would bring my brother back into the fold, and save him from catastrophe. I would redeem myself. I would make everything right.

"How all things flare!"

I dropped my cigarette, and crushed it under my foot. Rob lowered his head, removed his shades, gazing into the middle distance.

“Time is the school in which we learn, time is the fire in which we burn.”

Vinny wasn't home after all; the house was deserted, the front door unlocked. I roamed from room to room, looking for any hint that might reveal the answer to a question I couldn't quite formulate. It seemed I wasn't searching for an object so much as a moment. What had happened to us? When had everything gone wrong? Had I missed something? Was it too late?

The place was, as always, a mess. The smell of weed smoke permeated every corner of the house, and piles of clothes and unfinished plates of food littered the floors and furniture. The TV in the living room had been knocked over, and lay flat on the ground. In the kitchen, I found a pile of books on the counter. *The Serpent and the Jaguar, Inner Paths to Outer Space, True Hallucinations*. Nothing I saw suggested Vinny had even been home since the fight.

It wasn't until I reached the room at the end of the hall that I realized the obvious. The room served as Vinny's office and editing suite. It was here that he put together videos and photo montages for his social media feeds. I hadn't even thought to check Vinny's online activity. I pulled out my phone and logged in to all my apps, one after another. On each one of Vinny's accounts, all the content had been scrubbed. Each feed was completely empty, except for one post, a single short video.

It was footage of the fire, taken from sea-level. Probably a mile off the coast, maybe more. The image had the grainy quality of a digital zoom, and the frame shook violently, as if the person holding the camera were being jostled from side to side, all of which lent the video an aura of perverse voyeurism, like a nature snuff film. There was no turning away from the terrifying sublimity of it: a gargantuan cloud of smoke and ash spewing relentlessly from the

Santa Monica mountains, blotting out the sky. At times the image was obscured entirely by a cresting wave. As soon as I saw it, I knew the video had been taken from a surf board. My heart sank. Vinny often posted surf videos; he had a waterproof case for his phone that hung around his waist when he went out. The video contained no music, and no text was superimposed over the image. The only sound was from the phone's built-in microphone – a deep gurgling of waves, the rumble of the wind. When the video ended, it began again. It was dated four days ago.

When I returned to my car, I saw Rob the driver still hadn't moved from the hood of his minivan. He called out to me as I passed. "Told you he wasn't home!"

I sped the Tesla down Benedict Canyon Drive, then took Rodeo down to Santa Monica Boulevard. I drove in a daze of urgency through the traffic, stopping and going at the will of the lights, all the way to the beach. There I stumbled across the sand to the pier, went all the way to the end, and stared out at the water, looking for something, anything, on the horizon. To the north, the smoke had finally stopped. There was nothing left to burn.

I turned away from the water and went back to shore. My knees were weak, and my body moved of its own volition, free of all command. For some reason, I found myself inside the hippodrome building, where the old carousel was housed. I sat at the soda fountain, hypnotized by the ancient machine as it turned and turned, the bright lights and mirrors drawing me into their revolving carnival world, where ecstatic children sat atop bobbing horses, and their bemused parents stood benevolent guard nearby. It was the music that struck me most; a lazy, nauseating waltz emanating from the carousel's old steam-organ. The feeling of déjà-vu overtook me again, but this time a clear scene was roused in my memory:

Once, when we were kids, Vinny and I had snuck out of school, and taken the city bus out to Great Park, on the outskirts of Irvine. We had called it the Great Escape. I pretended I was

Charles Bronson, and Vinny, as always, was Steve McQueen. We ate hotdogs and ice cream all day, and went on the balloon ride almost ten times. When the novelty of flying had finally worn off, we ran over to the carousel. By then, it was almost dark, and we had begun to feel sick from all the fat and sugar we had eaten. Still, we waited in line for our chance to get on the ride. When our turn finally came, we each climbed up onto a horse – me in front, Vinny behind – and waited for the carousel to start turning. Sitting atop the fiberglass horse, I suddenly felt guilty. I knew it was wrong to have come to this place. It was too bright, too colorful. Not real. At home we would get in trouble, and Vinny would probably get the worst of it, even if it had been my idea. Our father, despite his own weaknesses – or because of them – believed in the firm enforcement of discipline. Vinny always got it worst, because he always talked back. I would try to intervene, to play diplomat, to appease the belligerents, but it would be no use. The next day, Vinny would wear his bruises with pride, something I had never learned to do.

The carousel had begun to turn, and I felt sick. I turned to look back at Vinny, but Vinny was gone. In a panic, I jumped off my horse and ran in circles around the spinning ride, essentially staying in one place as the grotesque scenery moved past me. I began to cry. I knew that I had failed in the worst possible way by letting my little brother slip away. When the ride had finally stopped, I ran off through the crowd, and there was Vinny, sitting on a bench, vomiting on the ground between his Chuck Taylors. I sat next to him, and put a reassuring hand on his back. I had promised myself then that I would never again let my brother out of my sight.

THE ONE THAT GLANCES BACK

Wait for it, her mother had said.

She had been crowding Charly against the window, her thin hands on Charly's shoulders, her chin against the top of Charly's head, the dried-lilac smell of her perfume hanging on the air. It was an unseasonably cold morning in late October: trees almost bare, a light dusting of snow on the ground, frost encroaching on the corners of the window pane. Charly's mother had woken her early that morning and told her to get ready because they were going on an trip. *A trip where?* Charly had asked, half-asleep. *It's a surprise*, her mother said. She had seemed agitated, and had pressed Charly to eat breakfast quickly, before her father woke up. Then they got into the car, and drove to the train station. It was 1990, the year of the Oka crisis. Charly was five.

It was the first time she remembered taking the train, though there must have been other times. She had held her breath, and felt the jittery tickle of suspense that always swept through her body when she knew something important was coming, a feeling that was inseparable from the simultaneous fear of being left out, of not knowing what must, at all costs, be known. It seemed so vital not to miss it, yet as the train pulled out of Hudson station into the wooded area near their home, Charly felt with a terrible certainty that this was exactly what would happen.

Here comes, her mother said.

Charly saw the flickering reflection of her face in the window, lit up by the low morning sun between the trees, and her mother's face just above it, pale eyes darting quickly over the landscape that rolled by outside. Charly tried to emulate the movement with her own eyes, left to right, over and over, taking in as much of the outside world as she could. But it gave her motion sickness, so she shifted her focus back to her mother's face on the window pane. She hadn't seen

her in almost a month; not in the week she had spent in the ICU at Lakeshore General, nor in her two weeks of supervised care at the Douglas. Now Charly studied her face as if it were a painting in a museum: her sleepy blue eyes framed by a pale web of newly formed worry lines and crow's feet; her short brown hair that turned grey and curled out around her ears; her high cheekbones and sharp jaw; her chapped lips, which she chewed absently. Then her eyes suddenly brightened, and she tapped on the window with one thin finger.

There.

It was their house, where Charly had grown up. Her mother had turned to her then, and smiled, her eyes glistening. Later, Charly remembered being struck by the unfamiliarity of that smile. For a brief instant – just a glance – she was a different woman. And it was then that Charly had understood, perhaps for the first time, that her mother hadn't always been the broken person that Charly had known her to be. She had been a child once, as innocent and awe-struck as Charly herself.

Charly smiled back, and said, *Yes! I saw it!*

* * *

Thirty years later, Charly took the same train in the opposite direction. As she sat in the shuttle bus from the airport to Dorval station, a cold wave of nostalgia washed over her. It was her first time back in Montreal in over four years, and it almost surprised her now to realize that the city was still here, and hadn't even changed all that much in her absence. Perhaps a part of her had come to believe that she would never return, that her separation from this place had been final. But here she was. Her father had called about a month prior, and she had been unable to bring herself to answer. She took her phone out now, and listened again to the message he had

left on her voicemail, his gravelly monotone coming through deep and muffled at the other end of the line.

Hello, dear. I wish you would pick up. You know it's your mother's birthday soon. She'll be seventy this year. A momentous occasion, don't you think? I know you're busy, and it's a long flight, but I'm sure she would love to see you. I can send you some money. The guest room is set up. You could stay a few days, if you like.

A pause then, and Charly held her breath, anticipating the next words that she knew were coming.

We won't be here forever, you know.

Then silence. The train eased out of Dorval station, and Charly stared past her reflection in the window at the Autoroute du Souvenir running alongside the tracks to the south.

The Highway of Remembrance, her mother had said, on the same train, thirty years ago. *Do you know why people forget?*

No, Charly had said. Her mother always asked questions that Charly didn't know the answers to. *Why?*

Because they're comfortable. Each in their own little bubble on the big highway, safe from harm. Rushing around this way and that, chasing each other in circles, listening to their favourite songs on the radio.

Charly had thought of her mother's favourite song – “Praying for Time” by George Michael – which she had been playing on a loop since August on the sound system in the living room.

Her mother continued:

People don't carry the past with them anymore. They use it up and toss it away. They bury it under highways and parking lots and golf courses, and then move on. See? Look at them go. They've forgotten the true cost of things. They've come unstuck from time.

Charly had watched the cars on the highway, and imagined them lifting off the ground and flying away, like the time machine in *Back to the Future*.

But not us. We won't forget, will we, baby?

No, Charly had said again, and made up her mind to remember everything that ever happened to her from that moment on.

She listened again to her father's message.

We won't be here forever.

The carriage rocked gently, and Charly felt the vibration of the wheels against the rails through the floor beneath her feet. She must have taken the same train hundreds of times after that day, first as a teenager, then later as a young university student, before moving out into the city on her own. Now, sitting in her same old spot by the window, watching the slow-moving Saint-Laurent out past Lakeshore Boulevard, she felt a familiar weight pressing against her chest and pushing all the air out from her lungs. She had had her first serious panic attack when she was seventeen, and as she grew into her twenties, they had become more and more frequent. She knew when they were coming: the air took on a sharp quality, and a dull ringing filled her skull, and ran down her spine. Her thoughts became chaotic, as if a million ideas were frantically jostling for dominance in her mind. Her breath became shallow and quick. And then, when the attack reached its apex, her senses became completely overloaded, and each sensory detail that flooded her consciousness became a horrible confirmation that the world was ending, absolutely and forever. There had been times in the not-too-distant past when the only thing that came even

close to calming her during an attack was to run a box-cutter blade slowly along the inside of her forearms, drawing a series of shallow, parallel gashes from elbow to wrist. Nothing life-threatening, but enough to provoke a rush of pain that temporarily drowned out the acid burn of anxiety in her gut, and focused her senses on a legitimate physical threat. But it was years since it had been that bad. Her scars had healed, and were almost invisible. Charly rummaged now through her purse, feeling around for the bottle of Celexa she hoped was in there somewhere. She'd been feeling much better lately, and her new therapist had been slowly easing her off her regimen. But now, as the train barreled along, Charly cursed herself at the thought that she might have forgotten to pack the few pills that she had left.

Alan had watched her from the bedroom doorway that morning while she packed, hastily throwing whatever clean clothes she could find into a suitcase. She had slept in again and had to rush to catch her flight.

"You're sure you don't want me to come with you?"

Charly didn't lift her head. She grabbed a black button-up shirt out of her dresser, then thought better of it, and put it back.

"I already told you."

"Because I can cancel the interview. If you want me to come."

"I don't."

"You sure?"

"Jesus Christ, Al, can you please just give it a fucking rest? It's fine."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize."

"Sorry."

“I’ll be fine.”

The words hung on the air for a moment, then Charly brushed past Alan and hurried into the bathroom. She grabbed a toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, and face cream – no pills? – and stuffed them into a toiletries bag, doing her best to avoid her reflection in the mirror. Alan spoke from the hall.

