

MONGREL

Marko Sijan

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ABSTRACT

Mongrel

Marko Sijan

Set in Windsor, Ontario, *Mongrel* contains five chapters, each of which is narrated by a different adolescent character. Mixing tragedy, black comedy and pathos, their five interwoven stories span twelve manic hours on June tenth, 1999, when the United States ended its seventy-eight day bombing of Serbia. The bombing of a small, weak nation by the world's uncontested superpower mirrors the mutually exploitive relationships that develop among the characters and contextualizes a central thematic concern of the novel: that exploitation is one of the most basic features of human intercourse. The five narratives are inextricably linked, in that each one overlaps and influences the outcome of the other, and they all draw together to one end.

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From a United Nations Security Council Press Release, 10 June 1999:

The Security Council today, welcoming the acceptance by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia of the principles on a political solution to the Kosovo crisis, including an immediate end to violence and a rapid withdrawal of its military, police and paramilitary forces, decided to deploy international civil and security presences in Kosovo, under United Nations auspices.

Statements

DIETER KASTRUP (Germany) spoke on behalf of the European Union. He said that 1.5 million people had been forced to leave their homes as a result of ethnic cleansing and massed forced expulsions. Too many men, women and children had been killed and forced to flee the country as a result of the criminal and barbaric acts perpetrated by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia.

PETER BURLEIGH (United States) said that months of death, destruction and forced displacement could have been avoided if Belgrade had joined the Kosovar Albanians last March in saying yes to peace and no to war. For the people of Serbia, he continued, it was now time to look to the future and to abandon violence, repression and ethnic hatred.

Sir JEREMY GREENSTOCK (United Kingdom) said that Mr. Milosevic's ethnic cleansing machine had been stopped in its tracks. Today, the first step towards lasting peace in Kosovo was taken. The resolution brought the United Nations and the Secretary-General to the forefront of international action to give the Balkans a future in modern Europe. It had his country's unqualified support.

ROBERT FOWLER (Canada) said that Canada was committed to the effort, and would contribute actively. It was currently deploying a substantial number of Canadian Forces personnel to participate in the international security force for Kosovo. Its humanitarian and economic assistance to the region totalled \$45 million in Canadian funds since March 1999.

VLADISLAV JOVANOVIĆ (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) said the unauthorized action of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had lasted two months. During that time, aggression had been directed not just against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but against all mankind, and it had been based on global hegemony and domination. The record of 78 days of aggression against a peace-loving nation was a disgrace. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had not attacked any of its neighbours.

June Tenth, 1999.

Chapter 1 Gus Gets Laid

Fourteen and still a virgin. But not for long cuz I hooked up with this hot black chick Sera Lewis, who I'm meeting in Dieppe Park where Ouellette hits the river at nine tonight. She said it'd be nice if we went for a walk and got to know each other, our true inner souls, she says. Her eyes speak more than her mouth does, all sharp and green so when she says something she fully gets your attention. Her dreads are wicked which she puts in a pony-tail which is sexy, mon. Her neck's long and smooth and thin and sweet like a chocolate bar. If I give her a hickey tonight, you'll never see it.

I like her brain, too. She says real interesting stuff sometimes, stuff about herbal medicine and natural vitamins and cooking with weed. She makes muffins and cookies and bread and brings 'em to school and feeds all her friends. The other day she gave me a basket of cookies which is wicked cuz they not only taste good, they're healthy cuz they're made with whole wheat, but also cuz they make studying so much easier and funner. Although it takes me twice as long to do my homework these days. My grades are still top notch and my teachers think I've got real potential, don't get me wrong cuz I'm fully in control of the whole drug thing. It's important to try everything once and whatever you can keep yourself under control with, you do it once in a while. That's what my poser slut-bag eighteen-year-old sister Sophie says. She says it helps her with PMS and her ugly bastard boyfriend Brick, who's been the high school hero since he threw the game-winning pass in the last couple seconds of overtime in the WSSA finals last year.

The next day his ego blew a hole through the roof of the school. I swear, his head is so swollen these days it sways side to side as he struts through the halls. He hates me, too. Like a couple seconds ago him and his jock posse cornered me and Milan at lunchtime so there's a huge crowd around us and no teachers trying to stop it. Teachers don't give a fuck.

"Hey look, it's Pus and Retard. Come here, little faggots," he said as we left the cafeteria and turned the corner and went down the hall towards the exit to the park.

They were hanging out behind the big wooden door in the front hallway, ribbing anyone in grade nine as they walked by, but me and Milan are their special targets and they knew we were coming and wanted to give us the beats again. We were supposed to meet Byung and Nicole to burn one by the water fountain in the park before geography but there's no way that's happening now.

"Chew my dick, pizza face!" I say.

"What did you say?"

Brick lurches forward with his dog-death look and grips my shirt with his iron-calloused hands and starts dumping his toxic verbal spillage on me. Like he can't do it at my house – No! – he has to beat me in front of the whole school for his bravado persona satisfaction.

He wrinkles his forehead pushing back his cherry-blond crew cut scalp and pulls his eyebrows in like bat's wings and says, "Don't ever talk back to me, Pus. You think you're hard with your faggot clothes and makeup?"

"I'm sorry."

"Did you hear that, boys? Pus is sorry."

The jock posse chuckles and nods and starts tossing Milan around between 'em. I can already see Milan's face clenching up and I know he won't last long before busting out into his bizarre bleats. Everyone at school thinks he's kinda retarded but they're so full of shit. I dig him. He's a badass cuz he sucks it up and takes his beats. I've never seen him cry once, which is cracked cuz he looks kinda depressed all the time. He's real quiet, too. Sometimes when we hang out he doesn't say anything for hours, but I don't care. I like hanging out with him cuz I know he's for real, not like these cheap posers I gotta go to school with every day. They can eat the nuts outta my shit for all I care.

As for the jock posse, there's Bruno the wop who's shorter than me but two hundred pounds heavier with a baby face and a pretty smile and coiffed-up oil-black hair, who barely ever says anything but when he does it's cracked cuz his voice is so deep. Rich is tall and stacked and always bounces around on the balls of his feet cuz he's a track star so I guess he likes to keep his calves in shape. His ruddy skin and short red messy hair is always the first thing I see when they're coming. Jack who's Brick's best friend's fucked about every chick in school at one time or another and they keep coming back for more, which I don't get cuz even though he's rich and his wardrobe and the stuff he puts in his hair to give it that glossed natural sheen are state of the art, he's got the biggest nostrils I've ever seen on a guy. His nose is sloped normal thin but his nostrils take up half his face. I guess his straight shiny white teeth get 'em every time, plus he's real brainy. Brick for sure's the ugliest and scariest guy I know cuz he's got patches of blonde pubes poking from the boils slathered across his face, which he picks at all the time and he's tougher than anyone in school and doesn't give a shit about anything so

everyone's always kissing his ass. Him and his posse beat us all the time cuz they think we're fags, which we're not.

“What are you sorry for?”

I just want this to end before Milan starts bleating like a stuck lamb, so the less I say, the better off we'll be in the end. Brick grabs my shirt and yanks me closer, almost lifting my wicked new skull-buckled boots off the ground.

“Answer me, fag.”

“I don't know!”

Brick's eyes light up like firecrackers and he cranks his head to his posse, who's slapping Milan's face and chest and calling him a Serb rapist baby butcher. Every time Milan tries to bury his head in his arms, they slam his head against a locker.

“Did you hear that, boys? Pus lied to me. He's not sorry.”

They chuckle and roar some more as Brick swings me around and slams me into a locker, then he snatches my head and turns me back to face him.

“I'm gonna have to throttle you for lying to me.”

I admit I'm real scared. I'm a blinding shade of white and so is Milan cuz we know we're about to get the beats for the eleventh time this year, even though we wish it wasn't. I'm more used to it than Milan, taking it from Brick at home in front of my sister, which of course she never does anything about cuz she doesn't think of me on an equal level as her cuz I'm younger. Her low self-opinion is cuz she's real skinny but she thinks she's real fat so she pukes all the time and she's got a couple zits and she's always had a wandering eye, so she thinks all fourteen-year-olds are scum. But she's just four years

older than me. She tried to kill herself once, or so she says, with a ton of sleeping pills which didn't work, but come on, as if a ton of sleeping pills wouldn't work. Drama queen. She's a slut-bag, too. The football team had a huge party last weekend and she was there and she met a bunch of 'em in the bedroom and sucked 'em all off, one by one. I hate her. She's so embarrassing, but now at least I've got something juicy in case I ever need to get her in trouble with mum.

Brick pulls my shirt partway up over my head, which pops off a couple buttons which I know I'll get in trouble for from mum who puts tons of effort into choosing my clothes. She says if I'm gonna dress like a freak she's gonna help me look at least a touch normal. If she knew I put on eyeliner and lipstick every morning once I got to school, I'd get a real bad wooden spoon lashing. I can't tell her who Brick is and that he ripped the buttons off my shirt and he gives me the beats all the time cuz she doesn't know he exists and Sophie said she'd slit my throat if I did. I don't know why she's kept him a secret from mum all this time. She even told me I can't bring my friends over when mum's home or she'd slit my throat for that, too. She's such a poser. She cuts me up about my long hair and says it's way outta style. I don't care but mum makes me put it in a ponytail but as soon as I'm outta sight of the kitchen window on my way to the bus stop, I take it out. Except yesterday I got fed up and took the elastic out before I'd turned the corner off Laroche onto Tecumseh and sure enough, she was watching me from the kitchen window, making her delicious dumplings for dinner that night.

When I walked in the house, there was this eerie silence and the swampy thick of her breath in the air, so I knew something was up.

"Gustave! Viens ici tout de suite!" she screamed at me from the kitchen.

Right away I knew she saw me take out my pony-tail and I was gonna get the spoon, so I took a real long time taking off my boots.

“Gustave D’Isney!”

“Coming, mum.”

“En français!”

She gets so pissed off at the dumbest shit.

“J’arrive, une seconde.”

I kinda hate speaking French. It’s so pointless cuz the only time I ever speak it is with mum. We don’t even speak French in French class. We just do dumb grammar lessons. When am I ever gonna need French? Mum says I should speak at least two languages cuz being bilingual helps me see how French and English cultures are similar, which she says is more important than how they’re different, whatever that means. She also says even though I don’t remember it, I was born in Quebec and one day I’ll wanna go there and learn about myself, which I’ll need to speak French for to fully understand. When I was younger she used to call me her little Viking. She was born in Normandy and says our ancestors were Vikings who became French, then conquered England twice. She goes on and on sometimes about the French and English being brothers who’ve fought each other so many times through history and put so many words in each other’s languages. She says the more similar they become, the more they understand each other and that’s real important for the future of Canada as a model of multiculturalism. Whatever.

I scuttled into the kitchen to find mum standing over the countertop, her big tits wrapped in a grey sweatshirt, popping from either side of her apron. She was all violent mashing bread crumbs onto a tray of finished dumplings.

“Je t’ai vu sur la rue ce matin.”

I tried to act innocent.

“Quoi?”

I knew I made a mistake before I even said it, which is one thing I always do and one thing I don’t get about myself. I saw the red anger in her eyeballs, the left one kinda twitching, which only happens when she’s pissed. I heard the nervous rasping of her fingers as she rubbed them together like she always does before I get the spoon.

“Mum, qu’est-ce que j’ai fait?”

“Tu le sais! Ne mens pas!”

I didn’t exactly lie to her. I just did something behind her back which is definitely not the same thing even though she thinks it is, which is wrong, but I’d never tell her that.

“Arrête de mentir, Gustave. Me détestes-tu? Est-ce pour ça que tu me mens toujours?”

“Non, mum –“

“Jusqu’a quel point dois-je être honnête pour que tu cesses de me mentir? Je te dis tout et tu continues à me mentir.”

Sometimes mum tells me too much. She told me all about her cracked childhood and how her dad was kind of a perv and how she married my dad, who was in love with her dad and married her to be close to him. I don’t wanna get into it.

“Tu veux me manquer de respect? Alors je te manquerais de respect. Maintenant je te couperais les cheveux!”

“Quoi!?”

“Complètement! En haut des oreilles!”

“Mum, non!!”

“Veux-tu la cuillère?!”

That was all she had to say. My lips were hermetically-sealed or whatever. While she spent ten minutes searching the house for scissors I followed her around screaming, “Mum, je m’excuse! S’il te plait ne me coupes pas les cheveux! Je te promets de ne plus jamais te mentir!” Luckily I wore her down and she let me keep my hair. I love mum and she means well, it’s just she’s mean sometimes cuz she says I remind her of my dad, who’s still in Montreal. When I was born he told her he liked fucking guys more than chicks. I don’t remember him. He writes me letters all the time but mum doesn’t let me read ’em cuz she says they’ll corrupt me, which is dumb cuz there’s no way I’m a fag even though she’s scared I am and always goes on about how the way I dress is a clear sign. She just reads his letters and throws ’em away, then tells me what he said, but sometimes I get the feeling she doesn’t tell me everything he said. Mum’s got tons of boyfriends but I think they’re just for fucking cuz they only come over at night when I’m sleeping and they’re always gone in the morning before I wake up.

“Let go of me!” I kinda spray in Brick’s face, which isn’t good cuz I get him all over his forehead and some in his eyes, which sets him off and he slams me against a locker and grins at Bruno, who grabs Milan’s hair. Still holding me, Brick lunges across

and punches Milan in the nose which snaps and echoes through the halls. He likes breaking noses. Milan bleats and collapses in a frenzy, which lights a fuse in my brain. I try to clinch Brick in a bear hug but he's too strong and he chuckles for a couple seconds and slams me into another locker and chucks me across the hall into a crowd of salivating student spectators, who throw me back at Brick like we were in some kinda octagon fighting one of those no-holds-barred type things. Brick palms the back of my neck and lowers my head like I'm a chicken and he's about to chop off my head, till I'm face-to-face with Milan bleating in a fetal ball, blood bubbling from his nose, trying to breathe. I can't breathe, either.

“See that, Pus? I told you never to talk back to me. Got it?”

I gag and choke and cough. Brick presses my face against Milan's and I feel his warm blood on my cheek.

“Say, ‘Brick, I got it.’”

My neck starts throbbing under his vise-grip so I'm having a hard time telling him I got it, but I don't wanna get the beats anymore so I muster up a huge breath and all the strength I have left.

“I got it!”

He lets go of me. I sprawl on the ground like road kill, slobber spilling from my mouth and a razor pain in the back of my neck. Of course right away Brick and his posse start spitting on me and Milan like they always do when they conquer us.

Milan's still bleating but he's not crying cuz he's a badass. I wanna get up but I'm scared. I wanna stab Brick with a fork and eat him like a midday snack, which reminds me of mum's dumplings so for a second I'm happy.

Brick stomps his Nike on my neck, pinning my face to the concrete. I grab his ankle and try to yank him off but he's way stronger than me. He bends over and grips my hand and rips it off his leg with zero effort.

"Don't ever touch me, fag."

He takes my pinky in his other hand and snaps it! I hear "Ew!" and "Ow!" as I scream. It's bizarre though cuz it doesn't hurt real bad, it's just the sight and sound of my pinky snapping sending me into this dizzy daydream tailspin. I see myself floating away on a river of purple and blue fingers which tickle me and plug up all my holes. My ears bubble and gums tingle and I can't feel my legs anymore, so I give up. I grip my pinky and lie down and hold back the tears trying to push their way out and wait for more of his dirty gob.

"How does it feel, Pus?"

I look up at Brick. Behind him I see orange lockers and eggshell concrete walls and glassed-in rows of trophies and plaques and photos of champion athletes past and present, and I think, "It feels good, you ugly bastard, and I don't care anymore cuz I'm ready for whatever comes next. Bring it on."

Brick takes a couple steps back and grins at his posse and runs at me but at the last second, turns and kicks Milan in the ribs. The posse starts kicking him, too. Milan tightens his fetus position, bleating. Brick drops beside me and takes my neck and squeezes it in his hands. I gasp for air and blood starts boiling in my brain as Brick's nails dig into my skin. With each word he shakes my neck.

"This'll never end until you stop being a fag."

He lets go and presses his knee on my chest. I pull in a couple short rapid breaths and stare up at Brick and hope again, for once, my refusal to break down'll get me some respect. For a second I hope maybe Brick'll offer his hand to help me up or pinch my cheek like some mafia guy and say, "You're all right, kid." Maybe he'll tell my sister I'm a badass and promise never to gimme the beats again. Instead, he runs his fingers over his crew cut and grins and winks at me.

"So tell us, Pus. Where are you from?"

Fuck. Now he's gonna try and gimme another one of his dumb history lessons. He thinks he's brainy just cuz he knows stuff about history and he used to be on the debating team, but I bet some of what he says is full of shit cuz I learned in history class that history is written by the conquerors and sometimes they lie to make themselves look benevolent or whatever. Plus he always makes up these cracked stories and spreads 'em around school to try and scare people. Like once he said AIDS was invented by fags working for the Israeli government, who unleashed it on the planet to get revenge for the Holocaust.

"I told you already."

He presses his knee down on my chest.

"Say it again."

"Quebec!"

"Quebec!? *We wanna separate, tabarnac! We 'ave de distinct society, calisse! We should send you spineless whiners back to France on a lily pad. Know why you Quebec-quads are so bitter?*"

"I'm not Quebecois!"

He slaps my face.

“Answer the question.”

“I don’t know!”

“You see, 200 years ago the English created Canada by doing two things. First, with European diseases and more than a few tit-for-tat scalplings, they wiped out 80 percent of the prairie niggers and got the rest hooked on glue and gasoline. Second, they conquered your Frog ancestors and made them live under English laws. Think of it as revenge for the Hundred Years’ War. You know that acid feeling in your guts every time you Peppers think about the past? It’s called historical guilt.”

He presses his knee down harder on my chest.

“Say it.”

“Historical guilt! Now leave me alone!”

“Easy, Pus...”

“Get off me!”

He slaps me again, harder. My pinky’s throbbing.

“We’re almost there. Now, what about Retard? Why do you think the Serbs are all rapists?”

“They’re not rapists!”

He slaps me so hard he cranks my head to the side. I’m all dizzy and my cheek’s on fire.

“Why are Serbs rapists, Pus?”

“I don’t know!”

“Of course you don’t. You see, the Serbs were Muslim slaves for 500 years. What’s important to keep in mind is that Muslims hate women and love rape. So after Serb cunts got pumped with 500 years of Allah’s jism, every Serb had that anti-woman rape gene lodged in their DNA. Got it?”

He’s got me fully pinned and I’m all worn out.

“Got it.”

“Don’t feel bad, Pus. We’re all fucked-up. My parents are from Germany. We roasted six million Jews. We feel quite bad about that. Now, you seem to think that you have it all here. You think that English Canada respects you as an equal. But that’s just a lot of fakery. The same goes for all cultures. Know what culture is, Pus?”

“No.”

“A costume that hides the animal inside us. We all pretend to get along because we don’t want to risk progress. But you see, if our economy crashed and whatnot, the whole country’d drown in its own blood. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“No, you don’t. You’re a liar. I’m trying to teach you something and now you’ve hurt my feelings. Maybe you should stop smoking dope and playing video games. Start watching the news and educating yourself. Otherwise, when you grow up you’ll get torn to shreds.”

Brick studies my face a couple seconds, then springs up and points down at me.

“Tell you what, Pus. Tonight I’m gonna rape your sister’s cunt. Then I’m gonna tear her a new asshole. After that I’m gonna come into your room to find out what was on the news. If you can’t tell me, I’ll kill you.”

The posse twists their mangled lips and howls at their supreme commander. Brick horks up one more gob and drops it in my ear. His aim is wicked.

It's kinda bizarre he's coming over tonight. He broke up with Sophie as soon as he found out she sucked off his teammates. I heard he wasn't at the party when it happened but when he found out, he was real hurt and dumped her on the spot. I even heard he almost cried. Maybe he forgave her and they got back together. I don't know. She hasn't been at school all week and I haven't even seen her at home. She's just been in her room all by herself not talking to anyone and crying all the time, but what does she expect after what she did? She's gotta be fully embarrassed and maybe she'll never show her face at school again. I just hope Brick doesn't actually rape her or anything. I hate my sister but I still wouldn't want anything that bad to happen to her. Over at Hank's place I've seen chicks get raped in porn lots of times and they act like they like it, but I think they're just acting.

The posse stomps on my neck and chest and strolls away down the hall. I check out my shirt which has dirty shoe prints all over it but you can't see 'em cuz I'm all in black. Brick isn't pleased so he drops his Nike on my cheek and digs in to separate my upper and lower jaw. I taste dirt and mud and rubber and dog shit and a bit of bubble gum on the edge of my lip.

"It's up to you, Pus."

He grinds his Nike in and struts away.

I'm lying on the concrete, holding my throbbing pinky. Milan's sniffing and bleating beside me and I start thinking about Sera and how happy I am she's not in school cuz I know she spends her lunches in the park, burning joints and eating weed muffins

with her fashion-victim raver friends. I know she knows Brick and his posse terrorize me and Milan all the time but I never want her to see me like this and I hope it doesn't come up tonight.

Her whole inner soul thing kinda creeps me out. She went on once about how there's some soul or life force that's different inside every person. I don't know. I know everyone has two eyes and ears and arms and legs and a mouth and a body and some hair, but I don't know anything deeper. I get my beats at least once a month and everyone hates me cuz I'm different. That's what I know. I could wear more colourful clothes and cut my hair and try to be everyone's friend, but I don't wanna. Mum'd have a heart attack, anyway. She says I'm stubborn and I dress like a bum and why do I wanna look like I'm homeless and I'll probably end up on the street, which is fine cuz I've sat on tons of park benches which were just as comfortable as my own bed, plus tons of people are homeless so I wouldn't get lonely. There's no way I'd run away from home or anything, it's just I know I've got the option. Life with mum is too good cuz she makes the best food ever. Before we came to Windsor, she grew up in Montreal and waitressed in this German restaurant a couple years and learned to make these wicked German dishes, like spatzles and cabbage rolls and wiener schnitzel.

No one's helping me or Milan. Everyone walking by either doesn't care or doesn't have the stomach to look at us and the ones that do either laugh or look real satisfied or whisper, "Glad I'm not you."

For a couple minutes me and Milan just lie there in fetal-like positions, nursing our wounds. My pinky's throbbing even worse swelling with blood and it might explode in my face any second so I just grip it real tight and drop my head back and relax and

think about Sera, who I hope I'll fuck tonight. I hope she's got a wicked pussy. Over at Hank's I've seen lots of black slut-bags in porn like "Massive Dark Jugs #7," but they're different cuz they're fully-developed adults or whatever and they've been fucked so many times, their pussies are loose and soggy and hairy. Hank says the best pussies are tight and young and shaved. I hope Sera's is like that. Milan's cousin Jovan told me once he ate this chick out in a closet for two hours and passed out cuz he was baked off his ass and had lockjaw. When he woke up he still couldn't move his jaw and his face was all crusty so he went to the can and looked in the mirror and saw his face all covered in blood. He puked large. I hope that doesn't happen tonight although I doubt Sera'd let me get near her if she was on the rag. I see her as that kinda chick, real dignified and brainy and classy or whatever, but still hot. She's eighteen, too. She said I can't tell anyone about us meeting tonight, so I only told Milan who only told Byung who only told Nicole, who's real good at keeping secrets so I think I'm safe. Sera said even though we're just friends she doesn't want anyone to know cuz everyone'll call her a faggot-loving cradle robber, which is so full of shit cuz she's just four years older than me but everyone thinks it's a real big difference. Everyone pretty much only mixes with people their own grade. I don't get it, but I know Sera just wants to keep her reputation. Everyone at school's into backstabbing and gossiping and I can't wait to be an adult so I don't have to deal with it anymore. Sera says I'm interesting and clever and she's been watching me from a distance since I started grade nine in September. She saw me the first day and I was wearing this yellow- and white-striped T-shirt and she thought I was just another dork, but a month later she saw me all in black, my hair growing out and a butt in my mouth and she was impressed with how quick I found my style, hanging out with a bizarre but

different crowd. She says people like me and Milan and Byung and Nicole are important cuz we're not scared to be different and flaunt it in a school flooded with jocks and preps and wankers and other types of normal people. For a while I saw her getting baked with her friends every day at lunch in Jackson Park and she just stared at me. Her forehead and eyes and mouth looked sharp and tough but not angry, like a thoughtful scowl. I didn't get her, but she got me hard anyway. I decided she was either awestruck or disgusted by my lipstick and eyeliner and long matted hair and wanted to ask me what planet I was from. I woulda said Uranus if she asked, but she never did.

Friday of last week I took the 11A bus downtown and there she was all alone at the back, her dreads tied up, wearing an orange spandex tank top with a white star between her tits and a fat book in her lap, scowling at it. I still didn't get her but she got me hard again, so I sat in a chair four rows in front of her and shut my eyes and imagined my dick in her mouth and one hand all over her tits and the other inside her pussy. I turned every couple seconds to see if she was still scowling at her book and each time I did she still was, but after a couple times I turned I actually caught the last bit of movement of her head as she dropped it from me to her book! I swung my head around all wide-eyed and smiling.

I thought, "No shit. She's looking at me. I can't believe it. This is so wicked. What should I do? Should I go over and sit next to her? Say, 'Hi'? Does she *like* like me? Is it my face? My style? This is so wicked. I'm super-curious about black chicks. And she's a senior!!!"

Suddenly I heard the annoying ding of the exit chord. I ignored it cuz my dick'd pitched a tent in my pants. My palms went all slimy and hands got all shaky and I felt the

blood rush from my head. I knew I had to go over and say something to her. I had to before it was too late. All I had to do was reach into my pants and wedge my dickhead between my stomach and underwear elastic to keep it secure, then I could go talk to her. When I reached in and grabbed a hold, I felt the bus slowing to a stop and saw a shadow pass over me. Hands in my pants I turned to find Sera walking by with her knapsack on her shoulder, peering at my waist with the corner of her eye. Her mouth drew a sharp scowl as she watched me rip my hands from my pants and glue them to my sides and my face go burning pink. She moved so fast I had a second to say, "Hi."

Too late. She ignored me and cocked her head forward and bolted off the bus. I crunched my brow and all this hot and cold blood in my brain started spinning and buzzing like a blender. My dick went soft and I went dizzy and this purple glaze spread like a virus on my skin. The bus pulled away and I bashed my skull on the headrest behind me and squeezed my limp pathetic dick and closed my eyes and pinched teardrops from either socket and jerked my head forward to wipe 'em away. I stared ahead and cried for a while, wishing the bus'd smash into an oil truck and blow up.

"Gus! Milan!"

Byung and Nicole return from the park to find us on the concrete crusted with blood from Milan's nose. Their glazed and bloodshot eyeballs stagger towards us down the hall. Nicole drops her licorice and covers her mouth as she gets close enough to spot the blood. I wanna get baked. I need a phatty between my lips right now.

"Oh my god!" she gasps as she drops beside us. "Are you guys okay!?"

I look down at my purple throbbing pinky. It's swelled up another centimetre. I can't move it or feel it anymore. I drop my head back and spin around to find Milan lying there oblivious to us all, sniffing and shifting his nose back and forth trying to breathe through it, counting the broken shards to himself.

"I think so. Brick broke Milan's nose and my pinky."

Nicole starts biting her nails, splotching her fingers with black lipstick. She might break down and explode any second and her eyeliner'll smudge like tree branches across her face. She starts scanning the halls and rifling murderous looks at people passing by, screaming, "Fuck off and die!" at them.

Byung hangs his mouth open like he always does when he finds me after I get my beats.

"Dude," he says, deep in thought.

He knows there's nothing we can do. In the ten or so minutes since the posse left us to rot, tons of students walked by without saying a word or lifting a finger to help us. Byung and Nicole are scared and mad and sad but glad to see for the twelfth time this year, we're beaten but still conscious.

"Fuckin' assholes, dude," drawls Byung.

"Just help me and Milan get to the infirmary."

We get the rest of the day off like we always do but not before Nurse Weatherford pukes a couple words on us, the same ones she's puked on us the eleven times we've seen her before.

"You damned troublemakers. You bring this down upon yourselves every time. If you were to just make an effort to be part of your community, if you were to stop

rebellious against it just to shock people, then you wouldn't experience all of this unwanted hostility. And I know what you little drug addicts do in the park. Don't think that I'm unaware. I smell it wafting in here through the window every day at lunch. Now. I have had many chats about the two of you with Mr. Weatherford, and he's almost decided what it is he's going to do. You two are a curse on this institution. So all I'm going to say is be careful. Both of you just watch your step."

Nurse Weatherford is married to Mr. Weatherford the principal. Once, he said me and Milan and Byung and Nicole are "warts on the ass of the student body," which I learned this year in English class is a metaphor. He also said he's sure we worship Satan but he's got no way of proving it, but he's gonna call our parents at some point and ask 'em if they've got any "suspicions about our after-school behaviours and late-night activities." There's no way he believes we ask for it, but Brick and his posse are important cuz the football team'd suck without 'em.

Last year I started having this sappy wet dream about fingering a nurse on a delivery table in a hospital. Her slender legs are spread and bent into stirrups. Her hands grip her thighs and her fingers spread her pussy lips apart. She's got this pink nurse outfit on but the top buttons are undone and her shirt's open with each side held back by her hard pointy nipples. Even though she's on her back, her tits pop out like soccer balls and some of her blonde hair sits on top of 'em. I don't remember her face. I start by sticking a finger in, then two. Soon I get my whole fist in, then my arm. Then the faceless nurse says, "Climb inside."

So I climb in and swim around inside her. There's this hot blood-red glow and her inner ooze is olive oil on my skin. Suddenly this whirlpool suction starts pulling me back

out but I wanna see her beating heart, so I grab hold of an intestine and start yanking myself up. When I find her heart, it's charred black and it isn't beating. Then I wake up coughing and drenched in sweat, cum in my pubic hair, which is also why it's so hard being around Nurse Weatherford wrapped in a pink nurse outfit, black veins around her ankles and her bony fifty-year-old ass and the fat mole on her neck and her black nicotine lips. I never listen to a word she says. I just nod and keep my head down and I told Milan to do the same. If we ever talked back to her or Mr. Weatherford or any teacher in this school we'd get booted out so fast. Not that getting kicked out'd be so bad it's just mum'd kill me and send me to alternative school which'd suck even worse than this hole. They'll never bust us for weed. The park isn't school property and there's tons of other students out there who get baked at lunch every day, even a couple jocks. No, they've got better things to do like polish their newest football trophy.

A couple days later when I got over the hand-on-my-dick thing with Sera, I refused to give up cuz I knew she smiled at me once so I hopped back on the 11A to see if I could find her again and there she was in the same spot at the back, except this time she was scowling out the window with a different book in her lap, a thicker one. I started swaggering down the aisle but I wasn't sure what I was gonna do so my legs started shaking and I couldn't swagger anymore, so I crashed into a seat around the middle and took a couple deep breaths. I started with these panic sweats, like maybe she was smiling just cuz she thinks I'm pathetic so I turned around to see if she was looking at me, which woulda given me a clear sign she was interested, but she was still staring out the window kinda lost in her own world which gave me nothing to work with. She looked hot. She had on this black baseball cap with her dreads poking out the bottom and this wicked one-

piece black stretchy dress and she looked like she was thinking long and deep and hard about something, maybe life and death, or maybe the tool and die shop and drug store and car dealership and funeral home and Tim Horton's passing by. I had no plan to go say something to her so I just gazed for a bit at her chocolaty skin and tiny ears and short wide nose and green eyes and small round forehead. I saw she didn't blink too much but when she did she kept her eyes closed longer than most people, which made me think she was in real deep thought cuz mum does the same thing whenever she's got something in her brain. I got fully fixated and forgot I was staring, when suddenly she turned her head and saw me. Any other time I woulda turned away but I was so fixated I just kept staring. After a couple seconds her scowl disappeared and she smiled and widened her eyes and lifted her finger and wiggled it back and forth to get me to come sit with her. I looked left and right and got up and stumbled over and sat in the chair in front of her. She kept smiling at me in this warm motherly kinda way, which fully threw me off.

"You're Gus."

I nodded blushing and dizzy cuz she looked so hot and I still couldn't believe it was happening. Suddenly she got all serious. I wanted to look away, but I remembered mum said it's important to look a girl in the eye when you talk to her, so I did my best.

"Are you nervous?"

"No."

"Don't be."

"I'm not."

"I don't bite."

"I know."

“Where are you going?”

“Um...downtown.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Hang out.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know, just...I don’t know.”

“Why are you nervous?”

“I’m not.”

“Are you meeting somebody?”

I shook my head.

“So you’re going to spend some time by yourself?”

I nodded.

“And do what?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying to me.”

“No I’m not.”

“Then why are you going downtown?”

“I don’t know, I just...like going downtown.”

“Do you like it more than school?”

“Fully.”

“Do you know my name?”

“Sera.”

“How did you know?”

“I saw your picture in a yearbook.”

“Where?”

“In the library.”

“You go to the library?”

I nodded. My dick was real hard but my arms were jelly so I couldn't adjust it.

“I've never seen you there. When do you go?”

“Um...in the mornings.”

“I see. What's it like in the mornings?”

“I don't know. Stale.”

“Stale, huh?”

I nodded again. I was stoked. I could feel my virginity slipping away.

“How old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

“Fourteen?”

She lifted her eyebrows in disbelief or whatever, but it looked like an act.

“Oh, my!”

“What?”

“Do you know how old I am?”

“Eighteen?”

“Yes, I'm eighteen. I shouldn't be talking to you.”

“Why not?”

“What do you mean why not? I'm four years older than you.”

“So?”

“So!? You know as well as I do how much trouble I’d get into if anybody found out we were talking.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, you can’t tell anyone we talked.”

“Why not?”

“Tsk. Don’t let me think you’re stupid.”

“I’m not.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. I was so embarrassed I had to stare at my wicked boots for a while.

“I remember you from the first day of school.”

“You do?”

I looked up and she was nodding and smiling out the window.

“You looked very different.”

“Fully.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, I just thought...I wanted...um...I didn’t like my clothes anymore and I wanted to just...I don’t know.”

“Well, I like your new look.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s very creepy.”

“Whatever.”

“I mean it as a compliment.”

“Oh.”

“Where did you get those boots?”

“Savage Leather in Detroit.”

“Detroit? Where’s Savage Leather?”

“On a street full of wicked stores near Greek Town.”

“Do you go there often?”

“Sometimes.”

“I’m going to Ann Arbor on Thursday. I’m very excited. We’re going to a party in an abandoned warehouse. Have you ever been to a party?”

I shook my head.

“Some call it a rave. Detroit and Chicago acid house. Fission and Sonikman are going to be there.”

“Who?”

“They’re only the most amazing DJs in the world. Sonikman’s real name is Chris Martin. He actually grew up in Windsor. I’ve met him. He used to work at Red Moon Video on Delacroix. Now he lives in England. He’s famous and very brilliant.”

