

INTRUDERS

& other stories

(NYC/Seoul Sketches, 2012-2015)

By

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8/5/13

Glass

Even before I get to the party, I know it won't be the kind of party where I have to worry about the impression I make. I think of myself as normal, so I just have to be myself, and I will fit in. To think I'm crazy for thinking I'm normal is to be crazy, which I have decided I'm not, so I don't.

But not to say I'm not nervous. I am nervous, just not for me. I'm the normal one.

I walk between the cars in the driveway and the side of the house to the escalating chatter and splashing and smell of barbecue. I've come alone, but I know that here, in my good neighbor's backyard, I will be among friends.

At the gate, I pause. There's a pool, swimmers, a tent over picnic tables. I recognize everyone but the kids in the pool, who all look alike in the pool. I don't see Grace, the woman I'm nervous about, a woman others think is crazy, a woman whose eccentricities I've risked my reputation defending, but I know that from here I can't see everybody. Only when a kid cannonballs, demanding everyone's attention, do I enter.

The first to see me are Mrs. Anderson and Zane's mom, both standing at the grill, both drinking bottled beers. They open their arms for me, and soon, as those previously preoccupied with the cannonballs gradually grasp my arrival, I've exchanged greetings with almost everyone.

A long patio that looks like a sidewalk but functions as a patio lines the back of the house. At the other end of the patio is a glass door to the kitchen.

I look for Grace in the kitchen. I hope she hasn't already made a fool of herself.

I walk by women drinking wine and dressing salad, kids playing video games, a dog in its cage, barking, looking sad, knock on the bathroom door, enter. I do my thing, do my other thing, pet the dog through the cage, and walk back into the yard.

“Is your friend coming?” one of my friend’s mom asks. She’s eating a chicken wing and wiping her hands on the towel wrapped around her waist, this being more polite than licking each finger clean. But I’ve forgotten whose mother she is, exactly.

“Who?” I say, but I know of course she means Grace. Everyone knows Grace, whether they’ve met her or not.

She shrugs, licking a finger finally.

I realize that Grace has already let me down. She will be the last to arrive to this party, and the last person to arrive at the party always ends up standing out a little extra somehow, as a sort of final symbol of hope for patrons who have yet to have their expectations for the party met, and standing out, making her presence known, is not what I wanted for Grace today.

My friend’s friendly, wet, greasy mother heads indoors, where I guess she’ll change. I think about her only words to me, her only words about Grace, her choice to refer to Grace as “your friend”, instead of as “Grace”, and think about how Grace had already let me down even before showing up late, how she is only welcome at this party because she is a friend of mine, judged by the women who claim to know her but have only seen her and heard stories about her. But true stories. Yes, Grace has only ever let me down.

Children and their fathers are playing and eating off paper plates in and around the pool. My friends my age are also late, but should be here soon. I go back to the grill, where Mrs. Anderson and Zane’s mom are still talking.

Then I see Grace, and she looks lost. She’s dressed normally, at least – brown top, blue jeans, natural brown hair past her shoulders in a sort of lazy ponytail (she has a single braid that runs down with the rest of her unbraided hair; if there’s a name for this hairstyle, I don’t know it, and it doesn’t matter, really, because the point is that it was nothing anyone else would make a note to remember, an omitted detail in the future telling of whatever embarrassing moment Grace would inevitably contribute to today) – and carries, like a good guest, a tray of food to contribute to the picnic. She looks like she’s looking around for someone she knows.

“Grace,” I say, smiling. She hands me the tray, nodding, watching the party, looking like she’s looking for someone else. “Hmm,” I say. “What is

this? What do you call this?”

I am referring to any or all of the five glass saucers balanced on the tray, each filled to the brim with cloudy broths of different colors disguising iceberg-like chunks of various shapes, colors, and apparent consistencies.

“Oh, that,” she says, smiling now. “That’s just a few healthy broths. And these…” She reaches in one of the broths with her dirty hands and pulls out a scorpion. She holds it up for me to look at. Either the wind’s blowing very strongly, and I don’t feel it, or this scorpion is very much alive. “These are proteins!”

I open wide, as if hypnotized, and she drops the protein in my mouth. I kill it, chewing.

“Hmm,” I say. I’m thinking about all the little kids here going up to the picnic tent themselves, because their parents don’t care, as long as they’re eating, and because dessert isn’t out yet anyway. “And kids can eat it?”

“Sure,” she says. “Would you mind putting this down for me? I want to get something out of the car.”

“Sure,” I say.

I walk carefully over the concrete and grass surfaces leading to the picnic tent, trying to keep the five broths from spilling. But they’re filled to the brims, and I have to watch where I’m going, and guests come up to me to see what I’m carrying and ask what it is, or what they are, and who brought it, and where she is, and how I know her, and which one or two I would recommend and how I would recommend to eat it or them, and ask whether I’m sure they could use their hands, whether I’m sure it’s okay they spilled a little into the tray, and plus, when I get to the tent, there’s no room on the tables, so I have to balance the tray partially on the table and against my body, and move more stable trays to the ground to finagle this terribly unstable tray onto the table first, and then rearrange everything, not only to get all the dishes back on the table, but to make Grace’s dishes look as edible as possible, which is to say as edible as they looked when she handed me the tray, which is not very edible, and also impossible because by now, all five glass saucers have spilled their broths considerably, the lipped tray itself now a long, wide, shallow saucer barely containing the mixture of all five broths and the more buoyant chunks of solid food, the

tray itself now a saucer of broth with five little glass saucers floating on the surface, each with just a little bit of broth and dense chunks of food I can't identify. The broth on my arms I wipe on my bathing suit.

Back at the grill, I wait for Grace.

"What was that?" Zane's mom asks.

"Some soups," I say.

"And is that what's-her-name?" Mrs. Anderson asks.

"Grace, yeah," I say.

"And is she much older than you?" one of them asks. "I forget."

"She's 34, I think. I don't know. I've never asked."

Grace returns in a bathing suit that makes me think she could be anywhere from 30 to 54, what do I know? She comes up to me, and I introduce her to my friends' moms.

"I've heard so much about you, I feel like I know you," Mrs. Anderson says.

"Do you know my son, Zane? I'm Zane's mother," Zane's mother says.

"I don't know Zane," Grace says. "Is he here?"

"Not yet," I say.

"I think he and Aaron are driving over later," Mrs. Anderson, Aaron's mom, says.

I want to lead Grace away from these women. I want her to myself, with someone who won't judge her, me, the only one here who won't judge her.

"I wanna try one of what you brought," I say. "What would you recommend? Also, I had a bunch of people asking me what the best way to eat it was."

"*Is*," Grace says. "What the best way to eat it *is*." She smiles at my friends' moms. "Just bring back five little cups, a scoop of each, and I'll show you. There are cups there, aren't there? Don't tell me. And spoons?"

I nod and turn. More kids cannonball into the pool. Other kids hang out on the trampoline, eating off paper plates. Adults drink beer in the shallow end. A few women in straw hats tan up on the hill. More kids surround the picnic tent.

Near the pool, I step with my shoes on something that seems to hold, give, and scratch. At first, I think "toy", but bending down, see the

pieces of glass I've broken. I pick up the pieces, aware of my mistake in plain sight and the bare feet around me, but while picking up the pieces, I see many more pieces around me, pieces of glass only others could have broken and neglected. But aware of my still being watched, and of the urgency of removing broken glass from the play area of barefooted children, I begin to pick up all the glass I can see. I pick up more than I can carry, glass dropping from my grasp, and rush to the garbage by the picnic tent, hands miraculously yet to bleed.

Next, I check for scrapes. There are a few scrapes, but no blood. There are also no cups on the table to bring back samples of Grace's broth. Whether the scrapes are new, from the glass, or not, is unclear. I take a paper plate, which I decide must pass for a shallow saucer. But the tray is almost empty. Whether the five dishes or mixture was so popular as to be consumed within minutes, or whether the broth spillage was taken for garbage and wiped clean, is also unclear. Also, the glass saucers are chipped.

Onto the plate, I empty the solid contents of the five chipped glass saucers and pour what's left of the broth mixture out from the corner lip of the tray. The grayish, greenish, broth permeates the solid chunks of what look like – in addition to scorpions – potatoes, scallops, pieces of egg, eyeballs, and diced chunks of dried blood. There are also pieces of broken glass floating around in the mixture. I watch where I step.

I'm removing glass from my plate, filling my pockets, when I see a little kid I don't know, maybe three years old, in a diaper and water wings, sitting alone on the grass, in the broken glass, feeding himself scorpions, making faces. I take the plate away from him and pour its contents onto my own. He cries, still years away from being able to understand the concept of me saving his life. I run my hand through the broth to check for any glass I've added to my plate. Something bites me. It's a scorpion. I eat it.

There is so much broken glass on the ground that the best I can do is step over the larger chunks of glass, so as not to break them into smaller, sharper, more unavoidable pieces. I reach the grill, having spilled only half the plate's contents and yet removed all the glass. I hand the plate to Grace, who looks at me with disappointment.

"There were no cups," I say. "Are no cups."

Grace has taken what looks like a chunk of potato and begun rubbing it around the plate. “You want to sop up as much flavor as you can,” she says. “That’s the idea. Pack each bite with as much flavor as possible. As much flavor as you think you can.” She picks up the sippy potato-looking chunk and offers it to Aaron’s mom, who declines, and then to Zane’s mom, who declines, and then to me.

“Mmm,” I say. “What is that?” It’s tougher than potato.

“That’s a protein,” Grace says. “That’s all it is. Just proteins and flavorings.”

“Hmm,” I say. “What kind of protein?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Grace says. “My dishes don’t have names.”

“But what about the ingredients you use?” one of my friend’s mom says, finishing her beer. “What do you buy at the store to make this... interesting concoction?”

Grace shrugs, smiling, about to answer. To stop her, I interrupt, changing the subject, afraid she’s about to embarrass herself, to embarrass her and me, afraid she’s going to say something completely wild and unnecessary, revealing some crazy idea or superstition she has about separating her groceries into “protein” and “flavoring” jars, and mixing them all up, and then when preparing a dish, throwing a dice or choosing in some other mysterious, maniacal way some combination, some way maybe not all that different from what she pulled today, which was presenting a single dish disguised as five different unstable dishes, their inevitable combination by human error the final step in her recipe.

“There’s broken glass everywhere,” I say. “It’s not safe.”

The three of them look at me.

“I just picked up a whole bunch, and there’s a whole lot more too. I’m worried about all the kids running around.”

Because everywhere there are kids running around, kids in party hats playing barefooted on broken glass and eating scorpions and eyeballs. Kids in the pool. I look in the pool, and there’s glass everywhere. Kids and their dads swimming in glass. I reach into the pool and scoop out handful after handful of glass. I look back at Grace, to see if she’s seen me, but she’s gone, and the women at the grill are paying attention only to each other, as before. I pick up more glass at my feet and use the end of my shirt as a wheelbarrow to carry what I can to the garbage.

The garbage has become a pile of glass, no can. The picnic tables themselves are chipped glass tables. The five saucers on Grace's tray have become what look like a pile of sand. I pick up a tray and a whole table collapses. I pick up all the glass I can, on the table, on the grass, in the pool, dump it atop the glass pile of garbage.

And Grace is in the pool, holding on to the edge in the deep end. She is as unfazed by the broken glass as everyone else. I don't understand it. Everyone keeps narrowly missing the broken glass. It makes no sense. A kid falls onto a pile of broken glass, gets up with grass stains on his elbows. I walk over to Grace.

"Get yourself in here!" she says to me, splashing me.

I hear a splash louder than a cannonball and see a kid surface with a kickboard.

"My tray!" Grace says happily. The kid is using her tray as a kickboard.

I ask the women at the grill what they think about all this.

"It's really very sweet of you," Mrs. Anderson says.

"It is," Zane's mom says. "Now, how do you like your chicken?"

It's clear they don't believe me, clear that from the grill, they can't see the extent of the problem, that not only is there more broken glass here at the party than is normal under any set of circumstances, but that there are kids running around barefoot! And what's really crazy is that no one's reacting to the glass besides me, me reacting like the only normal one here, everyone else just going about their business as if they see or feel nothing wrong. So of course, these women who can't see the glass – glass is clear, after all, as clear as it gets – have no reason to suspect anything different if nobody's acting any differently. It's like they think: if everybody's normal, then so is everything.

"Hey!" I yell. "Everybody stop moving!"

Everybody does. They all stop moving, all looking at me now.

"I don't want to hit anybody," I say.

Now everybody's looking at me. Now I've got all of their attention. I kick off my shoes, toss my shirt to the side. Kids on the other side of the pool roll down the dune of broken glass. The dog freed from its cage licks glass off a toddler's plate. The women at the grill have stopped talking to look at me. Grace wipes her eyes, the back of her hand bleeding. The sun

smiles warmly.

I tell myself it's only glass. I close my eyes and pinch my nose. It's only glass. Grace shrieks. "Don't!" she says. But she's already let me down. The dog whimpers.

6/26/13

Sky Was Blue

The lawn was green. The sky was blue. The sky was red. The lawn was green. The sky was gray. The lawn was black.

The hired man dumped a body in the woods.

The sun was the color of a peach. The sun was a peach. The woods were brown. The lawn was green.

The dog wanted to go into the woods. The woman wanted it to shit, so she could get home already. She held tight and followed her dog off the bike path.

The sky was blue.

The woman answered the officers' questions as best she could. She was fine. Her name was Janice Butterworth. She was 32. She lived just a few blocks away, on Kickapoo Avenue. She had no idea who could have done this to her husband.

The sky was red.

Janice pulled into her driveway. She unlocked the door and entered without putting out her cigarette. Officers were looking around.

The sky was black.

She walked her dog towards town, along the sidewalk. At the promenade, she sat on a bench for a long time. Her dog fell asleep.

The water was gray. Soon, it would be bright gray.

Janice woke her dog with a kick.

Officers on Kickapoo Avenue waited for the woman to return.

She knocked on her sister's door. Her sister let her in.

The peach returned.

A car had been sent out to follow Janice, without her knowing, for protection. The longer she stayed out, the more officers began to suspect her.

The lawn was green.

Officers found nothing unusual inside the house, and though her prints were all over the crime scene in the woods, her admission to taking

her dead husband into her arms when she found him there checked out. Still, they couldn't help but think her behavior was suspicious. They looked closer, dug deeper.

The hired man waited at the promenade.

Her sister Denise dropped her off at home. Officers tried to stop her, to ask her questions. Denise rolled down her window, told them who she was, where she lived, and that Janice had said she changed her mind and didn't feel safe spending the night alone in her house on Kickapoo Avenue, after all.

A car followed Denise.

Officers asked Janice again about the night before last. Again, Janice told them she'd fallen asleep early that night, before he'd returned, and then had woken up alone, without any sign he'd ever returned. She'd called him twice, once right upon waking, once after her shower, and he hadn't answered either time. Then she thought she'd take Karl for a walk before trying her husband again.

The sky was mostly sunny.

Denise sat at the promenade a long time. On her way back to her car, officers stopped her. The promenade was her favorite spot, where she always went to think. The last she'd seen Dean was the day before he was murdered, when he'd stopped by to speak with her husband.

The lawn was green. The sky was blue. The sky was white. The lawn was white.

For much of the past year, I've identified as an insomniac. I snack. I surf the Internet for cures for insomnia and causes of insomnia. I look out the window.

The sky was black.

People I generalize have this tendency to pigeonhole insomniacs as night owls. But the truth is, true insomniacs – or truly sick insomniacs such as myself – can't sleep during the day, either. We are not merely nocturnal animals. We were madmen, Dean Butterworth and I.

The peach returned. The lawn was mostly white.

The sky was blue.

The lawn was mostly white. There were some grays, some yellows, some blacks, some patches of green.

Officers asked Denise if they could search her home in the morning. They wouldn't tell Denise what it was they were looking for. They also wouldn't tell her what it was they had found already that led them to believe they would find something more, something just as relevant and perhaps even more important, in her home.