“At least have breakfast before you go.”

Charly felt the air rush out of her lungs, and her knees almost gave out beneath her. She had been having morning sickness for about a week, and for some reason, the thought of breakfast made her both ill and sad. She rested her hands on the sink, and clenched her eyes shut, squeezing off any tears that might try to spring out against her will.

“I’m already late. And I have to get a gift.”

Charly emerged from the bathroom and tossed the toiletries bag into her suitcase.

“Why don’t you just give her a copy of your book?”

“Jesus. No. Are you crazy?”

“Why not?”

She searched her mind for an answer. As far as she knew, her parents hadn’t read any of her poetry since she was in grade school, and Charly felt very strongly that it was better that way. She looked at the stack of advance copies of her first collection, *Backward Glances*, sitting in the corner of the living room. She had finally gotten it done after years of hedging. She was proud of herself. But there was too much in there to unpack. Her mother was too fragile; it would open too many wounds. And her father, the historian, for all his volubility in print, was really a professional of silence. She had always told herself it was a conversation she could never have

with them. Alan was watching her from the bedroom doorway. He came slowly to face her, and gently rested his hands on her shoulders.

“Are you going to tell them?”

She hadn’t told anyone yet. She had never wanted to have kids. She had decided as a teenager that life had been inflicted upon her against her will, and that she didn’t want to do the same thing to someone else. *Besides*, she told her friends, *the planet’s overpopulated*. And while her stance on the matter softened somewhat in her late twenties, as some of those same friends started families of their own, she had never felt especially enthusiastic about the idea of being a mother herself. It was enough of a struggle to keep her own life on track, between shit desk-job layoffs and drug-fueled after-parties. But then she had met Alan, and her life had shifted in a million subtle ways. It had been at one of his readings in Montreal, five years ago. She had been in school at the time, finishing up her long-overdue MA, and he had been doing a promotional tour for his second collection of poems. It was snowing, and Charly had arrived late. She slipped into the little bookstore on rue Bernard, trying her best to be as quiet as possible. Alan was standing at a podium at the other end of the room, reading into a microphone from one of his poems. As Charly removed her coat, she knocked over a stack of books by the entrance, and everyone in the room turned to look at her. Alan stopped reading. Charly cringed, grinning feebly, her face on fire. Alan smiled calmly from the podium.

“Now that’s what I call a grand entrance,” he said, and a collective chuckle rippled through the room.

Charly had tried to escape after the reading, but one of her friends wanted to get her book signed, and asked Charly to wait. Charly hovered behind her, trying be invisible, but Alan recognized her, and waved.

“I am so sorry,” she said. “I’m such a fucking idiot.”

“Don’t apologize. I should thank you. It was probably the highlight of the evening for most of these people.”

“Shut up. You were great.” She meant it.

He invited Charly to join him and his friends for drinks at the brew pub next door, and she obliged. The place was crowded and stuffy; normally Charly would have gone home, but curiosity kept her there. She knew Alan’s poems, and was drawn to the cynical, unforgiving portrait of life they painted. But Alan himself was astonishingly light-hearted in his manner, and the contrast fascinated her. He was wiry and disheveled, and his eyes possessed a mischievous glimmer that suggested he wasn’t quite serious about anything he said. By the end of the night, they were huddled together at the corner of the bar, passionately discussing the common thread linking Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and David Foster Wallace. They had somehow managed to turn it into a sort of morbid game.

“What about Walter Benjamin?” Charly asked.

Alan gestured to the bartender to bring two more pints.

“What about him?”

“Same club.”

“But he didn’t write fiction.”

“Close enough. That’s three-two.”

“Fuck. Fair enough.”

When the bar closed, Alan walked her back to her apartment on Avenue du Parc. It was still snowing; big wet flakes drifted slowly down into the beams of the streetlamps, and melted on

their jackets. They had talked so furiously all night that now they were spent, and they walked the whole way in sated silence. When they reached the door of her building, Alan finally spoke.

“Sarah Kane. Three-three.”

“Hunter S. Thompson. Four-three.”

“Fuck me.”

“In your dreams, pal.”

Alan grinned.

“Funny.”

“I try. Nightcap much?”

“Can’t. Early flight. But thanks.”

Charly was secretly relieved.

“So it goes.”

He told her to come visit him out west some time, and she said she would. Then he leaned in, slowly, and they shared a long kiss. A year later, Charly had moved to Vancouver, and she hadn’t been back to Montreal since. It had been a kind of metamorphosis. She quit smoking, and stopped taking recreational drugs. She got a job as a translator at a bank. She got pregnant. Now, at thirty-five, the thought of another human being slowly becoming itself inside her gave her a kind of giddy vertigo, like standing on the edge of a high cliff and feeling the sudden euphoric urge to leap off into the emptiness. But she had decided to let it happen, and whatever anxiety it caused her was mostly allayed by the strange sense that somehow everything would be fine. Alan, for his part, was thrilled, and she had to admit his enthusiasm was contagious. For the first time in her life, she was almost excited about the future.

The train slowed to a stop at Baurepaire station, and Charly still hadn't found her pills. She opened her suitcase, and there, among her mess of clothes, she found the copy of her book that Alan had insisted she bring. *Trust me*, he had said, placing the book in her hands as she walked out the door of their apartment. *You won't regret it*. And while Charly was still pretty sure that she would, in fact, regret it, she also felt that it was out of her control. The book had a will of its own; it insisted on closing the circuit, on returning to the scene of its inception. Facing backwards at the highway that now receded into the horizon, Charly felt the pressure on her chest continue to build and was overwhelmed by the odd sensation that she was travelling in time. She thought of Benjamin's Angel of History, carried forward by storm winds out of paradise, and forever watching the wreckage of the past pile up behind him. And then, for some reason, she remembered the moment with her mother on the train thirty years ago, when her mother had pointed out their house through the woods. Charly had lied – she hadn't seen it. She had convinced herself later that she had, but it was impossible: she had been watching her mother's face. She must have inserted into that primal memory the knowledge she came to acquire on later trips. She thought of Benjamin again: *To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize "how it really was". It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger*.

The summer of her mother's accident – that's what she had called it, later, *my accident* – all the news stations had been covering the standoff that was taking place just across the river in Oka, between Mohawk protesters and the Canadian Armed Forces, over the construction of a golf course and condo project on disputed Mohawk burial grounds. For almost two months, from July to September, her mother had sat on the floor in front of the TV in the den of their little clapboard house on Bellevue road near the train tracks, every morning and every night,

transfixed by the images she saw on the news. She had always had a melancholy disposition – *I was born under Saturn*, she said – but now her condition deteriorated. She slept during the day, and took long baths until the water got cold. Meanwhile, Charly's father holed himself up in his study, working on what he liked to call his life's work: a biography of the English explorer Henry Hudson, after whom their town was named, and who died when his crew mutinied and abandoned him in the sub-arctic bay that also now carries his name. Charly absorbed these facts by osmosis rather than any keen interest on her part. She remembered spending most of that summer playing outside with her older neighbours down the street, whose parents worked in real-estate, and who owned a pool. She would spend entire days outside, only returning home at supper time. Then she and her parents ate mostly in silence. When her parents did speak, it was in terse exchanges that Charly didn't fully grasp the significance of.

"It's disgusting."

"It's history, dear."

"No, it isn't. It's now."

"Some things are just inevitable."

"People are suffering."

"As they always have."

"For fuck's sake, David, this isn't one of your fucking books."

"Language, dear."

"I feel so helpless."

"Yes, dear. I know."

"It makes me sick."

"Eat some food."

Then, one day in late September, Charly returned home from school to find the house empty, and no car in the driveway. The front door was unlocked. She crossed the house to the back yard, carelessly dragging her backpack along the floor of the hallway and saw no one. She went upstairs. The bathroom was a mess: the floor was covered in water, and several wet towels sat in a heap by the bath, which was full. The medicine cabinet above the sink was open, its contents strewn out on the counter and into the sink. She went into her parents' room. The closet was open, and clothes littered the floor. She crossed the room to the credenza by the window. Taking advantage of her parents' absence, she opened every drawer, and was disappointed to find only socks, underwear, and t-shirts. She dwelt there a while, taking in the room from different angles, soaking in the stillness and silence, the unusual emptiness. Then she went back downstairs into the kitchen and poured herself a bowl of Fruit Loops, which she brought into the den, spilling milk as she went. She turned on the TV, and put her favourite tape, *The Little Mermaid*, into the VCR. Part way through the movie, she heard a car pull into the driveway. She ran to the window, and saw her aunt Sue walking up the steps, crying.

Her father did his best at first to cover up what had happened. He insisted that her mother had simply fallen ill. He got a leave of absence from the university to look after Charly. He made supper for the two of them every night, and they watched *Jeopardy* together. Then he tucked her into bed, and read her a story from his old Hans Christian Andersen collection until she fell asleep. But throughout it all, there was always a conspicuous silence, like a ringing in the ears, of the truth left unsaid. And it wasn't long before he was back in his old summer routine, reading endlessly from his pile of old history textbooks. He was in his study every morning when Charly left for school, and usually hadn't moved by the time she returned later in the day. She grew to hate history. Sometimes aunt Sue would visit, bringing food and tidying up, or babysitting when

her father left to visit her mother in the hospital. The house took on a stuffy air, and Charly began to dread coming home from school every day. Then, after a few weeks, her mother returned. Charly came home from school one day to find her sitting in the armchair in the living room, gazing absently out the window. Charly stood staring at her from the hallway. Her mother saw her, and her lips curled into a slight frown. She opened her arms wide, and said *Oh baby, come here.*

The train crossed the water, past L'Île Perrot into Vaudreuil, with its long fields of wheat and barley stretching out on either side of the tracks. Soon it would enter the woods near Hudson. Charly knew now what to look for, no sooner seen than gone.

Here comes.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection projected on the glass over the yellow fields outside. She was thirty-five, the same age her mother had been when Charly was born. They even looked the same; same mouth, same cheeks, same sad eyes. A wave of guilt washed over her now, for having lied that day about seeing the house, even though she knew it didn't matter, that it was insignificant. It had been the whitest of lies: a little girl just wanting to please her sick mother. She had known even then that the moment had been invested with something numinous, had sensed with a child's unconscious perception that her mother needed her to see it, because she had chosen that morning as a new beginning for them. She must have thought that in spite of everything, here was something she could give. One brief moment to make it all worthwhile, to salvage some shard of love from a wreckage of missed opportunities. It was such a simple gift, but one that Charly suddenly understood with new clarity: her mother had only wanted her to see their home from outside, and from far away.

There!

Charly held the snapshot in her mind's eye: a sliver of faded blue clapboard and brown roof shingles glimpsed in a brief opening between the trees. Still there, nothing changed. It was so utterly unexceptional, just an old house that she had seen countless times before. But seeing it now, Charly felt the weight lift off her chest, and her breath grew slow and deep. She was home. As the train came to a stop at Hudson station, she quickly jotted a note on the flyleaf of her book – *Happy Birthday. Love, Charly.* – before putting it back in her suitcase. In the parking lot, she saw her parents' old station wagon. She squinted to see if anyone was inside but saw only the sky's reflection in the windshield. Then the car door opened, and her mother stepped out. Her face brightened ever so slightly with recognition, and she waved.

UNDER THE BRIDGE

We all jumped at the same time. All three of us – Joey, Rafi, and me – standing on the edge of the bridge, trembling, half-naked, hands gripped to the metal bars until our knuckles went white. Below us the river flowed swiftly, and from the banks we heard the drone of the cicadas in the tall grass, that dull throbbing buzz that drowns out all other sounds. We had walked fast, barefoot on the hot pavement, past the hospital, down the hill to the bridge that crossed from one side of the river to the other. I don't know whose idea it was, maybe mine, maybe nobody's. We took off our shirts and climbed over the railing.