“Wicked.”

“I can see you’re interested.”

“I am.”

“No you’re not.”

“Yeah I am.”

She glared at me with squinted eyes.

“You’re very self-conscious, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“You know who you are.”

“What?”

“You’re in touch with your inner self.”

I had no clue what she was saying but she looked hot saying it.

“Um...yeah.”

“Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Fully.”

She giggled like she didn’t believe me.

“Your walk is strange. It’s very straight. You want everybody to see what you’re wearing, don’t you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes you do. You’re such a liar.”

“No I’m not.”

Suddenly she blinked long and deep and looked back out the window.

“I get off at the next stop.”

“Oh.”

She kept her eyes out the window, then closed them, thinking, so I took a quick look at her tits which were kinda pushed up out of her dress and imagined burying my tongue between ’em. As she opened her eyes she turned to me and I shot my look down at my boots.

“What are you doing Thursday night?”

“I don’t know.”

I could feel her scowling at me a couple seconds like I was supposed to say something, but I had no clue what I was supposed to say.

“Well, do you want to do something or not?”

“Yeah.”

“Then meet me down at the river. Meet me at the end of Ouellette at nine. We’ll go for a walk. I want to know who you are.”

“Okay.”

“But don’t tell anybody. Not even your friends. If you do, I’ll deny everything. Then I’ll never talk to you again. Understand?”

“Fully.”

“Good. Where are we meeting?”

“Um...river’s edge at the end of Ouellette.”

“When?”

“Thursday at nine.”

I looked up at her and she scowled at me a couple more seconds, then curled her lips into a closed-mouth smile.

“Bye.”

“Yeah.”

She giggled and got up and strode off without looking back. I followed her hard round ass as it swayed off the bus.

I thought, “I’m not gonna be a virgin much longer! I don’t wanna end up one of those pathetic eighteen-year-old virgins, plus I’ll be one of the only white guys ever to

lose it to a black chick, which is another reason I'll be different than everyone else which is wicked!"

I looked out the window and saw her walking along the sidewalk beside the bus. As it drove off she took one last look at me and smiled again and put her finger up to her lips to remind me to keep my mouth shut. I imagined her finger was my dick and put my fingers against my dick and imagined they were her lips and she was sucking it. The bus sped up and she disappeared, so I dropped my head back and closed my eyes, dreaming about tonight, like I am now.

Nurse Weatherford gives me and Milan ten bucks to take a cab to Met Hospital cuz she has to and tells us to go straight to Emergency to the reception desk, so we cab to the Met. We walk in through these wicked sliding-glass doors and as soon as I walk in, I catch a whiff of this shit-skunk smell inside. The reception area's all painted puke-green and there's tons of fogeys shuffling around in white robes and IVs. The nurse at the front desk looks about forty, with a blonde helmet hairdo and makeup smeared on her face like a pink plastic mask.

"Oh, dear. Been up to a little mischief today, gentlemen?"

"Whatever."

She asks us for our names and birthdays and phone numbers and next of kin and religion and what happened. I have to answer for Milan cuz he's Black Death depressed and hasn't made a sound since he stopped bleating in the hallway. She tells us to sit in the yellow chairs, not the red ones cuz they're for the more urgent patients and says we might wait for up to an hour, but it takes two hours before another nurse calls us in. She's young

and kinda big-boned, with pointy tits poking out of her white outfit and a big red-lipped smile and says “Please” and “Thank you” in all her sentences. She puts me and Milan in different treatment rooms. I hope she’s the one who examines me.

She is. She sits me on an examining table and takes my hand with a smile and asks me what happened while she checks out my finger, but I keep stumbling on my sentences cuz she’s bent over and I can see she’s wearing a black lace bra and she’s got freckles on her chest between her tits. I get a hard-on again. She says my pinky’s broken in two places and I’ll need a splint and she’s gotta x-ray it. She also says I should press charges against whoever gave me the beats, which’ll never happen cuz Brick’d kill me twice if I did. We head into the x-ray room a couple doors down, which is old futuristic white. She tells me to lie down on the bed in the corner with this huge x-ray octopus machine above it and she sticks my finger on this metal plate and lowers the octopus onto it and rounds a corner into the radiation booth and presses a button and the octopus makes this grating electric snapping sound and a flash of white buries my finger and blinds me a second. She sends me back to the treatment room and a couple minutes later this hairy fifty-year-old Paki doctor flies in and slaps a metal splint on my finger and wraps it in white tape and runs out in a couple seconds without saying a word to me. The hot nurse comes back and says I’m done and I’ll have to wear the splint for six weeks and I should come back in a week to re-dress it. She gives me some Tylenol 3s and says I should take one every four hours to numb the pain. She also says Milan’s nose is broken real bad and his breathing’s “compromised” and he’ll be a couple minutes more than me, so I can wait for him in the waiting room if I wanna. She leads me back out and I grab some water from this fountain in the corner and pop two Tylenols right off and grab a seat.

A couple minutes later I'm sinking into my chair when Milan walks out with this huge nose cast, which kinda looks like a butterfly, purple and black seeping out onto his cheeks underneath. His eyes are swollen red and he ignores me as he walks out so I jump up and almost fall over from dizziness. I catch up with him in the parking lot.

"Mil, wait up!"

Milan stops but drops his head and doesn't turn.

"What's up?" I ask.

"Can we get stoned?"

I know Milan's brain is spazzing cuz he's gotta deal with his cracked dad tonight so I let him hang with his thoughts as we walk to Nicole and Hank's tiny three-room house past Pillette on Tecumseh beside this strip joint. We walk into their dusty resin-stained living room with two brown couches and chairs and a tv and a vcr and a Sony Playstation and a stereo and stacks of beer cases and a "Steal Your Face" poster beside the door. Nicole and Byung and Hank are waiting for us with a big bag of weed, playing the Playstation Nicole got on her fifteenth birthday last month, which is dumb cuz she hates video games which makes it obvious Hank just got it so he can play Bushido Blade with us whenever we come over, which is always a couple times a week. Hank is this wonky forty-year-old with long ratty brown hair stretching halfway down his back and a fuzzy brown beard with balls of lint buried in it stretching about the same length down to his breastbone. Every time I see him he's in the same position buried in the left corner of his couch, one foot on top of the other and both his big toes poking out his black socks and his postal uniform wide open showing his coffee and piss-stained undershirt, his head tilted back on his oily pillow and his mouth slightly open showing two silver teeth and

charred half-open eye-slits. Cool blue eyes, no pupils. Once, I watched him for an hour and he never blinked, although he's not much of a thinker. He used to be a carpenter till he threw out his back, so now he works part-time for the post office and gets the kindest BC red hair sent to him by his ex-deadhead brother who lives in a cabin on some deserted beach. I heard about it from Nicole who goes there with Hank once a year for a week-long smoke fest. Every month by express courier, he gets a full Z inside a can of coffee grounds. Covert ops.

Hank takes a good look at our injuries and rolls up a three-paper phatty and we burn it while playing a round robin of Bushido Blade. I recommend this game to everyone cuz the carnage is wicked. I win the first three rounds so I'm on a tear. The phatty helps cuz it takes the edge off and helps me focus on the slicing and dicing I need to do to win. Each round I imagine I'm fighting Brick dressed in Samurai gear. I get all riled up shedding Brick's blood and slicing him to pieces. The more baked I get, the more everyone else in the room fades away and it's just me and Brick. The best victory happens after my fifth-straight. Brick steps in for an overhead chop, the long sword his weapon of choice and I telegraph his maneuver and step to the side and gut him with my rapier, spraying chunks of blood from his stomach. But I'm not finished. As he falls to his knees I lunge forward with a double slice-attack to his neck and back spilling more of his bastard blood, making him groan and wail with the pain of death and defeat, but I'm still not finished! As he keels over lifeless to the ground, I give him one last Samurai chop to his neck and my rapier cuts right through him into the ground which cracks open and his head rolls straight down to Hell!!

“Eh man, you're uh...you're wreckin' the joystick.”

Hank yanks me out of my fever dream with his crackly whiny voice.

“You’re uh...pressin’ the buttons too hard, man.”

The graphics are so wicked it’s easy to forget, plus any chance to imagine Brick getting his beats drowns me in huge wads of joy.

“Sorry.”

“Why don’t you give up the joystick for a round, man. Take a little reality check.”

I look over at Milan who’s puffing on the phatty all glassy-eyed and smirking at me cuz he knows where I was. Milan always knows what I’m thinking. There he is beside me on the couch, my best friend in the world, staring at me with his purple-black mangled nose, wishing he was dead. I wish I could do something cuz he’s the most wicked friend I’ve ever had and it sucks to see him so fucked-up. My pinky starts throbbing again so I pop two more Tylenols as Milan passes me the phatty. I inhale a mother haul and hold it in my lungs and throat as long as I can to smoke out all the angry sad thoughts swelling in my brain.

“So Gus, uh...you thought about, you know, bringin’ a weapon to school?” Hank asks.

“What kinda weapon?”

“Uh...stick or knife?”

“No.”

What a dumb-ass.

“Well you should. You know, next time those punks try to fuck you up, man, just uh...pull out a knife and watch ’em run for their lives.”

“Dad!”

It always takes Hank a couple seconds to react to anything, so after a couple he turns to Nicole who's straight up in her chair, rubbing her thumbs together with this look of rancid venom like he's the worst advice-giver on the planet. Hank cocks his left eyebrow and lifts his right one and smiles like he knows her next line off by heart.

“What, baby?”

“Dad, you can't, like...you can't tell Gus to bring a knife to school!”

“Why not?”

She gasps and tilts her head to the left and stares at the swollen ashtray on the coffee table. She hates this game. She hates Hank never confessing to giving bad advice whenever we come by. He knows how much it pisses her off how much he embarrasses her sometimes. I can't imagine having Hank as a dad, but they get along well enough. He cooks her food and gives her money and doesn't molest her or whatever, but I wonder what'll happen to her if she lives with him much longer. I can just see her brain melting a bit every time she has to lace him for his deliberate dumb-ass advice.

“Because! He'll get kicked out of school! He doesn't wanna carry a knife, okay? He's not like that, okay?”

Hank drops the left side of his mouth and snatches her ankle and shakes it and winks at her.

“Okay, baby.”

Nicole glances at Byung, who gives her this indifferent look. He always gets along with Hank and doesn't think much about the dumb-ass words he pukes on us when we're around. He thinks Hank's righteous and cool for living life the way he wants, all lazy but still owning a house and having a couple bucks to throw around, especially since Byung

never gets a penny from his parents but they still make him work at their convenience stores on the weekends and do the dishes and vacuum the house during the week. Nicole ends up paying for everything whenever they do something together, which is always. They didn't tell us yet but they mighta hooked up. If it's true it'll come out eventually so there's no point buggin' 'em about it, especially in front of Hank who I think'd bust a nut if he found out Nicole wasn't a virgin. Me and Milan are the only virgins left. Milan doesn't like chicks at all. He says they're "really weird." I try to talk to him about 'em but he gets all cringed up and says he just doesn't like anyone touching him except his parents. And he usually closes his eyes when Hank puts on porn. I asked him why porn freaks him out so much and he said he can't explain it. Maybe it's cuz his parents are super-strict and kinda treat him like a baby sometimes. I don't know. Plus a couple months ago when America started bombing Serbia, his dad told him he couldn't date a chick unless she's Serbian so Milan'll be a virgin a long time cuz all the Serbian chicks at our school are butt-ugly, except Basha, but she's his sister.

"Nah, man, we're uh...gonna have to do somethin' 'bout these football guys beatin' you up all the time. It ain't right, you know? I never let anyone beat me up when I was your age. I just ran for my damn life! I wanted to stay good lookin' for the ladies. Oh yeah, so Gus, you uh...plug any beaver yet or what?"

I glance at Nicole and see her wince and shake her head a couple times. Hank never stops yapping when we're around. I think it annoys everyone but Byung. I don't care, I just feel kinda bad for Nicole all crushed into her chair like a snotty Kleenex, wishing her dad'd shut the fuck up.

"I'm gonna get laid tonight," I say as I sit up and feel a woozy tornado head rush.

“Yeah? Fuckin’ eh.”

I see red and yellow and blue spots between me and Hank as I nod and smile,
drool webbing the corners of my mouth.

“What’s her name?”

“Sera. She’s eighteen and she’s black.”

“Eighteen and black? Lucky you. Know what they say ’bout the dark meat, eh?”

“What?”

“The darker the meat, the sweeter the juice, man!”

Nicole heaves a sigh and bolts in.

“You’re not gonna have sex tonight. You know that, right?”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not. She’s just playing with you.”

“How would you know?”

“Because she’s eighteen, okay? She’s a senior. It’s just some joke she’s playing
with her friends.”

“Yeah, you don’t know anything so shut up.”

“Tomorrow I’ll be saying I told you so.”

“Whatever.”

“Just listen, okay? What makes you think she’s gonna have sex with you? Because
you talked to her for five minutes on the bus? That doesn’t mean anything. Don’t be an
idiot.”

“Fuck you! I’m getting laid and tomorrow I’m gonna make you smell my finger!”

“What’s that gonna prove? You could just stick it in your butt and tell me it’s her!”

“Whatever. Just shut up. I don’t care what you think.”

I wonder sometimes why I’m friends with her. She’s a dumb bitch. Byung’s the one that was friends with her first. Before, it was me and Milan and Byung, three guys, the way it should be. Now it’s three guys and a half-guy, which is what I think of her. She fully acts like one always trying to muscle her way into everything and always thinking her opinion means something, like she’s a voice of reason or whatever, which she’s not.

The phatty’s coming my way again and I can’t wait. It’s like all the blood’s running from my head to my thumb and my skull’s all soft and the spots aren’t going away, so I know Hank’s brain-tunnel weed’s the medicine I need.

I have no idea what I’m gonna tell mum. I can always tell her I got in a fight, which is what I always say anyway, but this time she’ll fully gimme shit cuz my pinky’s broken. She’ll gimme the same speech as Nurse Weatherford but different cuz I always tell her I started the fights, which makes it easier cuz she says I’m just being a kid cuz to her fighting’s all right if you’re a kid. To her it’s a normal part of growing up. She says if I’m twenty and I’m still fighting all the time, then I’ll have a problem, which means I’ve got six more years to get rid of Brick.

Byung hands off the joystick to Milan who’s still fiddling with his cast, kinda crossing his eyes trying to get a closer look at the purple-black across his face. He takes the joystick and squares off with Byung, although I think Hank’s the only guy he can beat cuz Hank’s so dumb he can’t even play video games, but he was a good carpenter cuz he had his own business for ten years and him and Nicole used to live in a way bigger house

near Hebrew Heights by the 401, with red bricks and a front lawn and a backyard, plus other stuff.

I don't know what I like about Byung, except he's Korean and he's the only Korean I've ever met, but he was born here so just his skin and eyes are Korean. He's dead-lazy most of the time, seriously he's the laziest guy ever. Sometimes you need a crane to get him off the couch and he's slow like a snail about everything. Even though the four of us are friends it's a division between me and Milan on one side and Byung and Nicole on the other, who really likes to be around him cuz he's so laid back and always does whatever she wants no matter how boring it is, like going to the mall. Byung just wants other people to do his thinking for him. Sometimes I can't hear what he's saying cuz he barely mumbles when he talks. His long greasy black hair covers most of his face and his little round glasses, which make him look kinda brainy when you can see 'em. I don't remember the last time I saw his eyes and I have no clue what colour they are. Maybe brown.

"Byung."

"What?"

"Peel back your hair."

"Why?"

"I wanna see your eye colour."

"Brown."

"Yeah, but lemme see."

"Dude, I'm too blitzed."

Nicole reaches across the couch and lifts his hair. He squints from the daylight so I can't get a good look, but a couple seconds later he opens an eye and it's brown.

"They're brown, Gus," she says like she's annoyed I don't know.

"How was I supposed to know?"

"You've seen his eyes before, okay?"

"Yeah, but I don't look at him like you do."

I shouldn'ta said that cuz Hank pops up and glares at me. Actually he shifted his ass maybe half a centimeter and wedged his eye into the corner of its socket, just enough to get a peripheral or whatever type look at me. Nicole blushes and drops her jaw and throws a quick glance at her dad and rifles her eyes back at me.

"What is that supposed to mean!?"

"We know you're suckin' his chopstick. Don't deny it," I kinda slur from the left side of my mouth cuz I can't move the right one anymore, before realizing Hank's changing colour beside me.

Nicole leaps out of her seat and starts smacking the sides of my head with her open palms, screaming, "Take it back!" again and again till I stumble off the couch but she keeps coming at me till Hank reaches his hand out to her and says, "Uh...calm down, baby."

Byung and Milan are deep in combat and fully oblivious. Hank puts his arms around her waist to protect me from her vicious wrath. I can barely stand, I'm so dizzy and weak and I can barely see through the spots.

"You're an idiot! That's a lie and you know it so take it back!"

"I was just joking! Relax!" I say with my arms up in surrender.

“You’re uh...just teasin’ her, eh Gus? My little baby’s still a cherry, ain’t she?”

Hank mumbles with the closest thing to genuine concern I’ve ever heard from him.

“Let go of me!” she squeals as she yanks her hips from his pathetic grip. “Yes, I’m still a virgin, okay!? Why did you ask him? Why didn’t you ask me?”

“Okay, baby. Why don’t you sit down, eh?”

Hank pulls the phatty outta Byung’s mouth and gives it to Nicole, who sits back in her chair and crosses her legs tight. She pastes her eyes to the tv and inhales a couple deep long hauls. I drop back down beside Hank leans into my ear and whispers, “My Nicki’s still a cherry, ain’t she?”

I nod.

About a month ago me and Nicole were hanging out at my place when mum was out working, talking about getting laid and giving head and stuff. She said she lost her virginity in grade eight and she’s fucked a couple more times, but she said she likes giving head better than fucking. She likes seeing how far she can put it down her throat without gagging. I asked her to do it to me but she said, “No way!” She said I’m a bit of a scumbag and she’s worried I’ll tell everyone, even Hank. She’s right and I wouldn’t tell Hank unless he asked, but I didn’t this time cuz I didn’t want her to attack me again. It’s important to be honest as much as you can. Mum says you can make every mistake in life once, but you should never lie and never have anything to hide from anyone, no matter how ugly it is, although she said that when she was grilling me about being a fag and how if I was, I should just tell her so we could do something about it right away before it’s too late.

My eyes and head are getting real heavy. A thick dark quiet takes over the room like mud all over my face and in my ears. I can't feel my throbbing pinky anymore. The couch is twisting and churning. Hank's fidgeting and scratching beside me. He gets up and stumbles and shuts the game off.

"Dude..."

"I have somethin', uh... 'Come All Over Me 12.' A buddy from work had it in his private collection."

#11 was real good. We watched it last week. Hank puts the tape in and presses play.

"Oh my god, that is so gross, okay? I don't need to see what she looks like on the inside!"

I wake up to smooth, violent buzzing. I barely pry my eyes open. All I can see is white and a black square outline, like I'm underwater. I'm sprawled out on my back. My right shoulder-blade's digging into something cold and hard. I kinda hear muffled talking and traffic behind walls. My knees are lodged between my chest and something cold and hard.

Tylenol and weed's a bad combination. My brain's all soft like oatmeal sloshing against the walls of my skull. I sit up real slow and pull myself forward. I'm on a bus. How'd I end up on a bus? My vision's still blurred, but now like a rainstorm at night. I can make out the shape of this chick breast-feeding her baby in the seat in front of me and a couple people up ahead. Her shape looks young and thin but I can't tell if she's hot.

“Where are we?”

“Dougall and Tecumseh,” she says all sick and raspy.

I’m nowhere near my house.

“What time is it?”

“Eight-thirty.”

I missed dinner! Mum’s freaked out for sure and she’s already working. I gotta go see her. I can see the inside of the bus now but a blunt headache’s kicking in like a mallet against my brain. I’m never doing Tylenol again.

Wait, I’m meeting Sera in a half-hour! I must look like matted shit. I’m sure if I opened my mouth right now I’d fully embarrass myself. Can I speak? Oh yeah, I just asked that chick some questions, I’m all right. I just need to splash some water on my face.

I get off the bus in front of the casino. My palms are all sweaty cuz I know mum’s gonna gimme that sinister stare of hers right after she heaves a sigh of relief. She’ll shrug her shoulders a couple times and breathe heavy and try to punish me with, “Gustave D’Isney! Pas de quenelles pour toi! Plus jamais!”

The front oval driveway’s packed with limos and mercs and beamers all with Michigan plates and fogeys in suits, smoking cigars and fixing their lapels. This one fogey with a sequined gown and matching purse and blonde hairpiece and seventy-year-old wrinkles splitting her face is laughing at something a white-haired guy in a white tux beside her is saying. I doubt it’s funny. I stagger past ’em dragging my boots under multi-coloured rainbow lights flashing back and forth above. I get slimy looks and a couple

laughs from this crowd of fogeys jamming the entrance as I walk in. The doormen recognize me and as they let me through they laugh at me, too. What the fuck are they laughing at?

I still feel a woozy dizzy fog in my brain and every time I'm here (about twice a week) my skin tightens up like leather when I see the front atrium with the waterfall and huge painted blue sky and a couple clouds scattered on the ceiling and a brown rock water fountain in the center with fake trees wrapped in white Christmas lights. The carpet's all roses and the walls are stained glass windows and sequined mirrors. I stumble to the right into the slots room, a sea of slot machines in rows that go on forever making the most brutal clanging noise, which is where mum works. It also smells a bit like piss and shit cuz mum told me the real gambling addicts wear adult diapers and piss and shit in 'em all night so they don't lose their lucky slot, even though they never win. Mum just walks up and down the rows and serves drinks, which sucks cuz it always takes me forever to find her. The whole casino thing or whatever's kinda lame but mum makes tons of cash, which isn't so bad cuz I get a bit of it. She gives me twenty bucks a week which is always enough for weed, so for a couple minutes I just wander up and down the aisles like a zombie, passing rows of fat middle-aged American white-trash types in red and white and blue shirts and Red Wing caps, jerking off the slots, till I spot mum serving five drunks with her tray of drinks and her white buttoned-down and black bowtie and skirt and money pouch and nylons and high heels and her fake smile, wrinkling her eyes soggy with worry. She's gonna kill me.

She leaves the drunks. I come up beside her.

"Mum?"

She turns to me and her soggy eyes bulge out. Her mouth rips open and she drops her empty tray.

“Enfant du diable,” she whispers, which is cracked cuz she usually yells. I’m so confused.

Oh. Oh, fuck. I think my eyeliner and lipstick’s still on. I touch my lips and see my fingers stained black. I look back at mum. She’s shaking red-faced. I don’t know if she’s gonna die or kill me. I hope neither. I’m just gonna stand still. She palms her cheeks and clenches her face and coils her lips like a sphincter and clutches me to her chest, almost breaking my nose on her collarbone, then she starts sniffing and ramming her nose into my forehead. After choking me a couple seconds she pulls away and snags both my arms. Her face is acid venom.

“Vas directement à la maison! Laves ton visage et vas directement te coucher!! Nous parlerons demain matin!!!” she sprays in my face as she spins me around and pushes me away all violent so I almost fall over.

I don’t think she noticed my pinky. She shoves me down the aisle and I bump into this enormous fifty-year-old black bitch with a Lions jacket and hat, who sneers at me as I pass cuz I spilled some of her tokens.

Mum gives me another shove and I’m still too scared to sneak a look at her face so I keep my head cocked forward, taking quicker shorter steps. I hear mum shriek again but far behind me.

“À la maison maintenant!!!”

I keep at a good speed out of the slots room back into the atrium and out the door into the heavy sticky night, which also reeks like dirty ass cuz the casino's across the street from the river.

I wanna get laid real bad, but I should go home. This is serious. Mum's flown off the edge. She's gonna murder me. My legs are hot and hollow and sore and my stomach's loaded with metal chunks and my face is glazed in grease and makeup. I need to wash my face and get baked and think.

I circle the casino, clutching my stomach and walking and jogging every couple seconds across Elgin onto Pelissier across Howard into some alley. I wedge myself between a wall and the edge of a garbage bin and sit on a milk crate and pull my bag of weed and rollies from my pocket and spin up a pinner, as I glance around every couple seconds to make sure no one's around. My hands start shaking as I finish rolling and spark up. My first haul's deep and hard and it squeezes the back of my head and spine, which always makes me smile. I exhale out my mouth real slow, sucking it all back in my nose after showering in the fumes a couple seconds. There, now I can think. I'm kinda horny, I've got a hard-on warming up my thigh. I'll just hang with Sera a while but try to speed things up and be home by eleven-thirty and shower and get to my room in time for mum's midnight arrival. I just need to smoke this pinner and wash my face.

What time is it? Was it eight-thirty more than a half-hour ago!? If it's after nine I'm such a dumb-ass, I gotta find out what time it is. I put the pinner out on the garbage bin and stumble down the alley onto Wyandotte, smashing my shoulder into another wall almost knocking myself over. I race along Wyandotte to Ouellette and up Ouellette to the river, which is good for two reasons. First, there's a big black clock at the corner of

Ouellette and Riverside which has been there forever but it's getting torn down for the Chrysler world headquarters or whatever, and second it's almost where I'm supposed to meet Sera. With the hot dizziness rushing through my head again, I pass Pillette in a blur and spot the clock, which says nine-fourteen!

While rubbing my sore eyes and grabbing my legs filled with burning matches, all hopeful trying to focus on the edge of the river to spot Sera, I cross Riverside through a red light and almost get smashed by a 6A. The driver slams on the brakes and honks and I turn to the bus and his face is blood-red, screaming and shaking his arms at me as I stumble down the hill at the top of Dieppe Park and step on a couple roses, which is wicked. I cross the parking lot but I still can't spot Sera anywhere. I pass the public washrooms and head onto the sidewalk in front of the river, which is rank, making me nauseous again. No Sera. She must be late. I look left along the sidewalk stretching past the bridge off in the distance but I don't see her, so I look right along the sidewalk stretching to Hiram Walker and see a dark slender figure like hers kinda speedwalking way ahead. I take a deep breath but the stench of the river soaks into my lungs and I puke but I didn't eat all day so it's just yellow-brown bile. Bent over I heave a couple times and try to breathe and rub my legs and start hunchback-sprinting along the sidewalk towards her. I get closer and notice her black skirt ass-twisting walk and dreads tied up in a bun.

"Sera!" I yell, my legs and stomach and face in flames.

She turns her head but keeps her pace and turns it back and speeds up. She musta been waiting and left. I'm the world's biggest dumb-ass. I have no idea what to do so I keep running to her.

"Sera!"

I'm a couple metres from her when she spins around, her face all clenched up.

"Stop running," she says, ice-cold annoyed.

I stop and bend over, heaving in piles of river stench, then I look up and wanna say something but she beats me.

"I waited for fifteen minutes. Do you understand?"

I blew it. My head's twirling and I can't stand up straight and I wanna say something, but I don't know what.

I have an idea! I lift up my hand.

"I broke my pinky."

I notice her face loosen and her eyes clear up and her forehead peel back like she just got something, which used to happen to me lots, but not so much anymore.

"Yes, I heard about that. How are you?"

She steps up to me and right away I smell incense and weed in her hair and see her glazed eyes with tiny pupils as she takes my hand and holds the splint up to her face.

"I don't know."

"Does it hurt?"

"Kinda."

"Someone told me you started the fight."

"Who said that?"

"Someone who was there. Is it true?"

"No! They jumped us like they always do."

"I was told you have a big mouth."

"No I don't!"

“Well that’s what I was told. Apparently you were very cocky with those guys.”

“Whatever. That’s so full of shit.”

She stares real deep in my eyes. After a couple seconds her face smoothes out and her eyes wander back to my pinky. She believes me.

“Um...sorry I’m late.”

“I forgive you. But only because you have a good excuse. Next time I will just keep walking.”

She looks me up and down and takes my chin with her thumb and index finger and turns my face left and right and has a long look at a bruise Brick left on my cheek and the nail marks on my neck. She gives me a motherly-concerned look which sends this wave of blood from my head down my spine, reminding me I’m still baked. She lets go of my chin.

“We should get high. Come on.”

She leads me along the sidewalk and I stagger a couple steps behind so I can watch her ass while she walks but still make sure she doesn’t see me watching it. She’s being friendly again, asking tons of questions.

“How long do you have to wear the splint?”

“Six weeks. I don’t care.”

“You’re not upset?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t you want revenge?”

“Fully.”

“Well, maybe I can help you think of something,” she says, smiling, and I wanna dive in her mouth and swim around inside her. She veers left onto the grass to this water pumping station and I follow her down a short grass slope into a narrow passageway under the station, where we gotta crawl which sucks for my knees, but her ass is almost in my face but I can’t see it cuz it’s dark down here so I lean in almost between her cheeks and try to smell it, but I can’t smell anything. We crawl some more and sit where there’s this beam of light seeping in through a hole in the concrete wall, which we lean against, beside each other. She pulls a small black ceramic pipe with a pudgy Buddha face and a bag of weed from her hip sack. She packs the pipe and gives it to me.

There’s this bizarre silence now and I don’t know what to say so I haul off the pipe and savour Sera’s kind weed. It’s not as kind as Hank’s but it’s still kind. She smiles at my boots again.

“I like your boots.”

“They’re wicked.”

“I’ve never seen anyone else wear them.”

“Yeah.”

She looks away and giggles like she knows something I don’t, then turns back.

“What do you like to do on the weekends?”

“I don’t know. Hang out.”

“With whom?”

“Friends. Um...I’ve got three of ’em. There’s Milan, he’s my best friend. And there’s Byung and Nicole. Um...I think they hooked up but they didn’t say anything yet, so...”

I trail off cuz I know I sound dumb but I can't help it cuz I'm still kinda woozy and half-conscious.

"What do you guys do?"

"Um...sometimes we go to Nicole's and get baked and play vids or whatever. Sometimes we get baked and go to the mall which sucks, but, um...sometimes there's nothing else to do. I don't know. Usually we get baked."

"Well, at least you don't stay at home all the time and do nothing."

There's another bizarre silence cuz I do spend a lot of time at home doing nothing and I think she knows it. Maybe a compliment's the way to go.

"I like your dreads. They're wicked."

"Thank you. They're not natural. I had them done in a salon."

"Yeah."

"So how smart are you?"

"Um...real smart."

"Do you get good grades?"

"Fully. My grades are top notch."

"Top notch, huh? Do you study?"

"Kinda. I don't need to."

She's scowling studying my face again and I wanna say something but nothing's coming. She looks away in thought out the crack in the concrete and sighs. The light on her face turns her white for a couple seconds, which is kinda eerie.

"I'm going to leave Windsor forever. I'm moving to Jamaica where it's sunny and beautiful all year round. Where the ocean breathes with life."

Breathes with life? She looks at me and smiles and shuffles closer, which scares me a bit, but I'm ready for anything.

"Did you know the human body is seventy percent water?"

"No."

"It's true. Have you ever been to the ocean?"

I shake my head.

"That's very sad. You must see the ocean someday. It's the most amazing feeling. Your whole body comes alive, but your spirit is calm. Your body's water moves in synchrony with the ocean. The energy of the ocean connects to the energy of your body's water."

I can't help it but a glaze of doubt covers my face cuz I've never heard a chick say something so cracked but still look hot, the way she's all animated moving her arms up and down, making her tits sway left and right.

"Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

I don't know what she's talking about but I like watching her lips move, especially when she pronounces her O's.

"Do you care?"

"Yeah. I was just...I've never heard anyone say that before. It's fully deep."

"What's your sign?"

"What?"

"Your astrological sign?"

"I don't know."

“You should. It’s important.”

“Why?”

“Do you know what astrology is?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then why did you say you did?”

“Um...”

She sighs and kinda shakes her head.

“Well, astrology is...”

She goes off and I watch how the light through the concrete turns her neck and shoulders white. She’d still be hot if she was white. Her arms are skinny bones with lean muscles and shiny skin. I like her dull black shoulder-string tank top with three small burn marks above her tit. I like her silver bracelets jangling together. I like how her dreads brush against her neck, making shadows on her shoulders while she’s talking. I like how she’s sitting cross-legged in her black ankle dress and I like her brown worn torn sandals and long skinny ratty toes with red nail-polish. I don’t like her silver hoop earrings much but I hate big earrings cuz my sister used to wear ’em and she said everyone at school wore ’em and I was scared everyone was gonna be a poser like my sister so I never wanted to go to high school, but once I got there I noticed almost no one wore ’em, so I hate my sister for making me not wanna go to high school, but there’s tons of other stuff, too.

Sera’s still explaining astrology. I hope she doesn’t make me repeat anything.

“...and this is why it depends on what month you were born. When is your birthday?”

“August twenty-sixth.”

“A Virgo. No wonder.”

“Why?”

She ignores me and takes the pipe from me and I feel her fingers brush across my hand, which gives me wet goosebumps and my dick gets all tingly. I watch her pack the pipe and she pushes her arms in to do it, squeezing her tits together. They look kinda squishy-soft, like fudge balloons. She puts the pipe to her mouth and curls her lips around it and lights it, sucking in her cheeks, which reminds me of “Teen Cocksuckers #4,” this wicked porn I saw once at Hank’s where this chick was sucking a guy’s dick so hard you could see the shape of his knob through her cheeks. Hank said Nicole’s mum used to do it that way all the time before she took off and it’s the right way to give head, but I don’t care if Sera gives me head cuz I just wanna get laid.

She exhales and some smoke comes out her nostrils and curls around her nose and into her eyes which she snaps shut and jerks her head back.

“You okay?”

She giggles and rubs her eyes with her bony brown knuckles.

“I hate eye-tokes.”

“Yeah, me too. Once me and Byung hotboxed his garage and my eyes got so red and smoky after, I couldn’t see straight for hours.”

She ignores me again and has another haul while I think how almost everything that’s come out of my mouth so far tonight’s been dumb-ass poser shit. I’m afraid to say

anything else. She closes her eyes and exhales and opens her eyes and shakes her head, then looks at me.

“Gus?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know why we’re here?”

“Um...no.”

“I want to get to know you. That’s why I invited you here, but I’m concerned.”

“Why?”

“I could get into a lot of trouble if anybody found out we’d met. You must keep this a secret.”

“Fully.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yeah.”

“Then say it.”

“I promise.”

She looks away back out the crack in the concrete and takes a couple breaths, all deep in thought. She looks at me again, scowling, which makes me nervous so I look down at my boots.

“Are you a virgin?”

“I guess.”

“Are you or not?”

“Yeah, so what?”

“Don’t be defensive. So am I.”

What? That's impossible!

"You are?"

"Yes. Are you disappointed?"

I shake my head.

"Did you think we were going to have sex?"

"No."

"Is that why you agreed to meet me?"

"No!"

"Gus, look at me."

I can barely lift my head and I look at her and her eyes are swallowing her face, like someone just told her her mum died or something.

"Are you lying to me?"

"No."