I suspected that it was the murder weapon they had found.

The sky was red.

The officers' suspicions shifted from Janice to her sister. They told Janice that her husband had died of blood-forced trauma to the head. They asked her again if she knew of anyone or anything capable of murdering her husband in such a way. She shook her head and cried. They asked her about Denise's husband, the last person they had on record of having seen Dean before his death.

Sometimes I like to drink and smoke alone in the dark and think. I have all the essentials. I roll my own cigarettes. I open the window out of courtesy towards my wife. If it's raining, I'll just open it halfway.

Sometimes I feel lucky, the way I have it. The window looks out onto the expanse of the lawn, without the obstruction of trees. I see the whole sky. I see the stars as they were billions of years ago. I see the clouds and can tell when the next rain will be. But most importantly, I can see the whole lawn. I can see everything that goes on there.

The sky was black.

Janice had been staying at her sister's. At first, Janice liked to sleep as much as possible, to take her mind off things. But she found this impossible. She found she couldn't sleep. She begged Denise to stay up late with her.

Denise's husband had gone to bed early, which was unusual for him. Denise acknowledged it was likely that he just wanted to let the sisters have their privacy, that he wasn't really going to sleep. In the morning, they'd go

back to Janice's, while Denise's husband would welcome the officers.

If I weren't an insomniac, I'd prefer the couch anyways. It's not that the window in the living room yields an unobstructed view – our bedroom window yields a view of the dimly lit street that is equally clean – so much as that in the bedroom I am constantly reminded of the fact that my actions, as natural to me as they may be, have consequences that go beyond me, due to the simple, singular fact that I have a wife. It's both funny and tragic: my wife depends on me, thinks I'm her rock, thinks me the Earth to her moon, or the sun to her Earth, thinks me all powerful, and yet I can't even will myself to sleep.

There's a black car on the street, under the black sky, in which an officer so obviously sits waiting for something to happen. It's obvious they are missing something key. That's why they are waiting out on the street. If they weren't waiting for something, they wouldn't be waiting at all, obviously.

The murder weapon is an aluminum baseball bat that belongs to a kid around the corner. The kid found blood on his bat. Having been warned by his parents about the murder in his neighborhood, the boy reported it, showing maturity beyond his years, maturity making the officers on this case out to be very lucky men.

Goddamn kids. If Denise were to ever get pregnant, I don't know what I'd do. Probably leave, because I probably wouldn't be the father anyway. Actually, that's not true.

The peach was a nectarine. The sky was green. The lawn was blue.

Denise's husband let the officers in. He acknowledged he didn't look so good, apologizing for having forgotten to mention while introducing himself the other day that he was an insomniac.

The officers asked if he could tell them how, in his estimation, Janice and Denise were holding up.

At first, I thought it was strange that the officers seemed to suspect Denise. For one, I couldn't think of what sort of motive they could pin on her, except maybe that she simply didn't like Dean, as I knew she didn't all that much. But still, that would be an absolutely ridiculous motive. Simple

dislike? She'd be able to plead insanity with that one! Secondly, a baseball bat is so not a woman's style. Thirdly, it simply wasn't her. It was the hired man. I hired him. But then I thought that maybe the officers were simply playing a game. That it wasn't Denise they suspected, but I they suspected. That by making it appear to me that they suspected Denise, I would be more likely to turn myself in, or talk, or do something – whatever it was they expected – to protect her.

The sky was blue.

The officers searched the house all morning. Denise's husband waited, accepting the officers' offers of coffee and donut after donut.

Janice and Denise sat at the promenade. They talked about their husbands, how great it was their husbands, brothers-in-law, got along, as if they were both still alive, still getting along. The dog lay under the bench, licking its forelegs.

The sky was red.

The officers were gone when Denise returned home. She and Janice got out of the car. Denise told her husband they'd spent the entire day at the promenade. There was no reason to lie.

Dean Butterworth said we should come up with a way to turn our insomnia into a good thing. He said we could be like watchmen. I reminded him nothing ever happened here. He said how could we be so sure – how could anybody be so sure – if nobody was ever really watching?

About three weeknights a week, we would stay up in the living room drinking. It was always my living room. He said it was because it was easy for him to sneak out, that he didn't mind doing me the courtesy of coming to my place. But it was clear to me that the real reason he didn't mind coming to my place all the time was that he liked drinking other people's booze.

One night, Dean got so drunk – Dean's an engineer – that he started to get real excited about this one idea he had for a new hobby – designing animal traps. He had me get him a paper and pencil, and he went to work. He wanted to catch animals the likes of raccoons (our town was infested with raccoons), possums, cats, dogs, or whatever. Catch them alive. Always large mammals (mice didn't count). And always alive.

Was an engineer, I mean.

The sky was black. The lawn was black.

Denise's husband asked to speak with her outside. He confessed everything, wanted to turn himself in. He had a backpack ready. Denise didn't understand. She asked who the hired man was and why he needed a backpack if he was just going to turn himself in.

Dean had it rough because not only was he an insomniac and a drunk, he was a compulsive gambler. And the weird thing about his gambling problem, it was worse when it was just the two of us, when it was just he and his friend who didn't like to gamble. The reason it was so bad with me was that Dean had to get extra creative with his gambling proposals, had to come up with something really crazy to get me to agree on a bet. Because I'm not the kind of guy who likes to just bet for money, unless the price of losing is worth the entertainment value. Or of course, unless the odds are clearly in my favor.

So at first, Dean would set up three traps in the yard, each night carefully choosing where in the yard he thought would give him the three best chances of catching a live animal. Every night was different, each depending on the last. He'd get a point for every animal he caught, and I'd get a point for every animal he didn't. So, if he caught three animals, he'd get all three points. If he caught just one, I'd win by a point, two to one. This was fun for me, a bet I could agree to, because he did all the work and I just had to sit back and make fun of him. And of course he would lose most of the time. I don't think he really cared, though. I think the price of losing was also worth the entertainment value for him, too. Plus, he was getting the free booze, which gamblers with money problems always appreciate.

The sky was black.

The police station was open, but Denise's husband didn't go right in. He begged Denise to turn back, to stay with Janice and make sure she was all right. When she wouldn't take no for an answer, he had to remind her that he was a killer, that he wasn't the kind, reasonable husband she thought she was reasoning with.

He made sure she was out of sight. Then, he laid down in a grassy patch in back of the station.

The sky was illuminated, colorful.

He counted the stars, lost count, counted the colors.

But then Dean got tired of losing, and he tried to change the rules. He wanted to make any animal other than a raccoon worth two points. I agreed. He was doing all the work, after all, and I was up big. He was a first-class engineer, maybe, but I don't think he'd ever hunted sober or in daylight or not as part of a bet with me.

The next time he tried to change the rules, he wanted to earn points for how early into the night he caught an animal. If he caught an animal before 3 am, it would be double. That was one rule he proposed. I agreed. He kept losing and losing. Then he wanted to be able to release an animal caught before 3 am at 3 am, so that he could trap up to two animals a night with a single trap. He wanted the opportunity to have a big night, one during which he could earn back a large chunk of what he owed me.

He called 911 from his cell phone. The officers came outside. He requested they handcuff him.

The sky lit up when he closed his eyes.

The night he was killed, Dean caught a raccoon a little before 3 am. He celebrated by pouring us each a drink out of the finest bottle I'd made available to him that night. Then, he walked out into the yard.

Now, he didn't have to take three steps into the yard to raise the trap. He was a good engineer like that. But, I guess, on this night, he wanted to get a closer look at the little fellow.

Fatal mistake.

The fellow was little indeed. I don't think Dean realized this probably meant its Mother was close by. The next thing I know, I see Dean running down the block with a huge Mama Coon dangling from his sleeve.

I run after him and see the kid's bat leaning against the fence. By this time, Dean's down on the ground, alive, but badly hurt, from the looks of it. Kill it, he tells me. Kill it, and I'll pay you my debt tomorrow, plus you win tonight. Be happy just to be alive.

I chase the Mama Coon, the fucker, around some neighbor's yard. The Mama Coon is joined by the little bugger. The Mama Coon's on the other side of Dean's body. Dean's lying down, looking up at the black sky, thinking about God knows what. I leap over Dean, swinging at the Coon. The Coon leaps over Dean. I swing hard. I hit something and see the Coon scurrying away, its kit limping after it down the kid's driveway.

The sky was blue.

Denise's husband woke up in jail. The officers pointed out that he'd been lying about at least one thing, but Denise's husband insisted he really was an insomniac.

The officers helped Denise's husband out of his cell and into another room. They brought him cigarettes and coffee. He declined both.

I am the hired man. I buried Dean's body in the woods. I panicked. And I killed him because he wasn't dead until I swung the weapon.

When the officers assured him that he couldn't have been the murderer, that the hit man was still at large, Denise's husband insisted otherwise.

The sky was red.

I don't ask Denise and Janice for forgiveness. All I ask for is a window, bread, water, these officers' understanding, and God for my friend to come back. But it's too late for that. Denise already forgives me, and she tells me, to my horror, that Janice is coming around, too.

The sky was black.

I am an insomniac.

The sky is blue.

1/30/14

Three

He looks up. The TV is on but it's not a cartoon. The grown-ups are down the hall, still in the dining room. When they laugh, they are louder than the TV. There are no cartoons on after dinner, on his TV. He still has some cookie stuck in his teeth. Usually, he puts on a movie after dinner or builds things on the rug or both. His house has smelled like cookies since before dinner. Tonight he cried when Mommy came into the den eating a cookie and offered to put on a movie for him. He wanted a cookie. When there were no cartoons on TV, the news was on every channel. When he left the table, there were some cookies left, but he had left the table a long time ago.

The grown-ups laugh loudly. He has to go to the bathroom, but is a big kid now. There were more than three grown-ups, and before he had left, they'd all had a cookie, but the old evil looking girl grown-up person had only taken one bite of hers and left the rest on her plate, so she wouldn't be taking another. He smiles optimistically. He is a big kid now.

There is a big step to climb to get out of the den, but he climbs it easily, like the superhero on his new big kids underwear, Superman. It occurs to him he might have to poop, too. To pee, and but also to poop. He runs and stumbles. The grown-ups stop laughing. He looks up, from the hardwood floor. They are drinking grape juice out of grown-up cups that look like glass flowers, and they are smiling at him. The old evil girl grown-up is eating something. He really wants a cookie. Once, he asked Daddy why there is no rug in the hall and in the dining room. His Daddy said because then they'd have to vacuum everywhere, and that would be too noisy. He really has to go to the bathroom. There's no rug in there either, he thinks. Just a little mat.

He uses his hands to help himself back onto his feet. Walking in socks on the hardwood floor is like walking on ice, but not as fun. The toe and heel parts on each of his socks are a different color from the rest of it. He wants socks that look more like his big kids underwear. Those kinds of

socks exist. Everyone has them, except for him. Everyone in the world. Even girls. Maybe even God. He farts.

When Mommy looks him in the eye, he feels safe and guilty. He farts again. She's smiling. All the grown-ups are. Mommy pats her lap. It's an invitation. When he's in her lap, he feels powerful, like he is in control. He also feels safe and guilty in her lap, but there, power is such the dominant feeling that none other matters. He knows that if he makes it to Mommy's lap, he will get a cookie. He takes a big boy step.

He thinks about taking off his socks. That would make it easier to walk without slipping. Last night, he went to pee in his dream and in the morning there was a puddle in his bed that smelled like pee. Mommy asked if he had another accident. She'd used the word "another". The bathroom is only a little further than Mommy's lap. If he pees his pants he won't get another cookie. He holds it with his hands.

Looking him in the eye, Mommy smiles and says his name in a way that makes him feel more guilty than anything else, guilty and totally unsafe, because he knows what's coming next. She asks him if he's doing the pee-pee dance. He takes his hands off his pee-pee, shakes his head, and tries to stand still. This isn't the pee-pee dance. He wants her to admit to the rest of the grown-ups that she made a mistake, that this isn't really the pee-pee dance. He wants her to say to him, I'm sorry, honey, here, come sit, we saved you a cookie. He's waiting for her to say these things so he can put his hands back on his pee-pee and stop the pee from coming out. He tries really hard not to pee, intent, until further notice, on using only his brain.

He looks down at the floor and spreads his stance, for balance. He knows it won't hurt. It will even feel kind of good at first, like taking a nap when he needs to, or eating one too many cookies. If he runs towards the bathroom, Mommy will think he's running to her, and pick him up. His Superman underpants are brand new. He got them as a present for no reason a long time ago, but Mommy kept them in her bathroom closet until today. There were a lot of presents in her bathroom closet. There were a lot of boxes of toys, and none of them had wrapping paper on them. But it was still too dark in the closet to see what the toys were, and he couldn't bring the toys outside the closet into the light because then Mommy could catch him and give his presents to someone else or keep

them in her closet forever. If he runs to the bathroom, Mommy will pick him up and he will pee on Mommy. She would make him change into his pajamas and wear diapers under his pajamas, like he did when he was just a little kid. If there were more superhero underwear in her closet, he wouldn't be getting those presents for a very long time. The only other bathroom is upstairs.

He has complex emotions but doesn't have the vocabulary to express them to grown-ups. The guilt he feels, the frustration he feels, the embarrassment, the love... these are all real emotions he has but can't express. The best he can do is laugh, cry, and make all the different kind of faces in between, but most of the time, grown-ups just look at him, smile, and make the same face that he's making. Everything is always so funny to them, because they've figured everything out already. He's wished he were a grown-up from the first time he remembers seeing his father come home. All he wants is to be able to communicate with grown-ups, because he has so many questions, and they, if anybody, have the answers.

Ah fuck, he thinks, as the pee warms his pants. It drips down his leg and a little bit gets on the hardwood floor. He cries in frustration; there was nothing he could do. A long time ago, he solved the problem, but could not articulate it, so instead of celebrating, he cried. The solution he lacked the vocabulary to articulate was that if grown-ups just talked to kids like grown-ups, then the kids could become more like grown-ups much faster. In practice, a grown-up would use grown-up words, not kid faces, to respond to their kids' faces. Mommy's smile slowly turns into a sad face. It's the kind of sad face she makes when she wakes him on days he's wet the bed, only redder. For example, a kid would make a frustrated face, and the grown-up would say, are you frustrated? Because a frustrated face is different from a sad face, frustration different from sadness. When he was a little kid, peeing his pants didn't make him frustrated. But now that he is a big kid, it makes him very frustrated. And what makes him even more frustrated now is that he can't be sure any of the grown-ups notice a difference. To them, he either pees his pants or has learned to hold it in. He cries in what he is unable to articulate as indignation. The pee is only a little warm now and getting stickier.

Mommy gets up. All is lost, again. He hates what's coming next, everything about it. Diapers. He wants to tell Mommy that diapers are no

solution and that when he makes a face, it's how he really feels. It's not a joke, like when grown-ups make faces. He feels sad, but an angry kind of sad. The word he's looking for is frustrated. He's crying but doesn't feel sorry and doesn't want to say sorry. It's not his fault that he peed. It's not his fault that they sent him to play in the room furthest from the bathroom, that they sent him away from the table in the first place because they wanted to talk about grown-up things that he wasn't allowed to hear. It wasn't his fault that they made this rule about what he could and couldn't hear, that they made all the rules in the whole world. It wasn't his fault that the reason they'd made so many rules was because they were afraid that if he heard their grown-up words and learned to talk like them, he would become too smart for them.

Mommy is standing low like a frog. He keeps his eyes on the floor because he doesn't want to look at her, even though he knows she is his only hope. She pets his head and tells him that it's okay to cry, which makes him want to stop crying, but makes him cry more instead. He feels like he will be a little kid forever. The end is in sight, but will never be closer. He had it and lost it when he peed, and now it's further than it was before. What face could he make to convince Mommy to trust him with her words, if she can't even trust him to hold it in? She takes him upstairs.