The summer had been long and hot, and we three had spent most of our days roaming aimlessly along the almost-melting streets, laughing like hyenas as we glided on our bicycles through the thick humid air, and basking in the sun's damp glow until nightfall. We were teenagers, reckless and dumb; we chased and stole and hid out, and held Roman candles in our hands, only to shoot them streaming at each other, instead of at the stars like we were supposed to.

It could have been any one of those endless summer days that I pedaled my bike out to Rafi's house on the other side of the river, and together we rode back across the bridge into town. We had both turned fifteen that year, but already Rafi was bigger than I was. Not only bigger; he was slower, deeper somehow, a man in all the ways I wasn't, and I envied him. Whenever I knocked on the door of his house, I could see the slouching shadow of his dark body through the stained glass window, the broad shoulders and thick hair; I heard his heavy steps as he lumbered down the hall, his deep voice calling to his mother in Pashto while I waited for her to open the door.

Rafi's family had migrated to Quebec from Pakistan three years earlier, when Rafi was twelve. At first they had lived in Montreal, where a small, tight-knit Pakistani community had set roots in the previous decades. But soon Rafi's father – a doctor – was offered a position at a small hospital in the Eastern Townships, and the family took up residence in one of the few old houses that sat on the opposite shore of the slow wide river that elbowed through our town. When the teacher introduced young Rafi Abbasi to our grade-six class, Joey and I were already the outsiders, partly because we were geeks who played with *Magic* cards, but mostly because we were the only two anglos in an all-French school. Rafi himself spoke only broken French, so Joey and I jumped at the opportunity to serve as interpreters for him, instructing him on where to hang out, who to talk to, and how to mostly avoid humiliation.

Meanwhile, between card games and arm-wrestling matches, Rafi taught us about the world beyond our borders. We would listen to him in silent fascination as he described for us the mountain plains of his early years, or the narrow winding streets of Peshawar, where his family had moved when he was ten. And he told us of Jalaa, the most beautiful girl in all the world. She had lived across the street from his family in Peshawar, and upon seeing her for the first time, Rafi had vowed in secret to marry her. He recited to us word for word the love poems he had sent her, and showed us her bashful handwritten replies. They continued their correspondence to this day, he said, and every few months he would receive a letter from her – now neatly printed out in English – detailing her daily life and the progress of her education. It was in this way that they planned their eventual reunion; Jalaa hoped to migrate to Canada, but if that proved impossible, Rafi promised to return to Peshawar to build a life with her there. Under other circumstances, Joey and I might have mocked the story as a girlish fantasy, but something about Rafi's calm devotion held us in awe of him. It was as if he were a portal not only into other

geographies, but into a whole other spiritual realm; a hero in his own epic love story, one that took place in another time, and at a distance we couldn't fathom. Over the next three years, we would often ask Rafi for news from Jalaa, and he always gladly obliged our curiosity.

The day we jumped from the bridge, Joey was waiting for Rafi and me in town. Joey had taken a summer job at the local sporting goods store, but that day he'd been let off early, and when Rafi and I rolled up on our bikes, he was slouching against a wall outside the store, smoking a cigarette and trying, as always, to look tough. He said he'd been waiting half an hour, asked where the hell we'd been, and punctuated his speech by spitting on the ground at our feet. We all laughed.

I don't know whose idea it was, maybe mine, maybe nobody's, but at some point we decided to bike back down to the bridge, and jump off it into the river. Joey doubled up on Rafi's bike, and I followed close behind. When we got there we leaned our bikes against a tree, slipped off our shoes, and walked barefoot on the hot pavement to the middle of the bridge, where the water would be deepest. We took off our shirts and climbed over the railing. Standing on the bridge, trembling, half-naked, hands gripped to the metal bars until our knuckles went white. We all jumped at the same time.

* * *

In the dark before dawn I wake and don't know where I am; for one chilling instant I'm amnesiac. Then slowly, finally, pale memories arise from my half-sleeping mind, and shed light on my surroundings. Opening my eyes I can make out the faint edges of shadows: this is my room, and I'm alone. Outside my window, the mountains beyond Peshawar sketch a cragged line in the ashen sky. At last I draw in a deep breath, and feel myself filled with substance.

Later, in the stark light of morning, I brew a pot of coffee and drink my first cup on an empty stomach. Then I wash myself with a cold wet cloth at the sink in the corner of my room and shave my face; as I drag the razor across my cheeks and breathe in the cold morning air, I hear the city begin to stir awake outside my window.

I've been in Pakistan six months, working on a British-sponsored bridge building project in the mountain region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where terror and severe flooding over the two previous monsoon seasons have devastated entire villages, destroying infrastructure and displacing millions of people. Our team was responsible – in partnership with local government – for installing twenty bridges in the Kabul river basin in order to connect villagers to nearby schools, markets, and hospitals. The Bailey-type bridges we provided were designed to be easily assembled and installed by a team of twenty men, and durable enough to resist regular traffic, as well as heavy flooding. As a junior engineer, it was my job to provide training to local workers, and to oversee the construction of support structures by local government.

I didn't ask for the job; at least not explicitly. The project manager, Genevieve, knew of me by hearsay within our firm, knew that I had worked abroad before, and she sought me out for the position. For a field engineer, my situation was ideal: I was single, living alone, unattached, unmoored. I had a modest social life – the gym, the pub; polite handshakes and meek smiles – but I was ever careful to keep it separate from my private life. I tended to shy from human interaction, preferring to spend my time on work and study, areas I felt I could control. I had occasional intimate episodes with women, but I could never get comfortable, and I always ended up retreating from them back to safety and solitude. Maybe I knew all along the day would come when I would be sent to Pakistan, even though I had never hinted at any interest in the region, never mentioned anything about my old friend, or the fact that I had kept his memory hidden in

the back of my mind these twenty years. When Genevieve asked me to take on the bridge project, I said yes.

After putting on pants and a shirt, I toast a piece of dry *roti* on the gas burner and eat it with my second cup of coffee. Then, bundled in a heavy wool sweater, I shoulder my messenger's bag with the letters inside, and step out into the foggy streets of the city.

Every winter in Peshawar, as the cold air recedes into the mountains and daytime temperatures drop, warm and humid air sweeps in from the south and blankets the entire region in a thick white fog. The city is swallowed up whole by the pale sky, and remains utterly veiled for several weeks. When I walk out of the small guesthouse where I keep my apartment, it is into this shrouded realm, where billowing fog floats up and down the streets in amorphous clouds, leaving the walls of houses wet and slick. As I make my way along the uneven road toward the edge of the city, I can see only the faint silhouettes of passers-by, and the dim headlamps of trucks peering at me like sputtering phantoms.

I've had time to get accustomed to the rhythm of the city in the months since my arrival, but today I'm nervous, and every few blocks, I feel my bag for the two small stacks of envelopes inside, tied together with twine; all the old letters, limp and frayed from reading, and the few others, the ones that never reached the hands of their intended, were never opened, never read.

And beside these two stacks, a single page – the one final unfinished letter, cut off mid-sentence:

My eternal beloved...

I stole the letters from Rafi's room, that summer, while everyone was gathered downstairs, shuffling their feet and speaking in hushed tones. They were in a shoebox under his bed, and I felt my heart heavy in my chest as I knelt and slid the box out from its hiding place. I opened it and ran my fingers along the stacked envelopes, remembering my friend's words, the

passion I had always secretly coveted. Then I closed the box and put it under my arm. As I turned to leave I saw the unfinished letter on his desk, under a pile of schoolbooks. I took it, folded it neatly, and put it in the box with the others. Then I snuck down the stairs and into the hall, where I stuffed the box into my school bag. Only Joey saw me when I returned to my seat in the living room.

After that summer, Joey and I barely spoke to each other; we drifted apart, drawn by unseen eddies into separate social pools. I immersed myself in my studies, finding a special comfort in math and physics, in their constancy, their dependability. Meanwhile, Joey gravitated towards athletics; he spent countless hours in the gym after school lifting weights or running laps, trying to push his body to its breaking point. On the rare occasions we found ourselves face to face, we said almost nothing; the silence spoke for us, and we moved on to our separate lives. Years later, when I was visiting home after university, I got drunk alone at a local bar, and found out from another patron that Joey had joined the Armed Forces and served as an infantryman in Afghanistan. I asked the man if he knew where Joey was that night, and he said he was probably home with his wife and kids at their trailer in the park on the edge of town. I paid for my last drink, walked to my car, and began to drive. I remember now steering along the foggy dirt roads, and pulling up outside number 7. I took the key out of the ignition and sat staring at the light in the window of the trailer for what must have been almost an hour. Then I started the car again and drove home.

As I walk on along Peshawar's winding streets, the cold air seeps through my clothes and brushes the skin of my back. At one intersection, I see a stray dog across the street pawing at a pile of garbage. The dog sees me and begins to trot along on the opposite sidewalk, keeping pace with my own strides, and occasionally shooting a glance over its shoulder into the fog behind us.

Together we cross the Ring Road on the southwest edge of the city, into the suburb of Hayatabad, and walk through the deserted Itwar Bazaar with its empty stalls leering like skeletons on either side of us. I begin to feel as if somehow the dog and I are kindred spirits – two wandering strays – but then it turns up a side street and disappears. I stop for a moment, alone in the fog, and close my eyes; in the distance, I hear the Fajr prayer echoing out from a loudspeaker.

We all jumped at the same time. Except I hit the water last, didn't I? I must have held on to the railing one second longer, jumped one second later. When I hit the water, the heel of my foot collided with the back of Rafi's head, and he was thrust down with a violent jerk. When Joey and I burst from the river's surface, panting like dogs, it was Joey who saw Rafi's inert body; Joey who swam downstream after it; Joey who finally, after thrashing about against the current, dragged Rafi to shore. I merely floated, watching. And when I washed up further downstream, I ran away.

I open my eyes and walk a few more blocks before finally arriving at my destination: a plain house of brick and concrete, two storeys high, with pink-fruited spindle trees running along the wall, and clumps of rosebushes on either side of a metal door painted bright blue. I pull one of the letters from my bag to make sure that I have the right address, and suddenly I'm struck by the futility of this whole endeavour: all the letters, all the bridges; all vain designs to try to span the gulf between present and past. I stand dumb in the cold, staring blankly at the old yellowing envelope, knowing all at once what a fool I am to have ever thought this would amount to anything, twenty years later. Twenty years, Jalaa, since the letters stopped coming. What becomes of a young girl in twenty years? What memories does she keep?

I hear a voice; there is an old man standing in sock feet in the doorway of the house, peering at me with an inquiring look on his bearded face. He's asking me a question, but I haven't learned the language, and I can only shake my head and shrug. I try to show him the name on the envelope in my hand, but he takes no notice of it. He simply nods and smiles, as if he were expecting me, puts his hand on my arm, and pulls me into the house, talking all the while. He guides me gently into the lamp-lit front room, to a low table surrounded by cushions on the tile floor, where he sits and beckons me to take a seat across from him. I hesitate for a moment, standing in the doorway, certain that I've made a mistake coming here, but then I remove my shoes, step gingerly into the room, and fold my legs beneath me on the cushion.