She stares deep in my eyes for a second and looks away back out through the crack in the concrete. For a couple minutes that feel like years, we sit there in the dark with our thoughts shifting our asses on the cold concrete. I've got no idea what to say. She's a virgin. Nothing ever works out the way I want.

"Do you live with your parents?"

"Mum and sister."

"Where's your father?"

"He lives in Montreal. He's a fag but I'm not."

"Tsk. Fag is a very cruel word. Don't ever use it again."

"He is."

“Do you mean he’s gay?”

“I don’t know.”

“What happened between your parents?”

“He took off when I was born.”

“Why? Did he tell your mother the truth and then disappear? Tell me what happened.”

“I don’t know. I don’t wanna get into it.”

“Don’t you talk to him?”

I shake my head.

“He’s never tried to talk to you?”

“I don’t know.”

“That is so awful. I couldn’t imagine not having a father.”

I don’t feel like talking anymore. I kinda feel like passing out. I’m all dizzy again.

I wish it was just me and Milan playing vids and getting baked. Milan’s wicked.

“Do you get along with your mother?”

“I guess.”

“What about Sophie?”

“I hate her.”

“Why?”

“She’s a poser.”

“Why is she a poser?”

“She just is.”

“Well, I wish I had a sister. Sophie and I are friends in a way, but in a way we’re not. Her ex-boyfriend is evil, but still I can’t believe what she did last weekend.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know why she did that?”

“She’s a slut-bag.”

I’ve just been staring at my boots a while now but I hear her sigh real deep, like I’m offending her or whatever. I don’t care. I’m too dizzy. It’s getting harder and harder to keep my eyes open.

“Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“What?”

“Reincarnation. It happens when a person dies and is reborn as something else. For example, as another person or an animal.”

“I know what it is.”

“Well, do you believe in it?”

“No.”

“You should. In my former life, I was a rebel Jamaican slave.”

I chuckle cuz I can’t help it and I know I’m not getting laid.

“Laugh if you like, but it’s true.”

“I wasn’t laughing.”

“Gus, if you don’t stop lying, God will leave you behind.”

“What?”

This chick’s fully cracked.

“Do you believe in God?”

“God’s a fag.”

“Gus!”

I pissed her off now. It’s like there’s mud on my face and in my ears again.

“Look at me!”

I can just barely turn my head to her. She’s all blurry and she’s black and it’s dark down here, so it’s real hard to see her.

“Don’t ever say that again. Do you understand?”

I nod. At least I think I did. I think she’s scowling at me cuz it’s like her eyes are squashing my face.

“Do you have an awful name for everybody?”

“What...”

“Listen! What do you call black people?”

“Wha...”

“Did you tell your friends you were going to have sex with a nigger?”

Suddenly, I can see her perfect. I’m not tired at all anymore. I’m kinda weightless. She stares right at me as her eyes turn red and her cheeks swell up and her skin turns white. She’s studying my face. Her eyes shift from my hair to my mouth to my nose to my eyes.

“You look like your father.”

“I do?”

“I have a message from him.”

“What?”

“He wants you to know that you’re a fag, just like him. You’re going to burn in Hell together.”

“He said that?”

“Show me your palm.”

She grabs my left hand and digs her nails into it and flips it over and holds it up to the light seeping in through the concrete and lowers her head till it’s just above my palm honeyed in sweat. She starts scratching her nail along the lines of my palm as she licks her lips. My hard-on’s so big, the rest of my body feels like a raisin. She digs her nail into my palm and blood squirts out as she glares at me.

“You have a very short lifeline.”

“For real?”

“Are you ready to die?”

“No!”

She puckers her lips and lifts her tank top! She licks her fingers and starts pinching her nipples! They shoot out of her tits like worms and coil around my wrists and yank my hands to her tits and she wraps her hands around mine and makes me squeeze ’em as she cackles all sinister-like. Except her tits are all squishy-soft, like bags of water, like those African chicks in National Geographic.

“Show me your needle-dick,” she says, sweat beads squiggling sideways across her forehead.

“What?”

“Show me, fag!”

She rips my pants open and takes my left hand from her tit and puts it on my dick and wraps my hand tight around it!

“What are you...”

“Shut up!”

She’s all possessed with her left eye twitching and she wraps her hand around mine and starts jerking me off. She pulls her eyebrows in like bat’s wings and speeds up and it feels wicked so I tilt my head back against the concrete and close my eyes and keep playing with her Zulu tits, except faster. I start thinking about the sexy faceless nurse in my dream and I imagine Sera’s her, which gets me even harder and I can feel the cum sloshing its way out so I push my head forward and open my eyes and clench every muscle in my face and chest and legs and toes as I dump my batch, which twirls around in the air in front of me and lands on my shirt and Sera’s hand and arm. I look at her all breathless and her eyebrows coil around her huge red swollen eyes as her nostrils flare, pushing down on her upper lip, just glaring in twisted anger at my batch dribbling down her hand. Suddenly she growls at me and her hot breath sears my face, then she bolts away before I can think of something to say. I’m melting, like I always am after I jerk off, but this is so different cuz a chick helped me. Where’d she go? I can’t move so I’m just gonna sit here a while and wait for her to come back.

“Wake up! Wake up!”

I musta passed out. I was dreaming about the faceless nurse again. I was still inside her, clutching an intestine and reaching up to her charred-black heart. Finally I

grabbed it but it crumbled in my hand. I let go of the intestine and got sucked back out through her pussy. She picked me up and held me like a baby and stuck my face in her massive Oreo nipple and I looked up and saw her face for the first time and she was Sera scowling and growling, then Sera morphed into mum and mum started crying! I reached my hand which had her heart up to her face, but all that was left was a palm full of ashes. When she saw it she got all pissed and her eyes glowed red and she morphed into Satan with pointy ears and horns and red skin and flames in her eyes. She growled in my face and threw me across the room and I kinda flew through the air in slow motion and couldn't move my arms or legs real fast, like being underwater. The last thing I remember was wanting to wake up in my dream, screaming "Wake up!" to myself over and over.

What time is it? I gotta get home. If mum's already home I'm so dead. I musta missed Brick, too. He's gonna give me the beats again tomorrow. I hope he didn't rape Sophie.

Hey, where'd Sera go? Why didn't she wake me? What a bitch! Maybe she doesn't like me or maybe I was an experiment or whatever, or maybe she was just playing with me, like Nicole said. This is so lame and I'm pissed off and I'm gonna go up to her in school tomorrow and ask her why she ditched me. I don't care what happens and I don't care if she ignores me. I know she will. Did I get laid? No. I think...I remember her telling me she's a virgin and then she started going on about God... Yeah, I played with her Zulu tits and she helped me jerk off and I... Yeah I dumped my batch all over her arm, which is wicked. I wish I got some on her face.

I crawl out from under the building to the walkway and catch a whiff of the river which almost makes me puke again, but I've got nothing left to puke.

The streets are kinda empty. It's late. I think it's real late, this is bad. I've never seen Windsor so dead even though it's a dead city. But I don't have time to take it in so I stumble up the hill to the sidewalk along Riverside to Ouellette to check the clock.

Eleven-forty!

I'm on the 6B going home, thinking about the beats Brick's gonna give me tomorrow and the spoon lashing mum's gonna gimme tonight. My ass is gonna be red for a week. I don't care. Yeah I do. Why did Sera ditch me? Is this love or whatever? I don't know. My chest is hollow and tight and my hands are clammy and my forehead's throbbing and I can't feel my toes. I can't shake the image of the light through the crack in the concrete on her shoulders and her dreads brushing against her neck and her fudge balloons and my batch on her hand, all tattooed on my brain. I just wanna crawl into bed and pass out.

I hop off the bus on Tecumseh and hobble along the sidewalk to Laroche over to my house. I can see through mum's window her light's on, which means she's either reading or fucking some guy. Maybe if I'm quiet she won't hear me and I can just pass out and deal with her tomorrow, so I head up the front steps onto the porch and open the door and right away I hear that smacking slapping ass-fucking sound seeping out the crack under mum's bedroom door, which is spilling light on Sophie's door across the hall. Wicked, I guess I'm safe for tonight.

"You like that!? You want more!?" I kinda hear the guy yell through mum's door. She tells him to shut up.

I've seen lots of ass-fucking in porn and porn stars act like they like it, but I can tell it hurts. If you're a chick and you're not a porn star and you let some guy ass-fuck you, it means you love him, cuz mum said, "L'amour est douleur." I guess mum loves lots of guys. I feel this pain in my chest cuz Sera ditched me, so maybe I love her, but I also puked lots and didn't eat all day, so maybe I'm just sick.

As I pass Sophie's door I start to wonder if Brick's in there cuz maybe he forgave her and they got back together. No, he's not there cuz if he was he woulda met mum and that's impossible cuz Sophie definitely never wants him to meet her. I'm kinda glued to the carpet cuz mum's guy starts yelling, "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" real loud.

Someday, I'm gonna get laid like that. I swear.

Sometimes I like to sprawl out on the carpet in front of mum's door and jam my ear against it when she's fucking, so I do. I shut my eyes and imagine I'm ass-fucking Sera on a hospital examining table and she's got a pink nurse outfit pulled halfway up her back, like in the scene of my favourite porn of all time, "Naughty Nurses #3." Both Sera's hands are on the table and her head's cranked around and she's glaring at me with all this pain in her glowing red eyes. I yell, "You like that!? You want more!?" She nods and licks her chops and both my hands are cupped around her hips and I'm pumping her in and out and faster and faster and she reaches around and carves her nails deep in my legs and it hurts so bad and I yell, "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" as I ram my dick in deeper and deeper and

Mum's screaming wakes me up. I'm on my back on the carpet with my knees twisted to the side. I can't move my head or open my eyes yet. But I hear mum screaming

If

Any person wishes to know what kind of man he was,
 Or what honour he had, or of how many lands
 He was lord, then we will write about him
 As well as we understand him: we
 Who often looked upon him,
 And lived sometime in his court.
 This King William* then that we write about
 Was a very wise man, and very rich; more
 Splendid and powerful than any of his predecessors.
 He was mild to the good men that loved God, and
 Beyond all measure
 Severe to the men that gainsayed his will.

But

Amongst other things it is not to be forgotten
 That good peace he made in this land;
 So that a man of any account
 Might go over his kingdom unhurt
 With his bosom full of gold.
 No man durst slay another,
 For he never so much
 Evil did to the other; and
 If any churl lay with a woman against her will,
 He soon lost the limb that he played with.
 He truly reigned over England.

– From the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1086)

**Guillaume le Conquérant*

Chapter 2 Birth Control Pills

My Dear Mum,

News Flash:

THIS WAS YOUR FAULT!!!

You never knew me so you're shocked. I have so many things to tell you. Hmmm, where to start...How about Jack Reilly? He's the cutest guy in school and he's done it with all the pretty girls. He has big eyes, big nose, big lips, big teeth, big muscles, he's tall: Know him? Five years ago there was a hot news story that went around school about how Jack and his friends went to a rubby bar that serves teenagers and had a dogfight. They put all their money in a pot and whoever did it with the ugliest girl in the bar won the money. Jack won. He did it with an ugly cougar who was their waitress and has big boobs. Jack didn't have to do anything because she came over to them and took their orders and asked Jack if he wanted something else. The waitress was Monique: Know her? Jack didn't want to do it with her because she was too ugly but his friends said he would win the money if he did. He decided to do it. He couldn't bring her to his house because his parents would kill him for bringing home an ugly cougar twice his age. She told him to go with her to her house but his friends told him to take her to a fancy hotel. He took her to a cheap motel and did it in her bum. She told him to. She told him to not kiss her or look in her face but to just do her in the bum and go. He didn't want to stay after anyway because he was afraid he would die from throwing up. She was that ugly to him. He became a legend in school because he stole her bra in the motel and the senior

football players took it and put it in the locker room. To this day they rub it for good luck before a game and use it to initiate new guys by making them wear it around school for a day. Do you know who it belongs to? Gus doesn't know but he might someday. Aren't you ashamed? I wanted to leave school because nobody would have talked to me again if they found out. Imagine the headline:

JACK REILLY DOES UGLY LOSER'S MUM IN THE BUM

I was finally ready to try making friends in grade 9 but YOU made me too afraid. YOU ruined everything. How could you do it with a 14-year-old boy? You didn't know he was 14? Maybe he went to my school? Maybe I knew him? Maybe we were friends?

I HATED YOU!!!

I never brought anyone home when you were home so you thought I had no friends. I did have one friend. Her name is Basha. She's the nicest person in the world because she didn't care that I was fat and zit-faced and had a wandering eye. She's beautiful. Every day I used to sit by myself in the cafeteria because no one ever talked to me. She came and talked to me one day after a food fight. Everyone threw all this food at me, the ugly loser. They laughed at me and said: "One eye's lookin' atcha, but one eye's lookin' for ya!" I ran outside and started crying. She came outside and offered to lend me some of her clothes because mine were covered in food. We went to her house and talked for hours and I found out she wanted to start exercising but didn't know how to make an exercise routine. I told her I was into running and she asked if she could start running with me. I was so excited! She started coming over at night when you were working and I showed her how to stretch properly and we went running together. I had to slow down for her and it took her a while to learn how to pace herself and breathe properly but I didn't

mind at all. Eventually she got into pretty good shape and we would run ten kilometers three nights a week. She was so grateful and said my discipline totally inspired her. But I made her promise to never come over outside of our running schedule unless we talked about it at school first. She asked why not. I just told her I had the worst mum in the world and didn't want her to ever meet her. She didn't pressure me about you. She made me comfortable and said I wasn't fat and ugly. I know she was lying but it was nice to hear something nice about me, thank you very much! I also became sort of friends with her friend Sera. She came over when we weren't running but I don't think she liked me because she was always condescending like she was jealous of us running together. You thought I had no friends.

YOU WERE WRONG!!!

You loved Gus but not me: WHY? I bet it was because I was a girl. Every time you looked at me you saw yourself. You hated me for that. I remember when Gus and me were kids. If I fell, you did NOT care. If Gus fell, you cried. You say you're so honest but you're just as big a liar as Gus. Why did you marry a gay person? You didn't know he was gay when you married him? How did you have two kids with him? I never believed your sick stories about our dad and grandfather because it's obvious when a person is gay. I bet you just made up those stories to make us as screwed up as you are. Your whole life in Montreal was a big lie and one day you better admit that to Gus and tell him the truth. Who is our dad?

I was ugly like you but Gus isn't. I bet he looks like our dad. I bet our dad got beat up when he was a teenager just like Gus but he wanted to be normal and straight. He picked you because you look like a man. He could look at YOU, he could imagine IT was

a man. He could love you because he could pretend you were his husband. I bet that was how it was until I was born. Then reality crushed him and he was trapped but he felt so lousy when he thought about running away from us. Then Gus was born and it just became too much for him so he told you the truth and said he was sorry but he still wanted to stay for us kids. He's a nice man and he wants to be a good person but you wouldn't let him because you thought he was sick. I bet that was why you made him leave. Gay people are human beings, for your information! You never let us read his letters. What are you afraid of?

GUS IS NOT GAY!!!

Our dad's letters will NOT make him gay and you're stupid because you think they will. I know you think he's gay because he dresses like a freak but he just wants to be different from everyone else. The only thing he ever talked about with me is doing it because he wants to know what it's like. He watches porno with his friends. He's sick like you and you made him that way. I was sick too but more than throwing up your food, that's all you know. You sent me to Dr. Wong because you didn't want to deal with me.

News Flash:

I HAD MALADJUSTMENT DISORDER!!!

Problems fitting in, making friends, being normal...

I WONDER WHY!?!?

You told me I had to eat everything you made me and if I threw it up you would put me in a hospital. I said fine. After dinner I would go upstairs to do homework and you wouldn't let me close the door when I went to the bathroom. Secretly I bought laxatives. I would swallow some in my room after eating and crap out your sick food. You thought

me going to the bathroom was healthy but I just did NOT want anything else from you inside me, thank you very much! I didn't want to be sick anymore because I was tired of throwing up and taking laxatives but if I didn't I would get so fat I would explode. You and Dr. Wong said I was dangerously skinny and my heart might have stopped beating if I didn't eat more and run less. What do you two know? Neither of you knew me like I knew myself. I liked running because it was the only way I could feel good about myself, the only time I felt free. The only good thing you liked about me was I ran track and I won some races but I never won for you and never cared about winning. I just liked being good at something and pushing myself to be better. At this year's WSSA meet I was running the 3000 metre and was two-thirds finished and in the middle of the pack but I had the worst cramps in my legs. I could barely stand on them but my coach kept yelling from the sideline: "Don't you quit, Sophie! Run through it!! Come on!!!" So I ignored the pain and pushed myself harder than I ever have in my life and won third place. But no one ever wins anything because everyone dies anyway...

JUST LIKE ME!!!

Today Dr. Wong prescribed me Zoloft for my disorder. I have a bottle of 30 tablets. He told me to take one every night before bed but to not take more than one a day because that would be dangerous. I'm going to take all 30 after I finish this letter. I want to be sleepy when I cut my wrists.

News Flash:

I HAD A BOYFRIEND!!!

You don't believe me but it's true. His name is Brick. He was the quarterback on the football team and everyone's afraid of him because he's psycho. They started treating

me nicely when we fell in love so I thought life wasn't such a HELL anymore because maybe I would be normal and have a normal life. I started going to parties with him and making new friends. Brick loved me. He said it all the time and I believed him. I know he meant it because we were doing it in his bed one night and he was pushing too hard. He cracked my hip and it hurt and was purple for two weeks. He cried in front of me and said "Sorry!" over and over again. Three years ago when we first started dating he said he would never let a guy hit a girl. He said he would kill a guy who hit a girl so when he hurt me he felt badly. That was the first time he said "I love you." Sometimes he wanted to come over to my house but I never let him when you were home. Why not? Because he's Jack Reilly's friend! He was at the rubby bar that night!! He would have recognized you and told everyone and dumped me. I would have lost them being nice to me. They would have ragged on me back to HELL!! I told Brick my mum is a loser and I never wanted him to meet her. He understood. He didn't care I was ugly because he's even uglier. He has more zits than me and big boils. He didn't ask too many questions about my family but he asked why Gus is such a freak. He beats up Gus in school but I never told him to stop because I thought he would make Gus stop being a freak. I started feeling badly the first time he broke Gus' nose but our relationship was on the edge so I kept letting it happen.

Brick did the cruellest thing to me last weekend. My mood swings were getting bad in grade 12 but they were even worse this year and he couldn't deal with it anymore. I told him I could go on anti-depressants but he said "Fuck no!" He said he would whip some happiness into me if I did. He said he would dump me if I didn't cheer up and stop being quiet or stop crying and never wanting to go out or always thinking he was cheating

on me. I said if he dumped me I would get a gun and blow my head off. That was a mistake.

We went to a party last weekend at Jack's house. Brick took me upstairs to a bedroom. When we walked in some football players were standing in a row against the wall with their pants down! He said I had to give them all blowjobs! He said it was to show how much I appreciated them winning WSSA because they made the school such a happier place. I could NOT believe he did that! I did NOT do what he told me to do! I left the party right away and stayed calm but started screaming and crying running home. I kept calling him the whole weekend but he kept calling me a cunt and hanging up. When I came to school on Monday everyone was giving me cruel looks and some of them were laughing when I walked by. I found out from Basha that Brick went around the school saying I gave some football players blowjobs at Jack's party. He said he wasn't even there. He said he was so hurt and would never talk to me again.

AND THEY BELIEVED EVERYTHING!!!

Even Basha looked at me suspiciously. That was the worst part. I ran home and didn't go back to school and didn't care anymore if they wanted to believe his filthy lies.

THEY CAN GO TO HELL!!!

I want you to do something for me. After I finish this letter and swallow all the pills but before I cut my wrists I'm going to write Brick a letter. I will put it in an envelope and stamp it and address it. You will see it on my bedside table. Do NOT open it! Don't you dare! Put it in a mailbox. That's all I ask.

I hope you read this letter and think about everything that has happened between us. I hope you feel lousy when you find my corpse. I hope you let Gus read our dad's

letters and give up this stupid idea he's gay. He's just sick like you, our whole sick family. We used to be half-normal when Gus and I were little kids. We watched TV together and ate dinner together. We went to Florida once, that was fun, I still remember. I was swimming in a pool and lost my alphabet necklace, the one you bought me in a flea market. Gus dove in and got it back for me. You and I clapped and Gus smiled toothless. We lifted him out of the pool and he gave my necklace back. I pushed him back in the pool and you laughed and pushed me in too. Gus tried to pull down my bathing suit so I dunked him a few times. I looked up and saw you smiling.

It's gone.

Everyone wants to find someone
They want to be loved
They want to be happy forever
A feeling they thought they could never have
They want to share every moment with someone special
They never want to be alone
They want to find the deepest person
And be lost inside them forever
When you know someone deep inside
You see their heart and soul
You start floating in the sky
Now I found the deepest person
You are my special person
You can make me happy forever
I'm floating in the sky

Guess who my poem was about? Remember the other group members gave me 19/20 but you gave me 11/20? You said my poem sucked and I never participated. That's funny because I was always the one that spoke in front of the class for our group. And you spelled my name wrong: Sofie. You came to my desk and gave me the sheet with my grade and said "Na na na na na you're in trouble!" You didn't know the poem was about you? I waited over two years until you noticed me. I hated our school from the first day and wanted to leave and go to another one but didn't because I was afraid I would never see you again.

Did you really love me or was I just the best you could get?

I will be dead by the time you read this but maybe you found out already. This is a Goodbye Forever letter. Are you sad? Will you cry alone in your room looking at the picture of us kissing in Jack's pool?

I swallowed my whole prescription of Zoloft took me a while to take all 30 because I could only take two at a time and had to drink lots of water go to the bathroom over and over again. Are you mad I got anti-depressants? Ha ha ha! You hate me so I'm dying to make you happy because now got what you wanted.

I hope you never forget me and feel guilty your whole life you jerk! My death is your fault and I hope you suffer forever. How could you tell them such a cruel lie? I never did anything cruel to you loved you everyday all my heart. Every time you got sick I made you soup. Every time you got hurt in a fight I kissed your cuts and bruises. I made love with you even I didn't feel like it. Did you think I would dump you if you did something cruel to me? It's so obvious. Have a laugh with Jack because I'm finally off your back but I will come back as a ghost to haunt you when you're doing it to all the girls you want to do it floating above you whispering things like I'm here I can see you get away from him because he's a jerk when you get married I will always be there to remind you what you did and make you feel what I feel forever.

Excuse me I'm getting stupid on you. I just took my medication. I know I treated you lousy sometimes when I had my mood swings but they wouldn't have been so bad if you let me take anti-depressants. Promise you try harder and never take me for granted I did I tried so hard it wasn't easy. Wanted you to help me so make you happy tried tried couldn't control my brain never listened to me know you got tired of can't believe I said to you

sometime nver meant to scream at you call you stpid ugy macho methhead jrk pleas forgive

me never wanted to make you liv nitmare last year worst life said so many tims all

you had do when I jerk hug me tell me loe me

yu thrw me away when everthing abut to change

mum just came home some jerk shush him told him go bedrom said she be there in

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close my eyes feel you besid me kkis you hod you

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Mr. Director,

In response to the invitation of the Liaison Committee established at the Sorbonne, I have entrusted Mr. Zivorad Stojkovic with a manuscript of the "Obsidian Heads," which you have certainly received by now.

I should like to briefly explain the motives for this donation. While, in the darkest hours of the last war, after Warsaw, Rotterdam, Dunkirk and the remaining nations were yielding their fate and their territories to the Tripartite Pact, Belgrade rebelled on a spring morning of 1941. All its people had chosen freedom, while the rest of the continent had surrendered. The reprisal that followed was spurred by rage over such insubordination. In the first few hours of bombing, which started without a declaration of war, tens of thousands of lives were destroyed, and with them the library, the foundation of the national culture.

In memory of those events, I have decided to entrust my manuscript to the restored National Library of Serbia. In the fate of your library, I see the fate of a nation that identifies culture and freedom. Human dignity, that your country always paid a high price for, still inspires her independence.

Mr. Director, I assure you of my best wishes for your country, the development of the library and you personally.

André Malraux

*Letter to the Director of the
National Library of Serbia, 29 June 1975*

It is unfortunate for all that no issue has ever been clearer. Any attempt to plea-bargain with outlaws and renegades will only be at the expense of honor, decency and self-respect. The Serbs are two-dimensional people with a craving for simplicity and an ideology so basic it can be understood without effort. They need enemies, not friends, to focus their two-dimensional ideas.

Life for them is a simple tune, never an orchestration, or even a pleasant harmony. Animals make use of their resources with far greater felicity than these retarded creatures, whose subscription to the human race is well in arrears.

*Sir Peter Ustinov, in
"The European," 10 June 1993*

Chapter 3

Retard

I'm not retarded but Mama thinks I might have a learning problem, though. She wants me to go see a shrink. Tata won't let me go see a shrink. He thinks they're robbers that steal people's money. They tell people they're sick when they're not really sick, then they steal their money. Mama and Tata fight about that a lot. Tata thinks I'm normal and I'm going to be smarter when I grow up.

Tata should be at home now. He didn't go to the restaurant yesterday but he told me he is going today. He comes home from the restaurant at 4:00 and I come home from school at 4:00. Then I go upstairs to study. He drinks alone in the basement, watching the news. Then he goes upstairs and he takes a nap, then we eat dinner together, then he goes back to the restaurant. Business used to be really good but not really good since the bombing started. His friends stopped coming when he stopped being nice to them when he was working. He has been mad since the bombing started. I can go home if he came home and if he fell asleep right away, then I can run up to my room. Then he won't see me. He can't see me today. He is going to get mad at me again. I don't like it when he gets mad at me. I didn't mean to do anything wrong. Gus is the one that gets us in trouble with Brick. His mouth is going bigger and bigger. Today he said, "Chew my dick, pizza face!" Then Brick punched me in the nose and he broke my nose, then his friends started kicking me. Then they went away. Gus and me went to the hospital. The doctor put a butterfly on my nose. I can't breathe, almost. Tata is going to shake his head and his face is going to go red and puffy, then he is going to yell at me about the money he is wasting

on my boxing and judo lessons. I'm shameful to my Serbian ancestors who lost all their blood in all their battles. They didn't give up and they survived, though. I should be strong like them to thank them. Tata is right. He isn't going to stop trying to make me strong, not ever.

I'm in the empty field behind a tree across the street from our house, sitting. We live in Hebrew Heights beside highway 401. Most of our neighbours are Jews. Tata thinks I shouldn't make friends with them because they think everybody is below them. I stand up, then I go across the street to our basement window that is under the front porch. We live in a brick house that has three floors. The first floor has a dining room, a living room, and a kitchen. The upstairs has three bedrooms and a bathroom. The downstairs has a tv room and a bathroom. I like turning up my music really loud, then running around the house to all the floors and all the rooms until I lose my breath, when Mama and Tata aren't home.

Tata used to make a lot of money before the bombing started. He thinks we might have to sell the house and the restaurant if his friends don't start coming to the restaurant again. Then we might have to move in somewhere smaller.

Tata might be watching the news like he was all day long in the basement yesterday. I crouch down beside the window and I look inside. He is watching the news on the couch, wearing his underwear. That means he didn't go to the restaurant for two days in a row. He is really mad about Mama leaving but she is going to come back soon. She loves him a lot but she had to go away from him for a little while. I understand that. He started yelling at her too much and he started drinking too much. He is always

drinking too much but not like he has been drinking in the last two months since the bombing started. I don't want to come home but Tata is going to be worried if I don't.

I'm going to come home through the garage that is far away from the basement. I can go inside really quiet and I can sneak upstairs to my room. I can tell him I'm studying if he knocks on my door and I didn't know he was at home. He doesn't come inside my room when he thinks I'm studying.

I go around the corner of the house to the backyard, then I go over the fence and I go into the garage. I unlock the door and I open the door really quiet. The door starts squeaking. I open it slower and I squeeze inside, then I take off my shoes really slow. Then I start tiptoeing up the stairs beside the stairs going downstairs. I step on a step and it creaks.

“Micho?”

“Da, Tata?”

“Doji dole, dusho.”

“Idem gore da uchim, Tata.”

“Neka, doji samo na trenutak.”

Tata told me to come downstairs to talk to him, then I told him I had to go upstairs to study, then he told me to come downstairs for a little while anyway. He won't let me talk in English when we're at home. I have to talk in Serbian. I can't even use Croatian words or he yells at me. I could use Croatian words until the war started in 1991. What is weird is Mama is a Croatian and she started talking in only English in the house when the war started. Another part of why she went away is Tata is really serious about the Serbian language. He thinks it is more pure than the Croatian language. That is also part of why

my sister Basha went away and she moved in with a nigger. She didn't want to talk in a stupid language she didn't ever want to learn. Tata was happy when he had a son after he had a daughter. He taught me to talk in Serbian first. I couldn't talk in English until I was six. I had a lot of problems when I first started in school. I don't have good grades but I have an A in history, though. I like facts because they're really easy to memorize. I memorized that John Cabot came here with a British expedition in 1497, then Jacques Cartier came with a French expedition in 1534, then the British beat up the French in 1760. Then they made up and Canada was born in 1867.

I'm going downstairs. My stomach is going tighter and tighter, crushing my guts. I'm going to get in big trouble. I have to tell Gus to shut his big mouth from now on or I can't walk around in school with him anymore. I need my nose for breathing. I don't think I can tell Gus to shut his big mouth, though.

I'm standing at the bottom of the stairs now. The back of Tata's head sticks out above the back part of the couch. He is watching the news, still. The news says the bombing of Serbia has ended and it says a peace agreement has been reached.

Tata is going to be happy now!

An empty bottle of plum brandy, six empty bottles of beer, and a bottle of wine that is half-empty is on the coffee table in front of the couch. The basement smells like Tata's breath. That means he is drunk and that means he can't yell at me too loud.

"Micho?"

I'm going to translate what we talk about because I need to practice my English.

"Yes, Tata?"

"Look, they have stopped killing us. I will fuck their mothers."

“Great, Tata.”

I hope Tata doesn't turn around and I hope he doesn't make me sit next to him.

“Tell me why.”

“Innocent Serbians aren't going to die anymore?”

“Innocent Serbians die every day, Micho. Come sit next to me. I want to talk to you.”

“I have to go study, Tata.”

“Come here!”

I take a deep breath into my mouth, then I lower my head. Then I go really slow toward Tata. He is sunk deep into the couch that is bending in the middle. He has been sitting in the same place and he has been watching the same news channel for two months, when he is not at the restaurant. His silver hair sticks straight up like a porcupine. His beard is white and bushy and he is wearing his big dark glasses. He is resting a glass of wine on his hairy belly that is black and white. He looks like a drunken polar bear with glasses. He didn't look at me yet. He slaps the couch beside him. His hands are like bear paws.

“Sit down, Micho.”

I sit down next to him with my head low. He looks at me, then he drops his glass of wine. The wine spills on the carpet that is stained with purple already. He takes off his glasses, then his grey eyes bug out. Then he squeezes his lips together, going purple like the carpet.

“Fuck the mother of Jesus!”

“I'm not hurt, Tata.”

“Shut up!”

He takes my arm and he squeezes it really tight, then he looks up at the ceiling and he shakes his fist in the air.

“I will fuck their mothers and daughters!”

Tata doesn't really mean that. He talks with bad words a lot but bad words don't have a bad meaning in Serbian. Tata says they're like breathing to survive. They cool his madness about all the slavery Serbians did over all the centuries. Tata would blow up if he didn't talk with bad words a lot.

“Who did this to you? That Brick again?”

“Nobody, Ta –”

“You're lying! Tell me, was it that Brick?”

“But Gus started it again. He –”

“Enough! You're never seeing that Gus again, do you hear me?”

“But Tata, he is my –”

“Shut up! That fucking devil worshipper is not your friend. You will never talk to him again! Do you hear me?”

“I hear you, Tata.”

Tata tells me I can't talk to Gus anymore every time I come home and I'm beat up. But that is impossible. I don't mean to not obey Tata but I see Gus at school every day and he doesn't worship the devil. That is what Tata doesn't understand. I don't hurt myself being with Gus, not like how Tata thinks.

“Again. Tell me and don't lie to me. Did that Brick do this to you?”

“Yes, Tata.”

He lets go of me. He leans forward, then he puts his elbows on his knees, then he sighs really heavy. Then he sits up and he looks at me. He takes the back of my head and he turns my face to his face. He lifts up my butterfly, then he presses his finger against the purple under my eyes.

“Ow!”

“Shut up! Pain doesn’t hurt.”

He looks at my nose and he shakes his head. His face goes redder and redder. Then he lets go of me. He picks up the glass off the floor, then he pours wine into the glass. He drinks all of it, thinking.

“What should I do with you, son?”

“Nothing, Tata. I’m fine.”

I’m not fine. I want to hug him for a really long time and I want to cry a lot. But I didn’t cry in all my life, though. My eyes never let me. Mama told me I didn’t cry when I came out of her. She told me I was making a weird sound like a lamb and she told me the doctor was worried. The doctor didn’t hear a baby make a sound like that, never one time.

Mama has been really quiet since the war broke up Yugoslavia in 1991. She hates it when Tata tells her Serbia is Yugoslavia. She tells him that’s not true because Yugoslavia died when Tito died in 1981. She thinks the whole world tried to wreck all the good stuff Tito did. The whole world was jealous about how great Yugoslavia was because all these people who really hate each other lived together happily and nobody else could do that like Yugoslavia could. That makes her cry when they fight about that. She starts crying if Tata says the name Tito, even. She really loved him but Tata hated him, though. She thinks he made Yugoslavia the best country in the world. Tata thinks he

made it a prison for Serbians. They don't talk about that anymore. They want to live here like normal people but Tata is having a hard time being normal. Their friends call them Gucci communists because they like to wear expensive clothes but they're old-fashioned like they're back at home, still. Mama was pregnant for six months with Basha in 1982. That is when she told Tata they should come to Canada and they should start a new life. She said Yugoslavia was going to fall apart soon. Tata said Yugoslavia should fall apart, then Serbians could live how they want to live instead of sharing everything with other kinds of Yugoslavians, like Croatians. He thinks Croatians are leeches. Then Mama told him he married a leech and if he wanted her to stay stuck to him, then they had to go away before everyone started dying. He couldn't say anything about that. Then they came to Windsor. Mama thought it was a good place to open a restaurant because it is close to America. They used to own a restaurant in Belgrade. Mama wanted to go to America first but Tata told her no. He thinks America has too many niggers.

“Why can't you fight back?”

“They're a lot bigger and stronger than us, Tata.”

“Stop shitting! It doesn't matter who's bigger or stronger. You must outsmart your opponent. Use his strength against him. What did the Serbians do against the Turks, the Austrians, or the Hungarians? Outsmart the bigger and stronger opponent!”

“I'm trying.”

“Don't try. Do! Didn't boxing teach you anything? Didn't judo teach you to find a man's weakness to cripple his strength?”