In his room, he plays with the stuffed animals on his bed. He thought his Mommy would make him take a bath again and then put a diaper on him, but instead she just put pajamas on his bed and told him to play in his room until she finished cleaning the kitchen. The whole floor of his room is one big, soft carpet. His pajama shirt is a big t-shirt that the big kid next door used to wear when he played soccer. He has a big bear, two little bears, and a rhinoceros, makes them all talk as a family, and then makes them all fight, just for fun, as a game. Downstairs, the grown-ups continue laughing loudly. Mommy is laughing too. He sneaks out of his room, carrying only the rhinoceros.

He listens to the grown-ups from the top step. They are in the middle of a conversation, but he hears a lot of words he knows already. He sits. There is a lot more laughing than talking. He listens for funny words, but can't hear any. Instead, someone says something about sleeping and everybody laughs. It's mostly very boring. He thinks he might fall asleep. Someone says something about God and everybody laughs. Sometimes,

when adults laugh, he will laugh, too, just because they are laughing, just like how adults make faces at babies making faces. The old evil girl grown-up starts talking. He falls asleep.

In his dream, the old evil girl grown-up is chasing Mommy, Daddy, and him around his house. She corners them in the kitchen. His Mommy asks the old evil girl grown-up what she wants. He tries to tell Mommy that maybe the old evil girl grown-up just wants a cookie. She raises a sword over her head. He screams and tries to tell his Mommy that maybe the old evil girl grown-up didn't finish her cookie before because she knew she wouldn't get another and just wanted to make it last. Mommy doesn't hear him, but the old evil girl grown-up does and gently lowers her sword. Then his Mommy gives her a cookie, and she leaves. Then his Mommy asks him, laughing, if he's doing the pee-pee dance. He runs to the bathroom and stands over the potty. For some reason, the little mat is gone from the bathroom. The voice of God tells him to wake up.

He's still on the top step, and there's still laughter downstairs, but not as much. He doesn't hear the old evil girl grown-up laughing or talking. His Mommy picks him up, and he cries. He pulls at her arms, kicking, wriggling his way out. She puts him down. He runs off for the bathroom and just barely makes it.

Better? Mommy asks him, sitting on his bed, on his new sheets. He wipes his eyes and smiles. "Yes," he says. "Better. I feel better." That's good, she says. "Yes. I feel better." Good, she says again. "I feel better, and also, I feel better."

6/20/13

Intruders

1

There were four of us to defend the kitchen, backed up as we were. We did however have one distinct advantage: possessing all kinds of kitchen utensils.

There was the cleaning lady. There was my friend's mother (it was her house). There was me (there was also Bruce). By the way the cleaning lady stood at the back door, with her ear to the wall, her finger to her lips, a steak knife large as a small sword tucked underneath her sweaty armpit, it was clear she'd be the first to die.

I'd recognized the attackers from afar, before we'd taken cover. They were old friends of mine, friends I'd lost touch with. I was innocent. I knew that. Bruce, too. But I couldn't speak for the cleaning lady or my friend's mother. I also knew that, to the attackers, I would be guilty by simple association, by proximity, by my simply being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The cleaning lady stood front and center, next to the counter. I was at one end of the kitchen, erect behind the waist-high counter, my friend's mother at the other. Bruce stood between us, but a bit behind us, half the length of the kitchen behind the cleaning lady. He wasn't even looking for a weapon.

I'd gathered a collection of knives. My friend's mother also had a collection of knives she was ready to throw if left to choose between dying alone or with her attackers. There was a side door near me, a second door leading outside, a possible escape route, but I knew I could never in good conscience live with leaving them – two women and one dumb man – there to defend themselves alone.

Voices escalated. The cleaning lady drew the steak knife from her armpit and raised it.

The four of us fleeing together was out of the question. To flee

together would be to leave the advantages of the kitchen; if we were to survive together, we'd have to defend ourselves here. (To all flee and all split up would be to sign the death sentence for one of the two women I knew I had to both, as a man, protect, whichever one of the two women it was these criminals were after, assuming it was one and not both, and assuming, of course, they weren't after Bruce. They couldn't be after Bruce.)

The door burst open. The cleaning lady delivered a blow at the same time she received one. Both she and the first intruder collapsed in the doorway, entangled, into what was fast becoming a pool of blood.

So then there were three of us left. The door had been busted open. One of theirs had fallen. None of us were safe.

Bruce hid beneath the counter, unarmed still, the idiot. Big Bruce. Useless. I hated him, I thought in that moment, almost as much as I hated the attackers.

From the back of the kitchen, through the open front door, I could hear the other intruders yelling to one another about how one of their own had died and that all hell would break loose. So this was not yet all Hell.

An attacker charged through, hopping over the dead enemies (each other's enemy), firing a dagger in mid-air, struck in mid-air by one of our own. My friend's mother had also been struck. With daggers in their necks, Mrs. Weisman and her attacker collapsed into their developing puddles of blood. It was the second woman to die on my watch in the past fifteen seconds. And it was my friend's mother. I looked at poor, oblivious, innocent Bruce. These attackers must have gotten whom they'd come for, whomever it was, whichever of the women, whichever one it was. But Bruce and I, we were still not safe. Our deaths would be retaliatory.

He sat on the floor, unable to – too huge to – cross his legs. He looked down, at the kitchen tiles. The pattern was simple: whitish square feet. He looked sad, the way dogs do during thunderstorms. Retaliatory sounds grew. I let Bruce's life flash before my eyes.

He was the kind of friend who always seemed to be there, and nothing more. He did nothing or said nothing on his own. He never let his actions reveal his feelings, assuming he felt something. He never gave orders, never set forth propositions, never asked any questions, as far as I could remember, and I'd known him my whole life, as far back as I could

remember.

Our Moms met the same time we did, they've told us, when they were out grocery shopping, pushing us in their carts. When first told this story, I believed it; though I was too young to remember any details that, now, I could attribute with certainty to the story, a flickering, moving image of a red can of soup falling off a shelf and exploding onto the aisle floor beneath me passed through my head. After that, I remember playing with Bruce's toys in Bruce's basement while he sat on the carpet and silently watched. I remember Bruce's father yelling at Bruce for burning his hand on the kitchen stove, a series of teachers calling on him in class when he hadn't raised his hand, his black eye from defending himself, the sling with which his attacker returned to school the following Monday, him showing up to school without any lunch or lunch money and everyone at our table donating their snack to him to the point where he would eat more than any of us, him drinking beer and burping and sometimes laughing, the concussion we all thought he'd gotten after his car accident, driving him to school after his license had been suspended, returning home from college to find him where I'd seen him last, asleep on his Mom's couch, his face after following our friend's neighbor's cleaning lady's daughter out of the boiler room after his first sexual encounter, him eating sixteen mini-hamburgers that same night and snoring like a fat, happy dog, everything but the last ten years, during which our old friends had seemingly become our enemies...

My thoughts emigrated into survival mode. They'd already become our enemies whether they were aware of it or not, whether or not they knew it was us, their old friends, in the kitchen. The only ones to have definitely seen us were dead. And these intruders, they couldn't have been after Bruce or myself. We used to be friends. These intruders – these old friends of ours – didn't know it was us in here. Or might not know. I guess I couldn't be sure they hadn't seen us. But could only guess.

And regardless if they'd seen us, to remain in the kitchen now under these certainly retaliatory conditions would be to die, to die next or die several dead bodies from now. Even if we tried to reason with them, there would be no time, considering how quickly four just died. I thought of yelling for a truce, but hesitated. With no more women to defend, Bruce and I had nothing, no one left to lose. "Let's go," I said to Bruce, taking

him by the arm, pulling him up, leading him out the side door and up the hill away from the ruckus that of course refused and would continue to refuse to die out.

Because of course they were following us up the hill. Of course they were. Two of them. Probably aware or simply by now aware there had to have been more people in the kitchen with the two women. They'd be looking for someone – probably a man – conspicuously trying to escape. So I pulled Bruce's arm again, slowing him as if he were a horse, so that together we could walk, now inconspicuously, up the hill, towards town.

2

The Patriarch sat facing the fire. He didn't turn to look at me when they escorted me in, his way of inviting me to sit.

They stood around us. He turned a log with a poker.

"We got it," I said, beginning with the good news.

The Patriarch faced me, pointing his poker at me and then at one of the men around us. The man nodded.

The Patriarch nodded and turned back towards the fire.

"Bobby," I said, feeling my blood flow no further than my stomach, my blood just die there. "And Steve."

The Patriarch eyed me without turning his head.

"They were holed up in the kitchen," I explained. "Right by the backdoor. Ready for us."

The man to whom I'd given the bag presented it to The Patriarch.

The Patriarch looked inside and then handed it to me.

I didn't know what to say, what it meant.

"Ready for you," The Patriarch said. "They were ready for you..."

Still wasn't sure what The Patriarch meant, what he was thinking.

He turned to face me. "Finish your story, and then, don't give... offer it to me." Talking about the bag we'd recovered, the bag he'd called essential, whatever that meant, whatever was in it...

"Bob and Stevie," I said, unprepared beyond anything I've... "It wasn't how you said..."

"So they were ready," The Patriarch said again.

I said nothing.

“Where are they now?” he said, coolly.

I lowered my head.

“Where are they?” he said. Now swinging his poker at the hardwood, watching everything in the room. “Where!”

I watched and heard him exhale. Never had I seen him react like that, never seen him exclaim.

“Two women,” I said. Then I thought about Bob and Stevie’s mothers, mourning whenever it was it all went wrong. “They were two women, Mrs. Weisman and... someone...”

“Another woman with Weisman...” he said. “A cleaning lady? Speak, son.”

“They were ready,” I said, struggling. “Bob and Stevie...” But they died as soldiers. I’d tell their mothers that. Not criminals. Soldiers. But I couldn’t.

“Bob and Stevie...” he said. “OK, we’ll start there. Where are they?”

I hesitated. The men were listening, guns holstered.

“We were lined up against the outside of the house, by the backdoor,” I said. Cracking. “Bobby, the brave fucker, opens and is immediately struck.” Crying like a fucking baby. “And this all happens in like two fucking seconds. And then Stevie... he goes... there’s this fucking sound, and then another. I’m outside the door, haven’t had a look inside yet, think, OK, be smart, someone’s there that shouldn’t be, collect my... And I just say fuck it and go but the kitchen’s empty, no one left, just four dead bodies, the two women with them. Then it was easy to notice a side door swinging. So I run back out the back door, not wanting to touch anything, you know. Keith’s standing there and tell him to follow me, Weisman was here and got away. We run up the hill, but he’s nowhere... And Keith suggested we go back, see if the bag’s there, where you said it’d be, and that’s Keith for you, always hedging...” Trying to save Keith’s ass. “... Always getting something out of nothing. He’s a smart one.”

The Patriarch used the poker to lift the bag out of my lap and into the fire.

For a while, we watched it burn.

After which he said: “Find Weisman... Find him and kill him, or disappear. Son of a bitch deserves it... But you don’t find him by sundown, you disappear, you got that?”

I nodded. I thought he was crying. The Patriarch, crying.

“Just for a few days at least,” he said, but I wasn’t reassured.

“OK,” I said.

“Did they recognize you,” he said.

They might have. It had been a long time since I’d been to the Weisman’s. I just shrugged.

“Or they thought you were intruders...” he said. “Of course...”

“Weren’t we?” I said.

The Patriarch dismissed me, deploying me to complete my assignment. I put my shoes on by the front door and left.

Walking up the hill, after another smoke, I thought about the door that made the sound, about how Weisman fled and had gotten away. But I knew Weisman wouldn’t flee. Not after his wife died would he flee the killers’ accomplices outside. No way. Not Weisman. But then who? Was I just hearing things, or could there have been another... a witness? A coward? Weisman wouldn’t go to the police, but another...? Another night.

The burning of the bag I tried not to think about. It made no sense. Four died to retrieve it. I hadn’t dared look inside, hadn’t dared. But as I watched it burn, I could see that inside was just paper, like documents. So instead, I thought about how fleeing the battleground earlier this afternoon, I’d run into two of my friends from growing up. I hadn’t realized they’d stayed friends, all this time. I hadn’t seen Henry since high school, or maybe once since high school, and definitely hadn’t seen Bruce since high school. We used to be close, Henry and I. Used to play sports, video games together. Even had a joint birthday party together, once. Went to summer camp together. Got in trouble at school for bullying together, though I don’t know if you can really call it bullying since he and Bruce stayed friends. I never told him how once I walked in on our Dads smoking weed together. It was at one of those big barbecues our parents put together. Henry was there, actually. Only he definitely couldn’t tell it was weed they were smoking.

But it was good to see he and Bruce were still chilling. It’s so easy to lose touch with people you have history with. All you have to do is stop making the effort.

The edge of town was where I met Keith. I told him about how The

Patriarch burned the bag. I told him how he threw it into the fire, how in a rare betrayal of emotion he showed concern over where Bob and Stevie were.

Keith seemed pretty affected, too.

“So what now?” he said.

“Find Weisman,” I said.

“And what? Not *kill* him...” he said.

I shook my head. No.

“Just find out if he was there,” I said.

I don’t know if I’d call Henry a quiet kid, but he wasn’t ever what you might call a dominant personality. He had his moments. Bruce, on the other hand, I’d say he was more of what you would call a quiet kid. Maybe that’s why Henry liked keeping him around, as it would seem he were doing. Maybe it made him feel more important, hanging out with such an agreeable, quiet guy like that.

3

In 3rd grade, I did a report on Mahatma Ghandi. I found on the Internet that Ghandi said: “Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.” Since then, I’ve tried to live my life by this ideal the best I can.

The worse conditions get, the more I must exert myself towards this ideal. In the kitchen, things got so bad that my only chance at happiness at that moment was to think nothing, say nothing, and do nothing. That’s why I just sat down, head tilted down eyes along the floor, trying not to look at my dead friends, Robert, Stephen, Mrs. Weisman, and Attie, the greatest cleaning lady ever, who looked so much like her daughter, Agape, mindlessly counting the clean kitchen tiles, you might think. But never had I had such a hard time with staying happy. I had had some tough times, but never had I experienced anything quite like that.

I’d met Bobby and Stevie before I discovered Ghandi, back when I was active and miserable. We played all the sports and video games together, went to all the birthday parties, our Dads smoked weed together. I bet they wouldn’t even remember how much like them I was back then, back when I was skinny and fast and could still kick or hit a ball off a tee

further than anyone. And I wouldn't say everything changed suddenly in 3rd grade. We remained friends. We kept playing together, our Dads kept hanging out. I just had learned a secret I wouldn't share with anyone else. And so gradually, very gradually, I let this secret envelope me. I let this secret become who I was, without any of them noticing. But maybe I should have told them. Maybe I should have told Robert and Stephen why I liked to hang out with them even if I never participated in any of their conversations, even if I wasn't even listening, if I didn't even care what they thought or said or did, as long as they were happy.

Henry told me to wait outside while he ran in to use the ATM.

He'd told me he was torn as to whether or not we should go to the police. I didn't offer any opinion; I had none. He said that it might be dangerous people we were dealing with. He said that considering we had just crossed paths with them, and that they hadn't realized it was us in that kitchen, us they were after, we'd be safe if we just kept our mouths shut, if we just acted as if nothing had ever happened, as if we were never there, and thought nothing more of it.

"Let's go eat," he said.

He led me to a diner. He loves diners. He loves diners like he'd rather be stuck in a diner for the rest of his life than a private island.

It was noisy in the diner.

He ordered a bacon cheeseburger. He insisted I order one too. I shrugged. He ordered me a three-egged omelet.

He told me he thought bacon cheeseburgers were interesting because two different kinds of animals had to die to make them. I couldn't help thinking he was sick, but I just nodded. He told me that three-egged omelets were interesting because up to three chickens could have died, but most likely, no chickens died. I don't know a lot about chicken farming. I nodded. Anyway, I thought he was just trying to be funny, trying as he may to take our mind off things.