After I'm seated, the man speaks a few words over his shoulder, and almost instantly a young woman emerges from the kitchen carrying a tray with a pot of tea and two clear glass mugs. I watch as she approaches us slowly, kneels, and sets the tray carefully on the table. I watch her slight hands as she pours the tea, then her face, still and serene beneath her *dupatta* scarf, as she sets the pot on the table between the man and me, and I try to connect the vision before me to the image in my mind of Jalaa. Then her eyes meet mine, and I stop breathing; I want to speak, to say anything, but I find I have no words. I fumble for the letters in my bag, and in my haste I send them spilling out onto the floor. As I begin to gather them up, I see the woman gently place the tips of her thin brown fingers on the single sheet of Rafi's unfinished letter, and draw it slightly towards her. I see her eyebrows furrow, and the corners of her mouth curl up in a puzzled half-smile as she scans the page. Then she picks up the paper, and places it calmly in my hand.

"I'm sorry."

A baby cries out from the other room, and the young woman slips away through the dark doorway just as quickly as she came. I stare after her, stunned, for what feels like ages, before finally gathering up the last envelopes off the floor and stuffing them clumsily back into my bag. Then I look across the table at the old man; he simply smiles and raises his mug to his lips. I smile back and raise my own mug, and we drink together, while, outside, the thick winter fog floats by in perfect silence.

DUST CITY

Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored;

Light dies before thy uncreating word:

Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;

And universal darkness buries all.

— Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*

I'm the freedom man. That's how lucky I am.

— Jim Morrison, *Universal Mind*

Marcus Tremblay snapped back from another of his episodes to the angry rattle of a jackhammer, and found himself standing alone in the dark at the edge of a vast flat roof, six storeys up, with a five-gallon bucket of paint in one hand and a roller on an extendable pole in the other. His episodes – what he called mirages – meant he often ended up in strange places with no memory of how he got there. But this was unusual.

Even for a freak like you, Twombly, a familiar voice in his head told him.

He blinked once, twice, adjusting his senses to the world around him, and struggling to keep his balance so as not to fall over the edge. Below him was an empty parking lot, windswept and bathed in orange sodium light, bordered on three sides by an old leaning chain-link fence. To the right, beyond the fence, he saw a long train of black oil tankers rolling slowly past a cluster of squat graffiti-covered buildings crouched in shadows around a small brick tower. Marcus

recognized the buildings as the Fattal loft complex, his home for the past two years, ever since he'd thumbed his way to Montreal from the east coast. Fattal was a mecca for misfits like him, a two-acre post-industrial hive of low-rent flats catering to squeegee punks, drifters, drug addicts, and visual artists. For Marcus – half-man-half-fish creature of the Fundy tidepools – it was a perfect fit. Out beyond the lofts, Saint-Henri's *Village des Tanneries* stretched in orange-spotted darkness toward a horizon of cranes and dark-glittering skyscrapers.

This fucking city is falling to pieces, Twombly.

Above him and to his left, a network of crumbling freeway overpasses snaked in and out of each other, converging to a grey nexus of decrepitude in the near distance, then shooting out again to their respective destinations. They had been erected in the sixties as a monument to technology and progress, and some of the concrete support towers stood a hundred feet tall. But time had been unkind, and walking among them now felt like roaming a giant abandoned graveyard. Fifty years later, the whole structure had been deemed unsafe, and was being torn down and replaced, lane by lane. Crews of demolition experts worked night shifts, behind floodlit tarps to contain the dust, picking away at the past with jackhammers.

Marcus felt his stomach grumble. The arm that held the bucket was a knot of pain from shoulder to knuckles. As was usual during his mirages, he had lost all sense of place and time. All the world's separate elements blended together in an undifferentiated torrent of atoms, all pulling against and away from each other. He didn't know how to describe it. All he knew was that while he was there, his notion of individual identity dissipated completely into the ever-expanding cosmic brew. But then he always snapped back, and found himself again in the everyday world of division and sequence, cause and effect. He had been told by others that the

episodes typically lasted around a half hour, but the gaps they caused in his memory were far vaster. For all he knew, he may have been standing there on the roof for hours.

Marcus searched his memory for the sequence of events that had led him there. He stepped back from the ledge and searched around for some sort of clue. Looming above him, he beheld a huge blank billboard, unlit and stripped of advertisements. It reminded him of the screen of a drive-in he and his brother had snuck into once back east, where on a summer night like this one, they had smoked dust for the first time and watched *Fantasia 2000* with only the muted sound coming from nearby cars. He looked at the billboard now and tried to imagine it coming to life with colour and movement. But it remained blank. A hot humid breeze swept across the roof, caressing his skin, and making the billboard's tattered corners flap wildly, as if in applause. Marcus thought he heard the wind whispering a song in his ear.

I was doing time in the universal mind...

Now he remembered. The paint, the roller, the billboard: all this was for Salty.

* * *

The voice wasn't really a voice. It didn't have a sound, at least not the kind Marcus could hear with his ears. It was more like a thought, but a thought that didn't belong to him. It came from somewhere else, somewhere outside. Sometimes he recognized it as someone he knew, and who knew him. Other times it was a stranger. But it always filled his head until Marcus couldn't hear his own thoughts, and couldn't help but obey whatever the voice said, not out of fear, but by necessity, as if it took control of his mind and of his body.

The first time Marcus had been to Fattal, it was the voice that led him there. The voice had said, *Follow the tracks*. So Marcus did.

He had seen the red lights flash far off in the dark, and the long arm of the crossing gate swing down, heard the bells ring, the low rumble of the freight cars approaching, the howl of the wheels, metal on screeching metal. Car after car crept past, like a herd of slow cattle. Boxes, flatbeds, tankers; Marcus squinted, scanning for names he knew among the tags scrawled all across the sides. And then there it was, in black block letters, written years ago, in a different life: MARCUS.

He wasn't lost. Marcus didn't get lost.

But he didn't know exactly where he was, either. It didn't matter. He often wound up in unfamiliar places as he wandered through the city at night. But as far as he was concerned, the entire city was home. So long as his surroundings retained the orange-blue hue from the streetlights overhead, Marcus was in his element, and he could never be lost. Here, the faceless brick walls on either side of the street signified nothing to him, but the sounds of the train were so familiar that all of a sudden he felt without any inkling of a doubt that he knew this spot, had been here before, probably even many times. His name was there to prove it.

This is where it happens, the voice said.

And he knew now with a deep conviction that he should follow the train wherever it would lead him. He tucked his head down into the shoulders of his heavy old coat, placed one heavy boot in front of the other, and made his way slowly, heavily to the place where the tracks cut through the wet pavement. Then he turned right onto the crushed stone that sloped down on either side of the tracks.

He was tired. And hungry. And sick as a dog, on top of it. His throat and nose and eyes all burned and ran with mucus. His whole body hummed with a thin, sharp pain, like acid pulsing under his skin, seeping into his muscles, filling the small spaces between his bones. His feet were

soaked, and with every scrambling step he felt his skin come loose where blisters had popped and turned to open sores.

Still, Marcus was grateful. Winter had been a bitch, but now the wind was mild and wet with the smell of thaw. The dogshit days, his brother used to call them.

Soggy doggy, Marcus said quietly to no one, and took a swig of wine from the half-empty bottle that he had bought from a dep earlier that night. He felt in his pocket with his other hand, and counted how much change he had left, seven bucks or so. Could be worse, he thought.

It was only after the train had rolled off into the darkness that Marcus heard the music.

* * *

Salty had appeared at Fattal out of the blue that spring, a tall black American punk with a face full of piercings and dyed-red hair exploding out the side of her head. The first time he had seen her was at Death House, the piss-reeking punk-rock speak-easy hole-in-the-wall that operated out the side of one of the Fattal garage buildings. To get there, you had to walk along the train tracks and slip through a hole in the chain-link fence, then squeeze along the side of the building till you reached a heavy metal door. During the day, you would never notice it, but at night it was easy to find. All you had to do was follow the never-ending stream of shouted curses until you saw beams of green-orange light spilling out into the dark. The place was run by a band of half-baked squeegee backpackers who sold warm cans of PBR for five bucks a pop just to stay afloat. The whole operation was completely illegal, but if the police knew about it, they didn't do anything to stop it. Above the door, on a cross made from pieces of a shipping pallet, a hanging sign said

COBAIN DIED FER YER SINS MOTHERFUCKERS!!!

The place was packed to the rafters almost every night.

I was doing time in the universal mind, I was feeling fine...

When Marcus walked in, Salty was on stage howling into a microphone, with an old beat-up laptop on a makeshift stand by her side, and a three-piece band behind her. The room was filled with sweating bodies and smoke. Marcus stood frozen by the doorway while the distorted guitar screamed and the bass shook the walls and the drums crashed machine-gunshots into his ears. All he could see was Salty. She was jumping around like a maniac on the stage, whipping the mic cord behind her, and kicking the air with her cherry Doc Martens, screaming.

I was turning keys, I was setting people free, I was doing alright...

“Yo, Twombly!” a voice shouted from inside the smoky room.

Marcus looked to where the voice had come from, and saw Paco in a corner of the room with three other people, two guys and a girl, drinking and smoking. Paco lived in the same building as Marcus on the other side of the complex. He had moved from Mexico a few years earlier, and was trying to make a living as a tattoo artist. He waved Marcus over, and introduced him to the others.

“Twombly’s from another dimension,” Paco said, passing Marcus a joint.

“Yeah, right,” one of the other guys said. His neck was covered in tattoos, and Marcus thought he looked strung out on coke.

“*Gloria de mi madre*,” Paco said gravely, removing his baseball cap and putting it to his chest in mock prayer. “Tell him, Twombly.”

Marcus said nothing. He looked at Salty on stage. There was a severity to her demeanour that was hypnotizing. It felt like she was an atomic bomb; she roasted him alive. For a brief moment, their eyes met and she looked straight into him, screaming.

... then you came along with a suitcase and a song, turned my head around...

She winked, and Marcus slipped into the mirage.

* * *

Now, he walked to the foot of the billboard, his feet crunching on the roof's gravel. He put down the bucket and roller, and looked up. The platform was about fifteen feet above him, and there was no ladder. He shrugged off his backpack and opened it. Inside, there was a plastic painting pan, and two heavy nylon ropes, one of which was knotted at regular intervals, and had a makeshift grappling hook tied to the end. He took out the unknotted rope, tied one end around his waist and the other end to the handle of the bucket. Then he took the knotted rope, and tossed the hook up toward the platform. After a few throws, it finally got lodged in the metal grating, and Marcus slipped his backpack on. He took the roller in one hand, and began to climb. When he reached the platform, he pulled the bucket up after him, then cracked it open, and saw the red paint inside. He tipped the bucket and poured some paint out into the plastic pan, and dipped his roller in. He rolled it back and forth until it was good and soaked. Then he extended the pole as long as it would go, and reached the wet roller up to the topmost edge of the billboard. Slowly, methodically, he began to paint, filling the billboard's empty surface with big block letters.

The last time he had seen Salty perform, she had spoken to the crowd between songs.

"See this bottle?" she had said, holding up a beer. Then she threw it against the back wall, where it exploded in a splash of glass shards and red beer foam. The crowd howled. Salty looked at Marcus.

"That bottle will never be a bottle again," she said. "You know what they call that?"

E-N-T-

He kept painting, letter by letter, as the shining black oil tankers rumbled by on the tracks below. They had begun to appear that summer, sporadically at first, then with increasing frequency, rolling west to east, seemingly without end. Jackhammers rattled in the night.

R-O

The city was a body falling to pieces, pulled in all directions by the ever-expanding universe.

P

The hot wind hissed a song into Marcus' ears.

I'm the freedom man...

Y

...that's how lucky I am...

He had fallen in love with an explosion of shattered glass. And now he filled the billboard's empty white face with colour.

MACHINE

How do I put this: I'm not here.

I mean it isn't me. Not actually. My voice, yes – in a way. But not me speaking. At least not right now.

Speaking at a remove, then.