“Yes, Tata.”

“What is Brick’s weakness?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think!”

I don’t like fighting. I would rather get beat up if it didn’t hurt too much. I have to learn how to fight, though because Tata thinks it is important because everybody wants to hurt you. You have to be proud of yourself if you’re small and if you’re weak, then you can defend yourself. Tata thinks the best weapon is the mind. I don’t understand what he means by that but I’m going to appreciate all the great things he teaches me when I grow up.

I have no idea what Brick’s weakness is. It didn’t really hurt right away when he punched me in the nose. Then all the blood went out of my head and my eyes were leaking and my nose went really hot, then I fell down on the floor, then blood started going out of my nose. Then my nose started growing and going hotter and hotter. I thought it was going to blow up. The kicking in my stomach wasn’t as hurting as that punch, not nearly. Brick has rocks in his fists.

“Go on. Tell me.”

I look up at Tata. He is waiting for my answer but there is no answer in my head. He tries to stand up, then he falls over, almost.

“Go put on your shoes and wait for me in the car.”

“Where are we going?”

“To find Brick’s weakness.”

“No, Tata!”

“Shut up! Go!”

Tata goes toward the stairs. He hits the coffee table with his legs, then the empty bottles crash together, falling to the floor. Then he disappears upstairs. I wonder what he is going to do. I hope he doesn't make me watch him beat up Brick. Then everybody at school is going to make fun of me. They're going to tell me I need Tata to fight all my battles.

There was a dance in the cafeteria when high school first started. I was having a good time with Gus and Byung. Tata told me he was going to come at 10:00 pm to pick me up. He told me he was going to wait for me outside in the car. That way nobody would see my Tata was picking me up and nobody would make fun of me for it. But then he walked into the cafeteria a few minutes before 10:00 pm and he told me to leave with him right away. He didn't want to wait anymore. Everybody was laughing at me in school next Monday when I walked by them. They told me I was a daddy's boy for a few weeks and they wrote it on my locker, even. Tata was getting bored in the car, though. That is why he didn't want to wait for me five minutes more. I wasn't mad or anything but I was really shameful. I don't go to school dances anymore.

I go upstairs to put on my shoes. Tata is there and he is dressed now. He is putting on his shoes, wobbling.

"Brick's last name is Wuhl, isn't it?"

"Yes, Tata."

"Good. I know his father, that Kraut bricklayer who did the Milisavljevic house. I know where he lives."

I hope Tata doesn't beat up Brick's dad after Brick. Tata had two slipped disc operations from twenty years of boxing but he is really strong, still. We go into the garage

to the car, then we get in the car. Tata starts the engine, then we leave. He drives pretty good when he is drunk. He thinks the drunk driving laws are stupid here because you can drive drunk all you want in Serbia. He likes being drunk. I like being stoned. Everything is better when I'm stoned, like video games and movies. I don't like porno movies, though.

“When we get there, don't say a word. Just stand beside me and let me talk. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Tata.”

“Oh, my son. I won't be here to defend you forever.”

“I know, Tata.”

“Good for you that you know. Then everything will be alright.”

Tata is being funny. That is when I know he is sad. I'm going to go live in jail with him if he kills Brick or his dad and if he goes to jail.

Mama and Tata had a big fight two days ago. Tata wanted to go to Basha's apartment, then he wanted to bring her home. Mama told him to leave her alone and she told him it was his fault she went away. Basha and Tata used to fight really loud. She doesn't understand him, though. He wants her to respect where she came from and he wants her to know what is happening to our family and our people in Serbia. Mama told him he is tearing apart our family and he is making us go back to the stone age. She thinks his acting is embarrassing and it makes the whole world think Yugoslavians are cave people. She told him to let Basha live how she wants to live. He is mad about Basha living with a nigger. He isn't a racist or anything but he doesn't think races should be mixing together and making weird babies. Then everybody is confused about where they

came from. Tata thinks Canada is dangerous because too many cultures are mixing together and if they mix together too much, then one day everybody will become a monster. All the monsters will hate each other because they will be all the same but they will want to be different. Then they will kill each other so they can be different again.

Tata hired a private detective to follow Basha's nigger. He wanted to know if he is a criminal or a drug dealer. Mama started crying when she found out about that. She told him he was tearing her apart and she couldn't stand to live with him for another second. Then Tata told her, "Go!" Then she went away. I was in my room pretending to study but I heard everything they were telling each other. Mama has been gone for two days and Tata doesn't know where she is. I called Basha today, then I told her everything. She told me she didn't see Mama or hear from Mama and she's worried about her. She isn't worried about Tata, though. I miss Mama a lot. Tata doesn't cook as good as Mama but I'm having fun with him, still. We eat dinner together, then we wash the dishes together. He doesn't let me go with him to eat at the restaurant because I have to stay at home to study. Mama is going to come back. She really loves me and she always wants me to eat good food. She must be worried I'm not eating good food. Mama and Tata really love each other and they showed it a lot before the bombing started. Mama made breakfast in the morning and Tata came downstairs in his underwear and he started dancing around her, singing songs from when they were young. She laughed, then she pinched his butt. Then Tata told me to go out for an hour to "count hats." That means they were going to make it and they didn't want me to watch or listen. My parents touched each other a lot and they were happy when they were doing it. Everybody would be happier if they touched each other like Mama and Tata did. But I don't like touching anybody but Tata,

Mama, and Basha. When you touch somebody, then they go away, then part of you goes away with them. Pretty soon you're all over the place. I want all of me to stay with me. Then all of me is closer to Tata.

I see porno movies at Nicole's house sometimes. They're really weird. I don't like how they're making it because they're screaming and yelling. That means they're hurting each other. Gus talks about that a lot. He is weird that way. He told me Byung and Nicole are making it. Maybe I should ask them if I can watch them some time because I want to make sure they're not hurting each other. Mama and Tata are married. That is how I know they're not hurting each other. People promise to never hurt each other when they get married.

"Tata?"

"Yes, Micho."

"When do you think Mama is going to come back?"

"I don't know, son. We fucked things up beautifully."

"It was both of your faults?"

"No, it was nobody's fault! Your Mama and I have many disagreements about how to raise you and Basha. Mama thinks Basha can do whatever she wants but I think she isn't old enough to make her own decisions. Her lazy attitude toward her daughter is typically Croatian. They run away from everything, especially from the past. In all of history they have jumped into bed with whoever came to conquer them. If it wasn't the Hungarians, it was the Austrians. That is why they're fucking blonde! But I love your Mama. She is a wonderful woman. I want you and Basha to love where you come from. I want you to go back home one day and to see that people live there differently. Serbians

don't hide their true thoughts or feelings, not like these greedy lying Westerners. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Tata. I want to go there as soon as possible."

Tata puts his hand on top of my head and he strokes my hair.

"I know, son. You will. Remember, your citizenship is Canadian and you are raised in Western ways. But your blood is one hundred percent Slav. You will always be different because your blood is pure. No matter what anybody tells you, always be proud you come from a race of survivors. Those fucking Muslims turned our hair black and our skin dark but they couldn't destroy the purity of our culture. Look at them now! They live in caves, dream about past glory and blow themselves up. For 500 years they ruled a great empire and now they're dying slowly. Now the cannibal Americans are devouring the world but Serbia will never be eaten. Have I told you where our family comes from?"

Tata told me that a lot of times but I think he likes to talk to about it.

"No, Tata."

"A Serbian area in northern Croatia called Krajina. This is where the best Serbian warriors were born through history. At the height of our empire eight hundred years ago, our kings would go out of their way to recruit warriors from that area. You have warrior blood in you."

"Yes, Tata. Tata?"

"Speak, son."

"Why aren't you happy the bombing ended?"

"The bombing never ends. The bombing has been going on for six hundred years and it will continue for six hundred more. The Balkans have never known more than sixty

years of peace. Empires have always used us as puppets in their games. But we will survive this American occupation like we survived under the Turk.”

“They’re not going to bomb us anymore, are they?”

“Hear me, son. I haven’t told you this because I didn’t want you to be upset. About a month ago your cousin Nena was in labour in a Belgrade hospital. The hospital was beside a military barracks. The Americans bombed the barracks when she was about to give birth. The force of the blast blew in the windows of the hospital. A piece of glass stuck in her stomach and killed her baby. Luckily the doctor removed the glass in time to save her. But then another bomb dropped and it missed the barracks and it hit the hospital. The ceiling caved in and it crushed Nena. Has the bombing ended for our family? The Americans have spilled our blood and we won’t forget. One day we will have our revenge!”

I used to talk to Nena on the phone a lot. That was before the war started. She was Tata’s sister’s daughter. She was going to come to live with us after she made her baby.

“Enough about the bombing for now. Remember, stand beside me and don’t say a word.”

“Yes, Tata.”

We turn into the driveway of a small brick house that has an American flag and a Canadian flag hanging above the front door. We go along the driveway that goes beside the house into the backyard. There is Brick in the backyard and his friends are there. They’re drinking beer and they’re throwing a football around to each other. I’m really scared. My stomach is crushing my guts again. I don’t see Mr. Wuhl anywhere but I don’t know what he looks like. I hope he isn’t home.

Tata parks the car. Brick sees the car, squinting his eyes. He sees me inside, then he grins. He looks at his friends, then he says something to them. His friends start laughing. I lower my head. I don't want to get out of the car. Tata takes off his glasses and he puts them on the dashboard, then he gets out of the car, slamming the door closed. He goes around to the door on my side, waiting. His face goes red, then he bangs on the window. My legs don't want to move. Then Tata opens the door and he pulls me out by my arm. He pulls me along toward Brick and his friends but my eyes keep looking at the ground. Then I look up. Brick is grinning at us, still and he is walking toward us. His friends are walking behind him. My eyes look down again.

"Afternoon, sir. Can I help you?" Brick asks Tata.

"Yes, I think you help me."

I didn't hear Tata talk in English since forever. He talks pretty good. I think he has to talk a lot in English at the restaurant.

"This is my son."

"Hello, there!"

Tata lifts my chin. I'm looking up now but I wish I was looking down, still.

"You do this to my son?"

"Do what?"

"Don't play game! My son say you break his nose."

"Sir, you're trespassing on private property. You might want to control your temper."

"Stop your game! Tell me truth!"

"I no nose-break your son."

Brick made fun of Tata's accent. I look at Tata. His face goes even redder. A vein goes out of his neck. He goes one step closer to Brick.

"Yes you do! My son say you break his nose!"

Brick goes one step closer to Tata.

"Easy there, sir. I didn't touch your son."

Tata is a little taller than Brick. He is looking down at him. Brick squeezes his fists at his sides. His friends are staring at me. My legs go hard like tree trunks.

"Very easy beat up young weak boy."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You do! Maybe you don't like if big man threaten you?"

"You threatening me?"

"I threaten you leave my son or will be problem!"

Brick stops grinning. His face goes calm like a frozen face. He takes the front of his baseball hat, then he turns it to the side. Then he hits Tata's nose with his forehead! Tata falls backward. Brick punches him three times more in the face. Tata lands on his back. His eyes are closed. He shakes his head. He opens his eyes. They're grey and shiny. Blood goes out of his nose. I look at Brick. He is doing a weird dance for his friends. They laugh. I look at Tata. He wipes the blood under his nose. He tries to stand up. He falls on his butt. I want to go help him. My legs won't let me. Tata stands up. He wobbles left and right. He squints. He can't see anything. Brick runs at Tata. He kicks him in the stomach. Tata flies back. His feet are up off the ground. He lands on his butt. He falls over on his side. He throws up a lot of wine. Brick stands over him.

“Now get off my property. Go back to your country and rape some more women. That’s all you Serb savages are good at.”

Brick spits on Tata, then he starts walking away. Tata tries to grab his leg but he kicks Tata’s hand away, then he walks back toward his friends. Brick beat up Tata. He is ugly and he is mean but he never gets mad, though. He is really calm when he beats up Gus and me.

I look at Tata. He starts standing up again, wobbling. Purple wine and red blood is over all his beard, his neck, and his shirt. He grabs my arm and he drags me toward the car. My legs can’t walk, almost. I look back at Brick and his friends. They’re staring. Brick winks at me, grinning.

Tata opens the door, then he pushes me into the car, then he wobbles around the front of the car to his side. Then he comes inside. Then he starts the engine, then he drives backward out of the driveway onto the street. Then we’re going down the street.

He is really sad now. His face is going whiter than his beard when it doesn’t have blood and wine on it. His eyes look like grey marbles. A little more blood is going out of his nose, curling over his lip into his mouth. He is staring straight ahead at a red light that is coming closer and closer. He is speeding up the car.

“Tata? Tata!?”

He is ignoring me. He is driving faster and faster straight toward traffic that is crossing in front of us. I grab the door handle. Then I push my feet against the floor. I squeeze my teeth and I close my eyes. I listen to a million cars that are honking right in front of us. Then all around us. Then behind us. I open my eyes. We didn’t die!

Life is weird a lot of times. That doesn't mean I want to die. I want to be a lot more with Tata and Mama. I want to grow up more. Tata thinks everybody goes to hell when they die. I don't ever want to go to hell. I don't like fire or hotness. I like the winter. Everything is white. That reminds me of Tata.

His bottom lip is shaking. His forehead wrinkles. Then a tear falls from his right eye. Tata's eyes are starting to cry! I didn't see his eyes cry before, never one time. He is really sad about Mama. I want to tell him to not be sad but my mouth won't let me.

I would say if my mouth let me, "Don't cry, Tata. Mama is going to come back and Basha is going to come back. I'm going to be stronger. I'm going to practise boxing and I'm going to practise judo for a lot of hours every day. I'm going to beat up Brick really soon. I promise!"

Tata pulls over onto the side of the road. We're close to the mall. That is where we go sometimes when Gus and me get stoned.

"Get out."

He told me that in English.

"Why, Tata?"

He reaches over to me without looking at me. He undoes my seatbelt, then he opens my door, then he pushes me out of the car.

"Go home. Wait for me."

Why does he keep talking in English?

He closes the door, then he goes away. I don't know where he is going. I hope he doesn't go back to Brick's house to try to beat him up again. The reason Tata got beat up is because he is drunk. It is easy to get beat up when you're drunk. Tata wasn't going to

hurt him at all. He wanted to yell at him to leave me alone. Tata thinks that is wrong to beat up somebody that isn't your size and your strongness, or for no reason. Nicole says Gus asks for it because he has a big mouth. That is true but Gus is trying to be strong, though. Brick picks on us all the time first. He broke Gus' pinky finger today. The doctor at the hospital gave Gus pain pills. He swallowed too many pain pills and we got really stoned, then he went to sleep on Hank's couch. Byung and me carried him to the bus stop, then we put him on the bus to go home.

Byung told me to go visit Nicole and him later on today. He lives in a neighbourhood on the other side of the mall. I don't want to be by myself now. I really want to get stoned again.

I go to the neighbourhood on the other side of the mall where Byung lives with his parents in a house that is bigger than Tata and Mama's house. His parents own six or seven convenience stores in Windsor. They live really good. I didn't know you could live so good from owning convenience stores until I met Byung. I go to the front door, then I knock on the front door. I hope they're inside.

"Who is it?" Byung asks.

"Milan."

"Dude."

Byung opens the door, then a big pile of smoke runs over my face. That smells really good. Byung's eyes aren't open, almost. They look like black scars on his face. I think he is weird to be getting stoned in his parents' house. He told me they don't know what pot is. He sprays air freshener in the house every day. Both of his parents work all

day long, then they come home at night. If they smell pot when they come home, then they ask him what that is. He tells them Nicole was cooking something weird. Nicole is sitting on the couch and she is smoking a bowl in front of the tv.

“What’s up? Where you comin’ from?” Byung asks me.

“I was with Tata...at the mall.”

“Cool.”

Byung and me sit down on the couch. Byung sits beside Nicole, then he picks up his Playstation joystick. Nicole puts her hand on his leg, then she rubs his leg. Icicles tickle into my spine.

“Tata. That’s so cute,” Nicole tells me.

“What do you call your mom, dude?” Byung asks me.

“Mama.”

“Seriously?” he asks me.

I nod my head.

“That’s too funny,” Nicole tells me.

“Why?”

“Because you sound like a retard.”

“I’m not, though.”

“I know. All I said is you sound like one.”

I want to tell her to stop calling me that. People call me that a lot. She rolls her eyes at me, then she looks back at the tv. We were watching a porno movie at her house one time and the man and the girl in the porno movie were making it like how dogs make it. The girl was screaming really loud and she was making weird faces. I asked everybody,

“Is that hurting her?” Then she asked me, “Are you retarded? She’s having fun.” Then I told her, “That sounds like she’s hurting.” Then she told me, “People make loud noises when they’re screwing. It means they’re having fun.” Then I told her, “That is really weird.” Then she told me, “No offense, okay? But you might be retarded.”

“Can I please have a bowl?” I ask Byung.

“For sure, dude. Grab.”

Nicole packs a bowl for me, then she gives it to me and a lighter. I light up the bowl, then I inhale really deep. Then all of my body goes away and my head becomes shining snow. I’m not sad about Tata anymore. It is okay to get stoned because when you go normal again, the things that make you sad come back to your head.

I look at the tv. Byung is playing Doom.

“When did you get Doom?”

“On the way back from Hank’s.”

“I swear to God I coulda killed Gus today,” Nicole tells us.

“Why?”

“Because he almost told Hank about Byung and I.”

I really want to know if they’re making it. I want to be sure they’re not hurting each other. I don’t like it if my friends are hurting each other. I don’t think I can ask her about that. But I want to be stronger. I want to make Tata proud of me.

“Nicole?”

“What?”

“Are you guys...Are you guys really –”

“What, Milan?”

“Are you guys...you know –”

Nicole smiles at me, then she leans over to Byung and she kisses him really hard on the mouth. My head rolls into a snowball. Byung pushes Nicole away.

“Dude, I’m playin’ Doom.”

Nicole looks at me and she makes a little smile.

“Answer your question?”

“I guess so.”

“Don’t you dare tell Gus. I’ll kill you, I swear to God.”

“I won’t.”

Nicole scares me. She’s really strong for a girl.

“I don’t wanna give that scumbag any satisfaction.”

I don’t understand why Nicole hates Gus so much. It is making it hard for all of us to be together.

“Dude, you wanna play?”

“Can I?”

Byung gives me the joystick, then I start playing. I want to understand why Nicole hates Gus, still. That is really hard for me to ask her. I want to be strong for Tata, though.

“Nicole?”

“What?”

“Why do you... Why do you hate Gus?”

“I don’t hate him, okay? But he’s always starting shit just because he’s bored.”

“You mean with Brick?”

“I mean with Byung and I. Like, why was he bugging Byung before about his eyes? What was that all about?”

Doom is the best game ever. You have to shoot a lot of monsters and people. They're not real, though. That is why you don't have to feel bad when you kill somebody. I'm pretending I'm a Serbian in Krajina. I'm shooting a lot of invading Croatian soldiers. Tata told me if I was old enough, then he was going to send me to Yugoslavia to fight in the war. I wanted to go if I was old enough. But the war is over now. I hope they have another war, though. Then I can go and I can show Tata I'm strong.

“Byung and I don't want Gus coming over anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because we don't know what he's trying to prove. He's being a scumbag.”

“Gus is my best friend, though.”

I'm being really strong. I wish Tata was here to see me.

“We know, Milan and that's okay. You can hang out with him whenever you want and hang out with us when you don't.”

Nicole bosses around Byung a lot of times. I want to know if he doesn't want to be around Gus, either.

“Byung?”

“Dude, talk to her about it.”

“I don't think you can say bad stuff about Gus anymore,” I say to Nicole.

“But I am.”

“Stop, though.”

This is fun. I'm really stoned.

“When did you grow a spine?”

“I had one before.”

“Since when?”

“Since forever.”

“What is your problem?”

“What is YOUR problem?”

“Okay, you know what? You better run home to your Tata right now, you little retard!”

“I will!”

I drop the joystick onto the floor.

“Dude...”

I jump up off the couch. Icicles go stabbing through all my body. I start wobbling toward the door.

“When did you become such a scumbag, Milan? Gus is obviously rubbing off on you. Think about finding a new best friend, okay?”

I turn around, then I look at Nicole. Then I point my finger at her.

“Gus is the best guy ever! I think you’re a...I think you’re a...”

I want to use a bad word that is stuck in my mouth but I can’t, though. I don’t ever use bad words. They’re really weird. Bad words are for when you’re mad. I didn’t go mad in all my life, never one time. I’m not mad now. I’m pretending, only.

Nicole stands up really fast. She makes two dark lines between her eyebrows and she puts her hands on her hips. Byung is playing Doom.

“You think I’m a what? You want *me* to break your nose this time!?”

My legs turn me around, then they run me toward the door. Then my left hand reaches out and it opens the door.

“That’s right, run away and don’t come back! You and Gus belong...”

My legs run me out of the house, then I’m running down the street. I want to stop running but my legs won’t let me. Then I stop running.

I’m walking now. I’m breathing invisible snow that is snowing out of my head really fast. I wasn’t scared of Nicole or anything. I was being strong. I don’t know why my legs made me run away. I wanted to be stoned and I wanted to not worry about Tata. I feel worse than I did before. I’m really hungry. I don’t want to think about anything anymore. I’m going to turn off my head for a while. That is the only part of my body I can control.

I come home between when the sun is going away and the night is coming back. I hope Tata doesn’t yell at me if he is at home. I want to go into my room and I want to lie down on my bed in the dark. I go to the basement window to see if Tata is watching the news. He isn’t in the basement. I go around to the backyard, then I go over the fence, then I go into the garage. I open the door into the living room and a smelly cloud of Mama’s bean stew runs over my face. I knew Mama was going to come home! I run through the living room and I run up the stairs toward the kitchen. I didn’t take off my shoes, even.

“Mama!?”

“Micho, come to the kitchen!” she tells me really loud and happy.

I run into the kitchen and Mama is stirring her bean stew that is boiling on the stove. She turns around. She has wrinkles around her eyes like spider webs from smiling too big. Then she sees my nose and her smile goes away. She drops the spoon on the floor, then she puts her hands on her mouth, then her eyes start crying onto her hands. I stop running and I'm standing in front of her, almost.

"My nose doesn't hurt, Mama. When did you come home?"

She holds her arms out to me.

"Come here, my angel."

I go inside Mama's arms and she hugs me with them. I turn my face, then I press my cheek into her chest. I hug her back with my arms really tight. Mama's soft and warm and she smells like bean stew. She puts her mouth on top of my head, then she kisses it over and over. She did that every day when I came home from school before she went away. Her crying is making the top of my head warm and wet.

"When did you come home, Mama?"

"Are you okay, my angel?"

"Pain doesn't hurt. When did you come home?"

"Your father found me at the Milisavljevics this afternoon. He told me about everything that happened today. After dinner we will talk about what we are going to do."

Mama talks in English better than Tata. She talks in perfect English, almost. She talks better than me, even. She is really smart.

"That is fine. I knew you were going to come home."

"Did you?"

"I did. I'm really hungry."

“Yes! Tata told me how much you were missing my cooking the last two days.”

“When are we going to eat?”

“Where you go, Micho?” Tata tells me from behind me. He talked in English.

That is weird. He doesn't ever talk in English when he is at home.

I turn my head, then I see Tata coming toward us. I didn't let go of Mama, though. Tata hugs Mama and me really tight. He is warmer than Mama but he is hurting my nose a little. I can't breathe anymore. You die if you don't breathe for a long time. I don't want to die until Mama and Tata die.

“I'm dying, Tata!”

Tata lets go of us and he turns me around. His nose and under his eyes are purple and puffy where Brick's head hit him. He has little yellow buttons in his grey eyes that are looking down at me. His skin is pink now. He doesn't look like Tata anymore, almost.

“What, Micho?”

“I couldn't breathe.”

Tata smiles a little and Mama laughs, putting her arms back around me.

“I am sorry.”

“Don't be sorry, Tata.”

“I tell you go home. You see Gus?”

“No, I was...Everything was...”

“Okay, Micho. Is okay you see Gus?”

Tata is acting weird. I'm not stoned anymore and I know I'm not dreaming, either. That made all his madness go away when Brick's head hit his head, maybe.

“Come, Micho. We go now one place before dinner.”

“Where are we going?”

“Come.”

I turn my head and I look up at Mama. Then I open my eyes wider to ask if she knows where we’re going. She smiles down at me with her spidery eyes.

“Tata will not tell me where he is taking you. Go with him. When you come home we will eat and we will talk about what we are going to do.”

“Wait downstairs, Micho.”

“I love you, Mama.”

“I love you, too, my angel.”

Mama kisses me on top of my head one more time. Then I start going away but I turn around when I’m about to go downstairs and I see Tata and Mama hugging. Mama’s eyes are crying again and Tata is staring ahead out of the window. He is really calm. He didn’t use to like when Mama cried. He used to yell at her, “Stop crying!” I didn’t see him calm like that in all my life, never one time.

I go downstairs, then Tata comes downstairs. He doesn’t look at me, though. He puts his arm around me, then we go out to the car, then we get into the car. He starts the engine, then we leave. Now we’re driving in the night. Tata doesn’t tell me anything for a long time. His breathing is like soft hissing. He sounds like a baby snake. Then he starts hissing louder.

“Micho, hear me now. Important thing I tell you.”

“Tata, why are you talking in English?”

“Hear me, Micho.”

“Yes, Tata.”

“Today I leave you on street and go to Milisavljevic house. I know Mama there whole time but she don’t want see me. I tell her what happen today. I say sorry to Mama. I ask her come home. I stop fight with her. I tell her no Serbian in house. Only English. I call also Basha. I say to her sorry and ask her come home.”

Now Tata is hissing really loud, like a snake is stuck in his nose. He looks at his watch, then he starts driving faster. I wonder where we’re going but I’m not going to ask him where we’re going. He is trying to tell me something really important.

“Mama forgive me. I don’t know for Basha. They are right. I am wrong. Do you hear me, Micho?”

“Yes, Tata.”

Tata isn’t Tata anymore. My old Tata is great but I really love my new Tata. I’m really happy now because we’re going to be a family again like we used to be. Tata is going to bring Basha home, maybe. That would be great!

“Micho, forget all I say. About Serbia, America, blood. You are Canadian. Enjoy life here. Is good here. Is good for you. Study for future. Make girlfriend.”

Tata turns onto Vallières street where Belgrade is. I think that is where we’re going. Vallières street has a lot of different kinds of stores like pet stores, jewelry stores, clothing stores, hardware stores, video stores, and a lot of other kinds of stores. Tata pulls over onto the other side of the street from Belgrade that is a little up ahead, still. It has a big front window and *Belgrade Restaurant – Fine Serbian Cuisine* is painted on it. It is next to a Blockbuster on the right side, a Foot Locker on the left side, and an Office Depot is across the street. Tata called his restaurant Beograd when he first came here but nobody knew what that meant, then he changed it to Belgrade. That made him really mad.

Tata parks the car. He doesn't turn off the engine, though. He is staring at Belgrade. The streetlights are glowing but all the stores are closed and I can't see anybody around. The street is really quiet and shiny.

"What are we doing, Tata?"

He doesn't say anything for a few seconds, hissing. His grey eyes with yellow buttons go to his watch again. His face goes whiter like his old face. My old Tata is coming back a little. I love him, too.

"Micho, I make mistake whole life. Now I correct. You are man in house."

"What do you mean, Tata?"

He knows I'm a boy, still.

"Micho! Hear, please."

His eyes go to his watch again. He scratches his forehead in circles. His face goes red a little. Then he stops scratching his forehead, then the red on his face goes back to white, then it goes back to pink. He looks in my eyes. He is really serious but without any madness. He looks weird. That doesn't matter, though because we're going to be a family again like we used to be.

"You are good boy, Micho. Trust only Mama. Visit doctor with Mama. Doctor will help you. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Tata."

"Good."

He puts his hand on top of my head and he strokes my hair. His eyes go yellow. I'm really hungry. I can't wait to go home and I can't wait to eat bean stew with Mama

and Tata. Basha is going to come home for dinner. We're going to pick her up when we're coming home.

He stops stroking my hair, then his yellow eyes go to his watch. Then they go to Belgrade. He starts hissing really loud again.

“Okay, Micho. Look Beograd. Don't move eyes.”

My eyes go to Belgrade. They wait for a few seconds. The street is quiet and shiny.

A belly of fire comes out of the front window! Belgrade is blowing up! Flames are dancing where the window used to be. Smoke is curling around the streetlights. Belgrade is blowing up. My new Tata takes my face and he turns my face to his face. His eyes are grey and puddly. A snake is moving inside his forehead. His skin is pink like bubble gum. His eyes start crying. He kisses me all over my face. Belgrade is blowing up.

He turns my face to Belgrade, then he turns it back to his face.

“Do you see!? I am poison for you!”

He lets go of me. He blew up my old Tata's restaurant. He drives backward. He turns the car around. He is driving forward. I want to cry. My eyes won't let me. I want to scream. My mouth won't let me. I'm turning off my head.

I'm in the car with him in front of our house, sitting. I'm really hungry.

“Micho, get out from car.”

I get out of the car. He gets out of the car and he comes around to where I'm standing. I can't wait to come home. I can't wait to eat bean stew with my old Tata, Mama, and Basha.

He hugs me. He stops hugging me. He puts his red and puffy nose in front of my butterfly. His eyes are black with little yellow buttons.

"Go now to Mama. Go!"

He turns me around. He pushes me away. I fall onto my knees. That didn't hurt. I stand up. I turn back around. He is going back to the car.

My legs start running me toward him. My arms hug him. They press my face in his back really tight and my butterfly squishes my nose. I can't breathe. You die if you can't breathe for a long time.

He rips my arms away. He turns around. He turns me around. He pushes me really hard. I fall down on my hands and knees.

"Go to Mama!"

He goes to the car. He gets in. He goes away.

I'm really happy. We're going to be a family again like we used to be. I'm really strong and I'm going to beat up Brick. Then I will get revenge for my old Tata.

This province [Lower Canada] is already too much a french province for an english colony. To *unfrenchify* it, as much as possible...should be a primary object, particularly in these times...

A french system is an arbitrary system, because it is a military one, it becomes therefore the interest, not of englishmen only, but of the universe, to raise mounds against the progress of french power. To oppose it is a duty. To assist it...is criminal. To a certain extent the french language is at present unavoidable in this province; but its cultivation, beyond what may be necessary, so as to perpetuate it, in an english colony, can admit of no defence, particularly in the present times.

– From the *Quebec Mercury*,
an early anglophone newspaper (1805)

You say that the [French] Canadians use their privileges too freely for a conquered people, and you threaten them with the loss of those privileges. How dare you reproach them for enjoying the privileges which the British parliament has granted them... You ask absurdly whether the [French] Canadians have the right to exercise these privileges in their own language. In what other tongue could they exercise them? Did not the parliament of Great Britain know what their language was?

– From *Le Canadien*, an early francophone newspaper,
in response to the *Quebec Mercury* (1805)

[The] Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada.

It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to

g) promote the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins;

h) foster the recognition and appreciation of the diverse cultures of Canadian society and promote the reflection and the evolving expressions of those cultures;

i) preserve and enhance the use of languages other than English and French, while strengthening the status and use of the official languages of Canada.

– From the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1988)

Chapter 4

Border Town Baby

Thursday, June Tenth, 1999
4:38pm

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Life just keeps on getting better. I don't know how much more I can take.

For example: throwing the forty-yard pass to win WSSA; finally pulling the ripcord on Sophie; eight days away from finishing high school forever; and I just throttled some drunk old Serb. Get this: earlier today at school, about twelve-thirty, my boys and I were laying the beats to Pus and Retard, these two fags. We do it often. I shattered Retard's nose. Then, five minutes ago, hanging out with my boys in the backyard of my house, chugging beer, chucking the ball around, Retard shows up with his old man, who warns me to stop beating on his son, to pick on someone my own size. He gets up in my face with his boozy breath and his bloodshot eyes, threatening me on my property. So...I throttled his nose with my skull. You see, these brain-dead Serbs, they're raping women, butchering babies, genocide and whatnot. They seem to think that they deserve a bit of slack because they fought with the allies in World War I and II. They seem to think that it's their natural right to wipe out the Muslim because he enslaved them for half a millennium. Being the spawn of genetic turd left over from the Pleistocene, the Serb can't understand that revenge isn't a human right. Nobody deserves revenge. When you get the beats, it means you're weak. You deserved to get conquered and you have nothing to blame but the inferiority of your culture. No, I quite enjoyed throttling Retard's old man.

It's sweet to know that I'm doing my part, something moral. We should bomb those cunts until none of them are left.

It's the only way to be sure.

"That was awesome, chief," Jack says.

"Thing is," I say, "when he got up in my face I had to snap him 'fore he choked me with his breath."

"No shit," Rich says. "He had that drunk Elvis thing goin' on, man."

"I'm tellin' my grand-kids about that, brothers," Bruno says.

Let me tell you about my boys. Bruno was my center. He blocked every cunt that tried to sack me, flattened them into the dirt like flesh pancakes. He eats three whole chickens per day, benches four-fifty, spunks only in the off-season: marks of a true champion. Rich was my tight end. He did all the dirty work, the thankless tasks that you don't find in the stats; for example, he'd burrow a hole in the line so that the running back could gain three yards for the first down. After every game, for every tackle he let slip, he'd burn one in his thigh with a cigar. Jack was my wide receiver. Tall, lean, agile, he made sixty-two receptions this season. I'd throw the ball to a point on the field, he was always there, never a dropped ball, never a fumble. Out there playing the game, without my boys, I was nothing.

Nothing is out of the question. The world instead.

We just came into the kitchen for a celebratory shot of Gentleman Jack. Not every day do I get to throttle someone's old man. Last time I did that? Two years ago, rocked and ragged, I came home from this bender to find my old man sitting on his green leather lazyboy, watching tube. He never used to let me sit on his lazyboy, which irked me. So

when he got up to drain the squirrel, I figured that it was time to set things right. I sat down into the soup bowls molded by his ass-cheeks (My old man has a tiny ass and wishbone legs, but a colossal rock-hard belly; he doesn't walk, he shuffles, like a juggler balancing a ball on his nose.) and waited for him to come back. When he did, his face binged out like a hemorrhoid.

“Whadda ya doin’, you god-damned freeloada?”

“Shut up, I can’t hear the tube.”

He grabbed a hold of my arm. I pulled him down to the floor and mounted him, started filling him in the stomach and chest. And once in the nose.

Until that night, he used to like pushing me around, reminding me that he was the man of the house and whatnot. He didn't think that I'd be able to throttle him at least until I was eighteen. He was proud of me. After he wiped the blood from his nose, he held me in his arms for three to four seconds. We've been golden ever since; besides when he comes home with his workmates and I salute him with, “Zieg Heil!” That bungs him up.

“Chin chin, lads,” I say.

I lift my shot. My boys follow suit.

“To being invincible in every way,” Jack says. “Forever.”

“Amen, brothers,” Bruno says.