Then he said that he thought it had to have been Mrs. Weisman they'd been after. He couldn't help it, he said. He couldn't help thinking about it, because we were involved in it now whether we liked it or not. There would be evidence of us at the scene, and if they found evidence of us there, and we hadn't reported anything – two women dying, especially – then we'd have to be considered the prime suspects.

That's when Henry gave me that look, that annoying look my Mom gives me sometimes. That look that says, Bruce, you know what I'm thinking and you haven't said anything yet so now you should totally just save me the trouble of saying it and say it for me already. Show you've been listening. Show yourself capable of human thought.

"Find Weisman?" I said, miserably.

We knew where he worked.

4

The Patriarch called me at work.

"So you're at work," he said. "How long you been there?"

I didn't understand.

"Leave now and come over," he said.

I didn't ask any questions. I had no choice but to do as he said. He was The Patriarch. I hurried over.

They had their guns drawn when they let me in. They frisked me, made me take off my shoes, and then led me to the living room. The Patriarch had a fire going.

"The fuck is this?" I said. "Guns?"

"Sit the fuck down, Weisman," he said.

"Did she have it?" I said.

The Patriarch nodded. "She had it all right. And now she's dead cause of you."

"What?"

"My guy says she put up a hell of a fight," he said.

No...

"Buck up, Bronco," he said, with sarcasm coming from a place I didn't understand. "She had it. You were right."

"Dead, what?" I said. "No..." Crying in front of The Patriarch and no longer afraid. "No..."

The Patriarch nodded.

"Why'd you do it?" he said.

"No..."

"Why'd you do it?" he repeated.

I shook my head, unable...

“Who the fuck!” he said. “Who the fuck watches their wife die and goes to work?”

“You killed her...” I said. It had registered. “You killed her.” Walking towards him and stopped by a gun steady as a traffic gate. “Fuuuccckkkk!”

The Patriarch shook his head. “No,” he said. “No. You say that again... don’t you say that again. Only thing still keeping you alive is you told me the truth once before.”

“The fuck you talking about...”

“You were right about your wife, Weisman. She took it. Took everything. Everything anyone would ever need to know in order to know everything there is to know about me. Everything in those papers. Papers worth everything to me in my hands, and everything to everyone but me in anyone else’s. And lucky for you, it was under the kitchen sink, God knows why, just as you said... My, oh my... You know it was a mistake believing you, even if you were right...”

Was he crying? No. God no, not now...

“But she put up a hell of a fight, ain’t that right Glen...” he said. “You saw it! Fucking coward.”

“The fuck you talking about!” I said. He never called me Glen. “I was at work!”

“Whole time?” he said. “Coward...”

“All morning,” I said. “Fuck you, asshole.”

“Don’t talk to me like that,” he said. “Not today. Not ever, but especially not today. Not the day we lose Linda.”

Linda, my wife. I shook my head.

“She killed two of my guys,” he said. “Two kids.”

So that’s what he was crying about.

“Sorry,” I said, surprising myself. The fuck was I apologizing for again?

“I had another guy at the scene,” he said. “Told me what happened. Sent him to kill you. Thought you were there so he thinks you’re the difference between getting off and getting caught. But he listens, almost too well. ‘Impressionable’s’ the word I think they use these days, they, whoever the hell they are...”

“He won’t talk?” I said.

“You won’t talk,” he said. “You don’t talk and he doesn’t have to.”

“So then what about me?” I said. “When the police come, what do I say? When they question me... they will... the fuck I tell them?”

“You tell them the truth, that you were at work, right? The truth? Remember the truth, it’s what you do best?”

I rubbed my right temple hard. Feel something.

“My guy also said there was another woman...”

“God,” I said. “Attie? Attie...”

“Attie, the cleaning lady? That’s what I thought. Yeah, well, she went out with a fight, too, apparently...”

“But so what about the cops?” I said again. “They’re not gonna find your guy’s prints or nothing?”

“No.”

“OK but then so how do they save face, the fucking police! A neighborhood like this, four dead... my wife! Damn you...” Deep breath.

The Patriarch cocked his head. He wanted me to figure this out on my own. It took a minute.

“They’re all dead,” I said. Deep breath. “They all killed each other.”

The Patriarch tossed a new log onto the fire.

“It’s the truth, ain’t it?” he said.

I nodded, considering.

“You tell them nothing,” The Patriarch said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “They’re gonna come after us.”

The Patriarch shook his head.

“Not us,” he said. “Not you, not us. Like I said, my guy’s what’s known to smarter men than us as an impressionable young man. He says soldier, even says soldier, if you could believe it.”

“My wife,” I said.

“My guy,” he said again. “Is very impressionable. A fucking soldier.”
Laughed, psychopathically, I thought.

“My fucking wife.”

“Your wife’s a thief,” he reminded me. “She’s a thief and a liar and you’re an honest man.”

Keith and I ran into Henry again in the heart of town. He was still

with Bruce. I didn't know what to say. It was weird running into him twice in one day, after years of not seeing him.

I asked them what they'd been up to.

Henry looked at Bruce.

"We're looking for Glen Weisman," the big guy said.

The town was pretty packed in the middle of the day.

I looked at Keith.

"Us too," Keith said.

Henry and I looked at each other. It seemed to me that we were thinking the same thing, that this was one hell of a coincidence.

"She's dead," Bruce said. "His wife. She's dead. We saw it."

I stared at him and could tell Keith was trying hard not to look at me.

"Really?" I said, immediately regretting I'd said anything, really regretting everything I'd done in my life up to this point now. I can't say I remember ever being this uncomfortable. Not with The Patriarch. Not at the bloody scene itself. This moment right here, this moment with Bruce seemingly knowing something I couldn't fathom, something seemingly so effortless and obvious to him, felt like my worst nightmare, that my worst nightmare, which began this afternoon, would go on forever.

"Yes, we were there," Bruce said. "Agape's mom, too, they killed. The killers. But they are dead, too, now. The killers. Those fuckers."

"You were there," I said. I spoke without thinking. I was done thinking. I was just ready to speak, like Bruce was. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know what to do, think, say.

"We were there," Bruce deadpanned, as always, and I knew he was serious. He didn't talk a lot, but when he did, he usually just echoed what everybody already knew, from what I could remember of him. "It happened real fast. They all died at once, basically, and then we just ran, like somehow we'd be next, that there might be more of them outside ready to come in, ready to kill. So we left, because we weren't ready for any of that."

I let a family eating ice cream pass us on the sidewalk.

"Nobody was supposed to die," I said.

I was beginning to think how terrible I was at this. Weisman was here and his car was right outside. His co-workers would remember him leaving early on the day his wife was found dead with three others.

They would ask questions that he wouldn't know how to answer. I could imagine it all. Why'd you leave early, Weisman? You never leave early. Oh, what, you called and sensed something was wrong, was that it? Because you didn't call. And when you left, where did you go? If you went home, why did you not call the police? And if not home, where?

"Weisman," I said.

He opened his eyes.

"This was a mistake," I said. "I'm sorry."

He sat up.

"You should've stayed at work," I said. "I should've sent someone."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I have to think," I said.

Weisman didn't know the whole truth. For one, he didn't know the first thing about his wife. At least until today I didn't think he did. But whether or not he did he never would've believed the things she and I did while he and everybody else were at work.

"Weisman, you've got to go home right now," I said. "You've got to go home and call this in, say you left work early and just got home. Or say you stopped at the hardware store or something and then just got home. Actually, not the hardware store." Surveillance. "Just say you came right home, that you left early because business was slow, or whatever."

Weisman nodded. He stood. Except that how could business have been slow if he had to go in on a Saturday?

"Why'd you tell on her?" I said.

"Excuse me?" he said.

I shook my head, dismissing the thought.

Linda, Linda...

"You never work on Saturdays," I said, changing my mind again.

He sat back down.

Good, I thought. Deal with Weisman myself... Mexico my ass...

"I knew about you and Linda," he said, the nerve. "You want to know why she took everything from you, all there was to know?"

Yes, deal with Weisman myself. The kid, unable to find and kill

Weisman as ordered to do so by mighty me, will flee at sundown, scared to death, I've no doubt, especially after what happened today. Where was the kid, now? Could he have showed up at Weisman's work? What tracks was he leaving? I was out of control... Not my day... Linda, Linda...

"She thought Diane was back in the picture," he said. "Can you believe it?"

Diane, my ex-wife. Not a chance. Haven't heard from her in ten years.

"Get up," I said.

7

It was difficult for me to trust our old friends again entirely, though I couldn't say the same for Bruce. On one hand, on the surface, they seemed pretty remorseful and apologetic, but on the other hand, it was really tough for me to get inside their heads.

They had just lost two of their best friends and watched two women die, whereas we had just lost two old friends and watched two women die. They hadn't killed anybody or meant to kill anybody; the same went for us. They'd been looking for Weisman because they thought it was he at the scene, he who helped kill their two friends. I forgot why we'd been looking for Weisman. It was a bad idea to be looking for Weisman. We should've gone home right away.

Which is why it felt like a dream when I realized we were following our old friends. What did we expect to solve together? They were our friends yes, but criminals, still criminals if not murderers, accomplices to women's murderers, real murderers with whom we also used to be friends. Now we all knew it wasn't Weisman they needed to find anymore, but us, Bruce and I, whom already they'd found without realizing it was us whom they'd been looking for all along, us, the real witnesses, but, intensifying the dreamlike complexity, witnesses technically but who at heart were old friends who, in a heartbeat for their friends, would pledge their allegiance to the fifth alone. So we followed, with nowhere else to go and no shaking the feeling that this was merely the calm between two nightmares.

Weisman's car was parked on one of the first streets we walked down, as if they knew exactly where to find it. I looked at them skeptically,

and looked at Bruce, wondering what he was thinking, considering flight.

“That’s his car,” I said, trembling, and then realized we’d started looking for Weisman to save his life. How’d we find his car so quickly? Where were we? To where have our old friends taken us?

They looked at one another.

“This is Weisman’s car?” Keith said.

I nodded. “Yeah,” I said, for emphasis. “It is.”

Bruce scratched his head. I’d never seen him scratch his head before; he looked like he was thinking. Suddenly, he started walking towards someone’s front door.

“Hey!” Keith called after Bruce, but tentatively, not loud enough for Bruce or anyone indoors to hear. Our old friends looked at one another again, and then back at Bruce.

He rang the doorbell. I hid behind Weisman’s car with my old friends. We all waited, but then Bruce turned and shook his head. Nobody was home.

But then Bruce went to the next door. What the hell? What’s gotten into Bruce? I could tell my old friends were thinking the same thing.

8

Find Weisman, I thought. That would make me happiest. For Ghandi. For harmony. For the whole truth.

I waited by the door. I had a good feeling about this one. I didn’t understand what Henry and the rest of the guys were so scared of all of a sudden. Especially when we had all already just witnessed the horror of four people we knew dying horrible deaths.

I waited a good half-minute before I, as a last resort, tried the door anyway. Surprisingly, it was unlocked.

I opened slowly, quietly. I saw so many shoes at the door that I figured someone must be home.

“Hello?” I called.

I heard something but I didn’t know what it was. It sounded like people hushing one another. Then I thought I heard fire, its quiet breath and quirky cackle.

Then I heard footsteps coming up from behind me, in from outside.

It was my friends. It felt good that they hadn't abandoned me or abandoned our plans. Henry was there too, right behind them.

Then there were the men with guns. They led us right to Weisman.

Weisman stood. His face looked like shit. A man I've never seen before swiveled his rocking chair to face us.

I expected one of them to speak, especially Weisman, at least, who I've known for as long as I can remember. But neither he nor the guy sitting down said anything. They seemed confused.

"Your wife's dead," I told Weisman.

Weisman had no reaction.

The guy sitting down stood.

My friends were behind me, doing, saying nothing. I don't know what they were thinking.

The guy I didn't know came up to me, looked me in the eye, put a hand on my shoulder.

"What's your name, son?" he said. "What do you need?"

"Nothing more," I said.

He nodded.

"Can you do me a favor?" he said. I could feel my friends behind me doing nothing. What could they do?

I nodded.

"Go home," he said. "Forget everything that happened today, and I will forget your face. Understand?"

I shook my head. I didn't really understand.

"Go home," he said.

And so I did. I went home, and that was the last I saw of Henry.

5/10/13

Cantaloupe

Cantaloupe was my mother's favorite fruit and probably favorite food. So I was hardly surprised to find myself alone with her on a planet that was a cantaloupe, enlarged and peeled.

It was homogeneously the color of peeled cantaloupe, because it was a peeled cantaloupe. Its texture was the same; its smell was a mix of cantaloupe and nothing the smell of cantaloupe couldn't dominate. And it wasn't as big as the Earth, or even Earth's moon; there was no illusion of flatness. It was very much spherical, planetary, cantaloupe, very obviously cantaloupe, but the gravity was strong like the Earth's. And all around the cantaloupe, it was night, starry, silent but for the new sounds of our feet stepping along the cantaloupe, and we were alone.

Nothing changed, as she led me. The stars, the colors, the same exaggerated spherical perfection, texture, footsteps, and even the space between us, always several paces. But the texture. A thing or two of the texture – at once slippery and soft, such that sufficient footing could be had such as to step more so than slip, but not too soft such as to sink. No, we walked on this cantaloupe as if walking on heavily packed powdery snow or with rubber soles along the back of a whale, except less cautiously, for we stepped without fear of falling into anything but more pure cantaloupe.

Then my mother stopped, and I maintained my distance of several paces. She didn't turn towards me nor utter a word of explanation nor signal any orders. She knelt. She knelt on one knee and felt around the surface with bare palms, as if gauging ripeness.

I'll tell you about my mother. She wore a backwards baseball cap hardened from sweat dried long ago, a gray tank-top she used to jog in when we were younger, shorts, and a black backpack. Without looking at me still, she dug her fingernails into the cantaloupe. Carefully, she lifted herself up, still gripping the cantaloupe, back arched, hunched over, so that the whole of her bodyweight might soon contribute to whatever she had

planned. After some twisting about, her fingers sunk. After a bit more twisting about, she dug out a piece. This she brushed aside. She licked her hand lightly as if double-checking, still without having acknowledged me in any noticeable way, and the piece slid to a stop between us. I walked up to her, so close I could touch her to check if she were real, just in case I was dreaming. Instead, I knelt beside her and gazed at the surreal surface on which we stood. I found my reflection next to hers in the wet surface and saw I was wearing an orange hooded sweatshirt and gray sweat pants. I put the hood up and saw I was a cantaloupe resting on its peel.

Glancing back at my mother, I saw she had already dug a hole in the cantaloupe the size of a bathtub. I glanced back at my reflection. I smiled, but the reflection would not smile. I must not have really smiled, then. The hole was now too big for a bathtub, and then, it was too big for a grave. Finally, she turned towards me, as if for the first time in a long time, in the longest time, turned to check on me as if checking I'd been born alive.

"Where's the peel?" I asked. It was the best I could think of in that instant during which I realized I had to think of a question to ask her, or risk her never turning around for me again.

She shrugged in a way that rendered the peel, and consequently, my question, of secondary or of no importance, and faced forwards again. As if there were no peel ever, and that without a peel, there could be no questions about a peel, either, ever. She focused her digging on one side while I watched, inching forwards only when she did, maintaining a distance. The hole was a tunnel in progress.

I tasted a piece that she in her furious digging had flung at my face and I had caught. It tasted as I remembered cantaloupe to taste, cold, wet, sweet. A piece broke easily off the wall, and then I caught another piece before it hit my face, remembering snow.

This went on. She would dig, fling cantaloupe at me, and I'd eat it. Her not eating surprised me, because I knew she loved cantaloupe, but I didn't ask her anything, not wanting to disrupt her ferocious digging. I thought that if I were to ask her something, if she were to turn around again, I would ask her if she would like me to help her digging, because she looked tired and it felt wrong not to be tired and not doing any work.