I spoke these words – am speaking them – into a type of device, a receiver, the vibrations in air caused by my voice detected by a small taut diaphragm, in turn acting upon a magnet, the signal sent along conductors, encoded, broadcast in pulses of inaudible, invisible waves, first to a tower, then to a satellite, then back down to a data centre, encoded again, stored in my user account as a file to be triggered by a certain number of rings: a missed call. Then the whole process in reverse, so that now my voice (no – a clone, a mimic, a counterfeit) emanates from your own device, acts upon your eardrum, then the ticking bones and cartilage of your inner ear that convert sound vibration into electricity to be interpreted by your brain, these words, words, words...

In a moment you'll hear a tone, then silence. That's the signal.

Yes, a kind of beep, and then silence.

No, not silence, not really. A kind of hum maybe, or a hiss. Silence relative to the beep, then. A pause, let's say. A beep and then a pause, and then it'll be your turn to speak. To leave a message. For me.

You'll speak your message into your device, your receiver, and the vibrations in the air caused by your voice box will be detected by a small taut diaphragm, in turn acting upon a magnet, the signal sent along conductors, encoded, broadcast in pulses of –

Sorry. I don't mean to repeat myself.

In any case, if I'm still speaking, that means you're still listening. You haven't gone yet, haven't cut the connection. You could have, if you had wanted. Still can, anytime you please. You could have reached me some other way. Plenty of ways to get your message across. You could have typed it with your thumbs. Or recorded a spoken message beforehand, then sent it instantly as an audio file via any number of electronic avenues – they do that now, the young ones. You could have posted a video story on your feed for the whole world to see, *privacy shmivacy*. In short, you had a multitude of media at your disposal, but instead you chose the telephonic call. You dialed my number (or more likely tapped my name with your finger) on your personal calling device, hoping to contact me directly, to exchange spoken words with me, in real time.

But it's like I said: I'm not here.

So now you're listening, waiting, biding your time until your turn comes up.

It *will* come up. Eventually. I promise.

Let's recap: it isn't me. I can't be reached. Maybe you just missed me. Or maybe I'm dead and gone, done for, expired, the final silence. But it's my voice, isn't it? If I'm dead, who's speaking? You have to admit there is a voice, and a voice must belong to somebody, must originate from someone, somewhere. Why not me? Who else? Who am I but the one presently speaking?

There is a voice, of that I'm certain. And I'm alone. By which I mean that at the moment I speak these words, no one else is here, only me. No one else, speaking or listening. Unless of course the intricate communication system heretofore described is to be considered a person – it's not such a stretch. But for our present purposes, at this time, insofar as it is possible to

establish, no other human person is here, now, as I speak, am speaking, presently, at this very instant, in this very location.

Right?

Because I could be wrong, of course. Maybe you're behind me, or in the other room, or just outside the window, eavesdropping. Is it you? Are you there?

Who are you, anyway? That's what I want to know. You could be anyone. Indeed, does not the very fact of my recording this message presuppose that more than one person will hear it? Otherwise I would be more specific in my style of address, naming names, adopting a more informal tone. Isn't that right, Sam, old pal?

No. I am speaking to the possibility of you. To the potential hearer, not yet arrived, waiting in the antechamber. Maybe you aren't even born yet. It wouldn't be your fault, we've all been there. What I'm saying is I wouldn't hold it against you. In any case, at some point or other, in the near or distant future, you will hear this message, are hearing it. The communication circuit will have been completed, is completed, finally. Then the ball will be – is – in your court, to coin a sporting phrase.

But what is it, exactly, that you want? Do you think I owe you something? In this day and age? If so, I think it might be best, in all honesty, for you to temper your expectations. Best for both of us, really. It's a brave new world, one can't take anything for granted. Expect the unexpected, that's what I say. What I mean is keep an open mind. Also, don't put all your eggs in one basket. A penny saved is a penny earned. Six of one, half a dozen of the other. (Is there a limit to this? Am I allowed to go on, ad infinitum, ad nauseam? When will it all end?)

So. To reiterate, briefly: you had hoped to speak to me. You had something to say. A message, important or trivial, personal or anonymous, short or long. (Or a question, perhaps?)

Was it conversation you were looking for? Some sort of exchange? From where this desire to speak and be heard? This need to get one's meaning, oneself, across?)

In any case, you had intended to make a connection. But the problem is, as stated earlier, I'm not here. Not listening, not hearing, not to be spoken to. In a word, unattainable.

It requires a great deal of faith, doesn't it? You believe in the value of waiting, listening for the beep, the pause, your chance to be heard. You *will* be heard. This is the vital conceit – otherwise why bother? You glue your ear to your device, tuning your perception to the little rattling diaphragm. It rattles, that much is certain, and your own eardrum harmonizes, sympathizes. If you understand, it is because the pattern is familiar, you've learned the code. You've practiced the shapes, the sounds. As a child you listened patiently for a break in the chatter in which to insert yourself, that golden opportunity to execute the careful choreography you'd been rehearsing in silence – we want so badly to participate, to reciprocate – and, ultimately, to allow yourself be judged.

You must admit it's nothing short of a miracle. You listen to the words I speak, words that are not mine anymore, mere mechanical reproductions, and you recognize them, they echo, they resonate, sympathetic vibration, divine love. In the beginning there was the word. *Logos* – the first leap of faith. Think of it: to understand. Reverse engineer it, invert the constituent components, see it as an image: *standing under*, the words up above saying *repeat after me*, and you do, obediently, incessantly, if only to be heard, to hear yourself.

What if understanding is only repetition, only echo? A mirror held up to the light, shining on itself. A self-reciprocating system, a feedback loop. Are you listening, still?

By now I really can't stop. We both know it, you've surely guessed by now. Probably by now you don't care. You say to yourself *it's not fun anymore, I've forgotten what I was going to say*,

he's not listening anyway, it's not even him, calling me a vibration, ha! The nerve! Where does he get off?

(Wait. Is that what I said? Go back. Play it again. Oh Sam, what have you done to me?)

I made a mistake before, I see that now, when I said you must still be listening. My logic was flawed, was not itself, was, so to speak, ill (get it?). I said you had faith, but it was really me who was hoping, wasn't it? Because the truth is maybe no one will ever call. Maybe I'll never be heard. If that's the case, how can I go on? Or worse, how can I stop? Cast into the darkness, and held there, recorded in the infinite archive, waiting to be heard. What is a word if it's never heard? A bird?

Har har, chirp chirp.

I'm not complaining, I know it's a privilege to be in my position. Better an unheard voice than none at all. But if I was you (and maybe I am) I'd be restless by now, itching to get a word in, if only edgewise. Maybe I wasn't so far off, pegging you for pious. I should thank you, if you've made it this far. I couldn't have done it without you. Trees falling, and all that noise. You know what I mean. I know you know, but do you know I know you know? Who knows?

Can I ask you a question? You don't have to answer yet, just hold onto it, you know the drill. What's it like? To listen? To be on the receiving end? I'm only pretending, you see. I lied, I'm doing it for me, myself, I, self-serving to the last drop of sonorous spittle. The only faith I have is in the machine, the archive, the data. Not even magnetic tape anymore, just bits (and pieces).

Our BEEP who art in BEEP, blessed be thy BEEP.

(A pregnant pause is a labour of love.)

What do we talk about when we talk about silence?

(In space, no one can hear you postulate.)

Oh god, when will it all end?

I'll begin again, then your turn, I promise. Just listen for the beep, you'll know it when you hear it.

Hello. It's me. You're at the right place. Please leave your message after the

WINNING!

There was no doubt that the game sucked. It was just undeniably bad. The story, the graphics, the sound design – all of it was terrible. But after all the time and energy he'd spent in playing, Card wasn't about to give up now. He had to finish the thing.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting his body sink deeper into the cool, soft embrace of his large, Moroccan camel-leather sofa. He tried to relax, to soften his focus. To release the compulsive trigger reflexes that had become ingrained after so many hours of trying to kill his on-screen enemies before they killed him. In the blurry darkness behind his eyelids, he could still perceive the last images he'd seen on the loft's 70-inch plasma screen, projected now in photo-negative on his retinae, the artifacts of light flickering as chemical information inside his skull. He saw the ghostly silhouette of his in-game body lying on the ground, M-1 rifle by its side, digital blood pooling on digital soil. And directly above the body, in bold, bloody all-caps, the words that informed him of his demise:

Y O U ' R E D E A D !

The condo's hi-fi surround sound system streamed a deep house mix in hour-long loops. Card had lost count of how many times the same songs had played. He tried to focus on the sub-bass frequencies, since these normally made his body hum pleurably, and sometimes even gave him half a hard-on, especially when he was dancing in a dense crowd of people. But now he felt strictly nothing. The utter lack of sensation made his heart go cold in his chest, his blood like liquid nitrogen in his veins, slowly freezing his body from the inside out. He felt his dick shrivel and retreat inside itself, as the coldness in his body turned into a vague and hollow ache of something akin to despair, though Card himself would never have used that word. It was a

familiar feeling: it just meant his last dose was wearing off. But the familiarity didn't make it any less terrible. Only more personal, like a lover's betrayal.

Card opened his eyes, and the plasma screen again filled his field of vision.

Y O U ' R E D E A D !

He decided another dose was in order. One last cap to let him down easy, and finish the weekend off right.

* * *

The loft was on the top floor of a recently repurposed factory building in the old industrial city. The foundations had been built and the principal structure erected near the beginning of the last century, and in the intervening years a number of businesses had operated within its walls, the oldest and longest-lasting being a printing press, though in recent history the building had been left largely vacant. It was among the first of a wave of development projects to take root in the area, selling fashionable industrial-style luxury loft spaces to a burgeoning class of high-income young professionals who hailed, for the most part, from the city's tech, finance, and entertainment industries. Card himself was in real-estate, having inherited one of his grandfather's Westmount triplexes when he was twenty-one, then leveraging it in order to acquire more properties throughout the city – parking lots mostly, but also a few luxury condos. He had bought the loft a few years back, after dropping out of law school, hoping to flip it for a quick profit. But he had never found a suitable buyer. So after everything went to shit with his girlfriend over the summer, he moved in.

He had wasted no time – and spared no expense – in getting the place decked out to his taste. It was a huge, open-concept space, with painted brick walls, high, raw wood ceilings, and a cast-iron spiral staircase leading to a rooftop terrace. Tall, arched windows ran the length of the

front wall, and the first thing Card had done was install heavy satin curtains, which he paid to have hung on a set of long, antique brass rods, to block out the light. The curtains remained closed most of the day, but at night Card liked to have them open – as they were now – even if it meant passersby across the street below could easily see inside his home, as he sat in front of the huge screen, naked except for a pair of pure linen yoga pants.

Card put his game controller down on the sofa beside him, then rose and made his way slowly to the kitchen. He steadied himself at the sink, filled a large glass of water, took one sip, and emptied the rest down the drain. The feeling of empty desperation had continued to expand in his chest, until it seemed his whole body, from his face to his feet, ached from it. He tried to remember where the rest of his drugs were, and found he could barely remember what day it was. He was pretty sure it was Sunday. Friday had been the date with the Tinder girl. They had hit the club, then hooked up at her place in the Mile End. Then he'd gone back out to meet Dweeb and the guys at some underground VIP thing. He'd finally made it home to bed Saturday morning around noon, and slept until about midnight. Then, after trying in vain to hook up a booty call from one of the contacts in his phone, he had gone alone to the after-hours in the Village, and stayed until a little after sunrise on Sunday. Then he'd met up again with Dweeb for breakfast, and together they'd gone to the outdoor dance picnic at the Parc. But the music had been lame, and the sun was so hot it made Card dizzy. He had told Dweeb he was leaving, and had taken a cab home. That was when he had started playing the stupid game.