We chug them in unison. I close my eyes, the Jack slithering down my throat like a hungry snake. I open my eyes and huck the shot glass on the floor. It shatters.

“Nice,” Jack says.

“What're we doin' tonight, man?” Rich asks.

“Celebrating,” I say.

“Amen, brother,” Bruno says. “We gotta make this a night we never forget.”

“Let’s do something different,” I say. “Something we’ve never done before.”

So we stand around the kitchen for ten minutes, racking our skulls, but no ideas are coming. We’ve been chugging beer for two hours in the sun, which has sapped our juices, though I’m surprised that Jack, the smartest of us all, hasn’t come up with any sweet ideas. You see, my boy has never studied a day in his life, yet he gets straight A’s. He had his old man record all our games on a camcorder, used the footage to put together a highlight reel with the school’s A/V equipment. He sent the tape to four ivy league schools along with his brilliant stats, won full athletic scholarship to Yale. He’ll be second-string wide receiver next year, hump all the sweet cunt while he’s at it. The ones at our school think he’s Beauty. He humped most of them, in fact; not Sophie, the ugliest cunt I ever did see. No, I’m the ugliest cunt I ever did see. For three years we were a match made in Hell. I used to think that I couldn’t do any better, but I figured out this year that I won’t have these boils on my face for the rest of my life, as they’re starting to clear up, boil by boil. The scarring’s not too bad. Everything just keeps on getting better with age, I figured this out as well. Being a kid, teenager, twenties, thirties, forties.

Life takes time. It’s unstoppable.

Besides my old man and my mom, everyone calls me Brick. My real name is Gunther. My old man named me after his old man, this bricklaying Nazi who, after World War II, spent seven years in a Russian prison camp. When the commies let him go, he went back to Germany, moved back in with my grand-ma, who’d waited for him all those years. Not long after snapping off my old man inside her, he died of kidney failure.

In 1979 my 'rents went to Miami for their first wedding anniversary, first time in the States. They liked it so much that they decided to immigrate. My old man likes the beach; in fact, my earliest memory's of his gigantic snow-white belly dangling over his red Speedo banana hammock, taking pictures of my mom and me picking seashells out of the sand on Miami Beach. I was three or four.

I'm glad that I was born in the States, as football rules there, and if you play well, so do you. I got to playing when I was five. At twelve, my old man finally set up his own bricklaying company. We moved to Coral Gables, this upper middle-class suburb just south of Miami. I went to a new school. New kids always get hacked on. Some would stare me down, mostly the Cubans and niggers, trying to figure out what I was made of. I had to make an impression.

During lunch one day, on the basketball court in the park beside the school, a pack of snarling spectators encircled a small freckled kid getting hacked on by this nigger. I stepped up to him so that his nose was an inch from mine.

"Leave him alone."

He tried to punch my face. I dodged his fist and grabbed his arm, threw him over my hip, mounted him, pinned his arms under my knees, started slapping his face. Everyone laughed and whispered between themselves. From that day on, I got respect. It was sweet. I'd never helped anyone before, just acted without thinking: pure moral instinct.

The captains of the football team, Jose Gonzalez and Mario Fernandez, had witnessed the event and recommended that I try out for the senior team. I was in grade six, had had a major growth spurt the previous year and was five-feet-ten by my twelfth

birthday. I haven't grown since then, besides in width. I made first string offensive and defensive lineman. I was set. Football gave me status; I dedicated my life to it. I liked game days, wearing our jerseys around school, cunts smiling at you, knowing you were getting blown if you won the game; the pep rallies and cheerleaders, everyone checking you out, wishing they were you. During that time, I never hacked on anyone. I used my status to protect the little boys who couldn't defend themselves. I liked doing it.

The night after I'd made the team, Jose and Mario took me out to the Falls, which became our stomping ground, this outdoor shopping mall with fake waterfalls dumping into a fake river (We'd shoulder-tap these Cubans and niggers that hung out there in front of the liquor store; they'd get you whatever you wanted for an extra five bucks.) and bought a forty-pounder of Jack. I'd never drank before. Jose's single mom, this nasty Cuban cunt who'd won a swack of cash in her divorce settlement, even though she'd fucked her husband's boss, bought a giant boathouse. She went out of town for the weekend; Jose threw a bender. This drinking contest with the forty-pounder was going down in the kitchen, everyone passing it around, trying to take a bigger swig than the last one. When it got to me, I felt like swigging a shitload more than everyone else: out of instinct, you see. I sucked in a huge breath and chugged about a third of the bottle. While everyone stared at me like I was God with a twelve-inch hammer, the Jack spread like a brush-fire through my belly. I ran outside and spent an hour spewing into the ocean.

Time stopped ticking. I was alive.

Mario's old man (who worked for this Colombian coke cartel) would get us pure uncut blow, which we'd stash in the wall of Jose's basement behind the light switch panel. On the weekends, we'd bump a few lines each (I usually did four) and go water-

skiing with Jose's mom's boat in Chicken Key. The sun lay on the ocean like a silk bed sheet. The blow, the sun, the ocean reminded me that the world was mine.

Those were my good memories of Miami.

Life got fucked-up at thirteen. Out of nowhere, these fat red boils started growing on my temples, forehead, cheeks, nose, chin, neck: new ones everyday. My old man took me to a dermatologist, who put me on Accutane, which didn't do shit. They just kept popping on up. Mario and Jose stopped hanging out with me, though I was one of the best players on the team, and cunts started ignoring me as well, yet I had everything that I needed to be a king, besides a mug of beauty. Blood started searing through my flesh. Nobody was taking away my sanity and the respect that I'd fought so hard to win. I had to throttle another skull.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I set my sights on the one that everyone feared, Chucho Hernandez, a senior, this Cuban cro-mag with bullet scars in his cheeks. In the courtyard café during lunch, I got up in his face.

“Go back to Cuba, commie spick.”

“I bury you where you stand, puto.”

“Three-thirty on the court.”

The rest of the day I was quite bunged up, white-hot, spewing into the toilet, the hour of truth needling my skull.

I went out at three-thirty to find the court packed in with bloodthirsty spectators, cunts climbing the fences to get a better view. After Chucho finished his faggot Karate stretches, we circled each other for five minutes, until someone yelled, “Get on with it, ya

fuckin' pussies!" He clocked me in the cheek with a spin-kick. Blood squirted out of my boils onto his shoe. I dove in for his legs, lifting him up off the ground, slammed his head on the concrete. Blood shot out of his ears. I mounted him and just kept filling him, even after he'd gone out cold, his face opening up in rivets of blood. Then, like a miracle, I throttled his nose. The most beautiful sound that I'd ever heard: cartilage shards grinding like shattered glass against my knuckles. The crowd fell silent. I sat there on top of Chucho, closed my eyes, replaying the sound over and over in my skull.

I felt like spunking.

I got up off of Chucho, stepped on his chest for good measure, was unsatisfied, spat on his face, and looked out over the crowd, asked, "Anyone else want a title shot?" I made it clear that, from then on, if anyone ignored me, I'd send them down to their maker. I went up to Jose and Mario, who'd been watching the massacre, and told them that if they kept being unfriendly, I'd snap their necks.

We were golden again.

Not long after, fagged and shamed, poor Chucho killed himself. I felt bad about that for some time. Now that I'm older, I know that he did all of us a favor; but I'll always remember him fondly as my first shattered nose. That being said, the day was quite important for me for another reason. I figured out that to get people to respect you is to bung them up with fear. This is what I've been doing ever since. I like it. I'll be doing it the rest of my long life. And I don't rage anymore. True, here and there, some things irk me. But life is just so long that I'd hate having to rage though all of it.

I keep my blood cold.

Though my life changed again in grade eight. There'd been some home invasions around our neighbourhood, people getting shot for their tubes and toasters. Our house hadn't been hit yet, but just in case, my old man bought a twenty-two.

Late one night, hanging with Jose and Mario in my garage, doing bumps, talking smack, I heard a crash inside the house. I ran on in and – POP! POP! – watched my old man cap this Nigger trying to steal our tube.

The next day, he told me that we were moving to Windsor, Canada, where one of his boys from the Fatherland had set up a bricklaying company. They'd agreed to hook up as fifty-fifty business partners. I got the spiel about Canada being safe and clean, Canadians kind and mild. I could live to see eighteen. I was irked for two days, but then I remembered that Jose and Mario weren't my real friends anyway.

We moved to Windsor in time so that I could start grade nine. I'd expected everyone to be nice. That no one would give a shit about my fucked-up face. But I got the same cold stares and chuckles behind my back. I didn't get the rage, just knew that once again I'd have to make an impression.

Brent Rice, a senior on the eight year program, voted "Least Likely to Succeed" by the graduating class, this barrel-chested white-power skinhead, met me after school in the park. Like Miami, the park was beside the school, and like Miami, rabid spectators encircled us. This time, instead of doing the dance for five minutes, I dove right in and tackled him against a brick concession stand, pressed his face against the wall, scraped it all the way down to the ground. Spatters of blood and chunks of his flesh wedged between the bricks. The scraping bent his nose so that it angled left. This happened five years ago; three months ago, I saw him downtown. His nose is still bent.

I like to make a lasting impression.

No one disrespected me again. The myth that Canadians are nicer than Americans, it irks me. In Miami and Windsor, besides my boys, my rents and Sophie, I've never been sure of who likes me and who wants to spill my blood. I have to watch my back at all times. Life is just softer here, none of the hard stuff of Miami, no Colombian coke cartels, few home invasions, carjackings and whatnot. I like it here. I'm never leaving. I can do whatever I want and get away with it. For three years now, on the weekends, I've been laying bricks for my old man and his business partner. An apprenticeship. I might take over the company in a few years, build an empire, a bricklaying chain that'll span the continent. Or I might go to university. My old man tells me that I have a good skull for business. Whatever I do, I'm going to get rich, though I'll avoid the fakery that goes along with it. My old man did a good job of this. He may not be rich, but he's built quite the sweet life for my mom and me. He left his country behind, but never forgot his roots.

Thing is, in the last five years, I've asked him a bunch of times about the Fatherland: World War II, Hitler, the Holocaust, but he always dodges the topics. When we moved here, he put up a Canadian and an American flag above our front door. I asked him why he didn't put up a German one.

"Nevamind, you!"

What he did tell me is that, if I go to Germany, I won't find one German flag up in any city. That has to be a lie. How can you live with yourself if you're not proud of who you are? My old man once asked me who I am.

"Part German, part American, part Canadian – all Brick."

5:02pm

“I got it,” I say to my boys. “Let’s get rocked and hit the casino. Along the way, we’ll roll someone for cash.”

“You think our fake IDs’ll work there?” Bruno asks.

“Course,” I say. “Don’t worry. We’ll just have to behave. There’ll be lots o’ cops.”

“Sounds good, chief,” Jack says. “We got enough booze?”

“We’ll just drink the Jack,” I say. “I’ll buy the old man some more tomorrow.”

I take the Jack with us to the living room, laying the roots down on my old man’s lazyboy. Bruno turns on the tube. Some catwalk fashion show is on. I like models, the skinny ones, weak and delicate. Sophie was a twig. And she’d yammer on about how fat she was. She’d always eat right, three meals per day, all the food groups and whatnot. Then she’d spew it all out. Or she’d chuff down laxatives and dump it out. She was bent that way, but at least it kept her skinny. She ran like a fiend, ten kilometers every night. Her legs, arms, abs were quite striated, green veins bulging out of her forearms and calves. She was my first kiss, first hump, first everything. Truth is, I loved her. She was loyal. She always did whatever I asked: hung out with my boys and me watching football, never whining or sulking; made us food or drinks when we were hungry or thirsty; waited around for me after I’d had a scrap and nursed my wounds. Never told me to stop scrapping. Never told me to stop throttling Gus, aka Pus, her faggot little brother. She knows that I’m trying to help him. He fags himself out to be different, his black makeup and duds. He doesn’t have an old man to whip him into line. He needs guidance. He needs me to show him that being different is just a lot of fakery. It’s a costume. I’m trying

to help him take off his costume, you see. Though I admire his guts. Today, he said to me, "Chew my dick, pizza face!" I had to break his little finger for that. I also told him that tonight I was coming over to rape Sophie, and that afterwards, if he couldn't tell me what had been on the news, I was going to kill him. I admit that I got carried away. And I'm not actually going to their house tonight. But the kid's got quite a talent for irking me. I'm trying to help him channel that talent into something more productive, like his own self-education; once he figures out that everyone wants the same thing, he'll understand that to get it he has to knock everyone else out of the competition. He wants to be different. Fair enough. Soon he'll learn that our differences don't penetrate the surface. No, Sophie knew that I have a special place in my skull for Gus. I like that kid. He oozes spunk. If I can beat the fag out of him, he'll be hard when he grows up.

The best thing about Sophie was that she was almost as ugly as I am. She had this wandering eye, always looking for me, always had ten to fifteen zits on her forehead and chin, ripe whiteheads filled with pus, which I'd rub my face against when we were humping. And watch them burst. Sometimes, we'd blow out of town and spend the weekend at my 'rents' cottage on Wasaga Beach: hang out, talk smack about how great it is to be ugly, go for walks, swim, cheesy romantic shit. I liked it all. At first.

Two years later, she started losing it. One moment, she'd be climbing all over me, telling me she loved me; the next, bawling her eyes out, telling me everyone hates her. That being my girlfriend is the only reason anyone talks to her. But that was why she'd gone out with me in the first place, you see.

She'd dug her way out of her own skull.

One night, three months ago, we went to a flick. Afterwards, we were walking around downtown. She accused me of eyeing other cunts passing by, yammered on about how I didn't love her anymore. How I wanted to hump other cunts, how I'd humped a handful already. It wasn't true, not yet, but she didn't let up. When we got back to my house, she started screaming at me like a gutted vulture, my 'rents asleep upstairs. I just threw her out.

By next morning, she'd left thirteen messages on the answering machine, begging me to forgive her. It was too late. I tried to dump her. She told me that, if I did, she'd blow her head off. Without me she had no reason to live. I told her that you don't live for other people, you live for yourself: a simple fact that I've learned over my long life. She didn't get it. I was fucked. If I dumped her, and she offed herself, I'd feel bad, you see. I racked my skull for two and a half months, trying to figure out how to pull the ripcord on her.

Then last weekend, Jack was throwing this bender at his house. I told him what had gone down between Sophie and me. With his cunt-chewing smile, he said that if I did something to Sophie, something so fagged-out and unforgivable, she'd stop loving me, start hating me, dump me. She'd get on with her life, forget about me forever. Jack, my boy, the genius with everything but an ugly face, had come up with the master plan.

We rounded up the first offensive line, brought them upstairs into his 'rents' bedroom, lined them up in single file against the wall, had them drop their pants and stroke their hammers, until they were goosed. I went downstairs and found Sophie, brought her back upstairs, led her into the bedroom. The sight of all that hard meat bunged her up. Straight-faced, I said to her, "Suck these boys off. Show me how much

you appreciate us winning WSSA. We made the school a happier place. If you love me, you'll do it."

The colour drained out of her face into her eyes, the wandering one spasming. Before she could start crying, she bolted out of the room, left the bender. My throat seized up on me. I doubted what I'd done. The love that I used to feel for her started creeping on back. This went on for three minutes, stopped. I realized that I'd had to do it, you see.

Jack's master plan wasn't finished yet. The following Monday at school, my boys and I spread the rumor that she'd sucked off the O-line at the bender. That I hadn't known about it. That I was crushed. That I'd trusted her, that she'd betrayed me. And I never wanted to talk to her again. She was weak, but nobody would ever put up with that much abuse.

Since Monday, she hasn't been to school. Monday and Tuesday she kept calling me to chew me out. I just kept telling her to fuck off, hanging up on her. I'm sure that we're through. Down the road, when she's over me, she'll thank me. I miss not having a girlfriend the last four days, but I won't have these boils for much longer, and when they're gone, cunts won't find me ugly anymore. I'll be running my own empire. I'll be rich.

When you're rich, you're a cunt magnet.

5:46pm

My old man and my mom walk in, arms full of groceries.

"Good aftanoon, gentlemen," my mom says.

"Whadda ya doin', you bums?" my old man asks.

“Hangin’ out,” I say.

“Vautching beautiful ladies on ze television?” my mom asks.

They put the grocery bags down on the kitchen counter. My old man spots the broken glass. His cheeks light up like lamps under his flesh.

“Jesus Christ, Guntar! I gonna beat da shit oudda you in a minute!”

“Sorry. Bruno said he’d clean it up.”

I look at Bruno and nudge my head towards the kitchen. He gets up without flinching. He’s my boy.

“Guntar!” my mom says. “Vaut on erz did you do zat for?”

“Actually, Mrs. Wuhl,” Jack says, “we’re celebrating today.”

“Celebrating, Jack? Vaut for?”

“A kid from our school came over here with his dad this afternoon. He’d told his dad about how we’ve been good role models at school this year. The dad wanted to thank us personally.”

“Is zat zo?”

“It’s true, Mrs. Wuhl,” Rich says.

“His old man,” I say, “wanted to give us a check for ten thousand bucks, to help us with our university tuitions, but we politely turned him down.”

“Ya!” my old man says. “Nevamind you, bullshita you. Don’t make Bruno to clean it up. You clean it up!”

“Rudy...,” my mom says, trying to unbung him.

“No worries, Mr. Wuhl,” Bruno says.

As Bruno sweeps up the glass, my old man puts the groceries in the fridge: one carton lactose-free milk, one carton egg whites, one container brussel sprouts, one package tofu, two packages boneless chicken breasts, and so on. My mom comes over to the edge of the living room to get a closer look at the catwalk models. She'll take this opportunity to ask us if we throttled anyone today. If we've given any thought to living more peaceful lives. She started taking yoga nine months ago, reading up on Hindu philosophy, yammering on about chakras and whatnot, on this live-a-healthy-and-peaceful-life kick. Since my old man had a mild heart attack ten months ago, she hasn't cooked any red meat, has forbidden salt in the house, has put my old man on a low-fat diet. He's lost forty pounds in the last eight months. It's like I have another Sophie on my hands. My mom smiles at the tube.

"Zose girls are beautiful, no?"

"Not," Jack says, "as beautiful as you, Mrs. Wuhl."

"Oh, stop it, Jack! You are ze devil. Zose girls are extremely beautiful."

"No, they're not," I say.

Everyone has an ugly face. Mine is the ugliest.

"Vye not, Guntar?" my mom asks.

"No one's beautiful."

"Zat is not true. Ev'ryvun is beautiful in zeir own vay. Try to see ze mystical behind ze everyday, Guntar. Ze verld is not defined by numbas."

"Numbers don't lie, mom."

"Neiza does beauty."

"Numbers define beauty, mom."

“Is zat zo? How?”

“Something about geometric proportions of eyes to nose, chin to groin, ass to mouth. I don’t know, ask a cosmetologist.”

“Oh, you are zo cleva, Guntar. Your zhit has a perfume fragrance.”

“Are you beautiful, mom?”

“Guntar!” my old man yells.

“Just asking a question.”

“Ya! I ansa your question. Your mudda is beautiful.”

“So am I.”

“You are, Guntar,” my mom says.

“Thanks.”

My old man spots his bottle of Jack on the living room coffee table, points at it.

“Is ’at mine?”

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I’ll buy you some more tomorrow.”

“Nevamind you buy some tomorrow. Stop drinking my alcohol and buy your own, you god-damned freeloada!”

“Relax. I said I’ll get you back tomorrow. I’ll buy you two bottles.”

“Rudy, please vautch your langvidge. Vee have zuch vell-behaved guests. Jack, do you have a girlfriend?”

“New one every day, Mrs. Wuhl.”

“Oh! You are ze man of love?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hm....and if you have zo much love in your heart, vill you share it vis Guntar?”

"I'm bursting with love, mom."

"Zen share it, Guntar. Ev'ryvun must share. Imagine zis verld if vee cared more about each uzza zan vee did about owazelves."

"That's impossible, Mrs. Wuhl," Jack says. "We're too selfish."

"Vye yes, Jack. But it is a beautiful dream, don't you sink?"

"I suppose."

"Zo? Dreams can be reality."

"You're losing us, mom."

"Guntar, imagine a verld vizout zelfish people."

"What for? It'll never happen."

"It can happen in your heart, if you believe zat ze happiness of uzzas is more important zan your own."

"I made her happy for three years, mom."

"Did you? But you do zumsing despicable, no?"

"What do you mean?"

My mom tilts her head forward, glares at me.

"Don't worry. I didn't hurt her. She's fine."

"Zen vye did she ztop viz her calling?"

"I have no idea."

My mom lifts her head, sniffs the air.

"Do you smell perfume, Guntar?"

My mom's eyes, these balls of stone impaled in her face, resume their glare. She's been doing this for eight months. Once per week, usually Sunday nights over dinner, she throws these abstractions at me. And glares.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

She doesn't know what she gave birth to.

8:53pm

We finish up my old man's bottle and hit the road. We're a little rocked. Before we make our way down to the casino, we need cash. No way any of us would spend our own to gamble, as you'd have to be a slobbering cunt to do that. We've laid our roots down in the dirt, in a dark alley between the Beer Store and the law offices of Katzenburg & Associates, on Gloucester street just north of Wyandotte, around the corner from the Detroit tunnel. Waiting for a rich cunt to swing by on foot. After he's bought his beer, we'll follow him at a distance of one block, until he hits an empty residential area. Then when we've closed in on him, I'll throttle him and thief his cash. If he's dry, we'll head on back and try again.

"I'll take first watch, brothers," Bruno says.

Bruno cracks open a beer and peeks his head around the corner, his eyes glued to the front entrance.

"So what're we doin' this summer, man?" Rich asks.

"My boys," I say, "can work with my old man and me if you want, you know that. He'll start you off at ten per hour. You could make six grand by summer's end. Rich, you figured out where you're goin' in September?"

“Yeah, think I’m goin’ to Western.”

“S’alright.”

“Yeah...I thought about McMaster, but...football team’s better at Western. I think Dyl an’ Lance an’ Jay are goin’ too, so...”

“S’alright. Still see you on the weekends an’ whatnot?”

“For sure, man. I’ll come down. Think you’re stayin’ here?”

“For a year, at least. My old man’s gonna start teachin’ me how he runs the company. Might go to school in a year. Haven’t figured it out.”

“You gotta come check out my games next year. Bring Bruno, man. Show him what a fuckin’ university looks like.”

Bruno turns to us, black lines carved across his forehead, his eyes bulging out. He didn’t get into university. After I’ve set up my empire, I’ll give him work and pay him well. I take care of my boys.

“Bruno doesn’t need school. He has me.”

I nod to Bruno, grinning. He nods back.

“You know it, brother.”

“When you leavin’ for training camp?” Rich asks Jack.

“Mid-July. But my Dad and I are driving down to New Haven at the end of June. I’m supposed to meet the coach and the vets, shit like that. Should be awesome.”

“I’m still pissed,” I say, “that it’s just gonna be Bruno and me next year.”

“Hold on, brothers,” Bruno says. “We got one.”

Bruno waves us over. We get up and have a peek at our potential investor.

“Perfect,” I say.

A bald cunt, fortyish, this rich twig in deck shoes, a yellow polo shirt, whistling, pulls his wallet from the back pocket of his Bermuda shorts as he walks into the Beer Store. His wallet looks fat.

“Alright,” I say. “When we get him to a safe place, he’s mine.”

“You know it, man,” Rich says.

We grab our beers and wait. A minute and a half later, he comes back out, still whistling. We give him a one block head start, then follow him at his pace. He crosses Wyandotte and heads down an unlit residential street. We start closing in on him as darkness swallows up the streetlights behind us. I speed up ahead of my boys. I’m ten feet behind him now. He turns up a driveway, where he lives, still whistling. I look around to make sure that neighbours aren’t peering through their windows or standing on their lawns. I don’t see anyone. I run up behind him and tackle him face down. His six pack sails onto the lawn. Before he can scream, I take the back of his head, smash his nose on the driveway. Crackling cartilage echoes off the houses. It didn’t sound quite as beautiful as when I use my fist. More muted, like his nose had been wrapped in a towel. Still, I replay it twice in my head, looking around to make sure we didn’t stir up any of the neighbours. I still don’t see anyone. I turn back to the poor cunt, out cold on his stomach, between my legs, blood seeping out of his nose, filling in the cracks of the driveway. I pull the wallet out of his pocket, open it and find a wad of bills, which I take, then return the wallet to his pocket, and head back to my boys, counting each bill one by one.

“How much we got, man?” Rich whispers.

“Hold on, I’m still counting.”

Now we're making our way towards the casino. We head on back to Wyandotte. I finish counting.

"Two-twenty."

"Not bad," Jack says.

"We'll just have to keep winning, won't we?" I ask.

I divide the earnings, fifty bucks each, keep the extra twenty.

"I'm hittin' the slots, brothers," Bruno says.

"What?" I ask. "You wanna smell piss and shit all night? We'll stick together and play blackjack. S'the only way we can make something worthwhile out of this."

"If we win big," Jack says, "we should put all our cash together and go some place."

"Where, man?" Rich asks.

"New York," Jack says.

"Fuck the States," I say. "We'll rent a car and head up to Toronto. Get a hotel room, few hookers, some blow and just live like kings for a night."

"I'm in," Rich says.

"Why're you so eager to get to the States?" I ask Jack. "You're goin' in a month anyway."

"Never been to New York. Always wanted to see it."

"It's like Windsor, only bigger. Got everything you need right here, trust me."

"I know it."

"Better know it. Don't be goin' to the ivy leagues and forgettin' your roots."

"Fuck that."

We start crossing a wide empty dirt patch, where they're building another casino parking lot. The casino's about half a mile in front of us.

"I swear," I say to Jack, "if you forget us, we'll drive on down there an' kick your ass. S'at clear?"

Jack splits his face with a smile and lifts his arms up for a hug.

"Gimme some props, chief."

I wrap him in a bear hug and lift him up off the ground, start mock-raping him.

"Oh yeah, baby! Stick me! Stick me!"

Rich scoots around behind Jack and grabs his hips, pumps away at his ass. Bruno stares at us like a kid the first time that he sees his parents humping.

"That's right," Rich yells, "it's a fuckin' Jack sandwich tonight, man!"

Jack starts howling, wrestles himself free of Rich and me.

"Fuckin' homos!" Jack yells between convulsions of laughter.

"You need to be prepared," I say. "Know how many cardigan-wearin', pipe-smokin', pole-throatin' faggots there are at ivy leagues? We're just preparin' you for the inevitable, you see."

"BITCH-ASS FAGGOTS!!!" someone yells out from across the street in that guttural Detroit nigger twang.

I take a look: five of them in oversized duds, older than us, just standing there, yapping and cackling, staring us down. They figure that they can come to our town and snap off their crack-smoking mouths whenever they please. It irks me how these flesh-wasting cunts come on over across the border, acting like they own us, exploiting our hospitality and cheap dollar.

“Come again?” I ask.

“Ya heard me, beeyotch!” he yells.

My boys’ pale faces show me that they’d rather sit this one out.

“Alright, boys. This is what it’s all about.”

They just keep on staring at me, choked with doubt.

“Come on, boys! We’re being fronted by a bunch of crackheads in our own backyard. Just stick to the I-formation and follow my lead.”

I huck the beer in my hand at the niggers, just missing one of their heads. The bottle shatters behind them against the back wall of this Shinner restaurant called Lo Fung, which shut down for a while last year for serving stray cat meat instead of chicken.

Bruno hurls his bottle at them. One of them dodges it as they come on sprinting towards us. We step into an I-formation; as always, I’m at the front. Jack and Rich hide their bottles behind their backs. I search the ground for a suitable weapon, find a fist-sized rock, pick it up. They’ve almost crossed the street. I whip the rock at the nose of the biggest one. He tries to duck. Too slow. It blasts his nose in a thundering crack. Goosebumps like geysers erupt on my flesh. His head peels back while his legs shoot forward; he lands on his back, out cold. The other four don’t even flinch, coming on hard, murderous scowls on their cracked-out mugs. The first one lunges at me, dropping his arm back for a haymaker. I drop to my knees, lodge my head in his stomach, clutch his ankles, his fists digging into my skull. I rip his legs out from under him, slamming him on the ground. Dirt billows out around us. I mount him, throttle his forehead. He sputters out. A bottle smashes behind me. I turn around, see Rich with a broken bottleneck in his hand, standing over the second one, who’s on his knees, gripping his face, blood seeping

out between his fingers. To my left, Jack's on the ground wrestling with the third one, trading blows. Beside them, Bruno's on his back getting filled by the fourth.

"Richie!" I yell.

Rich is bunged up. He's never cut a face open before. I point to Bruno and his opponent. He turns to them, looks back at me.

"Get him off Bruno!" I yell.

Rich drops his bottleneck, lunges at the fourth and kicks him hard in the stomach, lifting him off of Bruno. They pounce on him, start filling him. I run at the third, who mounted Jack, is pounding away at his face; Jack's blocking most of the blows with his forearms. I grab his shirt and pull him off of Jack, spin him around and huck him to the dirt, start kicking the back of his head. He tries to curl himself into a ball. I drop my knee on his skull. He sprawls out limp in the dirt. Bruno and Rich have finished off the fourth, standing beside each other, clothes wrapped in blood, eyes aflame. I help Jack up onto his feet. And the niggers? They're through, lying on their backs and sides within a six-foot radius.

Nigger, I like that word. It irks me when niggers say that whiteys can't use it, but they can.

You can't own a word, just people.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I'm so alive that I could implode. I don't know if I can take it. Seconds clank like metal balls in my skull. Thing is, three cars have stopped on Wyandotte, the people inside them too scared to get out, just watching us. It's dark enough that they haven't seen our faces, but a cop could drive by any second.

“Let’s go, boys,” I say.

We run across the empty lot away from Wyandotte onto a street lined with apartment buildings, out of sight of the drivers. We slow to a walk, catch our breaths.

“That was fucked-up, man,” Rich says, his eyes barreling out of their sockets.

“What do we do, brothers?” Bruno asks.

“Let’s lay low tonight,” Jack says. “Go back to my place and chill.”

“Boys,” I say, “it’s been a perfect night, why spoil it? I’m proud of us. We stood our ground. We need to keep it rollin’.”

“Then where we goin’?” Jack asks.

“We go to your place and clean ourselves up. Otherwise, we stick to the game plan. We have two hundred-twenty bucks between us. Let’s win some more.”

“You sure, man?” Rich asks, his voice cracking.

“Course I’m sure. No one saw our faces. We’re in the clear.”

“We shouldn’t act like homos in public, man,” Rich says.

“You’re right,” I say. “New rule. No more bonin’ Jack on the street, alright Richie?”

“Fuck you! You were doin’ it too, man!”

“I’m jokin’, relax. My boys need to relax. Nothin’s gonna happen to us. Has it not been a perfect day so far?”

My boys are rattled silent. They’d thought that they didn’t have it in them, that they were goners. Nobody knows what they have, what they can get away with, until they try. Something else that I’ve figured out in the last ten months since my old man’s heart attack: life could end at any moment. But it doesn’t. It goes on, second by second, to drive

you crazy. I just try to outsmart Time. It wants to own you, choke you into laziness. The only way to beat it is to beat everything that it creates.

With a grin.

11:07pm

We head back to Jack's, dust ourselves off. Jack has a cut on his lower lip, Bruno a deep gash across his forehead. Now we're fresh, respectable-looking, on Riverside drive just two blocks from the casino. It's hot and humid tonight. Sweat beads moisten my ass-crack. The river stinks like a dumpster full of tampons.

"I'm serious 'bout what I was sayin' before," Rich says. "We gotta have some good times 'fore Jack takes off. This summer's gotta be unforgettable, man."

"I wish we didn't have to work, brothers," Bruno says. "Just take off somewhere, like BC or somethin'. Get a fat pad together, kick it all summer, throwin' benders an' shit, hangin' on the beach."

"We have to work, boys," I say. "We're adults now."

"Fuck that," Jack says.

"It's true," I say, "and it's a good thing. Puttin' in a hard day's work, there's nothin' like it. Look at my old man. He's worked his whole life with his bare hands. Built a family, I'm no poster child or anything. Still, if I can live like that, I'll be happy. Keep it simple: set up a business, get rich, raise a family. End of speech."

"Yeah," Jack says. "I just don't know about bangin' one chick for the rest of my life."

“Me neither,” Rich says. “Shit gets stale, man. Look at my folks. They been sleepin’ in different bedrooms for years.”

“But if you know how to be discreet,” I say, “three-four cunts on the side is a walk in the park.”

“I was talking,” Jack says, “to a friend of my dad’s the other day about just that. He’s a lawyer cat. He was tellin’ me how he cheated on his ex-wife many, many times. He said the cheating part’s easy. It’s the goin’ home and lookin’ your wife and kids in the eye part that’s tough.”

“Cunt’s soft,” I say. “He worries too much about what other people think of him, instead of doin’ what makes him happy.”

“Yeah?” Jack asks. “Did dumping Sophie make you happy?”

“Course not. But I had no choice.”

“Miss her at all, man?” Rich asks.

“Course I do. I loved her. But she went crazy.”

Bruno doesn’t know what love is. He hasn’t quite gotten around to humping yet. His ’rents are Catholic. They’re making him wait until he gets married, have four or five cunts from their local church lined up for him, wholesome Italian ones with big asses that’ll get fatter and hairier each year. And Rich? He doesn’t think too far ahead, you see. Whenever he gets rocked out of his skull, he starts yammering on about how he wants to be dead before he’s forty. Then there’s Jack. He wants to get out of Windsor and brighten his horizon, a genius with swollen dreams. I just hope that he doesn’t lose focus and forget us. Forget that life throttles us with these fake choices: work here, live there, own this, be that. If there’s one solid thing that my old man taught me...

Keep it simple or go crazy. It's a choice: the world, or nothing.

Jack thinks that going to the ivy leagues will set him up for a job on Wall Street and whatnot. I'll let him figure it out on his own. He's hard enough to make it in the States. Thing is, once he's had a lick of Uncle Sam's hammer, the white-hot craziness, he may never want to come back. I wish that he hadn't been so dedicated to getting the fuck out of Windsor. It'd be sweet if he were staying. Truth is, I don't know how I'll get on without him, since I don't have a girlfriend anymore. After having one for so long it sucks not having one, which irks me because when I had her, I did everything that I could to get rid of her. It's like I did something that I knew I'd regret, but did it anyway. That must be why it feels like my nuts are dangling over a sheet of ice, freezing over each second. Trying not to think about it.

We reach the casino, head up the driveway to the front entrance, bunged up with well-dressed rich snakes slithering out of their fancy cars. I put my face on, my hunting face. You see, when I get in a large crowd, like a bender for example, I scope everyone out, lock eyes with as many cunts as I can. Let them know that I'm good to go. I always keep my fists half-clenched, just in case, pushing my way through the crowd, digging my shoulders into backs, stepping on shoes. It's been four years since I went to a bender and didn't throttle someone.