Then I saw her eat a piece of cantaloupe, after which she discarded the next ten, beginning a pattern. As if one piece in every ten or so were all

she needed to keep going, to keep leading me down this tunnel in her favorite food while all I needed was ten in every eleven or so to keep following her. Almost as if the pieces of cantaloupe were a bribe. A bribe if and only if bribes could be without rules or consequences. That whatever we were working our way towards would be well worth the stomachache. And I don't even like cantaloupe any more than I do any other fruit, not now as I reflect, nor then as I ate everything my mother would discard my way.

It grew cooler, darker, damper, narrower. Ahead of me, she burrowed, digging up all she could see, and all I could see was her digging up all she could see and the dark walls, barely illuminated, the clean color of cantaloupe as I remembered it to be.

"We have to get to the center," she said. "We have to or the world will die of hunger."

I had nothing to say initially, in part taken aback at her finally saying her first words, finally meeting my expectation for explanation with both an order and a consequence, in part unable to speak with a mouth full of cantaloupe, and in part because each piece felt progressively colder in my mouth and throat and stomach and all.

Imagining between bites what could be in the center that was so vital for all the world, I ate, and ate. And then I thought, which world?

"What's in the center?" I asked finally.

"Seeds," she said.

I ate, everything I could, and ate, more than I'd ever imagine I could, and ate, following her through the narrow tunnel.

And ate, all she clawed back at me, and ate, crawling, almost slithering, and ate, my lips numb, my cheap, ruined sweatshirt barely keeping the rest of my outsides dry.

And ate. Beyond full, and ate. I compensated for hunger's exhaustion with a new motivation, by imagining I was a child again learning to bicycle, and ate, hungry for my mother's approval, reminding myself, unconvinced as I was, unconvinced because physically it didn't make sense to me at that age that in order to stay up on two wheels you had to keep moving, pedaling... and ate. And ate, and ate. It was easier to eat than to breathe. And ate. The cantaloupe lost its flavor, its temperature, and ate, even, as my throat went numb, its texture. And ate, and ate, and there we were and

there I was, full as I'd ever been, having reached the center.

And she didn't have to tell me it was the center. I knew it was the center when not a mere piece of cantaloupe but a whole cantaloupe that, unpeeled and the size I'd always known cantaloupes to be, hit me in the eye and fell before my nose.

"Seeds," she said. "Seeds."

So, the seeds at the center of this planetary cantaloupe engulfing us, once merely tempting us, were seeds that were cantaloupes the size of cantaloupes in life as I'd had known it before, ordinary, unextraordinary cantaloupes the size of youth soccer balls or heads. Soon there was no more peeled planetary cantaloupe to eat, only many unpeeled cantaloupes to traverse. I rolled through this core of familiar cantaloupes, behind her. But not so much as if rolling downhill, rather, as if swimming, or, rather more accurately, as if dreamily dumpster diving laterally, weightlessly crawling, floating, through the dense, mobile void.

"Grab as many as I can?" I suggested, surprised at suggesting such, suddenly dismissing the surprise, understanding the question as natural.

"Grab them all," she said.

This inspired my greatest questions. I kept them to myself. Grab them all? I wondered.

"Eat them," she said.

Eat the fruit? The world would surely die of hunger. All of it? Really? Yes. Die of hunger as a consequence of my failure. My world. But not by me. I can eat one cantaloupe, why not a continuous amount of cantaloupes, one at a time? Who's to stop me? Who's to salute me upon my return, before my funeral?

"Eat the fruit, carry the peels," she said.

I was having trouble peeling the first cantaloupe. She turned around, handed me a peeled cantaloupe and its peel. Her fingernails noticeably longer, sharper than before. I ate the cantaloupe, feeding myself with one side of my body, clutching peel after peel with the other.

"Eat them," she said. "Good. Eat the fruit and it will become part of you."

I paused between mouthfuls. My shell of a sweatshirt felt like cantaloupe on the inside, against my sweaty body. "Until I shit," I said. I felt it coming, too.

“And then that which you leave behind becomes part of the Earth,” she said.

Earth. That was my world. Our world, to which we intended to return with enough cantaloupe to save.

And so I peeled. I peeled, and peeled, and peeled, and held it in the long way home, because I’d do anything for my mother and the world we shared and cherished.

1/8/14

You Had To Be There

We left the stadium as twilight dawned. The subway station was crowded with disappointed spectators. I told my friend we'd have to transfer twice, but on the first train, my friend asked two women for directions anyway. They said they were going to the same place, but also didn't know how to get there. Once again, I said I knew.

At the first station to transfer, I led the way. One of the women asked if I was sure this was right. I said yes, absolutely. One of the women had curly blonde hair and a pale face full of pimples. The other had straight brown hair tied back tightly, and was plumper, with glasses, with darker, more visible facial fuzz and a feminine moustache. Both were nice women, friendly, at least. We shared our experiences as foreigners living in this homogenous country.

At the next station, the women led the way. I thought that maybe they thought we were too drunk to be relied on, even though I wasn't, though I guess I couldn't speak for my friend. They seemed indecisive. But they also seemed careful, attuned. I thought that now that I thought about it, maybe I hadn't really absolutely known the way for sure. That maybe my friend and I were lucky to have run into these friendly ladies, lucky to have made these new friends helping us home. They studied their surroundings with the diligence of serious students. But they did seem indecisive.

We hurried along a track as a train arrived. I thought it was the wrong track, just by the very nature of us hurrying along it. The women now leading the way stopped, turned, and the four of us convened. I said I thought it was the wrong track. The blonde asked: "You think?" Then the brunette, taking the blonde by the elbow, told her to follow her onto the train anyway. We followed them through the closing doors, the subway car more crowded than the station, the four of us all touching each other incidentally.

Only after the train pulled out from underground did the others realize we were going in the wrong direction. I told them to remember that

I'd told them so, told them before that this was the wrong train. Out the window, it didn't look like winter anymore. I think that's when we all realized that we'd not only gotten on the train in the wrong direction (the wrong direction on the right subway line, the train on the wrong side of the track), but in fact had gotten on the wrong train line altogether, a train off the wrong track we'd been correct to hurry along presumably towards another, after all. Neither our desired direction nor its reverse, it was a third direction. And outside were trees that weren't supposed to bloom until spring but had already.

I led the way off the wrong train at the first stop. We all wondered aloud both where the hell we were and how it could have gotten so hot so fast. The dawning of twilight lingered, yes, that dawning of twilight, as if the sun would never set, as if it could stay this hot all day. I unzipped my winter coat and loosened my scarf.

The tracks ran one way in the middle of the street, so there was no way of simply going back. My phone was dead and the GPSs on my friend's and the women's phones were not responding. The street had two lanes on either side of the one-way tracks, and all four were empty. We walked along, searching for a signal.

We waved down the first car we saw, a convertible, top down, coming up behind us, a foreigner like us at the wheel, a man in his fifties. He had a patchy gray and black beard. His gray t-shirt had small holes around the neck, and his safari hat was, even from a distance of five feet, visibly crusty with sweat. He spoke first, and I think the four of us realized at the same time, then, that we hadn't waved him down so much as he'd stopped to ask us something.

He said: "Have you seen a woman? A woman, about fifty? Dark hair, usually curly, about five foot seven?"

By his use of feet and inches in his description, it was apparent that he was an American. Unless, actually, he'd assumed that it was we who were American and, to make it easier for us to help him, somehow instantly thought to do us the favor of arithmetic, conversion.

The plump brunette said: "No. We haven't seen anyone. Can you help us find... is there a track that heads back the other way?"

The most likely American man scratched his neck and adjusted his tattered collar. His other hand remained on the steering wheel, its arm's

elbow locked. He said: “Listen, kids. Here’s a real problem. My wife’s missing. Went missing not a week ago. Thirty years... we come here, she goes missing. You ask me about directions...”

And then, as if to make some kind of point, he rolled up the window of his convertible. Shaking his head, he pulled off the shoulder and into the wide, empty street engulfing the tracks.

The blonde yelled: “Asshole!”

The brunette yelled, running after him: “How dare you! You don’t even know the half of it! You don’t know us! You think *you* have a real problem? We left the stadium almost an *hour* ago!”

The man flipped us off as he waned out of sight. I felt sorry. The brunette ambled back to us crying. The blonde took her elbow and wiped her tears. I turned to my friend. He seemed unsure whether to laugh or cry.

“We should find that guy’s wife,” I said. “That’d show him.” The brunette crying laughed.

We continued down the street in silence, the two women barely ahead of us, until my friend discreetly asked me what I thought of the blonde. I looked at him hoping he could tell I thought he was crazy, and he laughed.

“Maybe I’m just going crazy, man,” he said. But he looked serious. “I dunno.”

The supposedly urban street (a single stop away from the very busy city stadium) was lined with two-story houses with grass yards, separated not just by driveway, but by extra space, grassy and fenceless. The blonde had her arm around the brunette’s waist, forever consoling. The sidewalk we walked beside ended without warning, the way paths on snow-shoveled sidewalks end, and with it, its curb, so that the lawns came out to meet the street like welcome mats. Sprinklers oscillated. Dandelions persisted as if oblivious of winter, though strangely, here it felt like late spring at least. We followed the women until the road ended at a perpendicular. The women looked at us, though not so much for guidance, it seemed, but to make us feel included in the decision we would in theory make as a group. My friend and I both shrugged.

But before we had to make a decision, I saw, and pointed at, a house down the street to the left, and the convertible parked in its driveway.

We all looked.

“There he is,” the blonde said, amazed, appealing to me for verification.

“It’s him all right,” I said.

They hesitated, more awestruck than scared, I thought. I stepped past them. We walked along the side of the street opposite the house. Radio music emanated from that direction. The women and my friend followed me in silence. Once we were across the street from the driveway with the convertible, we saw that the music was coming from the open garage, inside of which, reclining bare-chested in a beach chair and wearing sunglasses that did little to disguise his identity, sat the rude American supposedly searching for his wife.

Walking past the convertible, I ran my fingers along its bright, glossy exterior, and then further along over the top of the driver’s side window, rolled up but roofless, its pineapple leather interior vulnerable as an animal sleeping on its back. At the edge of the open garage, I stopped, and behind me, so did my friends and the women.

The man placed the beer mug from which he was drinking onto the cement floor, turned down the radio’s volume, removed his glasses, and leaned forwards, on guard. His gray shirt, in his lap, he quickly put on.

“Your wife went missing a week ago,” I said, intending to put him at ease, to assure him that we were here to help, not hurt or rob him in retaliation for his rudeness, or anything like that.

“What do you want?” he said, looking around his garage. There were shelves and buckets of tools and athletic equipment, bikes, skateboards.

“You have kids?” I said.

He didn’t move.

“Look, we’re lost,” I said. “We don’t know where we are. Do you think you can help us... or we can help you?”

He fidgeted, shaking his head spastically side-to-side, his safari hat following, not so much to refute, it seemed, so much as to shake himself out of a truly horrible dream.

That’s when the women lost their patience. With me, with him.

“You asshole!” the brunette said, charging dramatically, so that her friend, the blonde, had time to react and hold her back. “You asshole! Let. Me. Go!”

The blonde tried to hush her.

“Asshole!” the brunette continued. “Asshole! You won’t even... and you tell *us*... you have *no* idea! He’s a... let me go! You’re an asshole!”

The man watched this display hunched forward in the recliner, his forehead in one hand, hiding behind all he could.

“Asshole!” the brunette said for the last time, because that moment, the blonde, already restraining her with a hug, put her face right up to her friend’s angry mouth, forehead first, then nose, then hard, stoic lips. Defiant lips. Lips that said without moving, that showed without moving: “I know, I know, love... I know... You’ve been waiting your whole life and are sick of it but I beg you...”

“It’s okay,” the man said. “Let her go.”

The blonde turned but did not budge.

“Let her go,” the man repeated, raising his voice. “Let her go!” He reclined, sighing outwards through his nose, sliding his hands along his thighs, forwards and back, and then leaning back, looking up, locking them behind his head. “Let her go, what does it matter...”

It was an invitation to sit, and the four of us took it as such. There were four more lawn chairs folded, leaning on one wall of the garage. We each took one and sat around the man. He’d barely moved the whole time, his hands still united, his gaze still obstructed by the roof. For whatever reason, perhaps a combination of his frustration over the present circumstances of his life along with his possible understanding that unusual circumstances usually yield more unusual circumstances, he didn’t seem at all surprised by our behavior. We waited expectantly. Finally, he relaxed. He picked up his beer, took a sip, put it back down. “There’s a mini-keg in the house,” he said. He took his shirt off again. “Seriously, a mini-keg. That’s what my life’s come to.”

“We have to get home,” the brunette said adamantly. She was sweating. Her cheeks were pink. Her hair was unraveling and greasy.

“I’m sorry,” said the man, the rude American. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” said the blonde. “We’re sorry about your wife.”

The man drank and rubbed his eyes with the back of his other wrist.

“It’s just that...” the blonde started again. “You can’t just go on assuming you’re the only one with real problems. Like your problems are so big you can’t help anyone else, and it just takes five seconds. And when you say what you said, ‘you don’t know real problems’, or whatever it was

you said, that's... you just can't... how can you even think to say that? It's not right, it's not cool. And you really don't know the half of it."

The brunette was weeping, rubbing her eyes with both her hands, holding her glasses in one, rubbing her tears over her fuzzy face and through her greasy, disheveled hair.

"You really don't!" she, the brunette, shouted just then.

"I'm sorry," the man said again. "I swear..."

"You *swear*?" the brunette said, in her threatening manner.

"I swear," the man said. "On my missing wife, I swear. What more do you want?"

I'd had enough. The poor guy, the poor man. This was too much. So I spoke up. "Stop," I said. "Wait. Hold up." They were all looking at me, all but my friend, who looked at the ground, or more precisely, the man's empty mug of beer. "What *is* the half of it? What is our real problem? That we're lost?" I wonder now why I didn't bring up the heat, improbable as it was for the season, and as intense as ever in that garage.

Now the brunette wailed, absolutely wailed. The blonde took her hand and held it firmly with both her hands, bringing her friend's hand up to her lips, not to kiss it, but to – in that foreign, feminine way – calm down its master.

"You're not lost, though," the man said, and I instantly understood. "You found me," he needlessly continued. "I offended you. You came after me. And you found me."

The brunette shook her head fiercely, negatively.

The man reacted: "Unless," he said. "Unless I was lost, and then you found me. So then, you are still lost, even if now, I am found. I don't know..."

The brunette shook her hand free from her friend's clasp. "No!" she shouted. "No, you're home! We're lost. Nothing's changed!"

The blonde rubbed her friend's shoulders.

"But we're together," I said. "His wife is missing..."

The brunette and the blonde conversed without speech or motion. Finally, the blonde nodded. Her blessing.

We followed the American expatriate inside. We sat on the floor of his air-conditioned living room drinking beers fresh from the mini-keg as he re-arranged his fireplace.

“Tell me,” he said.

It was obvious to us all what he meant. He squatted by the fire, rolling the burning logs imperfectly. The fire grew and glowed. The American’s scars underneath his patchy beard seemed analogous to the blonde’s pimples and to the brunette’s premature wrinkling beneath her painfully apparent down.

“You can tell me,” he repeated.

“It’s bad,” the blonde said.

“I bet,” the man said.

“No, but it is,” the brunette said, still teary-eyed, sniffing. “Like, really bad. It’s the truth... It’s really bad...”

The man said nothing. Over the fireplace was a window. And outside this window, it was snowing. It was the strangest thing – no chimney over this fireplace, just a window...

And then the man said something I thought I’d never forget. He said: “Bad truth...”

But it’s true. I did forget. I think he said: “Bad truth is truth and the twilight of understanding.” But he might’ve said: “Bad truth is truth and the twilight of belief...” or “... of faith...” or “...of knowing...” or “...truth and the inkling of twilight dawning...” or... “... the inkling of truth and twilight dawning...” I don’t remember... But he had been kind to us and his words which I’ve forgotten and may never remember, may never say, encouraged the poor women, the girls, encouraged them to tell, to please do tell, comforted them, encouraged them. So that when the bad truth finally did come out and was a horrible truth, truly, undeniably horrible, it was the telling of it that impressed me, the little I managed to remember, the telling, with the women there confiding to the rude American, and the season, whichever season it was, and the beer, and but especially the women, the telling of that abominable truth being just a very beautiful thing, a lovely scene. You had to be there. You really did.