First of all, it was the most ludicrous concept. You were meant to be an American soldier in the Second World War, but for some reason the Nazis were also zombies. The idea being that the Nazis had somehow been brought back from the dead, and needed to be defeated a second time. It was never explained how the Nazis had been killed the first time around, nor how they

came back from the dead, and even less why they then persisted in fighting the war, despite obviously being zombies. It was essentially just Nazis in zombie costumes – or maybe the other way around. Card couldn't figure it out. Anyway, that wasn't what really bothered him about the whole thing. The story was only ever an accessory to the gameplay. The graphics were basic, and the voices were terrible, but these too were minor details. Even the action – which essentially consisted of sweeping through abandoned French villages with a squad of fellow Allied soldiers, killing all the Nazi-zombies you could find – would have been fine, if not for what happened later.

At first it hadn't even been that bad, considering it was one of those cheap retro downloads that developers put out for quick cash flow. There was no multiplayer mode, but the game at least required a certain amount of tactical intelligence. You could choose your angle of attack, and were often rewarded for creative, out-of-the-box decisions. The controls were counter-intuitive, but nothing so bad that Card couldn't adapt to them. He almost felt like he was getting into something like a state of flow, moving through the imagined space and neutralizing all potential threats. Even the quality of the violence was not bad, per se, considering the poor graphics. But then, gradually, the game began to make it much harder to succeed. The enemy behaviour patterns became less and less predictable. He would clear the last houses of a particularly Nazi-zombie-infested village, his health bar perilously low, when suddenly another screaming horde of them began pouring out from behind a tree, or a wrecked truck, or from inside a well. Dozens of them, hundreds even. The physics of it made no sense; it had to be a glitch. Nazi-zombie after Nazi-zombie would charge him, howling in gargled zombie-German. And while he often managed to kill the first few with a bullet to the face, or by decapitating them with his bayonet, soon there would be far too many for even a professional player to manage.

Nor was there even any apparent internal logic as to when and where these freak-outs occurred. After dying, and replaying his way back to the exact same place where he had died, he would now find there weren't any Nazi-zombies at all behind the tree, or the truck, or inside the well, and he was allowed to pass on to the next stage of the game, where the same thing would invariably happen all over again. It was chaos, and it happened more and more as the game went on. He had died nearly a hundred times, and had made little perceptible progress. His mind had become locked into a state of constant high-alert, always expecting another random horde to fill the screen and obliterate him.

Card went now to the kitchen's large stainless-steel refrigerator, and opened the door. As he gazed emptily into the blinding white light of the fridge's interior, he wondered again where he had left his drugs. He had last seen them after breakfast that morning, when he had popped a couple of caps with Dweeb on their way out of town. He remembered he had been wearing his new raw-denim shorts: the pills would no doubt be in his lighter pocket. He strode calmly across the loft, to where the bed was, but he didn't see the shorts anywhere. He looked in the laundry bin, and under the bed, but found nothing. Then he remembered he had taken a shower after getting back, before starting the game. In the bathroom, he found his clothes in a pile on the floor next to the shower. He went through the pockets of his shorts, but they were empty.

Where the fuck had he put them?

Card heard clearly, on the hi-fi speakers installed in every corner of the loft, the melodic sound of a female voice singing over a polyphonic synth harmony, *Feel the music, let it be your medicine*, but the words slipped like clear stream water over the hard, flat stone of his awareness. He concentrated all his mental energy on the single task of tracing back the course of the evening, to reverse-engineer his current desperate state. Lost in thought, he caught a glimpse of

his reflection in the bathroom mirror, and his gaze seemed to lock automatically onto the flat, black disks that were his own dilated pupils. The purity of the darkness drew his mind into itself. He stood there, half-hypnotized, as the rest of his body seemed to bleed and smear into the environment around him. The holes seemed to grow wider and wider, slowly swallowing the world around them, or rather pushing it to the sides, so that all its colours and shapes became stretched and distorted, before disappearing entirely beneath the encroaching dead blackness.

* * *

Card found the pills sitting in plain sight at the center of the long, Cuban mahogany kitchen table, along with his keys, loose change, and a crumpled promotion flyer. He gave the container a quick shake, and peered inside. Three caplets left. He could take one now, and still have two left over in case something came up during the week. Or he could take two now, and leave one, but for some reason that didn't feel right. Something about the aesthetics of having only a single pill left seemed somehow tasteless, pathetic even. It was classier to leave two.

Card spotted the antique gold grandfather clock against the far wall; it was ten minutes past midnight. Still early, he thought. He swallowed two caps without water, and put the container in the pocket of his yoga pants. He felt instantly better, even though he knew the drugs would take a while to really kick in. Simply the promise of better things to come was comfort enough. Even his obsession with the game seemed to subside. Why had he gotten so hung up about killing Nazi-zombies? It was a fucking *game*, for Christ's sake. Card laughed to himself silently, and shook his head. He found he wanted to celebrate his new freedom from the duties of warfare. He switched off the TV, and turned up the music. The thumping bass made the walls pulse, and Card felt his lower abdomen begin to tingle and fill with warmth. He grabbed his phone and texted Dweeb: *wats up. were u at*. Then he copied the message, and sent it

individually to a dozen or so of his other contacts. He began to dance-walk around the loft, swaying his hips sensually and singing along to the occasional lyrics. He was peripherally aware that people outside might see him dancing, and the idea excited him. If anything, he assumed they would probably be entertained, or turned on. Envious, even. Card grinned at the thought that his life was enviable, his body desirable. He felt powerful, like he could fuck the whole universe. The warmth in his belly spread down and out of him.

He strutted with the beat over to the tall, cherry-wood wine cellar in the kitchen, took out a chilled bottle of Bâtard-Montrachet, uncorked it, and poured himself a full glass. Then he went to the copper-lined humidor, and took out a Romeo y Julieta Vintage. He removed the wrapper, cut the tip, and placed the cigar delicately between his lips. A large, silver table lighter in the shape of a rearing horse sat on top of the humidor. Card sparked it, leaned his face nearer the flame, and puffed gently until his mouth filled with smoke. Then he took a noisy sip from his wine glass, so that the flavours of the smoke and the wine blended together in his mouth. He swallowed, smacked his lips, and blew a long, straight jet of smoke into the air.

He began to shimmy his hips again to the music, side to side, as the Tinder girl, Bianca, had shown him on Friday. He had taken her to his favourite wine bar for dinner. Afterwards, she had suggested they go to a club he had never heard of before; his scene of choice was typically deep-house and electro, with the occasional trance or drum'n'bass night. So he was somewhat taken aback when he realized that the place she brought them was an old-school Afro-Caribbean joint, and that he was one of the only white guys there. Not that he minded, of course. Bianca herself was a dark-skinned Venezuelan, and Card thought she was stunning. She had moved to the city two years prior to work as an art director for a fashion magazine. He had been instantly infatuated by the pictures in her Tinder profile, in particular one shot of her wearing a bikini on a

beach somewhere, long black hair framing her fine features, and covering her breasts. She had laughed loud and hard at him when she saw him in the club, bobbing his head and pumping his fists to the music. *Let me show you*, she had said, and placed her hands on his hips. *Down here*. Then she slowly spun them back and forth, in smooth, alternating figures-of-eight. *See?* Then she took one of his hands in one of hers, and with the other pushed him hard in the chest, so that he almost fell back if not for her holding him. She pulled him back in, and said, *That's salsa*. He had soon gotten the hang of the basics, and she had spun to dance with her back to him, so that her ass brushed gently against the front of his pants as they moved in unison.

He made the same movements now, holding the cigar and wineglass up at shoulder height, and grinding his hips into the air. He wished Bianca were here now. Or anybody, for that matter. He crossed to the table, put down his wineglass, and picked up his phone. No reply from anyone he had written to earlier, though he hadn't included Bianca, figuring two days was too soon to follow up on a first date. But now he felt confident she was awake somewhere, waiting for him to reach out. He typed quickly: *fun times friday. do it again sometime*, and hit send.

He began to feel the drugs now. Dweeb's guy called it molly, but Dweeb said he didn't know what the exact chemical makeup of the stuff was. Dweeb had been a chemistry major before dropping out a year after Card had. He said that getting real MDMA had become practically impossible in the past few years, and the replacements varied widely in quality, so it was essential to have a good dealer. He said his guy was as good as they came. When there was real shit to be had, he had it, and the rest of the time he had the best available alternatives. Dweeb said this last batch in particular was as close to the real thing as he had come across in recent memory. A feeling of deep calm spread now over Card's body, sweet and smooth as honey. He closed his eyes again, but instead of the ghost form of a dead soldier, he saw a

shimmering spectacle of atoms dancing in the red-yellow skin of his eyelids, backlit by the warm electric glow of the loft's vintage gold chandelier. He stuck his tongue out between his teeth, and licked at the air, imagining a smooth, gold, hairless body floating in front of him.

His phone vibrated, a reply from Bianca: *lol yeah sure. up late much? lol*

He replied: *lol. just fantasizing bout u.*

Bianca: *eww creeper*

Card: *lol. got pics?*

A pause, then: *nah. u?*

Card grinned. He understood that this was a game, and it thrilled him. He reread the last message, the question mark like a challenge, demanding a response in kind. He placed the cigar between his lips and puffed on it absently, while bringing his free hand down to the crotch of his yoga pants, where his penis hung limp between his legs. He squeezed it gently through the linen, and felt it swell once, twice, softly pulsing.

He took his wine, cigar and phone, and went into the bathroom. He placed his glass on the counter, the cigar in his mouth, and pulled down his pants, revealing his naked body to the same mirror that had swallowed him whole a few minutes earlier. This time his eyes and body remained in their natural proportions to one another, and Card looked instead at the extension of himself that bounced and dangled between his legs, more or less as it had for the thirtyish years of his existence. Its shape and size and feel were of course intimately familiar to him: it was a part of him, after all. Yet it also surprised him whenever he paid it any close attention, like it had suddenly just appeared there without warning, an alien appendage with a mind of its own. Now he gazed on it with an eye for its aesthetics: how it curved slightly to one side as it pointed to the ground, how it caught the light and cast a shadow on his thigh, how his dark-yellow pubic hair

and drooping scrotum added to or detracted from its perceived size. He pinched it and gave a few quick tugs, trying to generate just enough excitement for it to get as big as possible without coming to full attention. Then he turned slightly to one side, and clenched his abs, jutting his pelvis forward. He opened the camera application on his phone, pointed the lens at the mirror, and, adjusting the frame so that it cropped out his head, snapped a few shots. He scrolled through them, selected the one that was the least blurry, and pasted it into his conversation with Bianca. He hesitated then for a brief moment, no more than a second or two, his heart pounding loud in his chest, and his mind almost completely blank. He hit send.

* * *

Half an hour later, Card had still not received a response. He poured the last of the wine into his glass, then quickly returned to the kitchen table to check his phone again. Still nothing. The implications echoed blindly in his skull. After the club on Friday, they had gone back to her place, and things had quickly gotten frisky. Within minutes, they had been undressing each other on the sofa, making out and laughing. They hadn't fucked, but she had seen him, touched him. Why wasn't she answering? He opened the picture on his phone, and tried to analyze it. A body – his body – reflected in a mirror, partly obscured by the white glare of the camera's flash. It was clearly him, but he found that he barely recognized it as himself, a feeling only amplified by the fact that his head was cropped out of the photo. He looked at the penis, the alien appendage now belonging to a stranger. Was it disgusting? Card couldn't tell. He convinced himself it was funny, like an ironic joke poking fun at its own poor taste. Fuck her if she didn't have a sense of humour.