I like to keep my moral instincts sharp.

I do have to be careful tonight. The casino has tight security, cops everywhere. If I were to mangle someone, they'd lump me in the basement prison cell with those crazed gambling junkies, who knock their bleeding skulls against the bars, begging to be let out to play one more slot. I've heard some wild casino stories. This Windsor cop, a fagged-

out wife beater, was playing blackjack and bet his whole mortgage on a single hand. Lost. Didn't want to go home and tell his wife. Knew that he'd just beat her to death out of shame. So right there, at the blackjack table, he whipped out his gun and blew his brains out all over the cunts beside him.

That night, his wife threw a bender.

The chaos of ringing bells, clanging chips, spinning slots pummel our ears as we enter. We show our fake IDs to the doormen, who glance at them, let us through. Nobody cares if we're under age. They just want our cash. My old man tells me that this new casino is the best thing for Windsor, gives it an edge that it didn't have before. More jobs for lazy slugs. And Americans have started spending their cash on us, instead of the other way around. It was time that this town got on the map. True, many parents have gambled away their savings that they were supposed to spend on their little cunts' university tuitions. But that's not my problem.

"Alright, boys. My old man recommended we buy some chips and find a good blackjack table. I say we put 'em all down on the first hand."

"No, man," Rich says. "Let's take it slow. If we blow it all, we'll be so pissed."

"S'about the feelin', Richie. Everything's been perfect all day long, has it not? It's not gonna fall apart now."

"I'm with ya," Bruno says. "We can't lose, brothers."

"Who," I ask, "gives a rat's ass about the money, anyway? S'about us, right?"

I shift my eyes from Jack to Rich to Bruno, grinning all the way.

"I trust you, man," Rich says.

"Let's do it," Jack says.

We buy a tray of chips and start looking for the blackjack tables. We pass a bar that's loaded with dead-looking drunks. Maggots who've gambled away their welfare checks. Grey-faced slob hunched over the bar, chugging their booze and crying it back into their glasses, drinking it down again.

"No fuckin' shit!" Jack says.

Jack stops, holding his arms out to block us. He's staring at the bar, his eyes twinkling, his fat nostrils flaring.

"What?" I ask.

"Look," Jack says.

He points to the edge of the bar. I look. No way. Tonight is. It's her.

The ditch-pig waitress, from the rubby bar, this dogfight that we had five years ago; sitting by herself in the corner against a mirrored wall, drooling into her pint, a butt with a long ash dangling from her chewed-up lips. Get this: Jack humped her in the ass, and when he pulled out, a blanket of shit was cuddling his hammer. He retched a few times and ran to the bathroom, scrubbed his hammer clean in the sink, got dressed as fast as he could, and in the midst of this chaos, had the wherewithal to steal her bra. It's become an heirloom of the football team, and made Jack immortal.

"I knew it!" I say. "I told you tonight was gonna be loaded with surprises."

"Should we go fuck with her?" Rich asks.

My first thought, here it is: I want to hump this cunt. She looks like a mule in a meat grinder. I know that it'd take my mind off Sophie. Truth is, I miss her. I miss her bony hips grinding against my belly. Her wandering eye, never able to find me. Her ripe

zits, waiting to be popped. Most of all, I miss how much she needed me: twenty-four hours per day. It's too bad that she. Too bad she's crazy.

I should capitalize on the fact that my boys don't know what to do. Jack humped her five years ago. Rich humps once per month, at least. And Bruno's a hulking virgin. I have the best reason.

"Check it out, boys. You're gonna go upstairs and win us big. I'm goin' over to her. I'm gonna work her over. I'm gonna take her to a motel and hump Sophie right out of my skull."

"You sure, man?" Rich asks. "We could help out."

"No. If she recognizes us, she might tell us to fuck off. If I go over there alone, I have a chance. Just go. I need this."

"Good luck, brother," Bruno says. "Come find us if she tells ya to fuck off."

"She won't."

My boys laugh as they walk off. I amble up beside her like a pimp.

"Hi there."

She turns to me. Red veins like stitches cross her cheeks. Black pockets hang from her dead eyeballs, like she hasn't slept in days. Her lower lip swallows half her upper lip. Her water balloon cannons are a plus. I'd slurp them on down in a heartbeat. She's looking me up and down. Trying to figure out if I'm the best that she'll get tonight. By a long shot. I don't think that she remembers me. Good.

"What do you want?"

She has this accent. I think it's Pepsi. I don't remember her having an accent. It reminds me of. No. Her snot-breath stinks worse than the drunk old Serb that I throttled this afternoon. I start breathing through my mouth.

"Can I buy you a drink, ma'am?"

She stares me down for five seconds, deep into my face. Her eyes wander from one boil to the next. Thinking, Should I sink down as low as him, straight down to Hell? She looks at her cigarette pack, takes one out, lights it.

"Sit down."

I sit down next to her.

"Beer, ma'am?"

She nods.

"Don't call me dat."

She pronounces the soft "th" like a "d". For sure she's a Pepsi. Reminds me of. No no.

"Sorry, I was trying to be polite."

She has this sickly voice that's still hard, like a boxer after going twelve rounds with an elephant. I wave down the bartender, point to her beer, hold up two fingers.

She squints her eyes at me. Don't remember me, you dirty cunt.

"What is your age?"

"Nineteen."

"In high school?"

"Graduated."

"Good."

Good, she says. This'll be a piece of cake.

"What's your name?"

"Monique."

"Is that French?"

She sighs for two seconds, looks away to her glass.

"*Oui.*"

"My ex-girlfriend was French."

"Spare me de life details, kid."

I like her. She doesn't care about anything. Like life has been kicking her in the box since she blasted into puberty.

"Sorry. It's good to meet you. I'm Brick."

She sniggers and shakes her head. Her dead eyes are holding something in, like they're about to burst.

"Your parents are sadistic?"

"No, they're sweet. Why?"

"Dey gave you dat unfortunate name?"

She plays hardball. She looks a bit like. No no no.

The bartender comes over with our beer. I pay him as she probes my boils, starts laughing and coughing, loosening up, her cannons jiggling up and down. She has this fagged-out laugh, like a busted accordion.

"It's my nickname."

"Ow did you receive dis nickname?"

There's the silent "h", a common Pepper error.

“Ever been smashed on the nose with a brick?”

She shakes her head, a little smile on her face, her upper lip disappearing inside her mouth, her lower lip stretching out.

“If you had, you’d understand.”

“You are a strong boy?”

“You could say that.”

“I tink you’re ’igh on yourself.”

And there’s the hard “th” pronounced as “t.” I wonder if I sound that retarded when I speak French.

“I have good reason to be.”

“Drop de harrogant bullshit, kid. Or I’ll fall to sleep.”

Oh! Strike four with the classic Pepper blunder: pronouncing an “h” before a word that starts with a vowel.

She sips her beer. Her throat swells out with each swallow; tiny beer streams drool down her lower lip. She truly does look a bit. No! Get her out of your skull!

“Sooo... You want to get out of here after this drink?”

“You don’t waste de time.”

“No, I always waste time. I waste everything.”

“Good boy. You’ll have success when you get older.”

“I’m quite old.”

She coughs, jiggling her cannons.

“Good for you. Enjoying adult life?”

“Sure.”

"It's good, no? Just wait until you marry and 'ave kids. Dey fill your life wit joy."

Is she...? Impossible.

"You're right. I'm a thorn in my 'rents' side."

"'Rents?"

"Parents. You *rent* 'em out for a while, then return 'em for a refund."

"You are one 'ell of a son, sure."

"Sometimes. The 'rents are good at putting up with me."

"Dey don't have a choice."

"Sure they do. Life's all about choice."

She sniggers, has a drag of her smoke. Oh, so you had no choices in life? You were destined to be a fat useless slug?

"May I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Why'd you move to Windsor?"

"You don't know your city's history?"

"I was born and raised in Miami. But go on."

"Dis area started as a French farming community two hundred and fifty years ago.

You never tot about why dere are so many French names of streets?"

"Not really, no. But you're right. I live on Beaudoin. It never even occurred to me."

"Of course not."

"Meaning?"

"*Parles-tu Français?*"

“*Un peu.*”

“Dat’s why I said it.”

“I said *un peu*, not *rien.*”

“You are Canadian. You should be bilingual.”

“Sorry? We speak English in Canada.”

“It should be de legal responsibility for all Canadians to be bilingual. Dis should be de foundation of de culture’s identity.”

Let’s see how she reacts to racial slurs.

“Why should Canadians be forced to learn the bastard language of a conquered people? What has Quebec contributed to the country, besides smoked meat, cheap hookers and rivers of snot from all your whining?”

“You have visited Quebec?”

She’s quite unfazed. The trauma of conquest has beaten her into submission.

Good.

“Montreal.”

“For de *danse contacte?*”

“*Mais oui.* Why else?”

“Dis is de only reason English Canada gives attention to Quebec. De English and de immigrants learn in school to ignore de French.”

“You’re talkin’ shit. When I moved here I was forced to study French for three years.”

“Dey tot you ’ow to speak, or just dey teach you grammar?”

“Mostly grammar. No conversation.”

“So you can see dey don’t want French and English Canada to communicate. Dey just want to give an illusion.”

I’m not getting into a discussion with this cunt about Pepper politics, though I’m happy to see that the historical guilt has chewed up her skull.

“Who exactly is ‘dey’?”

“De harchitects of dis nation.”

Harchitects! I love it.

“So...How do you like living in the indistinct part of the country? Have we been treating you well?”

“You treat me like de Quebecois treat me, just you don’t have abandoning issues.”

What the fuck is she yammering on about? Just finish your beer so that we can get on to the humping.

“So... You came to Windsor just because it used to be French?”

“No, it’s a joke. I took my kids here after divorcing. Dey still were very young. I wanted to give dem a new start. Dey deserved to ’ave a future, to be bilingual, to make deir minds strong. I didn’t want for dem dis stupid separatist bullshit.”

Ooooh, an anti-separatist Pepsi. My favorite kind: at least they’re not afraid to admit that they want to keep sucking Ottawa’s hammer.

“You’re against separating?”

“At some time I realized dey don’t want to separate. Like a spoiled kid dey want to be hindependent, but dey want all of Canada to pay for it. I didn’t want my kids to grow up in dis victim culture.”

Wow, the historical guilt is so strong in her that she keeps referring to her own people in the third person. And much as I hate to say it, I'm quite impressed that she's able to admit to her culture's inferiority.

"I agree. And I keep saying, you've been threatening us with separation for so long, we should just kick you out."

"No. Absolutely not. Dis is not de correct answer. Dis is de lazy, easy way. De English shouldn't abandon Quebec because dey remind dem too much of demselves. Brudders can be similar, no?"

"I'm sorry, you're implying that French and English Canada are brothers?"

"Tink about dis. Language decides de way we tink, and culture is created from language, den different cultures like English and French don't tink so different. Dere are French words and grammar in English and English words and grammar in French. Language is blood, den French blood is tick wit English culture and de hopposite."

"That's a retarded theory. It's quite obvious that we don't think in words."

"Culture is a word, no?"

"So?"

"All de haspects of culture live in words. We understand dem in words, den we tink about dem in words."

"Just...What's your point?"

"After William conquered Britain, for tree `undred years de hofficial language in Britain was French. French court poets gave rhyme to English poetry. There would not be Shakespeare witout de Norman occupation. So you can see it is stupid for de French and English to talk about deir cultures like dey are distinct, instead of totally mixed."

If she doesn't stop spewing nonsense, I might snap her neck and hump her corpse.

"Enough with the fake history. Make a real point. Can you do that?"

"If dere is any hope for de French and English, differences have to be always second to similarities."

"Alright, we're talkin' 'bout French and English Canada, right? Or is it France and England? Actually, I don't even know what we're talkin' about."

"Let's talk about Quebec and de rest of Canada."

"Great. Hope for what? An orgy of peace and understanding?"

"Just sumting to stop de current situation."

"What's wrong with it? French and English Canada aren't at war."

"But dey 'ate each udder."

"Bullshit. Serbs and Albanians hate each other, not French and English Canada."

"It's stupid for you to tink the French and English can't fight like de Serbian and Albanian. All four of dem 'ave more dan one tousand years of fighting each udder in deir history. De right provocation can start de fire of historical 'ate."

She's remarkably non-partisan for a Pepper. Most of the ones that I've met can't stop blaming English Canada for all their fake misery.

"Right: the French and English have been at each other's throats since the beginning. Quebec can't forget the conquest. They'll never feel at home in Canada. Their only hope is if they become their own country. And they know it. Deep down, they know that if they don't separate, it's because they're cowards. Only confirming what they always feared was true."

"*D'accord*. Better to just give up."

“Give up what? Trying to convince the rest of Canada that Quebec is relevant? Or teaching the French and English that deep down they’re actually brothers?”

I’m going to follow through with the prior threat if she says, “*Oui.*”

“We will see. Quebec is still young. De new generation doesn’t care so much about separation. They want to make money, so most of dem speak good English. Many of dem are bilingual and de children of immigrants are trilingual. Maybe dey will ’ave strong minds.”

“I wouldn’t hold your breath. My hunch is Quebec’s greatest legacy to progress will be *poutine.*”

She sips her beer. No racial slur seems to phase her. She’s unlike any Pepper that I’ve met.

“So...you still haven’t told me why you moved specifically to Windsor.”

“I am a waitress. Dere was a job in de first casino.”

“A waitress? Nice. I like meeting people who aim high in life.”

She sniggers.

“Dere is sumting poetic to look at the tables of people in a restaurant and see all of dem chewing their greasy mowts. Deir eyes are full of life. When dey stop eating, deir eyes die...Do you know de French created *les restaurants* to make people helty?”

“I thought it was the Chinese.”

“Now dey make dem fat.”

“Restaurants, or the Chinese?”

“Restaurants.”

“And you get off watching them get fat.”

“I don’t feel sexual when I’m working. But my ex-husband had a fat belly.”

“So does my old man. It’s his centre of gravity.”

“I liked his belly. Also de ’air on his back.”

“Sweet.”

Her eyes start glistening. She chugs the rest of her beer, waves down the bartender for another.

“No, let’s get out of here.”

“One more.”

She lights another smoke. Fuckin’ cunt. She wants to make me wait, like she’s a prize mule. I’ll just have to hump her that much harder. She exhales, watches the smoke dissolve in front of her face. Something’s chewing away at her skull.

“What’s on your mind?”

She stares at me, her flesh hard and dry, like her skull’s on the outside. I figure that she’s been through two or three lives worth of shit, bugged up into one long, steaming log.

“Tings.”

“Tell you what: if you need to let these ‘tings’ out, I’m a good listener. And discreet.”

For four seconds, she probes my boils. Then, her skull mask smoothes out.

“My daughter ’ates me and my son is gay, like his fodder.”

Her left eye rattles in its socket. No. No! This isn’t. She can’t. You see. I did mention that I’ve never met. Sophie did tell me once, two years ago, that her old man’s a

fag. That she'd never met him, that her mom wouldn't let her. That she hated her mom's guts.

"You married a fag?"

"Divorced. He didn't tell me until after de second kid."

Life is. Full of. I can't.

"Harsh."

The bartender gives her a beer. She takes a few large gulps. Gus and Sophie's mom!

"How'd you end up marrying a fag?"

"You want to hear dis story? It's a 'appy story."

"Knock yourself out."

"My husband married me because he loved my fodder."

"We talkin' brotherly love or ass-fuck love?"

"Bote. He was my fodder's co-worker and dey were good friends. He was one of de few Quebecois my fodder liked."

She keeps talking as if she hates her own people.

"Time-out for a second. Aren't *you* Quebecois?"

"My fodder and I moved dere when I was two. I was born in Normandy."

She's a Frog! No wonder she doesn't give a fuck about Quebec. I take back anything nice that I might have said about her.

"De Norman occupation of Britain is curious, no? One tousand years ago, de French were stronger dan de British."

"One love story at a time. How'd you end up with your ex-fag?"

“Dere is not much to tell. One day he realized my fodder didn’t love him as a romance, den he decided to go wit me. It was de best way to stay close to my fodder.”

“Alright, but you married your old man’s best friend. That’s fucked-up, *n’est-ce pas?*”

“For de stiff people, yes. But it was not so strange for my fodder and me.”

“So...when your old man cock-blocked your ex, and you jumped on in, how old were you?”

“Eighteen. I loved him because –”

“How old was he?”

“Same as my fodder, forty-tree or forty-two.”

“So...your old man just said, ‘Sorry buddy, you can’t lodge your hammer in my ass, but go ahead and fuck my eighteen year-old daughter?’”

“I told you, the tree of us were very close, like *les mousquetaires de Dumas*. I was two when my mudder left my fodder. Den he took a job in Montreal. Dat’s where I grew up. But he was not able to love anudder woman. I tink I was always like a compensation for my mudder.”

“How so?”

“Many times he slept in my bed wit me.”

“Oh yeah? How do you mean ‘slept’?”

“After fifteen years, sometimes in de night, he still wanted her. He came to my bed. He put his arms on me. He cried in de back of my neck. Maybe sometimes he touched my breast. Also sometimes I felt his penis in my back. But he didn’t try to kiss me or to molest me.”

“Yeah, but he wanted to. Did he ever –”

“A lot of my teenager years, it was just my fodder and me.”

Go ahead and interrupt me, cunt. Let’s give full attention to your story since you’re so desperate to justify your misery.

“We didn’t like de Quebecois because dey never accepted us. Even dough we were French, we still were...how do you translate, *les autres?*”

“No idea.”

“His co-workers made fun of him for de same tings my classmates made fun of me. Dey said we had a stupid accent, but I grew up in Montreal and talk like a normal Quebecois. Also dey said de French language from France has too many English words. But de big thing why dey ’ated us was dey said two hundred years ago, France abandoned de French settlers. Dey said it’s the French fault dey suffered more dan two hundred years like a slave to de English. The Quebecois talk like France is deir parent and dey are horphans.”

“Nice metaphor. So...your ex was different? I mean, he didn’t act like an orphan?”

“No. My fodder knew how much I loved him, so he accepted when I was pregnant and we would marry. I don’t know for sure, but I tink he gave me to my ex-husband to teach me what is love. He wanted me to understand what he felt wit my mudder.”

“School o’ hard knocks. S’the only way to learn. Your old man sounds like a firecracker.”

“He’s dead.”

“Harsh. What about the ex? He must’ve taken it quite hard. Or, wished he had.”

“De illusion was finished. He was very sad. He didn’t feel attached to our daughter. When our son was born, he kidnapped him.”

“Get out of here! You serious?”

“For two days.”

Kidnapping! Incest! Her life story just keeps on getting better.

“Why?”

“When he returned, he told me de ’ole ting. For a short time he decided to steal my son like a small part of my fodder.”

As she chugs the rest of her beer, I watch certain parts of her face: her lower lip suctioning the rim of the glass, her twitchy eyeball, the way her forehead peels back. Sophie and her mom look quite a bit alike, I should’ve seen it right away. What a fucked-up cunt, I mean Sophie’s mom. Sophie too, but now I understand why. I still don’t feel sorry for her.

She puts the empty glass on the bar, looks at me with a drunken smirk, beer suds like warts on her lower lip.

“So?” she asks.

“What?”

“Don’t play stupid.”

I can’t, she’s. Can I? No. Maybe. Maybe this would... Yeah. Yeah, the final nail in the coffin.

“Motel?”

“Why? We go to my ’ouse. My kids are sleeping.”

Beauty. This is. I still can't. I'm about to hump my. Jack. What are the? Poor Sophie. How many more of. Too l-o-o-o-ng.

My skull is sucking into my brain.

She picks her bag up off the bar, sniggering, like she can't believe how deep into Hell that she's sunk. Gets up off her stool. Waddles her way to the exit. I follow her, five steps behind. The sight of her, seconds, like needles in my eyeballs. Sophie's face, carved into my skull.

"Brick!" Bruno yells behind me.

I turn around. Bruno's hustling toward me, pink with glee. The cunt's still waddling away, oblivious. He grabs my arm.

"What?"

"Brother, we're up six hundred bucks!"

"Sweet. Listen. I have to. She's takin' me. It's crazy. She's. I'll tell you. I'll call you later."

"What's up?"

"I'm takin' off. I'll call. My boys, I'll call tomorrow."

"Have fun, brother."

He bear-hugs me. I push him off.

"Later."

I hustle on ahead, my eyes darting for. Half of me, it's like I'm being pulled back to my boys; the other half is just pulling me on forward. I spot her turning the corner out of the bar towards the exit and catch up to her as she walks outside.

"We takin' a cab?"

“You pay.”

“Sure.”

We head down to Riverside drive. I hail us a cab. We get in.

“Where to?” the cabbie asks.

“Tree-seventeen Laroche.”

Three-seventeen Laroche. Sophie’s mom. I start taking deep breaths, almost retch from the stench of her breath. I roll down the window. I can do this.

I look over at the hunk of misery puddled beside me. In ten minutes, I’ll be humping her like a horse on a donkey. Two tears slide down her cheeks. Stop. No, go ahead. No, stop. Wait until after I’m finished with you.

Minutes of silence pass between us as the old freeze funnels back into my veins. She just stares out the window. Sniffing, coughing. Then looks at me.

“Tell me, Brick. You want to ’ave kids in de future?”

“Sure. Not for ten years, at least.”

“I give you advice to love dem too much if dey ’ate you. If you do dis, maybe dey won’t become like you.”

It irks me that she keeps dumping her rancid life on me. She expects me to feel sorry for her.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Many tings, naturally. Also I am a tirdy-six year-old waitress. I don’t make enough money for my kids...Maybe, you went to deir high school.”

“What school they go to?”

She thinks about it for two seconds.

"It's better I don't tell you."

"I agree. That might complicate things between us."

Tomorrow's Friday. Tomorrow morning, I'll tell the whole school about this. The final nail in the coffin, you see.

"Maybe you want advice for talking wit your parents?"

Not from you. Gus and Sophie, they're goners with a hump like this for a mom. Once, she might've been hard, fire in her belly. But she made a choice. Gave up. Could have kept it simple, accepted her lot, let the seconds tick on by. She let Time wrap its fingers around her throat; she let it choke out the fire. Boohoo.

"Sure, but answer this first: your kids ever met their dad?"

"Never. Dat part of my life would be toxic for dem. It's enough I tell dem de troot and I show dem it's okay. Tell me, Brick, your parents talk wit you?"

"Sure. Not about everything."

"Dey 'ave secrets?"

"I assume so. My 'rents are German. They can be quite stoic. They don't wanna talk about history, Hitler and whatnot. Besides that, they're open."

"Listen to dis advice: if you want dem to tell you sumting, hask dem. Make dem tell you. Don't give up. Dey will tank you in de hend."

The cabbie makes a left onto Laroche.

Sophie used to yammer on about how her mom would bring home these drunk slugs, late at night, at least once per week. She could always hear them humping from her bedroom across the hall. How crazy would it get if Sophie found us? What a scene! Should I? I've got time to figure it out.

The cabbie pulls up in front of the house. Mosquitoes strum the porch light. The night is a wall of black behind the house, as if the house were painted into the night, a baby blue cardboard cutout. And the slow ticking of my heart.

“Problem?”

“No, why?”

“Pay for de taxi.”

I pull ten bucks out of my pocket, hand it to the cabbie. We step out, cross the front lawn, seem to float up the three steps to the front door. Everything slows to the pace of my heart: the dank breeze, the humming porch light, mosquitoes buzzing around my skull, their tiny shadows swirling in circles around our feet.

“Don’t make noise inside. Don’t wake up my kids.”

She opens the door. We go in. Sophie’s door is closed. Maybe she’s sleeping. The cunt leans in to my ear and whispers, “Bedroom is around de corner in dere. Follow me.”

Her breath melts my ear wax. I follow her floppy rump. The floor creaks under each step.

She unlocks the door and opens it, turns on the light, whispers again in my ear, “Go in and wait. Want a drink?”

Warm wax trickles out of my ear. I shake my head, stumble in. She shuts the door. Half of me wants to run out, kick Sophie’s door down, yell, “Surprise!” The other half is planting me right here.

I’m surrounded by four yellowed sheets of drywall, a yellowed mattress pressed to the left corner, a yellowed duvet crumpled in its centre, three yellowed pillows scattered across it, five cigarette holes seared into it; slanting against the drywall to the right of the

mattress, a bedside table with a lamp powdered in dust, beside the lamp some book called *Les Particules Élémentaires*, an ashtray seeping with butts beside the book, an empty closet to the right of the bedside table, clothes scattered across the floor. The room smells like fried fish and cigarettes.

She waddles back in with a glass of whiskey, points to the bedside table.

“Condoms are in dere.”

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I bend down and open the drawer. It’s loaded with domes and a jar of Vaseline. I pull one out. She starts peeling off her clothes, first her shirt. Her belly hangs in folds of grey flesh. I can’t see her bellybutton. She undoes her bra, has to bend over and reach down low to get it off. Her cannons dangle in strings of flesh, like when a kid stretches bubble gum from his mouth. I start stripping down, watching her peel off her pants, her panties. Thick mounds of cottage cheese ripple on her thighs, red stretch marks needling from her hips down to her knees. She keeps her socks on, drops onto the mattress on her hands and knees, opens the drawer, digs around inside. Out comes a gob of Vaseline glistening on her fingers. She reaches around and smears it on her brown chafed hole.

“Don’t kiss me or look in my face. Don’t say anyting. Just fuck me in de hass, den go.”

I don’t want to get shit on my hammer; but I have to do this, you see.

“Whatever turns you on.”

She sniggers and coughs.

“And don’t make noise. Don’t wake up my kids.”

“Sure thing.”

My heart almost stops. Chunks of frozen blood tremble through my veins. I slap the dome on, drop down to my knees behind her, shuffle closer to her hulking ass. A problem with the angle: she's almost as tall as me. I get back on my feet, squat down, grab her hips. My fingers sink inside pools of flesh. Little folds of her hips wedge between each digit. I slide in my hammer, easy and loose. I can't feel a thing. It's like I'm humping a stick of warm butter. I squat down lower, trying to get a better angle, anything for some friction. There, that's better. I pump her in and out, second by second. Sophie comes bulging into my skull, again: in the other room, crumpled up under the duvet, listening to her mom get humped, thinking that it's just some slug that she met at the casino. Maybe...If I....Yell something that I used to yell when we were humping. She'll hear me. She'll think that it's. No, it can't be, she'll think.

“You like that!? You want more!?”

“Shut up!”

Her voice is muffled, crackling, her face planted on the pillow, like I'm not even here. I'll yell louder.

“Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!”

She puts the pillow on top of her head. What a corpse. I could go on like this for hours. There's just no friction. I don't even think that I can come. My quads are burning. I want to sit down. She starts shaking, whimpering under the pillow. Whimpers exactly like Sophie used to. Which reminds me of three months ago, when we were on her bed, a late Sunday night, about to hump. I told her that I was sick of using domes, but she insisted; I told her not to worry, that I'd pull out just before. She wouldn't have it. She was paranoid about getting pregnant. Didn't want to bring any more D'Isneys into the world, she said. I

told her that she was being a cunt, driving me crazy with her never-ending mood swings, accusations, the screaming vulture act that she'd pulled in my 'rents' kitchen the night before. I told her that if she didn't stop, I'd dump her. She gave in. I started humping her without a dome. It was so warm and moist in there that I got carried away and forgot to pull out. Come oozed out of her onto her thighs. She crumpled up on the bed, claimed that I didn't love her anymore, that I was going to dump her; that if I did, she'd blow her brains out. She started whimpering, damping the air with her soggy misery. Just like her mom now.

I'm finished here.

12:18am

I pull out my hammer (clean), tear off the dome, put my clothes back on while she collapses on her side, head still buried under the pillow, feeding on her own misery.

Hold on... Was that why...? Sophie must have... Yeah! She knew that Jack. The boys and me. The bra. That's why she wouldn't let me meet the cunt. Imagine that? Being a girl, knowing that your boyfriend's best friend had fucked your mom, keeping it secret from him for three years? No wonder she went crazy.

I head to the door, take one last look at her. She's still sobbing under the pillow.

"Kill yourself."

I open the door, step forward, kick something at my feet, look down. No way. You twisted little. You see, this is what I mean by. Just full of. I can't take it. An even more perfect. Gus, passed out in front of his mom's door. What a twisted little faggot, listening

in on his. I'd like to. No, I'll deal with him later. I close her door, step over Gus to Sophie's door, open it.

This hot mist of piss and spew rifles up my nose.

"Sophie?"

The mist, it sucks me into her room, sponging into my flesh.

"Sophie?"

I can barely see her, a shadow etched on the mattress. I drift closer. The bedside table lamp is on. Beside it sits an empty pill bottle, an empty glass, a pitcher of water. She's lying on her back, the crotch of her pants drenched in piss, yellow bile streaming from her mouth onto the pillow along the mattress onto the floor. I'm beside the bed now, bile sloshing under my shoes. Her mouth hangs open, eyeballs murky and rolled back, a notepad littered with chicken scratch on her chest.

I'm.

I pick up the pill bottle:

Forest Lane Pharmacy

Dr. L. Wong

Zoloft 50mg

One tablet at bedtime

30 tablets

June 10, 1999

My heart stops. Muscles go limp around my bones. Time scratches up and down my flesh like fingernails.

I'm the.

I drop the bottle and pick up the notepad. My eyes dart in on:

“pregpegnapreganpegImpregantgotmepregnat”

I'm the fingers around her throat.

I drop the notepad, heart imploding. Sagging down to. Into her murky eyes. Want to.

Shake. There's a. Around you.

Gustave!

Gagging behind me. At the door. Standing over Gus on his. Squinting in the mist.

What de 'ell are you doing!?

Sees Sophie on the bed.

Sophie!?

Lunges forward.

SOPHIE!?!?

Runs to the bedside. Claws her fingers into my. Throttles me out of. Lifts Sophie up in her arms, limp.

I'm alive.

Squeezes Sophie to her chest. Screaming. Rocking back and. Glares at me.

GET DE 'ELL OUT OF HERE!!!

Feet nailed to the floor. My coffin. Born to die in.

Suddenly pulls away from. Just felt Sophie's wrist.

GUSTAVE!!!

Gus. Through the mist. At the door. Watching me.

APPELLES 9-1-1!!! MAINTENANT!!!

Gus runs out of sight.

I walk out of the room.

Gus on the phone watches me walk out the door.

I'm walking down the street.

Blades slash my guts

Breath like blood sputters out

I collapse

My heart petrifies

Lumps into my throat

Pops out of my mouth

Crumbles on the pavement

you see

i feel you see

about everything i

feel different now

sophies pregnant

sophies mine

I keep trying to forget what happened five years ago

wed just moved from miami

just met my boys at football tryouts

came home from initiation rocked and ragged
i dont remember coming home
dont remember tearing down the cupboards
smashing the glasses and plates
kicking in the toaster microwave dishwasher fridge
pissing in the cutlery drawer
old man disappeared the next day
he knew that hed unscrew my skull and squash it under his foot if he stayed
left it to mom sweet horrified mom
sat me down that morning five years ago
a cracked smile on her mask of fear
words unspooling from her mouth in a wire to choke herself with
youre a monsta guntar
ve lay awake at night
vishing ve verent so careless
ve wanted ve almost
but ve couldnt
then she told me
nineteen years ago when they first moved to miami
old man wasnt working
starving in motels with cockroaches under pillows
mom got pregnant
wanted to abort me

old man talked her into keeping me

she almost got rid of me anyway

the accident

but how could i even conzida oh of all ze despicable zings to destroy a life no i couldnt

and said even though im from hell they never regretted having me

they love me their little monster

i can fuck up as bad as i want and theyll never let me out of their cage

The fagged-out thing is that since that day

I can't get it out of my skull

I shouldn't exist

Just a bloody fetus the size of my fist in a Miami dumpster, wedged between

a container of rotting fast food and some kid's old teddy bear with its eyes torn out

I shouldn't know what it's like to throw the championship pass,

shatter someone's nose, get rich, have a family, keep it simple.

Every day I have to risk everything on the blind stroke of Time.

The last five years have been too long. Life just keeps on getting better.

I want to crush every cunt that breathes the stench of certainty.

The cold-blooded ignorant future.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I give you the world. Or nothing.

0:00

I love Sophie. I was afraid that she'd try to kill herself, but I never thought that she'd actually do it. What courage, to snuff it out, to slash the fingers around her throat. If I mean that much to her that she'd die for me. There's no one else like her, no one who loves that much. If she pulls through, if she wants to get rid of it, I'll talk her into keeping it. I'll make her give us another chance. We're having a kid.

From "First Message to the Negroes of the World[,] from Atlanta Prison"
By Marcus Garvey, *The Negro World*, 10 February 1925

After my enemies are satisfied, in life or death I shall come back to you to serve even as I have served before. In life I shall be the same; in death I shall be a terror to the foes of Negro liberty. If death has power, then count on me in death to be the real Marcus Garvey I would like to be.

Remember that I have sworn by you and my God to serve to the end of all time, the wreck of matter and the crash of worlds. The enemies think that I am defeated. Did the Germans defeat the French in 1870? Did Napoleon really conquer Europe? If so, then I am defeated, but I tell you the world shall hear from my principles even two thousand years hence. I am willing to wait on time for my satisfaction and the retribution of my enemies.

Look for me in the whirlwind or the storm, look for me all around you, for, with God's grace, I shall come and bring with me countless millions of black slaves who have died in America and the West Indies and the millions in Africa to aid you in the fight for Liberty, Freedom and Life.

The civilization of today is gone drunk and crazy with its power and by such it seeks through injustice, fraud and lies to crush the unfortunate. But if I am apparently crushed by the system of influence and misdirected power, my cause shall rise again to plague the conscience of the corrupt. For this I am satisfied, and for you, I repeat, I am glad to suffer and even die. Again, I say, cheer up, for better days are ahead. I shall write the history that will inspire the millions that are coming and leave the posterity of our enemies to reckon with the hosts for the deeds of their fathers.

Chapter 5

Detroit Is Beautiful At Night

“Citizenship?” the customs officer asks.

“We’re Canadian, officer,” I reply.

“Let your friends answer for themselves.”

The customs officer believes his job is very important. Should he pull us over, Basha, Lenny and I had agreed to swallow the Ecstasy we put under our tongues when we reached the tunnel.

“Canadian, sir,” Basha says.

“Canadian,” Lenny says.

“Where you all from?”

“Windsor,” I reply.

“Where you goin’?”

“Ann Arbor.”

“Purpose of your visit?”

“We’re going to a party.”

He scoffs and fondles his moustache. A moustache is the ugliest thing a man can do to his face, save for burning it off.

“Show me your identification.”

I turn to retrieve Lenny’s and Basha’s. As she pulls their birth certificates out of the drawstring pouch around her neck, she purses her quivering lips and raises her eyebrows. She wants to swallow her E. She fears we will get caught. She tends to fear the

worst; she lacks confidence. I smile at her, assuaging her fear. Lenny, on the other hand, could not care less.