5/15/14

Tale of Two Buskers

Two brothers, one visiting the other, relax on a crowded beach at night. They exchange tales from when, someplace far, far away, they once grew up together. The younger brother reminds the older of the holes they used to dig together during school vacations on North Atlantic shores that, according to their father, were bound for “China”. The older nods, needing no reminder – it was the tale he was going to tell next – pleased his brother remembers, too.

The sky is clouded with fireworks’ gunpowder, popping and crackling over breaking waves. It’s the older brother’s turn to tell a story. Remembering how earlier that night the younger brother said he’d never been anywhere in the world where it was so legal to drink in public so indiscreetly, he now thinks about how nice it is that fireworks are legal here, too. Even though, he says, sharing the thought with his younger brother, it would be nice to see the stars. But it’s still his turn to tell a story. The younger brother sits up. It’s warm for May, but windy on the ground, and both brothers, already out of beer, are underdressed.

They walk to where most of the people are: the promenade, between the city and the sand. Along it, locals in striped shirts holding hands or drinks walk by or stop to take pictures or videos of any number of the various street performers – musicians, magicians, dancers, caricature artists, Turkish ice cream men, skateboarders, toddlers out past their bedtimes clumsily taking on the masses, pyrotechnics – so that they can view them later, judge good take from bad and share the best with the rest of the world. Some performers have drawn dense, inordinately supportive crowds layers upon layers deep, as if they are their own inordinately successful performer alter-egos from a parallel universe, for whose talents people everywhere have paid to line up, ensuring their hero never has to stoop to busking again. Others mostly draw mere glances from passers-by, the occasional picture captured whilst moving, processed blurry, later to be

deleted, never shared nor reconsidered. One such relatively ignored busker, a local whose current crowd is two, and whose striped shirt extends out from underneath his half-unzipped hooded sweatshirt, is sitting on a box in the sand, acoustic guitar and microphone plugged into a small sound system behind him, singing a melody the brothers find familiar. They look at one another and sit, doubling the busker's audience.

The steps they are sitting on extend the length of the promenade, which extends the length of the beach. The song is an American classic, "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright" by Bob Dylan, but the lyrics the busker is singing have been translated into Korean. The brothers hesitantly sing along in English, unsure which verse the Korean is singing in Korean, singing as they guess, further hesitating to verify with each other in fraternal telepathy, when their guesses don't agree, whose guess is right. A toddler runs across the sand behind the busker as the older brother takes a picture.

The younger brother stops trying to sing to comment that the box the busker is sitting on is actually a cajón. A what? A cajón, the younger brother says. The brothers sing the final line of the song together, conveniently the same lyric that ends every verse. The two others in the crowd are locals in striped shirts, a middle-aged man holding a cigarette to his mouth, and a middle-aged woman holding the man's other arm tightly with both of hers. The busker stops playing. He says thank you in the local language and then says thank you in English, which draws laughter from the middle-aged Korean couple, and from the brothers. Into the microphone, he asks them, where are you from?

"I am American," the older brother answers in Korean.

A young local man smoking a cigarette sits down near the brothers and takes out his phone. The crowd is now five.

"Ah," the busker says. "American."

"He is our younger brother," the older brother adds in Korean.

The busker laughs loudly into the microphone, appealing to the middle-aged couple, inviting them to join in on the fun, and they do: they laugh, too.

"I can play American song," he says in English. "What do want hear?"

The brothers look at one another and guess silently they are thinking

the same thing. The older brother speaks for them, in a slow, carefully constructed broken English he hopes he won't have to repeat.

"We like... this one," he says. "This one you... just... played."

The busker laughs and says thank you in Korean and again in English. He asks again if the brothers want to hear an American song, and if any in particular.

"We like the last one you played," the older brother says.

The busker smiles at the middle-aged couple, his countrymen.

"Okay," he says. "American song."

The young local man on his phone next to the brothers gets up with his phone to his ear and walks onto the sand. A few locals stop walking to take pictures of the busker speaking English into the microphone. In their minds, the brothers go through the possible American songs this busker could play next that are more American than the one he just played. They look at each other and understand without speaking that they both have concluded there are no possibilities.

The busker's choice is a newly released, unambiguous pop song about love and sex in Los Angeles. The older brother wonders whether it's the first acoustic version of Maroon 5's "One More Night" he's heard, of all the times he's stopped for buskers in Korea. Neither brother tries to sing along.

By the end of the song, the busker's crowd has doubled to eight. The four new crowd members aim their camera phones at the busker, with unwavering diligence, as if the performance, from now on, couldn't exist without them. The brothers applaud. The younger asks the older if he wants to leave, if he wants to go find a trashcan to throw out their beer cans, or get new ones. One more song, the older says. The younger brother understands the older brother's sympathies towards the busker; if they leave now, the busker might take it the wrong way and think that they didn't like his playing or his choice of song, especially when he had chosen this song specifically for them, and if they, the Americans, didn't like the American song "One More Night" enough to stay for one more song, then the locals watching on their phones who couldn't understand the English lyrics could only be staying for one more song out of politeness, and this would all make the busker feel very, very, unfairly insecure about his playing, his art, his choice to devote countless hours of his life to perfecting

his act as a glorified beggar, every choice he's ever made, everything. The younger brother understood this immediately.

The man on the sand, hanging up his phone, jogs towards the busker. A new song has begun. The man reaches behind the sound system, pulls out a second cajón, sits on it, and immediately begins drumming. There are no lyrics yet. The brothers whisper to each other, trying to guess the song from its melody. The man, the cajónist, takes out his phone while drumming, drumming with one hand, reading something on his phone, typing on his phone with the other. The older brother takes ten pictures of the busking duo that would be identical but for one little girl out past her bedtime running behind the buskers in the sand. The song's lyrics are in Korean. The melody feels familiar, but neither brother can place it. It's no Dylan song, and by the seriousness of the busker on this one (the singing busker, not the cajónist still on his phone) – singing his heart out, the younger brother comments – it's no novel American song translated, either. The older brother scrolls through the pictures he's just taken. He wants to delete nine and keep one. He asks his younger brother to help him judge the good takes from the bad. His younger brother says they're all good. His younger brother's right.

The crowd's swelled to ten by the end of the song. One more song, the older brother says. The younger brother asks if he wants to get more beers afterwards, or food, or keep walking, perhaps check out another busker. The cajónist finally puts his phone away.

The singer stands up and says something in Korean that the small crowd laughs at. He starts strumming violently to the beat of the cajónist, who's just now given him his full attention. The song ends; the crowd's still an even ten. One more song, the older brother says. A bunch of toddlers out past their bedtime wearing identical striped shirts run across the sand, behind the two buskers. The younger brother laughs. One more song, he agrees.

At some point, it gets dark. At some point, my brother's friends arrive, and then it gets dark. We spend the day in the sand, waiting for all my brother's friends to arrive one by one. They arrive two at a time, until there are six of them, eight of us, altogether. At some point, but at different points, we all dunk in what for all of us at some point was a faraway ocean.

We all drink, get drunk, and then at some point, it gets dark.

The same buskers are out again, the same magician, the same musicians, the same pyrotechnics. The minstrel who played along to an accordion recording backing track all night last night is back in the same spot by the aquarium stairs. The magician with the megaphone is back in the same spot, as well, with what (what with the lines of volunteers he's forming) appears to be the same act. Tonight seems no busier than last; there is the same amount of people. But there is a difference. The same buskers from last night, the "Don't Think Twice" and "One More Night" buskers, who are out again, in their same spot on the sand between the restrooms and the convenience store, have drawn a remarkably larger crowd. Actually, it's huge. It might be the biggest on the beach.

I have to think they're playing the same set. My brother has already noticed, already telling his friends how we saw them play the same set last night to no more than ten people, including us. His friends express skepticism, a refuge for disinterest, perhaps, but I back my brother up anyway. It's definitely the same set, I verify.

We're all holding empty cans. At some point earlier, we'd begun discussing what my brother had informed me is the well-known Korean trashcan paradox: how the country keeps so clean with so few trashcans. Maybe everyone just buries their trash in the sand, one of my brother's friends says suddenly, restarting the discussion. And in Seoul? Maybe they donate it to the Ministry of Land, and then the Ministry of Land makes a big pile and builds a big park on top of it. The Ministry of Land, my brother explains, is a real thing. But I think it's more likely Koreans just bring trash bags with them everywhere they go, he says, and then suggests we all go watch the buskers for a few, maybe find a trashcan, get some more beers.

The buskers' crowd tonight surrounds them. We get as close as we can, behind the buskers, on the sand. The entire crowd is singing along in English to a song that sounds familiar but that I don't know. My brother begins singing, too. His friends, too. Only then do I recognize what song it is: "Let It Go" from the animated movie *Frozen*. It's a song that, earlier today, on the beach, after dunking, with a ukulele and two plastic bottles filled with rocks and shells, two of my brothers' friends and I played, too. It's a song that, earlier in the week, in Seoul, following our musical

performance for them, my brother's students sang for us a cappella.

But the insertion of this one song, this slight set change, cannot possibly explain alone how their crowd has multiplied like so. It's possible their sound system is slightly larger; it's possible I'm mistaken. It's possible the cajónist has chosen to take things more seriously tonight and laid off his phone; it's more likely the cajónist's unprofessional phone-play last night was the result of a meager audience, and not the other way around. It's Korean culture, my brother says. See a crowd, join a crowd. See a line, whatever's at the end of it must be worth the wait.

The buskers' next song is in Korean. The crowd seems to know this one, too, and my brother and his friends don't. I tell my brother to hold on, wait here while I run to the bathroom real quick, and look for a trashcan. I walk around the crowd, up the steps to the promenade. The singing busker is standing; the cajónist is sitting. I identify with the cajónist. I wonder where all these people were yesterday; if they'd all come yesterday, would the buskers have had this same crowd yesterday?

On my way to the bathroom, instead of a trashcan, I find a pile of trash. Its location on the promenade is a seemingly arbitrary one. I think of the buskers beginning and the growth of their audience – one person sitting, another following, another following, a couple here, two brothers there, and so on – and wonder, who littered first, who put the first piece of trash down? And then, who put the second?

There's a line for the ladies' room, and none for the men's. Standing over the urinal, I get the idea to go back to the pile of trash and retrieve my empty can. I will put it someplace new, someplace where it will be alone, a piece of trash without a pile, and watch what happens. I will solve the paradox.

12/21/12

Moment of Crisis

I am pushing a cart that is mostly empty except for some papers and some – like the dirty quilt, the unhinged lampshade, or the lost wire – of what others might consider “junk”. The papers, documents I’ve given my time to completing, are important to me, but not irreplaceable. I am headed for the Print Shop.

A man of poor attire strikes me as homeless. He and I are approaching each other on the sidewalk. He looks as if he has something to tell me. I make eye contact with him and begin to smile, but stop when I see this man’s eyes widen. He wants something from me.

He lunges for the cart and takes it from me before I can tighten my grip. He runs, pushing the cart in the opposite direction in which he’d been approaching, in the direction I’d been heading, downhill, along the sidewalk of the busy, urban street. I think for a second: do I chase this man who’s stolen a worthless cart (worthless to him and replaceable to me)? I chase him. From what I decide must be out of principle, I chase him.

I gain on him. I am faster without the cart. The man turns to check on me. He turns to check on me again and again, and this looking back slows him down each time.

He surprises me by opening the door to the backseat of an idling black car that may be a cab. I lunge for the cab and catch the door before he can shut it. The cart is halfway into the cab. I rip the cart away from the man. But the man has grabbed my hand.

He slams our hands onto the hinge of the open door. He cries: "You’ve broken my hand! You’ll pay for this!"

It occurs to me then that this man – this poor man – must have planned for all of this to happen. I begin to run downhill, along the sidewalk, pushing the cart out in front of me. This man probably steals worthless items from strangers constantly, hoping one (like me) is stupid enough to chase him and maybe even stupid enough to hurt him. The man has gotten into the backseat of the car, or cab, and they begin following

me. I am running because this man is going to sue me, and I am broke. I flee to keep my information (my identity) from my pursuers.

They are gaining on me – the man and his driver. I can't tell if they're in a car or a cab because the car/cab is all black – some cars are black, some cabs are black. I find myself hoping it's a cab. Otherwise, this poor man so hungry to sue has an accomplice. A partner.

I jump into the cart I've been pushing downhill. The cart flies down the street. I am certain now the poor man intended I catch him, to break his hand, allegedly. It's become obvious. If he hadn't intended on being caught, if he were intent on escape, he would've fled by jumping into the stolen cart, using its wheels to his advantage as I am now.

I am flying down the street in my cart now without breaks or a steering wheel although I feel I can steer some, just by leaning. The car is stuck at a light, behind me. They are obeying traffic lights, behind me. I lean heavy and turn slightly. This success – this turning at all – reassures me. My choice to flee by cart was a good one. I can't be sued. There's a red light ahead.

I will be unable to stop at the red light ahead. I am flying without breaks. Turning slightly will not get me out of this one. The light is still red. I tighten my grip on the cart as I fly through the intersection. I keep my eyes straight ahead. The next light is green. I survive the intersection.

I don't hear any police sirens. That's good. No police have caught me running the light in the cart. The car is still chasing me, though, behind me. I make the green light. The car is still there, approaching. The next light is red. I can't risk my life again. I'm lucky to be alive. I won't push my luck any further. The car is near.

I jump out of the cart. I can't be caught. I am broke. I can't pay this lawsuit. I abandon the cart and run. The car stops where I've abandoned the cart. The man who is going to sue me but first needs my information gets out and begins chasing me on foot. All my information is in that cart, I realize, in those documents I've filled out and left! I must lead this man away from that cart! I can't worry about the accomplice finding the documents, and in them, my identity. I've got to trust there was no accomplice, only a taxicab driver.

I'm heading towards my apartment. I reach into my pocket for my keys as I run. The man is close behind. I get out the keys, open the door,

get inside, and close the door. But immediately I notice I've closed the door on the man's hand. He screams; he cries. His hand! I open the door, pushing his hand out, and then I push the door shut again. I am safe from the man, for tonight. He does, however, now know my address, I realize, assuming he believes this is where I live, about which of course he'd be right.

I don't know what to do about the cart. There's no escape. I won't kill him. My hand hurts.

10/21/13

Thinker on the Toilet

Years later, he remembered an epiphany that had come to him during his college years.

He asked me: “Did you have any moments where you would, like, think of something and it would seem like really important?” And then he shared with me that while he was sitting on the toilet at my house my junior year, the downstairs toilet, the shitty one, though not taking a shit, just thinking, he began thinking about his family tree, how he was the first and only of his bloodline ever to be sitting on this exact toilet thinking about how he was the only one in his family ever to be thinking about how he was the first in his family.

He was laughing. Fondly remembering foolishness, the best stories sculpted from foolishness, hardened over time. I laughed, too, coughing, banging the table. “Wait,” I said when I could. “Hold up. Was the seat up or down, then?” Because he said he hadn’t been shitting.

He didn’t remember. All he remembered was his epiphany. Years ago, clear as a crystal, as mirrors before hot showers, as any crystal in the mind, any iceberg plucked from the neurological slime. Now, mysterious as... as... as a single footprint on a riverbank... a sentence out of context... an old stone eroding in the rapids, protruding through the surface, whose face is a statue’s face, rusting with time, within reach only to the birds and (maybe) fish...

“It just made so much sense at the time,” he said. “It’s funny.” He laughed again. English was his second language. “It’s funny how it could make so much sense then, at the time, but now it makes no sense, I don’t even know what I was thinking.”

I nodded. I understood. It happened to me a lot in college. It’s happened to me since. It happens regularly... epiphanies I forget and won’t remember until later...