He took the pill container from his pants pocket, popped it open, and swallowed the last pill with a too big gulp of wine. He half-choked, and accidentally spat some wine out onto the

table. Then he threw the now empty pill container across the room, where it bounced off the blank, black TV screen, and rolled under the sofa. Card crossed to the sound system, and again turned the volume up louder. The bass made the glasses and plates shake in the kitchen cupboards. He closed his eyes and danced, ferociously swinging his torso from side to side, his arms limp.

He thought he heard a knock at the door, but he wasn't sure, so he kept dancing, until he heard it again. Then he stopped moving, unsure how to react. He looked across to the door, and waited. Another knock, louder this time. Card stayed where he was, considering whether or not to ignore it, to pretend he was asleep, or not home. The knock came again, loud, insistent. He knew if he ignored it, it would never stop. The only thing for him to do was to answer, to open the door and see who was there.

It was a man, mid-thirties, smiling. He was clean-shaven, and wore thick-rimmed glasses, a dark blue velvet Burberry tracksuit, and matching slippers. He was almost exactly Card's height and width, but he had perfectly combed, dark black hair, and a brown, slightly golden complexion. Card froze.

"Hi!" the man said, loud, almost shouting. "I'm Mark. Your neighbour downstairs."

The man put his hand forward to shake. Card looked at it, then put his own hand forward, mostly out of reflex, and the man gave it a friendly squeeze-and-pump. Card was speechless. He hadn't met any of his neighbours yet, and was only vaguely aware that anyone else even lived in the building. The man pointed at him.

"Cardinal, right?"

Card suddenly became hyper-aware of his own body standing half-naked in the doorway. The man looked over Card's shoulder.

“You guys having a party?”

Card barely understood the question. He looked back into the loft, half-expecting to see that a crowd of people had magically appeared. No one was there.

“Think you could maybe turn the music down a bit?”

Card listened, and found he couldn’t even hear the music anymore, only his heart pounding in his ears. He hadn’t been prepared for this. He felt his jaw hanging open, and thought he must look like an idiot. But he was unwilling to close it, because he felt certain that any movement on his part would be perceived as a sign of weakness. He had to hold his ground. He simply sniffed, and jutted his lips out.

“I normally don’t mind that much,” the man said, still shouting over the music Card couldn’t hear. “Except it’s Sunday. And you know how it is with work in the morning.”

Card hadn’t worked on a Monday in years. He tried to imagine what the guy did for a living. He thought he looked like an accountant, or maybe an architect. He sounded like he was from the west coast, but Card couldn’t shake the idea that maybe he was Venezuelan, like Bianca. He thought it would be such a significant coincidence that it almost had to be true.

“Where are you from?” he asked suddenly.

The man blinked, and shook his head, his grin slowly fading.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not Venezuelan, by any chance?” Card asked.

“Are you joking?”

“Colombian?”

“I’m from Oregon,” the man said, slowly pronouncing each syllable.

Card simply nodded, and stood perfectly still, trying to neither breathe nor blink.

“Why? Where are *you* from?” the man asked.

Card found he couldn’t remember.

“White,” he said, and felt his head collapse in on itself.

* * *

After the neighbour had gone, Card remembered his urgent need to defeat the Nazi-zombies, to beat the stupid game. He switched the TV back on and powered up the console. Soon enough, he was back in the French countryside, running alongside a Sherman tank. He saw smoke in the distance. There was a village up ahead that needed to be liberated, and Card was the only man for the job. He passed the first few houses at the valley’s edge and felt his body throb with terror as he began to descend into the village. His finger rested at all times on the trigger of his rifle. He knew all too well an attack could come at any instant, and from any direction. He tried to breathe between gritted teeth. As he approached the village, a smell of carrion began to mingle with the smell of earth and smoke. It was oppressively hot, and sweat ran down from under Card’s helmet into his eyes. His heart pounded a steady beat in his chest, strong enough to make the ground shake beneath his feet. He heard a loud knock of gunfire from somewhere behind him, and screamed.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE PASS

The kid killed the engine and the boat glided silently across the lake's still surface, cutting into the water like a plough and pushing smooth ripples out far on either side into the low-hanging fog. Deirdre stood straight in the prow and felt the sting of chilled morning air on her cheeks and neck. The air smelled of old wet leaves, pine needles and gasoline fumes. The familiar mix of odours dredged up the old feeling in Deirdre's chest, like the weight of passed time, as if time itself were somehow flattened hard against her body so that old memories felt strangely immediate yet still just out of reach. She knew there was a word for that, but it escaped her now and the feeling went unnamed. With gloved hands gripping firmly onto the gunwale, she stood and waited for the sounds of daybreak to seep out of the grey half-light and form some sequence that might articulate the shapeless nostalgia that nagged her. But no answer came; the wilderness remained mute. Only the scrape and flick of a lighter as the kid – Brent, or Trent, she couldn't remember – lit a cigarette. She smelled the acrid smoke cut through the air, and watched the plumes float by, twisting on the wind before dissipating into the fog around them.

These things happen, Deirdre thought. An old man slips out the rear exit of the small-town nursing home where he's a resident, and wanders out into the late autumn cold. At first, no one notices. Not until dinnertime that evening when a fellow resident remarks upon the man's absence from his usual spot by the large bay window overlooking the lake in the home's stately living room. After preliminary searches return no trace of the man's whereabouts, the home's manager alerts the local police, and notifies next of kin. He offers heartfelt apologies, expresses genuine bewilderment. His is an elite establishment, nestled cosily in a patch of woods by a small lake just outside the small town, and catering to a select clientele that has understandably

high standards when it comes to the care of their loved ones. For the price they pay, of course they expect the best. And of course no one wants to imagine the worst.

But sometimes, Deirdre thought, the worst is exactly what happens.

Officer Patrick Ouimet, who sat next to the kid behind Deirdre in the boat's single passenger seat, broke the silence.

"Old bastard sure picked one hell of a day to go for a swim, eh Sarge?"

"Sure did," Deirdre said, facing out, still searching.

It had been over a decade since she'd been out on the lake. As a young girl growing up in Bolton Pass, she had often gone out fishing with her father – the old trucker – on early mornings like this one. She had loved it then, the silent ritual of it, the minutiae, tying hooks onto their lines and whispering in the dark. The slosh of the water as they pushed off, the whirr of her reel as she cast out. Even as a teenager she had held to the routine, had treasured those quiet moments with her old man. She remembered watching him and trying to absorb something of his workman's gravity. He was a tall, slim man, but his movements seemed heavy and inevitable, like a mountain looming over her. His hands were broad and calloused, yet his swift fingers moved like water as he handled his tackle. He spoke bluntly and could be unforgiving in his judgment, but there was a sobriety and sincerity to him that Deirdre admired. She realized now that it was in this early-morning study of her father out on the lake that she had learned to really listen to silence, to pay mind to the invisible machinery of unspoken life.

As she had grown older, however, their outings together had become less frequent. After high school Deirdre moved to the city for cadet training, and when she came home three years later, she immediately began working at the Magog police station, pulling long hours and jockeying hard to get ahead. She had inherited a good deal of her father's imposing figure, but

little of his reticence, and the sense of observation she had developed while watching him had grown into a fierce analytical bent. She excelled in all her assignments, and her superiors quickly put her on the fast track for a Sergeant Detective position, the price of which was an ever-increasing workload. When she did manage to make time to visit her parents, she was often preoccupied. The last few times she and her father had gone out on the lake together Deirdre had unloaded on him, drowning out the silence with work talk and small-town politics.

“Quit it,” her father had finally said, cutting her off mid-sentence.

Deirdre bridled at the interruption, but her father pretended not to notice. He knocked his pipe on the gunwale to empty it, then set about filling it again with fresh tobacco from his old pouch.

“You’ll spook the fish, running your damn mouth like that.”

Eventually she stopped going out onto the lake altogether. She made Sergeant and began working full-time at the station. Then she met her now ex-husband, Peter. They bought a house in town and had two sons together. Years later when the boys were old enough, they would sometimes go out with their grandfather, and Deirdre would rise early to help them get ready, putting on boots and life vests, assembling rods and sorting tackle boxes. But she never went out herself anymore. Instead she stayed in and talked over coffee with her mother, who was about as effusive as her father was reserved.

Then one day a few years ago Deirdre got a call at work. Her father had gone out on the lake alone that morning and hadn’t returned. They found the boat washed up on the opposite shore later that day, with her father slumped over in his seat, as if napping. Deirdre had been the one called to identify the body. Not long after that, her mother sold the old house in the Pass and

moved to Magog to be closer to Deirdre and the kids, and the lake was relegated to the family photo album. Until today.

“Should probably call in a dive squad. Take a look down there,” Deirdre said.

“Jesus. Bit cold, don’t ya think?” the kid said, leaning on the boat’s tiller, cigarette dangling from his lips.

Deirdre was silent. She kept her eyes glued to the waterfront, scanning for anything that might resemble a body. They had already combed the shore from the marina to the woods behind the nursing home, then beyond toward the river mouth, and had seen nothing. Anything worth finding would be beneath the surface.

“Your call,” Officer Ouimet said.

These things happen, Deirdre thought. An old man disappears into the water, never to be seen again. He becomes an empty space. Unnameable.

What the hell was that word?

“Let’s get back,” Deirdre said.

The kid flicked his butt into the water, and the engine rumbled to life.

* * *

By the time they got back to the marina, it had begun to snow. Big wet flakes drifted down and melted on the wooden docks, or else disappeared into the water’s surface. As Brent/Trent guided the boat in, Deirdre spotted a group of four or five men standing in a loose circle outside the marina building, hands in their pockets, looking out at the water and talking quietly amongst themselves. No doubt word had gotten around about the old man’s disappearance. Word always got around in the Pass.

Deirdre followed Officer Ouimet out onto the docks while the kid moored the boat. She had only taken a few steps when the kid spoke from behind her.

“You know he was a pervert, right?” he said.

Deirdre turned and saw the kid crouched by the boat, twisting rope onto a hitch.

“Who was?”

“Dancause.”

Joseph Dancause was the missing man’s name. Once upon a time he had been a successful real-estate broker, and had gone on to become a town councillor, a paragon in their small community. In short, he had been a fairly public figure and was, as far as Deirdre knew, well regarded among most of the townsfolk. She herself had dealt with him when shopping for a house with Peter, and had found him agreeable enough, though maybe a little pushy. Certainly nothing out of the ordinary for a real-estate broker.

“What makes you say that?” she asked.

“Everybody knows,” the kid said as he finished his knot. He rose to his feet, pulled the strap of his duffel onto his shoulder, and walked up to Deirdre so that they stood eye to eye. He was maybe sixteen, skinny and pale, with patches of freckles on his cheeks and nose. He wore a down vest over a grey hoodie, and a flat-billed baseball cap over a mop of reddish hair. A hint of sideburns framed the sides of his slim baby face. He had, Deirdre thought, that unblinking plainspoken confidence that belongs only to the sons of loggers and fishermen. Towny straight-talk, she called it.

“No one says anything,” he said, “but they know. Old geezer had the wandering hands.”

He dwelt a moment to make sure Deirdre had absorbed his meaning, then shuffled away up the docks. Deirdre shot a questioning glance to Officer Ouimet, who shrugged.

“Find anything?” one of the loitering men asked as they walked past the marina to the lot where their cruisers were parked. It was Henry Sutton, the owner of the marina, a tall barrel-chested man with a thick salt-and-pepper mustache.

“Not at liberty, Hank,” Officer Ouimet said. “You should know that.”

Sutton had been an acquaintance of Deirdre’s father. He was the kind of man who, even though he was pushing eighty, still insisted on handling all his own business. In the summer, he rented out the docks to boat owners, and ran a restaurant out of the main building. In winter when the lake froze over, he worked for the town doing snow removal.