“Here you go, officer.”

Inspecting our birth certificates, he asks more important questions.

“Bringing anything across the border?”

“No.”

“Anything in your vehicle I should know about?”

“Nothing.”

He tries to splinter me with his wooden eyes.

“No drugs?”

“No, officer.”

He returns our birth certificates and points out his window.

“Go on and park your vehicle in front of Customs Inspection. Check in with the officers inside.”

Anything to help you feel more important. We pull over.

“Swallow your E, guys,” I say.

“Fuckin’ piece o’ shit,” Lenny says.

We swallow our E and drag ourselves out of my father’s Chrysler. Basha and I bring our bags into the blue reception area. Two officers glare at us from behind a counter, ask us the same questions while rooting through our bags. We are safe, for the E will not affect us for half an hour.

“Leave your car key on the counter and follow me,” an officer says.

I place the key on the counter. He leads us through a door into a green hallway and directs each of us into separate rooms. Mine has gray walls, a metal table and three metal chairs. Minutes later, a black female officer wearing latex gloves saunters in.

“Take off your shoes.”

I remove my shoes and hand them to her. She reaches inside them and finds nothing, shoves them into my hands.

“The penalty for drug possession in the state of Michigan is ten to twenty-five years. You understand the seriousness of these charges?”

“Yes, officer.”

As I put on my shoes, she glares at my dreadlocks, frowns and tilts her head toward the door. I meet Lenny and Basha in the hallway. At the reception counter, an officer shoves the car key into my hands. We come outside to find they have torn apart my father’s Chrysler. Its user manual, some maps, a bottle of engine oil, a container of windshield washer fluid, the spare tire and the ashtrays lie scattered around the car.

People destroy other people’s things to feel important.

We put everything back in a hurry. We leave and pull out onto Jefferson Avenue. I adore the wounded streets, exhaust-baked buildings and deserted sidewalks of Detroit, vapour whorling out of manholes. Winds blowing through shadows whisper portents of danger. I know I should not be here.

I see in the rear-view that Basha is petrified. This is her first time in Detroit. Lenny and I spent one month convincing her to come. She has never gone to a party. When the E affects her, she will glue herself to Lenny.

“Do you guys feel anything yet?” Basha asks.

“Fuck yeah,” Lenny replies. “Don’t you?”

“I think so. Do you, Jam?”

Jam is my sobriquet.

“Vaguely.”

“When do you start to really feel it?”

“It depends,” I reply. “Don’t ask. Just let it happen.”

Basha has not been herself these last two days, staring off into space. She spends a few days in this way before she reveals to me her conundrums. I am doing my best to cure her of her naïveté. Things I have tried to teach her to help her grow up drift through her ears like ash. Her parents are ineffectual. Mr. Nastich is also a racist. He kicked her out of the house when he discovered she was dating Lenny. He loathes miscegenation, yet still he loves his daughter. He would file her nails and brush her teeth if she allowed him. And he gives her weekly stipends of two hundred dollars without asking her how she spends them. Mrs. Nastich is sweet and passive. Basha is like her mother: too much girl, not enough woman.

“She’s just curious, Jam. Go easy on her.”

I can always count on my dropout brother to defend his precious white girlfriend. Sorry. I love Lenny, but it is out of curiosity for her skin that he is with Basha.

And, my heart is rapt.

We are in Jamaica, our home. You are painting my portrait on the beach. It is dusk. Whorling clouds overhead obscure a carmine sky. I am kneeling before you, gazing into your eyes, waves foaming about the thighs of your muse. It is to transmit my soul you

are painting my portrait; it is the reason He has given you this gift. Can you see our future? He portends it for us tonight. I am coming to you, my love. We are almost one.

“Sorry, Bash. I’m distracted.”

“He’ll be there, don’t worry.”

“I know.”

Basha pouts like a puppy waiting to lick the tears from its owner’s face. She doubts the veracity of my certainty. Also, she understands how uncomfortable I have felt lately around her and Lenny. She knows I believe their living together is perfunctory.

“Why you doggin’ some fuck with a girlfriend?”

I see in the rear-view Basha furrowing her brow at him, demanding he not ask such a question by saying nothing. She says nothing when she wants to be kind.

“Fine. But I’ll kick his ass if he fucks you over.”

I wish Lenny would stop trying to be my guardian angel. He is not an angel. He assumes, since I am his sister, I have little to offer him beyond the occasional ride when I have our father’s car, gossip from school, how Basha feels about him at any given moment or advice on how to be a good boyfriend. Lenny burrows through life like an angry goiter, distending in hopeless gradations; when he bursts he will cause a horrible mess, and not all the water on earth will be able to wash him away.

“Bash, did you take a half or a whole?” I ask.

“A whole. Why? Is that too much?”

“No way,” Lenny replies. “It’s perfect. Don’t worry, babe. I’m right here. Can you feel that sweet bass pumpin’ through your veins?”

“Not really.”

“Fuck, you gotta start feelin’ it now. When Sonikman comes on, he’s gonna chew our minds. You gotta be ready.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Basha only considered partying after she had moved in with Lenny. She had believed she was too afraid. She believed I was a freak, yet still she wanted to be my friend. Five years ago after our first day of high school, I was sitting at the bus stop across the street from campus, listening on my Walkman to an amazing Trance mix I had made. I had not spoken to a single person the entire day. All of my old friends had gone to other schools. I had comported to the precocious idea of going to a school where I would not know anybody. I believed it would transform me into a mature, independent, dignified, intrepid and intelligent person. None of my old friends speak to me anymore, yet I doubt I could care less. Basha sat beside me and peered at me several times. I felt her gust of curiosity on my coal-black skin, long braids running down my back, white teeth and pink gums mottled with purple. I could see by the paleness of her skin that she had tried to meet people yet had failed. She was very insecure, timorous, raised only to obey and to submit. She had no idea how powerful her beauty was. Basha is a beautiful girl: shoulder-length locks of curly black hair, wide smooth forehead, long thin eyelashes, reticent eyes, gentle nose, soft crimson lips, spindly thin, tiny breasts and immaculate toes. I knew the moment she sat next to me we were going to be friends forever. I pulled an earphone out and asked if she wished to listen.

“Sure.”

When she put it in her ear she cringed, yet tried to mute her disgust. I took the earphone back.

"You don't have to listen."

"No, I want to."

"No, you don't."

"No I do, I swear, I just never... What is it?"

"It's called Trance. It's Techno."

"I know Techno. Can I listen some more?"

"Do you like it?"

We looked at each other for a moment. I smiled at her to invite honesty. She smiled back.

"I don't think it's real music."

And that was lesson number one. Never lie to me, for I smell liars before they lie. I smell the mouldy pong of dishonesty as it forms in the mind. I learned this skill through my father, the king of all liars, the most beautiful liar on earth.

"I'm Sera."

"I'm... Promise not to laugh?"

"Why would I laugh?"

"Because I have the ugliest, most embarrassing name."

"Let *me* be the judge of that."

She sighed and drooped her shoulders.

"Basha."

I smiled.

"Basha."

"Isn't it gross?"

“It’s beautiful.”

“Really?”

I nodded, for a name is a very important part of a person’s identity. Your name gives you the spiritual potential to do incredible things. Your former life plays a seminal role in determining your new name. I am certain that Basha was someone or something very special before she became who she is.

“Where are your parents from?”

“Yugoslavia, but it’s not really a country anymore. My mom’s from Croatia and my dad’s from Serbia. I don’t care, I’m just from Windsor.”

“That’s amazing. You come from a place with so much history.”

“I guess so. I still hate my name. I want to change it to something more normal, like...I don’t know. People always made fun of me in school. Guys ran into me on purpose and said, ‘Oh, I just basha’d into Basha!’ And girls called me Rasha or Moustasha. I always wanted to change my name, but my parents never let me.”

“Well,” I said as I took her hand in mine, “if we’re going to be friends, you have to learn to love your name and promise never to change it.”

She looked down at our hands and back into my eyes, radiant.

“I promise.”

I-75 leads us further out of Detroit. I glance in my side-view mirror and watch Hardee’s, Arby’s, Holiday Inn and Comfort Inn signs fade in the distance, old marble buildings being submerged by chrome and glass towers. Atop flat yellow grass hills

surrounding the interstate are neighbourhoods of knurled three-floor crimson wood homes. How can the people living there not take better care of their once glorious homes?

Anorexic bushes and trees caked in black exhaust, bloated garbage, abandoned rusted trucks, burnt-out shredded tires, shattered glass, squirrel and raccoon road kill and orange pylons line the interstate; their forms and colours swirling, I hear them whisper, *Go back to Windsor*. But I know they are testing me, I know I must continue. I am coming up. My stomach is cramping. My neck is distending. My head is absconding its weight. We cannot reach Ann Arbor fast enough.

Basha is very pale. She keeps puckering her lips and swallowing. Lenny stares out the window, listening to whatever the interstate artefacts are telling him.

“Bash, you okay?” I ask.

“I guess. Why?”

“What’s wrong? Do you feel sick?”

“If you gotta puke, babe, tell Jam, we’ll pull over.”

“I’m fine, really.”

Before I am too incoherent, I must resolve what is plaguing her mind.

“You’re lying. Just tell us what’s wrong.”

She sighs and pouts, drooping her head, assembling her words.

“My little brother called me two days ago. He said our dad heard him speaking English with mom and he freaked out. He said, ‘Your daughter wouldn’t speak Serbian, and look at her now! Is this what you want?’ He’s such a lying asshole. He didn’t kick me out because I wouldn’t speak his stupid language.”

Lenny puts his arm around her.

“We know, babe.”

“So Mom finally snapped. She told him if he wouldn’t let us speak English in the house, she’d leave. Then he told her he won’t let her leave, and no one’s speaking English in the house. Then mom told him she was leaving and if he touched her, she’d call the police. Then he said, ‘Fine, get out!’ So she left.”

“Len, do you know about this?”

“Yeah.”

It irritates me that Basha confided in Lenny first. I have taught her so much, made her a better person: she knows this. In our five years of friendship, I have taught her to stand up and to think for herself. She would never have left home and moved in with Lenny had it not been for me. I now regret having done this; though not for long, for regret is admitting to yourself you have made a mistake. Regret will lead you down a path of self-abnegation.

I introduced Basha to Lenny. They started dating for a few months, but did not grow serious until after a machine press Lenny had been cleaning dismembered half his right arm. The man who turned it on did not know Lenny was inside cleaning it. I remember Basha told me before the accident that she could imagine herself marrying somebody like Lenny, but not Lenny. He lacked ambition. Then after the accident, he turned suicidal. She cleaved to his side and pretended to love him. She pretended so fervidly that she came to believe it. Lenny was so grateful that he gave her his drawstring pouch, the one our father had given him when he was a boy. At the time, it was filled with marbles, but one night Lenny emptied it out and put in a small black spider. Then, during dinner, he handed me the pouch and said inside it was something he had made for me.

Our parents were pleased and I was curious. When I opened it, the spider crawled out onto my hand. I was in such fear I could neither move nor scream. I just watched as it crawled up my arm, then felt it crawl up my neck. I closed my eyes and my mouth. I could hear Lenny laughing and my mother gasping. Then a slap stung my cheek. I opened my eyes, lifted my hand to my cheek and felt the spider crushed against it. While I cried, my parents forced him to apologize, but I could not see through my tears if he was sincere. That was the first time I developed suspicions about my brother. As he grew up, he kept wearing the pouch everywhere, putting his keys, money or pot in it. For some mysterious reason, it became his favourite possession. I believe there lies a deeper significance to this pouch. Now, it belongs to Basha.

She believes she is improving the world by staying with him, yet I remember when he was still in the hospital, she cried on my shoulder many nights and told me she wanted to run away from him. She did not know if she could deal with a one-armed boyfriend. Soon, she will leave him. Everybody realizes someday the way they have fooled themselves. I believe she pretends to love Lenny because he is black. He is a novelty. It is cool to love someone from another race. I watch her when the three of us are together in a public place. She erects her posture and clasps his hand; she canoodles him in front of other black people. It drives me insane.

“My mom came to see me after school yesterday when Lenny was still at work. She left my dad and doesn't know if she's going back. She can't stand him anymore and his stupid love for Serbia. They're just savages over there and mom doesn't want to have anything to do with anything about her past. Dad can't accept that. He thinks she's a

traitor, and she's not even Serbian. She was sleeping at a friend's house and I told her to come stay with us, but she didn't want to get in the way. I'm so worried about her. What's she gonna do? She can't go back to dad. He's a lunatic. My little brother thinks it's nothing serious, but what do you expect? He worships him. Anyway, I don't know what to do."

Mr. Nastich has sundered his family. He is a despot, telling Basha and her brother what to wear to school, whom they can be friends with, when they must do their homework and when to go to bed. Wise parents do not tell their kids what to do. They teach them there are choices in life and they must decide for themselves what is in their best interest. My parents have raised me in this way, and I have become an adult. I am not an adult; but I am.

My parents were born in Jamaica. They met in England in the early seventies. My father drove trucks for the British army. My mother built sparkplugs for the trucks. They were eighteen. They love England, and Jamaica because it is a former British colony. They married and emigrated to Canada to find work. Canada is also a former British colony, which tends to offer the most stable living conditions. They had considered settling in Halifax, but Windsor was closer to America, another former British colony. My father was hired as a forklift mechanic for Chrysler. He was elated, for if you work hard, they rarely fire you, and you accrue many benefits. My mother was also hired at Chrysler, assembling sparkplugs and seatbelts. Ninety percent of the people who do this are women. It is believed that women, with their manual dexterity and natural patience, build small things better than men.

That is true, but women build large things better as well. For example, marriage is a very large responsibility. My mother built her marriage and she alone keeps it together. Father tried to sunder it with his infidelity, but mother had either the courage (or no self-respect) to forgive him. It is irrational to believe that men are capable of fidelity. Though I believe (*perhaps*) there are exceptions (*yes!*).

My parents have always been laconic with me. They only offer suggestions. When I was twelve, I had friends who enjoyed getting high; at first I resisted. My parents suggested that pot makes you lazy, then anti-social, then a criminal like the Rastafarians of Jamaica. But one day I tried it anyway. I also drank myself into a torpor. When I came home, I collapsed on the front porch of our house, a vomitous slab on the welcome mat. My mother found me in the morning, but she was not angry. She helped me clean myself up and suggested I go to school for a year in Jamaica. I did not want to go, for I loved my friends. Then she showed me pictures of the white sand beaches, refulgent sea, azure sky, the halcyon face of my Aunt Rita and the house where she lived in the verdant hills outside Kingston. My soul, though I did not yet know what it was, beckoned I go, portending self-discovery. I had already started wondering who I am. Only days before had I experienced menarche. I shuddered to think I would have to bleed that much once every month; but then I realized this gunge was in fact my spirit escaping in material form. It was imploring me to visit my ancestral home.

It was time to discover the birthplace of my soul.

I moved in with my aunt and started attending a co-ed Catholic school in Kingston. I loved my uniform: blue shirt, grey skirt, grey knee-high socks and black loafers. The nuns were strict yet very kind, His kindness shining on their wimpled faces. I

also made an amazing friend named Leah, who lived down the street. Her grandparents had moved to Jamaica from Germany in 1933, when Hitler came to power. Leah was a second-generation Jewish-Jamaican. She often talked about wanting to visit Germany. I told her I would go with her, but she thought it a bad idea. She came over one Saturday morning when Aunt Rita made an amazing breakfast called Ackee, a sweet red pod fruit boiled with onion, hot peppers and cod imported from Canada.

As we ate, Aunt Rita told us about my ancestors, rebellious nineteenth-century slaves called Maroons. They escaped from plantations to live in the hills as they did in Africa, spraddled up in trees, holding spears, jumping down to impale British soldiers passing underneath. That night, I dreamed I was a Maroon, spraddled up in a tree with a spear, soldiers marching underneath. A man whose face I could not discern, obscured by leaves and branches between us, crouched beside me. He said, "*Jump! I will protect you.*" Then he disappeared. As I jumped to attack, I awoke. I bolted upright out of bed, my body anointed in sweat. It was then that I knew this inscrutable dream was my soul revealing to me my former life. I jounced in the knowledge of what I had once been. My dream has been recurring for almost six years, and I always awaken at the same moment. My soul has not yet felt ready to reveal its secret.

But tonight I believe I will discover what it means.

Will I? I know it! For in my love, my protector, I must not doubt.

Mornings I awaken you with a kiss. We make love in swirling light. They are His beacons of truth that surge through our blood and irradiate our souls. We will bear them to all His beloved children of Jamaica, our home. I am inside you, we are one. Can you feel me inside you?

Aunt Rita also told us the ghosts of Maroons still live among us today, protecting our freedom: it is only because of their sacrifice that Jamaica is still free. I feel the spirit of my former life surrounding me always, my spirit-nimbus, protecting me and guiding me into the future.

The Jamaican ethos is freedom. Life radiates from their soul, and in their eyes I see their fusion to the God-spirit. They are fearless. They enjoy every moment of their lives on earth, even when they suffer.

Once, I was standing with Leah under the awning of a restaurant in Kingston. It was raining. A hunched elderly man toddled by, his hat drooping low over his face. He saw us, toddled over, took off his hat and said in the most resplendent patois, "Me see when dat rain come down de flowa dem bloom." I melted and kissed his cheek. I wish to be as sweet as him when I grow old, and this will only happen if I live in Jamaica. I will move there as soon as I finish university.

The worst people in Jamaica are the Rastafarians. They are charlatans, for they worship Haile Selassie as Jesus Christ. He was an evil Ethiopian despot who tortured and murdered all recusants. The megalomaniac actually believed he was Jesus Christ.

And according to Rastafarianism, women must only serve their men.

I had been living with Aunt Rita for nine months when elections started. Kingston streets turned violent and I could not go to school for days. She wanted to send me back to Windsor, yet I wanted to stay there forever; until one day, when her housekeeper returned from the market, a bullet having scraped his neck. I saw his blood-soaked shirt and took the first flight back to Windsor. I was young then, immature and full of fear. I

told my parents I wished to return after the violence had ended. They told me I could if I wished.

Mr. and Mrs. Nastich could learn so much from my parents.

“Your parents should have dinner with mine. They could learn so much.”

“I guess, but like that’s gonna happen. I think they’re gonna get divorced. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know if my mom can survive without my dad.”

Why do people still believe that women cannot survive without men? After all, we have more manual dexterity and natural patience.

“Bash, I believe the opposite. Your father wouldn’t survive without your mother.”

“Fuck that. They gotta hook up, talk about some shit, forgive each other and fuckin’... They gotta stay together, fuck.”

“I don’t know. I don’t care about him anymore. I hate him. I hope he dies.”

“No, you don’t. Don’t ever hate your father, no matter how evil he becomes. Part of you came from him, so to hate him is to hate yourself.”

“Anyway, he called me tonight. He was so nice and he spoke in English. It was strange. He was calm. He said mom was right and he was an asshole. He said he was going to bring her home and he asked me to come home, too. And the strangest thing is he told me to forget about Serbia. He said Serbia should cut out its heart and feed it to the monster. Whatever that means.”

“He means... He means Serbians should stop killing Muslims. He means long ago, Serbia fed its heart to the monster of racism and now it needs a new heart. Your father’s starting to understand that he and his culture can live peacefully together with Muslims

and other cultures, as we do here in Canada. That's amazing. He's finally learned something."

"Maybe. He didn't sound like he meant it. He kept pausing halfway through his sentences, then he didn't finish them. When he means what he's saying he says it loud and without breathing."

"Give him time. When you talk to your mother, tell her what he told you, and tell her he wants to change. Perhaps she could give him another chance, for the sake of your family."

"How'd you get so fuckin' smart, Jam? You read that shit in some book?"

"Yes, Len. In a book."

One morning, I was eight and Lenny eleven, we were walking together to school. Our parents had asked that he walk me there each morning and back home each afternoon, for I was not yet old enough to walk alone. Lenny felt me a horrible burden; he scudded along several metres ahead, snuffling and hot-blooded, lunging back every few seconds to clutch my arm and drag me forward. Some of his friends met us on the street, circling us on their shiny BMX bicycles, chaffing Lenny for his sibling duty. He exploded with fury, his eyes boiling crimson, and he spat on me. I collapsed on the street, covering my face with my hands to conceal the tears streaming down my cheeks. He left me there alone, huddled and petrified. I have never told our parents about this, but when I saw his crimson eyes, I knew he had a demon inside him. I love Lenny and believe that today he would die for me, but the fact remains that he was born unto this earth in perdition, and nothing can be done to save him. God decided that his soul would not carry on from his former life into this one. I believe he was once the devil's minion. He is doomed to live in

the service of others for the rest of his life: it is why he and Basha should never marry, for their kids would suffer the same fate, a family prison from which they could never escape. And the spirits around us would cry for all of eternity.

“My dad also said the bombing ended today, but he didn’t sound happy about it. He sounded angry about it, and he said he had to do something with my little brother, something important I’d know about tomorrow. He said he hoped I’d forgive him someday. I said, ‘Sure, Dad. Maybe.’ And he said, ‘I hope.’ Then he hung up.”

“I told ya last night, babe, sounds like he’s comin’ ‘round. For sure yer mom and dad’ll be bangin’ their brains out by Sunday. Don’t worry.”

“Lenny’s right. It sounds like your father wants to make amends, and I know your mother’s very patient. She might give him another chance.”

“Do you mean it?”

Basha knows better than anybody that I always mean what I say.

“Yes, I mean it. Now put it out of your mind and have fun tonight. Are you coming up?”

“I think so. My stomach feels like a washing machine or...Am I gonna throw up?”

“You might. A lot of people do when they first come up. But don’t be afraid. It’s mostly water coming out. It will clean your stomach and sharpen your high.”

“Should I force it?”

“No, let it happen naturally. Listen to your body, especially when we get to the party. When the music hits you, it will steal your body and the earth will fall away. All of

your problems will fall away. Let the spirits of the future guide you through the music.

Tonight will be amazing, I promise you.”

My love,

“Okay. Thanks.”

Can you feel me inside you?

“This party’s gonna fuckin’ blow our minds. Fission, Kristal Kriss, Sonikman, they’re all spinnin’ tonight. They’re the best DJs in the world. They fuckin’...how much they pay Sonikman a night, Jam?”

You are my Dream. It is in your body, the chalice into which my soul flows like warm attar. My soul is Nigel. Nigel.

Nigel is the man with whom I am fated to share my life on earth. I had never loved before, and I will never love again. I found him one month ago at the last Ann Arbor party. I was rushing through eternity, Fission spinning a polyphonous trance mix, a Malcolm X speech sampling underneath. Chewing on the words and beats, dubbing (Dubbing is the way women slaves danced in nineteenth-century Jamaica. They grated their hips and pelvises to the music of the time to express their power, courage, joy and fusion to the God-spirit. I dance like my ancestors to show them I value the protection they have offered me throughout my life.) as I had never dubbed before, I opened my eyes to behold the most beautiful man I will ever see: his skin like creamy silk, short curly black hair, six feet tall; long slender face, neck, arms, torso and legs. His eyes swollen shut, a deep smile purpled his lips as the music usurped his soul. He was dancing so wildly that a pond of sweat had gathered at his feet. Everybody around him had given him ample space, for they knew he had absconded reality. A man does not dance with such

intensity unless his life, beliefs, ideas, imagination and spirit are equally intense. I wished to swallow his spirit energy. I moved towards him, then in behind him, closed my eyes and within moments my stomach was pressed tight against his back. Without turning, he reached back and wrapped his arms around me. We started sharing sweat and spirit. We did this for a long time without opening our eyes or turning around to look at each other. When we finally did, we locked into a kiss, gazing into each others' eyes, his spirit stealing into my body and mine into his, through our eyes. I wished to eat his lips, mine more powerful than his. Then he pulled away and took my hand, led me outside and I followed him without fear. My soul went rushing through me in a hot blast. '*He is the man of your Dream!*' it said.

I knew in that moment I would live inside Nigel forever.

We stood outside in the parking lot. He took a small tin from his pocket and a joint and matches from the tin.

"What's your name?"

"Sera."

"Where are you from, Sera?"

"We all come from the same place. What's *your* name?"

"Nigel."

'*Nigel* is the name of my *soul*,' I thought.

"Wanna smoke this with me?"

I smiled at him. He smiled at me and was about to light it when I took his hand in mine.

"Let's smoke it in my car."

I led him to my father's car at the edge of the parking lot of the warehouse where the party was taking place. We sat in the backseat. He lit the joint.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Windsor."

"I knew it. You don't sound American."

"Why not?"

"You're soft-spoken, but confident. You're innocent, but experienced."

'He is brilliant,' I thought.

"Perhaps. Where do you live?"

"Here. I'm an art major at U of M. I grew up in Dearborn."

He passed me the joint. I took a deep drag, sharpening my high, amplifying the sibilance of crickets around the lot.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Eighteen."

"I'm twenty-four."

"I'm older than I am."

"I could feel it when we were dancing."

We shared a silence as I passed him the joint. He was gazing at me with his dark blue eyes. He had not taken them from me since we had sat in the car. They froze me in time. I gazed back, searching for myself in his eyes.

"Tell me something about yourself you've never told anyone else."

Such an unusual request could only come from somebody with infinite curiosity and one who consumes life. He passed me the joint.

“I know what’s going to happen in my future.”

“You do?”

“I’m moving to Jamaica after I finish university. I’m going to become a teacher in Montego Bay. I’m going to teach a generation of Jamaican kids to understand their spiritual history and prepare for the future.”

Nigel was amazed. He had expected I would tell him something about my fears, or insecurities or something unfortunate that had happened in my life. No misfortune has fallen on me, and when it does, I will be prepared, and I will endure. I am always aware of what is happening around me.

“You’re from Jamaica?”

I nodded and took another drag from the joint. It was almost finished. I passed it to him.

“In the sixteenth century, my ancestors were taken there from Africa to become slaves. But most of them escaped from their plantations. They rebelled and took back their freedom. My parents were born there. I was born in Windsor. But the spirits of my ancestors are always with me, protecting me. They taught the whole world that slavery is impossible. You can’t own the human spirit. It is one with God.”

Nigel gave me a queer look when I said His name. It struck me with doubt.

“Do you believe in God?”

“I...haven’t decided yet.”

“Why not?”

He looked down in thought, then rolled down the window, threw out the joint, rolled up the window and turned to me.

“Because too many people suffer, in ways you and I could never imagine. I mean, if God doesn’t exist, it explains why. But if He does, He’s indifferent to our suffering. I just don’t know if I...If I could deal with that, you know?”

And then I understood. Just as Nigel was born to protect me from the dangers of this earth, so too was I born to teach him God’s truth, to lead him from the shadow into the light.

“But those who suffer the most in this life will be happiest in the next. It’s all part of God’s plan. It’s how he balances the universe. The poorest of the earth are God’s chosen people. Like Jamaicans.”

Nigel nodded and looked away, unconvinced. I decided not to hurry his transformation. After all, we are one for the rest of our lives and beyond.

“Have you been to Jamaica recently?”

“Last summer. I went to school there for nine months when I was twelve. Now I go back every summer to Montego Bay where my aunt lives. She lived in Kingston for most of her life, then moved to Montego Bay where it’s safer. There’s a real beach where you can swim and not too many Rastafarians. My parents built a house there for when they retire in a few years. My aunt decided she’d live in it and take care of it until they retire. The tourists there are awful, but I mustn’t judge them. We mustn’t judge those who were never taught to respect their host when they’re guests in somebody else’s home.”

“You’re talking about Americans?”

“Only the ones in Montego Bay. I don’t hate Americans. I love everybody, but the rich ones have put up gaudy hotels and fast food restaurants along the beach. They’ve destroyed its natural beauty.”

“But tourism’s big business.”

“I know, but it makes Montego Bay look too modern. Don’t you think the world was more beautiful in the past?”

God inspired us to invent computers so that we may discover how to live as He does, as spirit instead of matter; but until then, we must preserve the earth as it is. We must not impose the design of the future on the world of today and yesterday. That is ecological blasphemy. Why have we witnessed sundry natural disasters lately? Why is the earth in such peril? God is warning us that we are making a terrible mistake by changing the world too quickly. We are locked in a process of joining him; we are becoming cyber-spirits. But in gradations. Once we are pure spirit, we may design the universe in any way we wish. God will be there to help us design our eternal happiness. Violence, pain and death will no longer exist, for we will no longer have bodies.

Nigel chuckled, smiling.

“It’s funny you should ask that. I was at a gallery in Chicago last week, and I saw a photo exhibit of New York, turn of the century. I just got lost in them. The architecture was wild back then and I...I wanted to step into the photos and live inside them, you know? Yeah, when I went back outside I saw all the...the stale postmodern buildings with the glass and the polished steel. I fell into this kind of malaise, you know? I guess what I’m trying to say is you’ve made an interesting point.”

“Thank you.”

“How’d you get around to thinking this way?”

“I read a lot. I’ve learned everything I know on my own. School doesn’t do a very good job of teaching important things. That’s what I’d like to change.”

Nigel kept looking at my breasts. I was wearing my favourite orange spandex tank top, a silver star between them. I knew he wanted to touch them. He did not yet know they belong to him.

“You’re fascinating,” he said.

“Thank you. I would hate to be boring. I decided a year ago never to allow myself to be boring. One day, I saw my parents reclining on separate sofas, staring dropsically at the television.”

“Wait, ‘dropsically.’ That means...kind of hangdog, like a zombie?”

I nodded. He had never heard the word before, nor had he looked it up. He is brilliant: my brilliant soul.

“Sorry, go on.”

“Don’t apologize. I mean I wish never to be like that. I love my parents, but they’re so boring, yet they believe they’re happy and comfortable. This is the problem with Jamaica I wish to change.”

Jamaicans are lazy, like my parents. It is due in part to the tropical climate, but also they believe life amounts to little more than being outside, playing sports and enjoying each other’s company. Were they more motivated and ambitious, there would be no limit to what they could achieve. Natural resources abound in Jamaica: sugar and exotic fruit, to name just two. If they realized this, they would become more productive. They would earn more money to spend on preserving their true primordial history, and educating themselves on how to use computers to prepare for the future. Old slave houses

and prisons now are tourist attractions, but for the wrong reasons. Expensive hotels are evil, for only black Jamaicans work there, yet they live in cardboard houses on the hillside. It is inhuman, and they must learn to effect change for themselves.

“D’you think you can help them change?”

We will help them change, my love.

I nodded. He looked at my dreads, then into my eyes.

“Can I ask you something?”

Another brilliant question.

“Anything.”

“I take it you don’t like the Rastas.”

“They’re criminals.”

“Then why do you have dreads?”

“Jamaicans wore dreads long before the Rastas came along. They’re my way of having a little piece of home with me wherever I go. When I move there I’ll probably shave my head, but until then I’ll keep them.”

“Can I touch one?”

I nodded, smiling.

He ran his fingers along one dread, tightening them around it, loosening them, stroking it gently up and down.

“They’re soft, like wool.”

“Flocculent.”

“Right.”

“I wash them everyday, not like the Rastas. Personal hygiene is very important to me.”

“Me too.”

He put his fingers on the nape of my neck, drawing small circles, gazing into my eyes.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

For a moment, he said nothing.

“I can’t lie to you.”

He took his hand from my neck.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“Why not?”

“I know you don’t love her.”

“I don’t. It’s just a casual school thing.”

“I know you loved me before you met me.”

“I did.”

I knew he was being honest. I knew he meant what he told me, for his eyes never wavered from mine. And they were open wide.

“I’d break up with her to be with you.”

“I know. I wouldn’t be here if you loved somebody else.”

“I want to be with you.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. We’re so far away.”

“Our bodies are, but our souls can be one. We can be always together.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Come with me to Jamaica.”

“I’d come with you for sure.”

And then we became God’s infinite magic, beyond words, actions, habits, commonalities, that which mortality can never understand, joining us together on the dance floor, guiding us out to my father’s car, keeping us together for all of eternity.

He kissed me. I took his hand, put it on my stomach under my top, lifted it up to my left breast, close to my heart. He quivered, for I was not wearing a bra. Lying back, guiding him down with me, I held him tight. We started grinding, moaning, clouding the windows in a veil of mist. He hardened and widened, my spirit trickling down my thigh, soaking his pants and the seat beneath us. I could have flooded the whole car and drowned us. He reached into my skirt, between my legs, drawing circles on my spot. He pulled my panties to the side and a stream of warm spirit coated his finger. He kept drawing, sliding his finger inside me. I reached down, stroking him over his pants. It turned hot on my palm. We had surrendered ourselves. He was very good. He knew how to touch me, to start slow and soft, then to speed up and to press harder. He started unzipping his pants. I stopped him and pulled away from our kiss.

“I’m a virgin.”

He froze. His cheeks sank. He snuffled.

“Oh...Sorry...I didn’t know.”

“Yes you did, but not consciously. I can’t make love until I’m an adult. It’s the ultimate spiritual and physical union of two people. I can’t until I can understand everything that’s happening to my body and soul.”

Nigel turned florid with dejection, but not the dejection a boy feels when he first discovers he will not 'score some pussy.' Nigel was consumed with spiritual agony, for he had not been allowed to share in the most profound cosmic act with the one he was born to love. For the sake of us both, we had to wait.

He tried to sit up. I held the nape of his neck.

"Stay here."

I pressed his lips against mine, guiding his finger back inside me. He was lost again, moaning as I stroked him faster. I wished to offer him a memory he could dream about each night our bodies were apart. I turned him over onto his back, opened his legs, kneeling between them. I pulled down his pants and brought it out, bracing it in my fingers. I looked up in his eyes, licking circles around the tip.

"Look at me."

Lips and nostrils flaring, he nodded. I put it deep in my mouth: it is not very big, but I did not mind. I went up and down softly, my lips wrapped around my teeth, my tongue coiled around it, sucking in breath each time I lifted up, never taking my eyes from his. His moaning grew louder. His flesh turned pink. His eyes rolled back; I pressed harder with my lips. I held the base of it so I would know when his spirit was ready to escape. Then I felt a pulse: I lifted my head, turned it to the side, stroked him very fast, and his spirit shot like a spear into the seat beside us. I kissed it a few more times as his breath slowed, then let it go, sat up beside him, took him in my arms and laid his face against mine, his heart pounding against my ribs.

"I can't feel my gums."

"Sshh..."

I held him, leaned my head back and closed my eyes, swirls of light echoing in the darkness. I foresaw in the light...

You and I on the beach in Montego Bay, our feet sinking into the sand as we walk to the market at the harbour. The moment we arrive, a throng of fishermen, their faces wizened from decades in the sun, wrangle to offer us the lowest price on fresh catches, while old spinsters offer us teeming baskets of mango and plantain.

Later that night, we sit on the patio of our house atop a hill overlooking the beach where we had successfully campaigned to have all of the hotels removed. Jamaicans who worked there are now back in school, learning how to use computers. We watch them celebrating on the beach below, falling in love and bringing themselves closer to God.