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean. I can see why you would’ve thought it made

sense.” I paused to let him consider this. Let him wipe the steam off the mirror. Let him lean and reach for the submerged while I’ve got a hold of him. “Because you’re the first of your kind, of your family, to ever be doing anything, really. You’re the first of your kind to be sitting right here, right now, doing what you’re doing.”

“Wow, yeah, you’re right.” More laughing. English his second language, “wow” learned in third grade from a textbook. “I guess.”

“Every moment you live is unique, not just from your family but unique from everyone, from anything.”

“Yeah, but it’s just so stupid,” he said. “I hadn’t even eaten breakfast yet and I was just sitting there, not even taking a shit, high as balls, I probably just went in there to wash my hands or face or something.”

“Or piss,” I speculated. “Maybe you went in to take a piss but the seat was down and then you just forgot what you were doing in there or you realized you didn’t really have to go anyway, you just thought you did, and so you just sat down. And then as soon as you sat down, you tried to remember what it was you were doing there, and then you thought, why you? Why you and not your father, or your grandfather, or anybody else in your family? And then you thought that what you were questioning was less why it was you in that bathroom, less whether you went in there to shit or wash your hands or grab a paper towel or look in the mirror or whatever, less why it was you out of everyone in your family, ever, in my bathroom, and more so a question about time and place, not “*why you?*” but “*why only you?*”, and you thought about how what you were doing was unprecedented and not able to be repeated, the first and last of its kind, and, as you continued thinking, shitting or not, head probably in your hands, fist holding up your chin, about how the kind of thing happening to you happens to everyone all the time, your father, your grandfather, everyone you’ve ever seen or thought about, the same kind of thing but at different times in different places, each moment unprecedented and unable to be repeated, for everyone, for all time. And in that moment, that unprecedented instant in particular during which you continued to think and think through a thought you’d never before thought so thoroughly through, you had the much deeper thought that you weren’t just a shitter on a toilet only, but a shitter on that particular toilet, in that place and time that you yourself held, a place that no one in your family has held or ever

would ever hold, a place maybe others have held, but in a space of time occupied by you alone... Truth be told, it's not so rare a thought, not so unique an epiphany. But what made you think this thought was an epiphany, what made it an epiphany to you, was that you continued thinking about it, you got a hold of it, found it wouldn't budge but pulled some more and budged it, and by the time you pulled it out, you found, to your pleasant surprise, something you recognized, something you hadn't totally forgotten. Like the thought you had was the tip of an... was the top of a statue in a river of statues... whose tops you watch erode when you relax, whose faces and bodies you saw once, before you lost them to the river... and then...

I'd lost him. He was eating, nodding. I'd had him to the end, and then I'd lost him.

"Nevermind," I said. "It made sense to me as I was thinking it. I had it at one point." I pulled up the stone statue with my fingertips, by its head. It was like *The Thinker*, only *The Thinker* was seated on a toilet, and his face was my own or my father's or my friend's. He'd slipped, cannonballed into the depths. And I imagined it being taken by the rapids, moving at rapids' speed, as if it could float, the statue, even partially, or as if it were a human head, empty, or full of water, and round, *The Thinker* in the shape of a human head, with the chemical qualities of a human head.

At the station, an old man in a nice suit sat at the top of the stairs. His friends, also in nice suits, appeared to be alternating between trying to help him up and trying to convince him to get up on his own. Or maybe trying to convince him to let them help him up. At least I knew from being in this country long enough that he was okay, that the old man was okay, just drunk, really drunk, a really drunk *Thinker*, like all the well-dressed old men here, and okay.

The train was full of more old drunk guys just like them. Just like how the river, clouded with the spoils of decomposing memory, reveals only the old stone tops of the statues it conceals. But silent, old, drunk guys. Statue-tops that don't ask for anything. Statues whose bodies you imagine to be the same as when you let them go.

As I began climbing the escalator out of the station, passing more old, drunk guys, I stopped to just stand there on the escalator, and let it carry me up. I thought about how I was the first of my family, as far as I

knew, but also almost surely, ever to be here, in this country. I stopped climbing halfway up the escalator. Not my father, nor either grandfather, nobody.

And escalating, escalating. And coming up for air. First I saw the stars and heard: engines, wind, footsteps. Then the buildings. The usual. They sounded the same, the engines, wind, footsteps, etc. Like a hum, as everything always does when you're not really listening. And then finally the sidewalk. I stepped off, past an old, drunk Thinker sitting on the top step. Past another on the curb, watching the cars, enjoying a smoke, and then past another, Thinking on a convenience store stoop, wearing a very nice, very well-pressed suit, enjoying cheap alcohol. For the rest of that minute, I remembered all of them, making the connection in my building's elevator that one was posed like The Thinker, that maybe they all were, all posed like variations of the Thinker, Thinkers eroding differently in rapids of different minds. Then I let them go. I must have. I can't remember thinking about them – the Thinkers, the related memories – until I sat on the toilet and started thinking about my friend's epiphany again just a moment ago.

5/22/13

Irreducible Children's Story Pt. 1

From his bedroom window, the boy could see houses across the river. He wondered what it would be like to be a boy growing up in one of those houses across the river.

He began working various jobs. Years later, he found a steady job and was able to rent a room across the river. And he did. This room had a view of his old house across the river. He could even make out his old bedroom window. For years, he would watch his old bedroom window without ever seeing anyone open it or look out of it, not even his parents because they didn't live in that house anymore, either. He wondered what he would do if he saw someone look out of it and see him. He also began wondering more about the river itself, especially what it would be like to live on a boat much like the boats he grew up watching after the sun went down and all he would be able to see were the lights on the boats and some lights in some tall buildings across the river.

He could not find a job on a boat, because he didn't know any of the boatmen or what he could do on a boat to help a boatman should he meet one, one day. So he continued working. His office was on a top floor in a tall building. From his desk, he could see out one set of windows a clear view of the side of the taller office building next door.

A year later, the boy found a job in the office building he'd been staring at from his office window. The job was similar. The boy became very good at checking the work of imperfect machines.

But something was missing, something obvious to the boy. The boy didn't like his job. The boy traced the route of his troubles back to his decision to move across the river.

The boy returned back across the river. He kept his job. Every day, he'd take a ferryboat to work across the river. He moved in with a girl. He thought he'd figured everything out.

The boy's father died. His mother was losing her memory. The girl he was living with began dropping hints that she wanted to marry him, the

boy thought.

One night, the boy packed a suitcase and walked down to the docks. He snuck onto a ship. He still didn't know much about boats. It could have been any kind of ship.

He spent the night under the stars, using clothes from his suitcase as linens. It rained in the middle of the night, but the boy resolved to spend the entire night on the boat, no matter what.

The next night, the boy snuck into an even bigger ship, one with a shelter on board. This time, voices woke him in the middle of the night. The boy continued to hide. He was at sea at least. He fell back asleep. In the morning, the ship had returned to the dock, and had emptied.

The boy returned to his room with his girl and proposed to her that they move away. The girl had mixed feelings about the boy moving away from his mother. So they moved only back across the river, across the river from his mother, as a kind of compromise.

Once back across the river, the boy found a job on the side of the river from which he'd just moved away, on the side from which he had now twice moved away, so that he could live with his girl and take the ferryboat to work every day. On weekdays, he'd take the ferryboat to his job, and on weekends, to visit his mother, which pleased his girl. Again, the boy thought he'd figured everything out. His mother said she'd live happily ever after.

Then the boy had a boy of his own. His boy grew up in a room the boy had carefully designed, with one window very high up.

Sometimes, the boy's boy would slide his bed underneath the high window and stand on it. From there, he could see the street, and beyond it, the river. But mostly, the boy's boy just contemplated doors.

4/23/13

Last Stop

For whatever reason, we were giving each other the silent treatment on the subway. We weren't smiling, and we hardly looked at one another. I was being mean to her because she was being mean to me. She probably felt the same, but she was wrong. She was wrong to probably feel that way.

I thought about what I'd say if she asked me why I wasn't saying anything. I thought maybe I'd tell her I was about to ask her the same thing, but then thought, no, better to remind her I hadn't had my morning coffee yet. Remind her, though I hadn't told her before. Remind her because she just should've known.

But she didn't ask. And, as she continued not to ask, I changed my mind and thought that maybe telling her I hadn't had my morning coffee yet would be in a way making light of a situation or circumstance or equilibrium I more truthfully wished to maintain that could very easily get out of hand if nothing changed. I wanted an apology and so I continued to wait for one.

But of course she was probably doing the same, waiting for me. We think in ways that are so opposite, they're really similar: similar as peanut butter and jelly, or as hot and cold, or as boy and girl, or as yes and no. I thought that maybe this standoff – this fear of miscommunication – would go on forever for us. I thought maybe I'd never see her again and there would be nothing I could do.

The stops went by. She sat. There was an empty seat beside her, but I kept standing. Facing the window – its blackness, its emptiness, my reflection – I didn't see my reflection. I saw only through my reflection and into the nothingness.

Ours was the next and last stop. The longer we went without speaking, the angrier with each other we became, it seemed. There were two seats open on her bench now, one next to her and one two away.

But there was nothing, really truly definitively nothing to be angry about. It was as if we were both angry in self-defense but with nothing –

no anger attacking – against which to defend. As if in our silences, we were regenerating the anger we had expended all weekend long, just conversing, having scheduled conversations all weekend long.

So I took the seat next to her, leaving the seat two away from her open. I imagined that if others on this mildly crowded subway had been paying attention to one or both of us before, they must now have found it odd that I sat down next to her instead of leaving a seat open between us, because, as it is well known, perfect strangers leave empty seats between one another when they can, and we, surely, it seemed to me, would have appeared to them all, all this time, to be just that, perfect strangers, nothing more, nothing less.

She kept staring straight ahead, as if she never knew me, out into the nothingness of the bright subway car crowded with true strangers, truly unfamiliar faces. I looked around and imagined the others on this subway hadn't had their morning coffees yet either and that they must have all thought this very odd that I sat down next to this strange woman, imagining, of course, that they had indeed been paying attention to us before I sat down. And then I thought: how could they have been paying attention to us before, before having their morning coffees?

The seat beside me remained open even as people continued to stand on the subway as if there were no open seats. My wife was staring straight ahead, still, or at the floor, or into that bright subway nothingness I imagined resembled the darkness I saw through my reflection, her head facing forwards and she not having said a word.

Other people were looking at us and the empty seat beside me. Why aren't I in that empty seat? They were all thinking of me, if not looking at me directly. Why don't I and that empty seat beside me switch places, so that this strange woman with her left thigh pressed to my right can have her space?

I laughed silently, without smiling, at what the others on this subway must have been thinking about me. To them, my wife and I were just two strangers, an elegant lady and a creepy young man.

I put my head down on my wife's shoulder, but still these strangers would not stir. My wife also did not stir. To her, in some sense, I would always be a stranger.

The intercom announced the next and last stop.

But I couldn't accept this. How could I? I turned my head inward, away from everyone, and sunk my teeth lovingly into her neck.

10/31/15

Taboo

Work was fine. I was a teacher. I was on my feet all day, or as much as I wanted to be. The students were all interesting, insofar as they made me think about what I was like at that age, and how, in many ways, I was still like that, which was interesting. I got along with all the other teachers. The administrators were all very understanding; they always took the teacher's side when a parent complained. It was all very fine; this was eight hours during the day, five days a week, that I didn't have to worry about. I couldn't have been happier.

The best part was that sometimes my class would mix with the class next door, taught by a young woman my age, Miss Ristic, or, as I called her, Tatya. I had noticed her on my first day — a girl my age, and we had clicked immediately. She was of medium height, with dark hair kept in a loose ponytail, and messy, unintentional bangs.

"I'm thinking of cutting my hair today," she told me once, after office hours. We usually walked out together. "Bangs. What do you think?"

"You have bangs," I said, observantly. "I thought you do have bangs."

She smiled at me, squinting her face, amused. A face that said: you have no idea what you're talking about, and I like that about you.

The next day, she came back to school, but her hair looked the same. Still, she had said she would be getting a haircut, so I pretended to notice.

"Nice haircut," I said.

She smiled.

"I didn't get a haircut," she said.

I had been at the job for three months; Tatya, a year and three months. She was very popular with her students, being pretty and all, but I was popular, too, being a male teacher and all. The more we saw each other doing our jobs well, being popular with our students, the more we liked each other. Maybe she thought I'd be a good father. I thought she'd be a

fun fuck.

The past few days especially, we'd been flirting. I noticed her smiling more; she was always smiling, but now, even when the students had gone home, and it was just her and I grading homework assignments or making copies, and I would ask her something, usually work related, she would look at me and smile, and then, usually, shrug, laughing lightly. She'd begun to dress more and more casually, I'd noticed, since the first day. On this day, she was wearing a black fitted top, with very short sleeves and a very low cut neck, and tight black jeans. I was sitting on a desk.

"What are you doing this weekend?" she asked, walking up to me. As she passed me, she squeezed my thigh and continued on past, as if that were a normal thing to do, to go with the innocuous question.

I turned my head. Her hips swayed dramatically. She walked into the storage room without looking back at me.

The door to the classroom was closed. The door to the storage room remained open. I got up. I checked that the door to the classroom/hallway was locked; it wasn't, so I locked it. I walked slowly to the back.

I stepped in and turned. Tatya had cleared a spot on the supply table, and was sitting on it, feet dangling, hands gripping the edge, smiling differently.

That was the one and only time we made love in the school. After that, we saw each other for about a month. I would go over to her place, or she would come to mine; we never went out together, no dinners or movies or events — we didn't want to be seen together in the community, didn't want to run into any parents, or worse, students with their parents. It never affected our work.

But work affected our relationship. Eventually, our respective apartments weren't enough; we wanted to be able to go out, we wanted to be able to introduce each other to friends, to others in the community. We wanted to experience things together, and we needed other people to witness our experiences in order for our experiences to feel real and meaningful, to feel like concrete building blocks that would advance our relationship towards something greater or deeper. Which, because of work, seemed impossible; thus we stayed inside, alone, together. Our experiences

were blocks of ice — rather, a horizontal archipelago, or scatterplot. No tower to heaven; no tunnel to from whence we came. No trajectory at all.

So we stopped seeing each other. My feeling was that it was mutual. One night, her head resting on my chest, she told me that a man had asked her out. An older man, five years older, in finance.

“He’s handsome,” she said. “And rich.” I could feel her lips moving as she spoke.

“And you said yes?” I said.

She began lazily massaging my penis, playing with it as if it helped her think, which was something I did a lot myself, to myself, come to think of it, because it really did help me think. I think her eyes were closed.

I felt her head nodding on my chest.

We made love once more and then we stopped seeing each other.

A year passed. The month Tatya and I shared never affected our work and became essentially forgotten, as if it never happened, as the saying goes. No one in the community ever knew. Maybe they had their suspicions, maybe we continued flirting, I couldn’t tell you, but no one ever, at the school, expressed such a suspicion to me. The working relationship between Tatya and I proceeded as normal, improved, even, as if proceeding organically. As people, if not lovers, we got closer and closer. I always looked forward to our classes mixing. She was my best friend there, maybe even my best friend in town, all things considered.

Until one day she betrayed me. I don’t know what she was thinking. I want to say she wasn’t thinking at all, but everyone is thinking, always.

We were all walking down the hall, after office hours, to our monthly staff meeting in the auditorium. One thing we all knew that would be discussed was the recent incident involving two seventh graders who’d been caught engaging in a sex act in a custodial closet, some sex act only a seventh grader could define. The question now, of course, was what consequences the students should face. Despite the administration’s and our (us teachers’) best efforts, it seemed all the students knew what happened, or at least, that something happened, something new and interesting. The details were all rumor, imagination, confused with older brothers’ fairy tales, but that hardly mattered. The students knew something happened, knew the students in question, knew that what had

happened wasn't allowed on school property and probably not off school properly, either. Not by either's parent, at least. An example had to be made.