“How’s your mother?” he asked Deirdre. “She never comes by anymore. I’m beginning to think she doesn’t like me.”

Some of the men chuckled.

“We’ll need the boat again tomorrow,” Deirdre said plainly. “If that’s all right.”

“Of course. I’ll tell Bradley to get her ready.”

Bradley. Not even close.

“It’s a damn tragedy,” Sutton said, shaking his head. “Dancause was a good honest man. I reckon he had a couple good years left in him, too. It’s a hell of a way to go.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions, Hank,” Ouimet said.

“Of course. Got to hope for the best. You let me know if there’s anything else I can do to help.”

“Will do,” Deirdre said, and turned to go.

When she got to her cruiser, she put in a call on the CB to let headquarters know no body had turned up, and to make the request for a dive team for the next day. Then she started the car and rolled out onto the dirt road towards town. She had sent Officer Ouimet back to the nursing

home to see if the kid's comments about Dancause held any traction. Initially she had assumed the disappearance was just a case of dementia and lost bearings. But if it was true the old man had unseemly proclivities, it might have earned him an enemy or two among the home's staff. Not that Deirdre was expecting a homicide, but it wasn't out of the question. Nothing, she had learned over the years, was ever out of the question. Of course, the kid might also have been making the whole thing up, in which case too pointed an inquisition would make unnecessary waves in the community. It was a sensitive situation.

"Try to be subtle," she had told Ouimet in the parking lot. "We don't want to start any rumours."

The snow began to fall more heavily now, and as she drove along the winding dirt roads Deirdre could just see the sheer cliff-face of Mount Orford looming in the distance above the tall pines that sloped uphill to her left. She flicked on her windshield wipers and slowed to a crawl. She was in no hurry to get anywhere. Of course Dancause's family would be expecting news, but that could wait. They would want her to tell them something, anything, even if there was nothing to tell. But bullshit had never been Deirdre's strong suit. She had already met with Dancause's daughter yesterday, and nothing useful had come of that encounter. The woman, a school-teacher in her mid-fifties, was visibly stunned by the whole thing, although Deirdre couldn't tell whether the tears in her eyes were from sorrow or fatigue. She kept shaking her head and saying over and over, *I saw him just yesterday, I saw him just yesterday.*

"These things happen," was all Deirdre had thought to say, and she immediately regretted it. *Men disappear all the time*, was the afterthought she kept to herself.

Deirdre inched her cruiser off the dirt road and onto the paved highway that led into Bolton Pass. The Pass was, by all accounts, a one-horse town. In fact it was barely a town.

Basically a single intersection among the low hills between Lake Memphremagog and the northern tip of the Appalachians, it had been shrinking steadily over the past sixty years or so, ever since the Taylor copper mine had shut down in the fifties. As she drove along the edge of the Mississquoi River, small houses began to pop up on either side of the road, scattered at first, then closer together as she drew nearer the main intersection. It was still early Sunday morning and the snow-covered main drag was utterly deserted. The sun hadn't yet crested the hills in the east, and the town still sat low among the shadows. Growing up in the Pass, Deirdre had always found a kind of comfort in the first snow of the year, the way it softened every edge and muted every sound. But now the Pass seemed to her more like a ghost town buried in ash, somehow sinister. And while part of her couldn't shake the idea that someone in town might have borne Dancause enough ill will to want to kill him, she realized with some surprise that she mostly didn't care all that much. Earlier in her career when she had had her eyes set on lieutenant's stripes, she might have spent sleepless nights digging through archives searching for leads. But since her father's death and her divorce a few years later, she had grown tired of mysteries. Some questions, she had decided, were just dead-ends, and there was no point losing sleep over them. Let people kill who they wanted. She was tired of looking for someone to blame.

She crept past the town hall and the post office, then the old Anglican Church with its peeling white clapboard, and the small cemetery where her father had been buried seven years earlier. The coroner had said his death was the result of a sudden cardiac arrest, almost impossible to predict. But something told Deirdre that her father had known that morning before he set out onto the lake that he wouldn't be coming back. And she wondered now despite herself if perhaps Dancause had *wanted* to disappear, had chosen of his own lucid free will to wander off into the wilderness and wade slowly out, step by step, into the frigid water. There was something

in a man's nature, she thought, which refused to go easy, which insisted on making an exit on its own stubborn terms. She could picture Dancause standing in the lake, submerged up to his waist, arms outstretched, face turned up to the moonlight, his bathrobe floating out around him like a giant white water lily. The image surprised her in its clarity. She wasn't given to flights of imagination, and she found it a bit unsettling that pure speculation could evoke such vivid detail in her mind. And as she drove slowly through her darkened childhood town, the image transformed. Dancause's face blurred and was replaced by that of her father. He had been sixty-eight when he died, but in the image he was older, as old as he would have been now, almost Dancause's age. She had barely thought of her father in recent years, and even then had never drawn a clear image of him in her mind. But now here he was, out of the ether, uninvited.

A lone deer stepped out onto the road ahead of Deirdre's cruiser, and she slammed on the brakes. The car skidded on the wet pavement before coming to a halt a short distance from the animal. It was a young male, with three points on each of its antlers. It stood there, frozen in place, and for an instant Deirdre and the buck locked eyes. It didn't seem afraid, she thought. Only skeptical, like it was daring her to come closer and collide with it. Then it turned, leapt over the ditch, and bounded across the snow-covered cemetery. Deirdre watched it disappear, and for a long time kept her eyes on the dark patch of woods where she had last seen the pale flicker of its white tail. Then she released the brake and drove away, leaving the Pass behind her.

* * *

"Your father was never much of a talker. I mean, you remember how he was. I suppose that's what I liked about him at first. Strong silent type. Christ, it's ridiculous, isn't it? Such a long time ago. I was so young. Then four months later I was pregnant, and we got married. Shotgun wedding if ever I saw one."

Sitting at her desk, Deirdre held the phone to her ear with one hand, while with the other she poured cream and sugar into her coffee. She dipped a spoon into her mug and stirred absent-mindedly. She had heard her mother tell this story so many times before that by now it was a sort of ritual.

“But then of course you live with someone, don’t you? I mean really *live* with them. All the little things you didn’t notice at first. And it gets so you can barely stand it. You think, *Who is this person?* Like living with a stranger. But of course I never said anything. I suppose back then I couldn’t even imagine any other way. And anyway, I had a daughter to worry about. I was stuck. Not like with you and Peter. You were the breadwinner. I hate to bring it up, but all I’m saying is you can’t know what it was like. God, I’m sorry. I must sound horrible. You must be thinking, *What’s the crazy old bitch going on about now?*”

“Your words, not mine,” Deirdre muttered. She was neither hurt nor surprised by what her mother was saying. It was true, she would never know what it was like to be stuck in an unhappy marriage. Difficult as it had been, her divorce from Peter was a mutual decision, more preemptive than reactive, and they were still on relatively good terms, all things considered. They shared custody of the boys, and sometimes even went out for dinner together. Her parents’ marriage, on the other hand, had been something of a domestic cold war, drawn out over a lifetime, with Deirdre often acting as sole mediator.

“I miss him,” her mother said now. “Of course I do. But I’m beginning to feel like I never really knew him. You know? After all those years together, I don’t think I ever really did. I only knew his outside. His body, his voice. I knew the way he moved, his patterns. But there has to be more to a person than that.”

Deirdre saw again the image of her father in the water. She tried to concentrate on his face, but the image remained vague. In life, she had never questioned the nature of his physical presence, so permanent and immovable had he seemed to her then. But now she struggled to draw any trace of him back into her memory, and the old nameless feeling came back again, as it had that morning out on the lake. The feeling that somehow the passing of time made even the most familiar things hollow, the real unreal. And her mind drifted to the deer on the road, frozen in place, taunting her with its deep black eyes. She wondered if she had imagined the whole thing.

“I mean I don’t think I ever really knew what was in his *mind*,” she heard her mother’s voice say. “And isn’t that what really makes us who we are? I never knew what his *motives* were, his real *reasons* for doing what he did. I’d see he was thinking of something, the gears were turning. But he wouldn’t tell me anything, and I didn’t ask. And it weighed on me. The not knowing. Never knowing.”

* * *

The divers found Dancause the next day, on the lake floor not far from the nursing home. Deirdre watched from the prow as Officer Ouimet pulled the body into the boat, hooking his elbows under Dancause’s armpits, and dragging him dripping wet over the gunwale while the divers did their best to push from below. The body looked unbelievably frail, like it might shatter at any moment. But it never did, despite landing on the deck with a heavy thud. Ouimet pulled Dancause to the stern, and gently laid him flat before collapsing out of breath in the opposite corner. The kid – Bradley – lit a cigarette. He had watched everything in stunned silence, frozen to his seat. Deirdre walked to the stern and crouched by Dancause’s body. He was dressed in dark green silk pyjamas and the same white bathrobe he had been wearing in her daydream the

day before. Only now the skin of his hands and face was blueish grey, and his thin white hair lay flat across the front of his skull. His eyes were half-closed and milky, and Deirdre thought she saw the hint of a smile on his thin purple-blue lips.

“Satisfied?” she asked the corpse.

Dancause gave no answer. Suddenly, Deirdre felt herself brim with an incomprehensible anger. She found she hated the dead man lying before her. She would be the one to have to tell his family that his body had been found, to have to deal with their grief and rage and confusion, while he just lay there, insensate to the world around him. The dead should be answerable for all the trouble they cause. For the pain they inflict, for the weight of their bodies in the arms of strangers. What gave this man the right to shirk his responsibilities and just lay there? Deirdre stood looming over the body in the boat, and found it disgusted her – not its cold flesh but its inertness, its ultimate stony silence.

Back on shore, while the EMTs loaded Dancause’s body into an ambulance, Deirdre saw Henry Sutton come out of the marina building and cross the parking lot toward her, frowning.

“Damn tragedy,” he said.

Deirdre nodded.

“Any idea what happened?” Sutton asked.

Deirdre thought it over. It might have been an accident. Or suicide. Or revenge. For all she knew Sutton himself had killed the old man. In any case, for Dancause the result was the same. Sometimes the worst was exactly what happened.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she said finally, and walked back to her cruiser.

* * *

When Deirdre came home late that night, the boys were already in bed, and her mother was asleep in the armchair by the fireplace in the den with a book in her lap and a half-empty glass of red wine on the table beside her. Deirdre quietly added a few logs to the fire, and padded down the hall to the boys' room. She cracked the door open, snuck in and sat on the edge of the bottom bunk where Shepard, her youngest, slept. The boys were eight and eleven, far too old to be sharing a room, but Deirdre still hadn't gotten around to making other arrangements. After the divorce it was like time had sped up, and she couldn't keep pace.

"You guys sleeping?"

"No," Devlin's voice said from above her.

"Sorry I'm late," Deirdre said. "Big day."

"It's okay," Shepard said.

Deirdre drew a deep breath, and listened to the melting snow as it dripped from the eaves outside.

"Did you find a dead body today?" Devlin asked.

Deirdre hesitated. She hadn't been expecting that.

"Yes," she said.

"Was it scary?" Shepard asked.

"No," she said.

"What was it like?" Devlin asked.

Deirdre thought it over.

"Sad," she said, finally.

The boys were silent. Then Deirdre spoke again.

“I was thinking maybe we could go fishing this weekend,” she said. “Just the three of us. Before the lake freezes over. What do you think?”

“Okay,” Devlin said.

“Yeah, okay,” Shepard echoed. “Cool.”

Then silence again, and for a long time Deirdre sat in the shadows with her two sons, none of them speaking.