You and I have opened an elementary school. You are the art teacher and I am the principal. Our beloved children swarm around us each morning, asking us what they will learn. 'Go to class and you will see,' we tell them as they snuffle and giggle with impatience.

And then I fell asleep.

I awoke recumbent in the backseat. It was dawn. I heard a faint throbbing bass emanating from the warehouse. I turned to kiss Nigel, but he was gone. There was a note and a flyer beside me. I picked them up. The note said: 'Dear Sara [sic], I couldn't sleep and I didn't want to wake you. You looked peaceful and gorgeous. I had the most incredible night of my life with you. I still can't believe we met. Here's a flyer for the next party in a month. Come meet me and we'll make plans for the future. Jamaica awaits us. I'll be on the dance floor waiting for you. And single. Love, Nigel.' I pressed his note

tight against my heart, and I cried. My soul had colluded with God to bring him to the party so that we could fall in love.

It is now my destiny to follow through.

“Jam!” Lenny yells.

“What?”

“You all right?”

“Why?”

“We lost ya for a bit there. Where’d ya go?”

“Sorry. Did you ask me something?”

“Yeah. How much does Sonikman get paid a night?”

“I’m not sure. A few thousand, I believe.”

“Why does he get paid so much?” Basha asks.

“Cause he’s a genius, babe. No one can do what DJs do.”

“Yeah but, don’t they just play records? How hard is that?”

“They don’t just fuckin’...It’s all ’bout how they mix the records and layer in the samples an’ shit. They gotta read the mood of the crowd, what’s gonna make everyone bust the fuck out. You’re talkin’ ’bout three-four hundred people, at least. Ya ever try to make that many people happy at the same time? It’s fuckin’ impossible. Those guys were born to play music. They deserve every penny, fuck.”

“Bash, they’re God’s chosen messengers. He has chosen them to spread the message of love and unity, to bring our generation together to prepare us for the future. Think about everybody our age. Who’s the happiest and most peaceful group of us all?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s us. Rave culture. We live for the joy of sharing a whole night together in one dark room of love, sweat and music. Did you know the heart beats sixty to eighty times per minute?”

“No.”

“It’s true. And most Techno tracks use one hundred-twenty to one hundred-forty beats per minute. So when there are hundreds of us hearing the same music, our hearts start to quicken at the same pace. When that happens, we become one, and the music lifts us all to a higher plane. You’ll have to see it and feel it for yourself. When we get there, you won’t believe what you’re feeling. I know you’ll never be the same again. I believe you’ll understand what I’ve been talking about all this time.”

“Right on,” Lenny says.

“I can’t wait,” Basha says.

We reach the exit for Ann Arbor, turning off into its suburban outskirts. A tool and die shop, racquet and fitness club, car dealership, Super 8 Motel and a Burger King are the first places we pass, followed on either side by columns of single-floor aluminum siding row houses of varying colour, like Windsor. We turn onto Main Street, following it toward the center of town. A stream of red and yellow roses dapple the island dividing opposing lanes of traffic, like Windsor. We cross neighbourhoods of old Victorian manors and gigantic fraternity houses with gaudy Greek letters on their front facades. Grass is Day-Glo green, trees erect as beanstalks. I am reminded of Windsor’s predominantly Jewish neighbourhoods where lawyers and furniture outlet owners live.

We pass the University of Michigan campus: it is monstrous. Concrete and glass edifices litter the empty campus.

I'm not here. I'm at the party waiting for you. Hurry.

I am starting to peak: my heart and stomach contract and expand in tiny eruptions. My head hums and toes sweat. I may vomit.

We pass the university football stadium. Its blue dome has yellow trim and a giant yellow "M."

I don't like Football. I'm an artist. Sports are humanity at its most savage and infantile. I'm a rebel, a radical. I organize student protests against racism and injustice. I organize food drives. I petition the administration to serve organic food in the cafeteria.

Have you ever gone to the chapel to pray?

No, but you've taught me to believe in a higher spiritual force. You've taught me there's something bigger and more profound on the other side of life.

I am hungry to know you, my love. I could starve in this moment, pass out from lack of you.

Then hurry, your soul is waiting.

The campus does not effuse the ethos of a great art school. A great art school must be located in the mountains or in a forest, sequestered from the rest of the world. Artists must avoid urban distraction, retreat inside themselves, capture the world unfolding in their minds.

I painted your soul portrait this month.

Will you present it to me tonight?

I'll come up behind you while you're dubbing. I'll put my arms around you and spin you around. I'll kiss you long, wet and soft. I'll take you outside. I'll fall on my knees and present it to you.

Was it difficult to create?

It was the hardest piece I've ever painted. I spent weeks in isolation. I had to find the perfect composition, tone and image to represent everything you mean to me.

Did I inspire you? Am I your muse?

Yes! I've been so inspired since I met you. I can't wait to thank you for everything you've given me.

Have you shown anybody my portrait?

My professor. He was so blown away he thinks it'll immortalize me. I told him it's not for public display. It's yours. I'm yours. Forever.

We cross the center of town: pizza and submarine sandwich shops, an ice-skating rink, a dentist's office, a travel agency, rows of sculpted bushes and trees, a red and yellow rose garden, red brick sidewalks, a Korean restaurant and an English pub with a bloated patio jutting onto Main Street: like Ouellette, Windsor's main strip. Windsor is less moribund, for it is closer to Detroit, looming over us like a shadow, warning us to awaken from our slumber, to be alert and to trust only those we love.

My parents first arrived in Windsor in 1978. As they drove up Ouellette toward the downtown, they saw the Renaissance Center and abutting towers and thought they were part of Windsor. They were elated to be moving to such a booming city. The further downtown they went, the bigger the towers grew, the more elated they felt. Then they

reached the Detroit River, where Ouellette ends. They gazed upon the Renaissance Center across the river; around them were just a few low buildings. Still, they were consoled by Detroit's proximity. They go shopping there each month. It took them years to overcome the crippling fear they felt each time they crossed the border. I told them they had nothing to fear, that if they had love in their hearts they would return unscathed. They no longer fear Detroit. It pleases me to know that sometimes I can teach my parents important truths. It is the best way to reciprocate everything they have given me. I was despondent to learn they had forgotten so much of what their culture had taught them. People in Windsor are stultified by the violence and danger in Detroit. I wish they would abandon their fear. It is irrational. If you remind yourself everyday there is nothing to fear, you start to believe it, and then you discover it is truth. For if you cannot trust God, you cannot trust anybody. Then there is no reason to live.

I have been to Ann Arbor only once before. It seems only the elderly live here. Perhaps it is a retirement community, like Windsor, where the elderly like to play Bingo. They also gamble at the casino with the Americans, or they spend their days in their apartments watching television. There is nothing to do in this part of the world when you grow old, but be bored. If you want a stable job and some comfort as my parents did, Windsor is a fine place. But when you retire, your soul dies, and in your remaining days on this earth, you are little more than a slab of wattled flesh. It is why my parents built a retirement home in Montego Bay.

I often wondered if God had designed our bodies for urban survival. Cities are receptacles of filth and hate, and even the air is too sick to keep circulating. Soon our bodies will begin collapsing in the streets. restaurants and apartments of cities. I also

wondered why God had even given us bodies if they are so imperfect, but now I understand what he is teaching us: it is awful being imperfect, and when we are perfect, we will appreciate how wonderful it is.

Windsor has been good to my parents. There they have found the happiness they sought and have shared all of it with me. It is for this reason that I am honest. But Windsor cannot offer the life that I wish for when I am an adult. Jamaica still has much to learn to catch up to the Western world. Poverty, desperation and ignorance do not exist here as there. Most Jamaicans have never even seen a computer; how else will they fuse with God? The past is important, the future is most important, and the present is irrelevant. God teaches us that we must take responsibility for our lives. He guides us to an extent, but we must be perceptive. We must transcend what He has taught us. We must stop living day-to-day, or He will leave us behind.

“Is this Ann Arbor or Windsor?” Basha asks.

“No shit,” Lenny replies.

“Every retirement town looks the same,” I say.

“Windsor’s a retirement town?” she asks.

“No, but there’s tons o’ fuckin’ raisins there. They like playin’ bingo an’ shit. They like shoppin’ in the States. Like our fuckin’ parents, Jam.”

“Windsor is a retirement town, Len. Why are there so many retirement communities and apartments for the elderly, especially along the river?”

“I dunno. There’s lots o’ kids too.”

“So what? A retirement town doesn’t have only the elderly. Sometimes parents move with their kids to the same town as their own parents to be close to them. And younger people have to work at the places the elderly like to go, like the casino. I’m sure Sophie’s mother makes good money waitressing there.”

“I’ve been calling Sophie all week, but she won’t return my calls,” Basha says.

“Don’t talk to her anymore,” I say.

She pauses a moment in thought.

“Do you think it’s true?”

“Of course it is. A lot of people told me they saw it happen. When a lot of people see the same thing, it must be true.”

“Yeah, but Brick’s a fuckin’ liar. I played football with him the year I dropped out, and he used to make up all these stories ’bout how his grand-dad knew Hitler. He said his dad was friends with Hitler’s kid, and they were plannin’ to start world war three an’ shit. The whole team shit their fuckin’ pants.”

“Well,” I say, “that’s a ridiculous story from a diseased mind, but he’s not the only person saying she did it. She’s a slut.”

“Don’t say that! She’s not a slut,” Basha says.

“Yes, she is. I went to talk to her about it...”

“When did you talk to her? She won’t return my calls!”

There is a fundamental difference between lying and concealing the truth. Lying is to honesty as shadow is to light; between them lies the delicate art of truth concealment. There are times when a person must not learn the truth, for they are incapable of understanding it. The truth will deceive them. Neither Basha nor anybody else at our

school must know what I did earlier tonight. It would give rise to little more than opprobriums about “cradle-robbing” or “having the hots for a faggot.” I would be ostracized, dooming my apprenticeship as God’s emissary. This must never happen, for I am His truth made flesh. It is my destiny to prepare Jamaica for the future, but first I must hone my skills as His apprentice.

Gus is a very cagey, effete young boy at my school. He is Sophie’s little brother. His troubles are deep and heavy, but I see something burning bright in the soul of his shadow. He is the perfect pupil. I will help ablate him of his sorrows and reveal to him the beauty of his burrowed soul. I will also learn more about Sophie: why she has strayed so far from God’s path; why she has chosen to live under her own shadow; why she subjects herself to cruelty day after day.

Gus and I met earlier tonight for an informal first session. He was very difficult and I made little progress. I had first to admonish him for being late. He came pie-eyed, knurled; he reeked of urine. His emetic breath was almost too thick to bear. I had asked to meet him, and he had misunderstood my intentions, believing I would offer him some ‘pussy.’ It was my fault, but I too am learning. Though he passed out only twenty minutes into our session, I will not give up on him.

He did reveal some fascinating details about his family life, especially about his relationship with Sophie and the indifference with which their mother poisons them. I was galvanized to learn more about her machinations. I rushed to their house to talk to Sophie, to ask her many questions about her mother and their relationship. If I am to be Gus’s teacher, I need to learn all I can about his mother. I am eager for God’s

approbation, perhaps too much so. But I cannot reveal these details to Basha, and I have now choked on my words.

I must backtrack, furtively.

“I went to her house tonight. She hadn’t been answering the phone and...I wanted to invite her to the party. When I knocked on the door, nobody answered, so I went around the side of the house and looked in her bedroom window. The curtain was drawn and a light shone inside, so I knocked, but she didn’t answer. I assumed she wasn’t home.”

“That’s strange. You just said I shouldn’t talk to her anymore.”

“I know I did, but I thought it would be nice if I invited her to the party. Then we could get her side of the story.”

“Why didn’t you bring me with you?”

“I’m sorry. I thought it would be a nice surprise.”

“She’s my friend, too. I wish you didn’t shut me out like that.”

“Bash, she’s *your* friend. She was never my friend. I put up with her because you like her so much. I know she encouraged you to exercise and you feel you owe her something for that. But do you think it’s healthy how skinny she is? Do you want to look like her? She looks like a skeleton. It’s disgusting.”

“Why are you being so mean?”

“I’m not being mean. I’m being honest.”

“Yeah, mean and honest. She loves Brick, and if she did what everyone says she did, maybe there was a reason. Maybe Brick forced her to do it, did you ever think of that? Not everyone’s as strong and together as you.”

“Do I smell a fuckin’ catfight or what?”

“Shut up, Len. This is none of your business.”

“Don’t tell my boyfriend to shut up.”

“I’ll tell my brother whatever I want.”

“Fine. But stop saying mean things about Sophie. She’s got problems and her boyfriend’s an asshole, but that doesn’t mean we should believe everyone else and stop being her friend.”

“It’s not about believing everybody else. It’s about accepting the truth. Sophie has no place in our lives, *especially* yours.”

“Why *especially* mine?”

We are pulling into the warehouse parking lot; in minutes I will reunite with my love. This must end now.

“She’s a bad influence on you.”

“All right guys, let’s kiss and fuckin’...”

“You’re not my mom!”

Basha has never stood up to me before. This is amazing. Though she is now misguided, at least she is learning.

The parking lot is packed. The party inside must be exploding. I find a spot at the back and park. I see in the rear-view Basha staring ahead, her arms crossed, Lenny wiping tears from her cheeks. I take a deep breath and turn to her.

“Bash, I’m sorry. I don’t have the right to judge you like that. I made a mistake. Please forgive me.”

“I don’t think we should talk for the rest of the night.”

“You know what? Good idea. I don’t have time for this. Len, I’ll meet you back here when the sun comes up. Have fun tonight, Bash.”

I get out of the car and walk to the front entrance. A groaning primordial bass blows out the cracks of the old warehouse, its walls bending and lurching. Doddering partiers riddle the front entrance: sitting, standing, roaming, screaming, cackling, vomiting, getting high, drinking water; preparing themselves for another dose of the future. I must immediately procure another E. The ones we swallowed before were decent, but they were cut with speed. I must find pure MDMA. Tonight I wish to soar high above the earth with my eternal love.

I pay the doorman twenty dollars. The moment I enter the foyer, I am doused in a mist of hanging sweat, the beats bruising my flesh. The foyer is thronged. I can barely see my hand in front of my face.

Nobody here is over twenty-five. Drenched in sweat from head to toe, strangers embrace, friends huddle together, screaming into each others’ ears, sharing memories of the perfect set when they lost their bodies in the cloud of electricity moiling above the dance floor. This warehouse is our church, where God says *Rise*, and we float up to Him, where we lose our minds only to find them again later: our escapist reality.

I must find MDMA before I seek Nigel. I burrow through the crowd, hunting for emaciated prepubescent boys in baggy clothes, glow sticks and necklaces, their eyes shiny and black, their faces scorched pink. These boys always have MDMA or know where to find it. The walls are draped in black garbage bags and dappled with red and yellow lasers, swirling and fading. I see a pink-faced boy with a smile swallowing his face,

jouncing from the main room into the foyer down a black corridor toward a washroom. I follow him.

I find in the washroom a group of girls and boys, huddled over their friend vomiting into a sink, giggling as they pass around a cannon-sized joint. Beside them, two girls are doing bumps from a phial dangling from one of their necklaces. Behind them, my boy runs into a stall and shuts the door. I walk up and knock.

“Hello?” I ask.

“What?”

“Sorry to bother you, but I’m looking for MDMA.”

“I got some,” says one of the boys nursing the vomiting friend.

“Hi,” I say.

“How ya doin’?” he asks.

“Amazing. You? Hi guys,” I say to everyone.

They smile bloated happy smiles.

“I’m peaked out, dude. I’m fuckin’ mashed,” he says as he hands me the joint.

I have a toke. It is delicious. He leans back and reaches around behind his knees into his back pocket, pulls out a pill container, opens it and holds it up so that I can see it.

“Pure MDMA. Shit’s the bomb. Trust me.”

I smile and nod.

“How many you need?”

“One. How much?”

“Forty.”

I reach into my pocket for my money.

“What’s your name?”

“Sera. What’s yours?”

“Craig. You’re beautiful, dude.”

“Thanks.”

I pay him. He holds the pill up to my mouth.

“Close your eyes.”

“That’s okay.”

Dejected, he puts it in my hand. I put it in my mouth and swallow it without water.

I never drink water at parties, until I have dubbed so much that I am no longer sweating.

Most partiers drink too much water too quickly, vomiting all over themselves, destroying their journey.

“Cool,” he says.

“Thanks so much.”

“No worries. Wanna hang out, get high?”

“No thanks. I have to find my friends.”

I smile at him and walk out the door.

The moment is now, my love.

I squeeze into the main room through a wall-to-wall throng of glistening writhing bodies. I am ready for eternity. I do not know this DJ, but he is spinning classic acid house. He and his turntables rest at the front of the dance floor, like a preacher and his pulpit. The high cupola of this church magnify the beats in a sustained crescendo. Dozens of partiers have converged around the speakers. The bass cannonade puffs out their shirts and pants like blooming flowers. They do not understand the true meaning of a party.

They are here only to thrash their minds into speckles. There is no substance to their joy, only eardrum cataclysm. They neither hear nor feel the music. God will leave them behind.

Red and yellow lasers cut through the partiers like spears, looping back and forth. In here the walls are also draped in black garbage bags. Dry ice smoke creeps with the sopping immortal sweat dangling over our heads.

Where are you? I cannot see you.

I'll find you. I'm your soul.

I will find a place on the floor, close my eyes, start dubbing and allow Nigel to find me. I squeeze my way through the crowd to a hairpin space near the center. The floor beneath me rumbles from hundreds of dancing feet; it and the thundering bass vibrates up my legs, through my hips and the rest of my body. I close my eyes and start dubbing. Minutes later, the MDMA hits me, first in my stomach, then my chest and knees, toes and head. Visions of light in delicate undulating convulsions come shooting toward me from the infinite darkness of my unconscious world. I am weightless but rooted. As one brilliant track dissolves into the next, our bodies slowly dematerialize and become pure energy. We feel no pain; we have no past. We are perfect. Truth! Again I am part of the future.

Adults today cannot understand the ultimate significance of what we are doing. They believe it is little more than a passing fad, another drug-addled rebellion. It is infinitely more. They will understand only after our bodies have become extinct and we are infinite matter in cyberspace. They will thank us, and we will forgive them. All of history reflects adults teaching kids how to live. But now God intends for kids to teach

adults how to live, to prepare them for the miracle of perfection the future will bring. This is the beginning of the end, and a new beginning. Adults cannot yet admit it, for they refuse to surrender their hegemony over us. It is another form of slavery, and if they do not admit it, God will leave them behind. Why are kids more apt with computers than adults? Why is the best new technology being created by kids? These are questions adults fear to answer.

Where are you? Why have you not wrapped me in your warm caress?

I'm here. Find me.

I open my eyes. Whispers of colour and smoke surround me, robbing me of balance. I waver, clutching the nearest body to hold myself up, inhaling streams of warm sweat as I lunge through the circling throng to the edge of the floor to find him.

I'm here.

Where?

I float weightless along the circle of undulating bodies, around and around to the other side near the foyer entrance.

And then I see him.

Several metres in front of me, dancing with a girl, clutching her tight to his body.

Is that your girlfriend? You said you would break up with her.

No, she's just a friend. I've been counting the seconds without you in wild desperation.

He is as beautiful as he was one month ago, his wet clothes fingering the delicate contours of his body, a pond of sweat at his feet.

My love, at last, our destiny...

Come to me. Hurry!

I float toward him. A path now clears for me. I stop behind him, lingering in the womb of his caressing energy. Then I wrap my arms around his stomach. He turns and sees me. His eyes flatten, then swell. He tears my hands away, smiles nervously, slides away from me and keeps dancing with his friend.

What are you

What is he doing? I move toward him again, his friend now leering at me. I take his hand. He tears it away. He turns and yells something at me, but I can neither hear his words through the pounding bass nor read his lips through the coiling smoke.

This is... You are feigning... This is not...

I am a frigid vortex of despair!

He looks at his friend, feigning confusion, pauses for a second that is an eternity, then leans his mouth in my ear.

“Go away! I’ll try to find you later!”

I push him back and scurry away, knocking bodies over like pylons, out into the foyer.

Why did you

Why did he do that?

How dare you Who do you

After everything...How could I have been wrong? I did not do anything wrong!

Why did you How could you

How could he lie to me? What did I not see?

You are not

My legs spasm and throb. I lean against the wall, covering my face with my hands.

I start crying. I have lost all control. I have lost I have never lost

Nigel

You're alone

What have I done

Don't ask

I must get out of here. I must leave. I run back onto the dance floor, searching from corner to corner for Lenny and Basha. I run back out to the foyer through the corridor past the washroom into the water room. I have lost all

You are not my

I see Lenny in a line up for water. I run toward him.

“Lenny!”

He turns around.

“What the fuck!? What’s wrong?”

“We must leave now!”

“What!? Why?”

“Now, Lenny!”

“Jam, slow the fuck down! What happened?”

“Forget it! Let’s leave!”

“Is it that fuckin’ guy!?”

I clutch Lenny’s arm and try to pull him away. He stands firm, yanking his arm out of my grip.

“Where is he?! He’s fuckin’ dead! Tell me where he is!!”

“I’m leaving now with or without you!”

I try to turn away but he grabs my arm.

“Wait!! Fuck! We gotta get Bash.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s...fuck...She took another E and it fuckin’ mashed her. She’s passed out in the front part. Just follow me.”

I follow him through the corridor back into the foyer past the entrance to a wall on the opposite side. Basha is sitting asleep against the wall, her legs straggled on the ground, her head tilted, her eyelids swollen purple, flanked by two laughing boys trying to share a joint with her. I look at Lenny. His face is molten fury.

“What the fuck!?!?”

Lenny lunges forward and kicks the first boy in the forehead, knocking him cold. The second boy tries to stumble up but Lenny kicks out his feet, smashing the back of his head on the floor. Lenny kicks him in the ribs. I start hammering Lenny’s back with my fists.

“Stop it!! Stop it!!”

He spins around and swats my fists away.

“Fuck off! Help me lift Bash.”

A crowd has encircled us, their faces white as flour. Lenny’s fury has choked and crushed the beautiful dream they had worked so hard to create.

Lenny and I lift Basha up. She groans, her swollen eyes seared shut. We loop her arms around our shoulders and carry her to the entrance. As we leave, Lenny’s pouch

around her neck gets caught on the door handle. I unsnag it and sling it over my neck. We shuffle toward the car.

“What were you doing, Len? Those boys were only being nice to her.”

“Bullshit! Nobody fuckin’ touches Bash but me! Don’t tell me how to act!”

“This isn’t happening.”

You are not _____

“Yeah, it is. It fuckin’ is. Ya gonna tell me what happened?”

“No.”

“Awesome! Let’s just go home and be fuckin’ bummed out.”

We put Basha in the backseat. Lenny gets in beside her, resting her on his shoulder. A thick caustic breeze ripples the trees around the parking lot, their leaves chattering and moaning. I get in and start the car.

Forgive me, but I do not understand why You have done this to me. It is far too cruel and agonizing to be a test. Have You abandoned me? Have I failed my apprenticeship? Is this my perdition?

We drive home in silence. Now and then I hear Basha gurgling and sputtering and see her (in the rear-view) chocked against Lenny, who stares out the window. He is still furious. I should be furious, but I feel nothing, a sinking shadowy nil. I wish to sleep, I wish to dream the dream of my inscrutable soul. Perhaps tonight *is a dream*. I do not *know*.

Now we are driving through the outskirts of Detroit. It is sometime after midnight. Shadows run along the pocked streets and cracked walls of buildings. Streetlights slant into them, drawing circles of light in the shadows.

I turn off the highway, taking a shortcut to the tunnel. Lenny touches my shoulder.

“Ya alright, Jam?”

“I’m fine.”

“Wanna tell me what happened?”

“No.”

“Fine, fuck. I don’t get what the big deal is with this guy. You knew him for what, one fuckin’ night? Who is he, Jesus?”

“Don’t be stupid, Len.”

“Fuck you, bitch.”

“I am not a bitch! Don’t ever call me that again.”

“And I’m not fuckin’ stupid, am I? But you keep sayin’ it.”

“I’ve never said you’re stupid!”

“But you think it. Dad always says I’m stupid and you believe it ’cause you believe every little fuckin’ thing he says.”

“That is not true. I only believe him when he’s being honest.”

“When is he honest? How do you know when?”

“I can smell it.”

“Smell it? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Forget it. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Cause I’m stupid.”

“No! Listen to me. I’m the one who discovered he was cheating on mother. I smelled the other woman on his clothes. I followed him to her apartment. I discovered everything by myself. You and mother never had a clue.”

“So what?”

“Well... When I told her she should leave him, you both said, ‘Why? He made one mistake, he deserves a second chance.’ But in my book, that’s a very serious mistake, and you don’t deserve a second chance when you make a mistake that serious.”

“Fuck that. Ya think you’re so perfect. Ya think you’re God’s gift.”

“Well, I’m right, aren’t I?”

“That’s your problem. Ya think you’re right about everything. Ya think you’re smart just ’cause ya get good marks and ya use big words and ya got some fucked-up ideas. That don’t mean shit in my world, and that’s the real world. Wake the fuck up. Ya still live with mommy and daddy, you’re still in high school. That shit’s make believe. Ya don’t know fuck all, bitch.”

“Stop calling me a bitch!”

“I’ll call ya whatever I want, bitch. When I dropped out of school and started workin’, ya said I was a lazy piece o’ shit, remember?”

“I did not...”

“Yeah you did! Ya said I was lazy and ya gave me some fuckin’ speech about bein’ the devil’s slave. But ya don’t know shit about me. And ya know what else? Everyone’s pissed at you now. Good! I hope ya fuckin’ learn somethin’ for once.”

How far will I fall? How far down will You take me? What is all this for?

Perhaps this is a dream.

“You hate me.”

“Fuck that! I don’t hate you. You’re my sister. But you and mom and dad can go fuck yourselves. Just go and be their little dream daughter. Make ’em proud. I don’t give a fuck anymore.”

It is true what Lenny has said. Our parents and I excoriated him when he decided to quit school. He had not even finished Grade 11, and he did not know what he would do next. He told us he hated school. He was wasting his time. His teachers were idiots; but he was only lying to us and to himself, making excuses for his self-abnegation. Or so I believed.

You are not my _____ You me could have been should

Lenny is my brother. He has one arm. He is lost in fury. And he has no soul.

Perhaps I too have no soul

We have never gotten along. He has always felt me a burden, shirking the big brother responsibilities our parents had foisted on him. In a way I have always feared him, kept him at a distance. I must now admit this.

Perhaps this is a

Perhaps it is my destiny to give his life purpose, to guide him and not _____, not my _____, from the shadow into the light. But I too am sunk deep in shadow. How can I lift us both...I fear I do not have the strength. But I must try. I must never hide my life from him again. I must learn to share the searing pain I will inure throughout my life on earth and beyond. I will ensure Basha stays with him. Who else will love him? Mother and father have given up. When I mention his name, their faces sag and curdle.

“I’m sorry, Len.”

“For what?”

“You’re not lazy.”

“Don’t fuckin’...Just leave me alone.”

“I mean it, Len. I was wrong. You’re not lazy, and you’re certainly not stupid. But I look at you and I know you can do anything, but you do nothing. Listen to me. It’s not my place to tell you what to do. I’m sorry. I’m your sister. I love you, that’s all. Can we stop fighting?”

“Yeah but, how can I... Ya think me and Bash are bullshit.”

“I was wrong.”

“I don’t know, man.”

This must be This is a

I am destined to fail tonight in all my endeavours. Will Lenny become the prodigal son who never resolves his bitterness and winds up murdering his parents? Do men exist only to betray? If they are such incurable charlatans, then *why did You give them all the power on this earth?* I must believe that women will rule once our bodies are extinct.

Why? Why do You not answer me? I have been infinitely loyal and patient. I do not want this body any longer. It only attracts men like dirty little boys to a pool of black mud under a storm cloud.

My lips are quivering. I do not want to cry again. *No!* I am not going to cry. *No...* I cannot stop it. I pull over to the curb, plunging my face in my hands.

“Come ’ere, Jam.”

I feel him jump over the seat, sitting close beside me. He squeezes me in his arm. I cry, spitting tears out of a cold dark nothingness.

“Let it out.”

“He was...He’s not...He pretended...He promised...He lied...I thought...It’s impossible!”

“Fuck him. You’ll meet someone better...”

I tear myself from his arm.

“No! I won’t. I’m never falling in love...”

As I sputter off in despair, I notice across the street on the wall of a building, above a doorway caked in shadow, a sign illumined by circles of light:

Portrait Studio Gallery
Watercolor Oil Sculpture

Could it be Are you

Is that Is it

A sign!

“Look!”

I point out the window behind Lenny. He turns.

“What?”

A familiar warmth consumes my body. My enervated heart starts pounding. It is

You have returned to me

It is Nigel once again inside me!

Why did you

Don’t ask. It doesn’t matter now. Come back to the party.

“The portrait gallery. Nigel...the man I love, he’s a painter. The gallery’s a sign from God not to give up on him.”

Thank You! I will never doubt You again. I will never regret the mistakes I make, for I am certain they are part of my apprenticeship. I will go back to the party to find my love, my soul. I will fulfill my destiny. There will be danger, but I do not fear.

“What? Slow down...”

“Yes! It’s a sign. Nigel told me he would leave his girlfriend to be with me. But when I saw him tonight he was still with her. But perhaps he wasn’t. Perhaps they’re friends now. They were dancing together just as friends. When she saw me she felt jealous. Or perhaps that wasn’t even her...”

“Jam! Slow the fuck down...”

“No, listen! He told me he was going to find me later. He wanted to see me. Why else would he have gone to the party? He knew I would be there. He had a plan. We have to go back right now!”

“Jam, you’re fuckin’...”

A sudden blast of light washes out Lenny’s face. Another sign!

“What the fuck?” he asks, lifting his hand up over his eyes.

I am eager and impatient, but I must not yet look.

“What do you see!?”

Through the blast of light, Lenny’s face deforms.

“DRIVE!!!”

The doors open *God* balaclavas *Is this* sparks of light *Is this my* ringing
The second burnt powder *This is* pulled out by my *The second part* on the street
part of my face pressed against

“S’up, bitch? Ya gon’ suck ma dick!”

unzips *final* slaps it on my *Instead of a* stuffs it in *The second part of my*

I am recumbent on cold hard ground. My head throbs. A starchy film coats my
 tongue and gums. I sit up. I cannot focus. I see only warm breathing shadows. I close my
 eyes. I open them. I see *Portrait Studio Gallery*. I am still *in Detroit*. *The car* is gone.
Lenny and Basha are gone. *I am still dreaming*. How long have I been *dreaming*?

This is the second *part of my dream!* *Instead of being spraddled up in a tree in*
Jamaica I am on the streets of Detroit. This is *my final test*, *God’s final test*. I must run *to*
freedom! *I must find my way*. Then I will know *my true past*, *re-unite with my soul and be*
ready for the future!

I stand up and *I am running*. *Swirling lights* flare and twitch *all around me*,
 guiding *my way*. I must return home to Windsor. *The tunnel is just ahead beside the*
Renaissance Center stemming out above a crop of charred buildings. I run toward it
through a shadowy alley onto Jefferson.

Up ahead I see *the tunnel, closer*, almost there, almost *free as swirling lights flare*
and twitch, guiding me home. I *run down* the sloping driveway to the *tunnel* bus shelter,
 stop, bend over, gird my hands on my knees, snuffling, waiting. *The lights* have
 disappeared. Do I wait for the bus? Do I *keep running?* I do *not yet know*.

I wait. Six drunk white American men approach me.

“Yo girlie, this the bus stop for the Windsor casino?”

“I...don’t know.”

“Been runnin’, girlie?”

“Yes.”

“Whatcha runnin’ from, girlie?”

They stare me up and down *with their bleary ravening eyes*. I scurry to the other side of the bus shelter. *It is whether they were a sign that I should keep running I do not know.*

Somebody taps my shoulder. I shuffle forward and turn. *A grimy elderly black man* stares at me, dodders, *reaches his hand* out to me.

“Take a steam bath or somethin’?”

“Excuse me?”

“Wus’ a matter? Look like ya done took a steam bath.”

“I didn’t...take a steam bath.”

He puts his hand on my shoulder.

“Sho’ could use me a steam bath.”

I run towards the tunnel *between rows of cars* waiting to pay toll. *A customs officer* runs out of a toll booth and pulls out *his gun*. *Two other officers* step in front of me and point their *guns at me*. They are not *wearing balaclavas*.

“Freeze, little lady!” the first officer yells.

I stop.

“Put your hands over your head!” the second officer yells.

I put *my hands over my head*. *This is another test*. I will not *fail*. I will find a way *to escape and run to freedom*. Or *perhaps He has delivered these officers into my dream to help me*. I do not *yet know*. They surround me. The first officer *handcuffs me*. They lead me into *a blue reception area* through a door into *a green hallway* to a room with *gray walls, a metal table* and three metal chairs. *This is where I was before I started dreaming!*

“Sit down,” the third officer says.

I sit down. I am *not afraid*.

“Where were you runnin’ to, little lady?” the first officer asks.

“To freedom, officer.”

“You runnin’ from the law?”

“No.”

“But if you were, you wouldn’t tell us, would you?” the third officer asks.

“Yes, I would. I never lie.”

“You don’t say,” the first officer says.

“I do. Did He send you here to help me?”

They look at each other queerly. The first officer *leans in and whispers* something to the second officer. It is a sign that *I must not ask questions*.

“We’ll ask the questions. Where you from?” the second officer asks.

“Jamaica.”

“You don’t sound Jamaican,” the third officer says.

“I was born in Windsor, but my ancestors were rebel Jamaican slaves.”

I believe *I understand*. These officers are here to *ensure I am of sound mind, and thus prepared* for His truth.

“Been doin’ any drugs this evening?” the third officer asks.

“Yes, I have, officer.”

The first and second officers stare at me *in wonder*.

“Any drugs in your possession at this time?”

“No.”

“What’s in the pouch?” the first officer asks.

I look down. *I forgot* I had been wearing it. There is a reason I brought it with *me into my dream*. Perhaps its *deeper significance* will now be revealed.

“It’s not my pouch.”

“Whose is it?” the third officer asks.

“My friend’s.”

“Where’s your friend?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why do you have your friend’s pouch?” the second officer asks.

“I was wearing it for her. She passed out and it got caught on the door when I was still awake.”

“Open it.”

The truth must be inside. They know *I am ready!* I remove it from around my neck, put it on the table *and open it*. I pull out *Lenny’s and Basha’s* birth certificates, lip balm, a hundred dollars; *and a joint*. Those two boys must have given it to her before Lenny beat them up. The first officer *picks it up*.

“What’s this?”

“A joint.”

The three officers shake their heads.

“Little lady, you’re in a whole world of trouble,” the first officer says as he walks around the table toward me.

This is my dream. When I awaken, I will know what it means.