Tatya was arguing that the students who'd gotten caught ought to get off lightly.

"I mean, it's young love," she was saying. "It's seventh grade. Kids are going through changes they don't understand. It's not so easy to think of what you're doing."

I disagreed.

"They knew what they were doing," I said. They planned to meet. They planned to leave class at the same time, meet in a certain place. They knew what they were doing."

"So what do you suggest we do, mister moral high ground?" she said, smiling, playfully. "Not like you never had sex in this school before..."

What...

I couldn't believe what had just come out of her mouth. That mouth that had been all over my body, that mouth I had trusted enough with my most vulnerable part, that mouth I loved once and admired up close.

For a moment, I just kept walking, as if I hadn't heard that at all, as if she had never said it. I think, because, for that moment, I truly did not believe that what I thought I'd heard was actually said. It couldn't have been said. It must have been my imagination, or it must have been a dream. But I wasn't dreaming. Everyone else suddenly stopped. I took an extra step, and then stopped, turned. They were all looking at me.

"What are you talking about?" I said awkwardly, ostensibly addressing Tatya, though it felt like I was addressing everyone. I tried to find the right balance of playful denial and downright indignation, but I found I was completely unprepared.

"C'mon..." she said, playfully.

I shook my head, and turned back around. They were all at least a step behind me now. I continued down towards the auditorium. I could feel them behind me, looking at me, judging me, wondering, and I listened carefully to hear what else Tatya was saying about me, but I couldn't hear anything. In fact, I couldn't concentrate at all. I was consumed by my next move.

I held open the auditorium door. Tatya smiled at me as she passed through, and I glared at her. Everyone else, I thought, glared at me. I tried to smile, maybe, I don't know. I probably actually averted their eyes altogether, come to think of it. The principal, the vice principal... Actually, no. I remember all their gazes.

After the last had entered (I'd held the door for at least thirty people), I stood in the doorway, watching the crowd take their seats, processing nothing, contemplating my options.

I had sex on school property. This was true. This would be difficult to deny. Everyone would believe Tatya. But she had sex on school property, too. With me. It made no sense. What was she thinking? Were there no consequences? No, of course there were consequences. Having sex on school property was a horrible thing, a serious infraction, a sex offense. I would have to register as a sex offender for the rest of my life, I thought. I pictured myself in a new town, having just moved there to escape the snarls and finger-pointing that now awaited me in my immediate future, in my current community, and saw myself walking door to door, knocking on doors to tell people that I was a sex offender, and saw these new neighbors smiling politely, perhaps frightened, closing their doors on me before I could explain myself: that it was for sex with a woman my age who had seduced me. But that hardly mattered. Didn't matter.

I didn't join the others in the auditorium that day. I went home. I packed a small suitcase, and I fled.

I went to Zimmerman's house. Zimmerman was a friend from high school who lived in the town three towns over. Of all my friends still living alone, he was my closest within a thousand miles. He knew about Tatya, knew we had a relationship we had to keep secret, once upon a time. He did not know it had begun in a supply closet, on school grounds.

I told him that Tatya had begun telling the other teachers about our affair. I told him that it was just a matter of time before parents found out and complained, just a matter of time before I would get fired. It was tempting to tell the whole truth; Zimmerman really was a great friend and listener. But in the end, I decided against it; I didn't want him to think I was a monster.

"When I was in elementary school, two teachers got married,"

Zimmerman said. “They met at the school... yeah, because I remember one teacher being there before the other teacher.”

“Yeah?” I said. I didn’t see the point to his story.

There was a pause, as if he was remembering something, something else, something more important.

“Yeah,” he said, satisfied. “Anyway, they married, and everyone was happy.”

We got drunk, I got really drunk, and then Zimmerman said it was time for him to get to bed. I told him not to wake me, that I had already called in sick for tomorrow, and then I lay down, face down, on the bundle of spare blankets on the floor.

Zimmerman laughed.

“The fuck you laughing at?” I said angrily into the blankets.

“Nothing,” he said. “Just that it’s probably true. You probably will be sick tomorrow.”

I woke up to an empty apartment. The first thing I did was look out the window, to see if I was being watched. I wasn’t. Then I got dressed, ready, packed my things up, tidied up my friend’s kitchen a bit, a token of my goodwill, and opened the door to leave.

But I stopped in the doorway. Where was I going? Back home? I turned back inside. I unpacked my computer. I opened it. I checked the news, checking to see if I was in the news. I wasn’t. I looked out the window again. I watched a car pass by. My car was still out front.

Shit, my car was still out front!

Two options immediately presented themselves to me. One, I could move my car somewhere and then come back to Zimmerman’s. But then, how would I get back to Zimmerman’s? The further away I moved my car, the safer I would be; but the further I moved my car, the further I would be from where I needed to be, the longer the route to return to safety. The second option was better. I would leave the car here and keep moving myself.

Only, it wasn’t better. It would put Zimmerman in danger. And I didn’t want to do that; he’d helped me.

I repacked my computer. I crept downstairs and carefully got into my car. I drove carefully. I drove one more town over and found a parking lot.

I abandoned the car for good. My cell phone, also traceable, I left in the glove compartment.

I found a convenience store and lowered my eyes as I entered, in case someone might recognize me, from the news, from what could at any moment become the news, or from somewhere else (one could never be too careful). I bought sunglasses, a razor, some soap, a large bottle of water, and three pre-packaged sandwiches. I asked for an extra bag, and they gave me one.

For two weeks, I was essentially homeless. I still had my apartment four towns over, of course, but I didn't dare go there. I knew they were looking for me. If not to punish me for my possible sex offense, then for being a missing person. I tried growing a mustache; I wore my sunglasses everywhere. Mostly, I hung around the public library, reading at the tables in my sunglasses until I realized how silly that looked, suspicious even, and so after that in the courtyard, where you could take books, but where nobody else sat, because of the cold. At night, I'd walk the dark streets inconspicuously, peering into windows for any signs that what I'd done had affected any of these people's lives in any way, picking up old newspapers out of recycling bins to add to my collection in the woods, extra padding for my bed.

One thing was driving me insane. Tatya. I could not stop thinking about Tatya. Why did she say what she said? And what consequences will she face, for the role she played? She didn't seem to have feared any consequences. Why? I had so many questions, and so far, in all my reading, had found zero answers.

I laid on my bed of newspaper and leaves and gazed up at the trees. The backpack I was using as a pillow was almost empty; I was wearing almost all the clothes I'd packed. Fucking Tatya, I thought. She'd seduced me. She was my age. No one saw us. It had been the start of a beautiful, *Romeo & Juliet*-style relationship, a secret affair whose only downfall was its dependence on total secrecy. What was the harm?

Finally, I'd determined my next move.

Of course.

Since our brief relationship over a year ago, Tatya had moved out of

her apartment and into the home of her new boyfriend, who'd very soon after that become her fiancé. The house was two stories, plus a basement, presumably (I'd never been, but all two story houses more or less have basements). A driveway, two cars, his and hers, both outside, in front of the garage. A stone walkway that bisected a respectable front lawn.

I rang the bell.

The fiancé answered. Finance guy. We'd met before.

He stared at me. I stared back.

"Tatya!" he called into the house. "Honey...!"

I tried to look cold. It was pretty easy.

"Henry," he said to me. "Where have you been? You know they're all worried sick about you."

"I've been here," I said.

I heard someone clamber downstairs. It was Tatya. She came to the door.

"Come in, come in," she said, ushering me inside, friendly as ever.

"Here. Come on, come on."

Directing me upstairs.

"Come on, come on," she continued, following me upstairs. "Go on, go on."

I looked back at her, unsure, but trusting. Last time I saw her, this friend of mine, this ex-lover, she'd betrayed me. But, in seeing her, I saw everything; not the one betrayal, but the fifteen, sixteen months of friendship, the seven or eight times we made love. And I knew what would happen. I knew what would happen next. She was going to seduce me. Again. Right here, right now. With her fiancé downstairs and everybody else looking for me, she was going to seduce me again.

I stopped at the top of the stairs to let her lead, and sure enough, she led me to her bedroom.

"Sit," she said, peering out the doorway.

I sat on the bed.

"Wait here," she said, looking at me but still in the doorway. "You know everyone's looking for you, right?"

"I know," I said.

"Henry, what the hell are you thinking, disappearing like that?"

I shrugged. I knew I had a question, but it wasn't coming to me.

Instead, I'd begun worrying that her seducing me was the same thing as her trapping me.

"Just hide here," she said, and she left, closing the door.

I took off my backpack, beginning to undress.

I learned nothing from Taty. Wasn't able to ask her anything. Apparently, she's facing no consequences, or at least it sure seemed like that, from the way she acted. I don't understand.

There was no time to ask her, either. We took our time, but afterwards, she said we had to get dressed quickly, her fiancé would be back. Also, that I had to sneak out the window, and climb down, so no one could see me go.

"Never come back," she said. "Probably, my fiancé has already told on you, and the authorities will be back here every day until you show up again."

"But..." I began, but she interrupted me with a goodbye kiss.

But I'll be back. I'm not far. Just a few towns over. I'll get my answers one day. I know they're there. I know she knows and that she'll tell me one day.

I know it.

I just know it.

Every week, I walk by and wait behind a bush outside her back bedroom window. She knows I'm there, waiting. She knows I'm still alive, waiting. She leaves me things sometimes, tomatoes on a stalk, flowers.

She knows.

10/20/13

Cancer Abroad

I was six months from twenty when my father died of cancer. Lung cancer, though I never saw him smoke. Maybe one or two victory cigars in twenty years living with him. Non-smoker's lung cancer, my mother began explaining to me some time (a week, a month, a year, I don't remember, maybe multiple times in different ways, maybe even never) after the diagnosis. Non-smoker's lung cancer? I must have said. She would have nodded. Then she must've read my mind, because she said (or she must've said), don't worry, it's not hereditary. You are no more likely to get it than Seth Greenbaum. Seth Greenbaum being a friend of mine chosen by her at random, or if not by random, by some way similar to the way in which the environment chose my father.

I was almost twenty-five when, after months of bearing a resilient yet certainly bearable pain on my left side, what I figured was an oblique strain from playing soccer with my students, I finally visited a doctor. The next week I was diagnosed with cancer. Lung cancer. But how is this possible? I asked. I hardly ever smoked. I'd bought just two or three or four packs of cigarettes in my life and had given up marijuana months ago. I don't smoke, I told the doctor, in English, and my co-teacher translated. It's non-smoker's lung cancer, he answered in English. And I only heard his words, not how he said them, though when I think back now I wonder how surprised he was, how much sadness or resignation I would have been able to hear in him had I been aware of anything outside my own body at that moment. I shook my head. It's a thing, he said, the doctor said, or I thought I heard him say, and then he said I had three or four months.

I thanked my co-teacher and told her I would be all right, that I'd go home and call my mother, and tell her, and get some rest. I'd see her tomorrow, I said, thank you. Because I needed her still, to translate, to advise me, to support me, everything. At home, I made rice and fried eggs and ate them together in a bowl mixed with soy sauce. My mom wouldn't

be up for another hour, at least. I brushed my teeth and climbed into bed early. I listened to folk music from the 60s as I closed my eyes and caught scenes from my youth. At five, ate my spaghetti and ran out back to play soccer on my neighbor's patio. At seven, rode a scooter downhill into town and bought a slice of pizza with money I'd found in the downstairs closet, which was as good as money earned myself. At twelve, blew out my knee. At thirteen, kissed Katrina Garacia for five good minutes in the back of a near-empty movie theater, beginning a history marked by or remembered through experiences with girlfriends, good and bad, at twenty-four left my friends, my family, my country, my girlfriend, and at twenty-five I would be dead.

In the morning, I got up at eight as usual, brushed, showered, dressed, skipped breakfast, showed up to school ten minutes late. In a meeting with my co-teacher and the school principal, I admitted to not yet having called home. They told me to go home, to pack up my things, that they talked to the municipal office of education and that I should book a flight home immediately, for which they would help pay. I walked home, taking a few detours, not including walking up steps beside a tunnel that led up a hill, into woods, where elders exercised (for what? I wanted to know. If only we spoke each other's language...), and led out to a view of serpentine steps leading back down to the highway I could follow home. I paused at the top of these stairs and cried. Slowly, taking in the cool, sunny sky, the street, the mountain behind me, I continued, but not halfway down, I called my mom, using the international code, at the international rate. It was ten-thirty at night for her, on the other side of world, she didn't answer, and I left no message.

I picked up a pizza for lunch a block before my apartment and forced myself to eat two slices at my desk. I lay down in bed with the lights off and the sunlight coming in through the window, clasping my phone to my belly, remembering. At five, soccer. At seven, riding a scooter downhill to buy pizza by myself, and the fear I felt deciding to turn downhill, onto the cracked, steep sidewalk, the turbulence beneath me, the land, the flawed pavement, a dollar fifty in change in my pocket and the cars to the left of me whizzing by up and down, from behind and from around the corner, up ahead. The triumph of raising the slice above my head and tilting it towards me so that the hot cheese could slide off and into my mouth, as I

sat on the bench across the street, my feet keeping the scooter from rolling. I put the rest of the pizza in the fridge and called my mom again. This time she picked up and I told her.

Before I booked the flight, though, I thought about how I wanted to spend my last three or four months home. The first thing I would have to do was probably see a doctor. But then I thought about something I'd overlooked, something my mom must've overlooked too in her disbelief, the fact that my health insurance, issued by the government here, would not be accepted in America. And an unselfish idea surfaced. I could stay. Here, I thought, a routine trip to the doctor's, under my current plan, cost five dollars, plus another five, potentially, if you consent to pick up the prescription he'll write you out. In America, I thought, uninsured, it costs five, ten times as much. And so what about cancer? I could stay.

But unselfish as it was at heart, it also felt just as utterly insane. I couldn't stay. C'mon. I put on some punk music from the 90s to get my blood going, and began to clean my apartment. The dishes I got out of the way first. Then I went through every loose paper on my desk, keeping only a subway map of the city and a sheet I'd written on months ago in an effort to learn this country's language, an effort to learn it that had in the months since gone unmatched. The thing was I didn't want my mom to blow any more money on cancer treatment, especially on me. Could I keep her from blowing money on me without staying? I thought I should call her back and ask her, tell her I would stay away if there were no other way to keep her from blowing all her money, but then thought she was probably on the phone right now with an oncologist or her accountant or one of her doctor friends or even my father's oncologist, and that there would be no way of talking her out of insisting I get the best treatment she could get me, no way of talking her into accepting the fact that, no matter the treatment, I wouldn't make it, I wouldn't survive. And but what if I just threatened to stay?

I thought of my brother. At four, five, six, seven, eight, piled all the pillows in the house onto the couch in the den and wrestled for the throne. At four, five, six, seven, eight, laid the futon out over the carpeted cellar stairs, wrestled inside the futon's unzipped linen cover. At fourteen called him a loser, in frustration, over basketball, for example. At fifteen, told him to cut his fucking hair. At twelve through seventeen, called him a dumbass,

a fuckface, everything, for definitely taking the last Swiss Cake Roll from the drawer underneath the microwave and then having the gall to lie to my face about it, for example. I thought I should call him. I thought now if I couldn't call my mom back again, yet, I should call my little brother, to spare my mom, my poor mom, the trouble of telling him herself.

When it went to his machine, I hung up abruptly, relieved. I turned the punk back up. My encased guitar leaning against the wall had the look of a dog that could sense its master was distracted. I thought of more reasons to stay, non-financial motivations. I tried to imagine how I'd explain to my mother my decision to stay, would I be able to make such a decision. How it wasn't all about finances, her finances. At seven, throwing out my pizza-stained, to-go plate, estimating another hour of daylight, wondering how much further downhill I could ride and still return home before dark. How dying in peace for me at least might mean dying with my vanity, or at least curiosity, appeased. How going down was faster. How uphill, I'd have to walk the scooter. How without further deliberation, I started up the hill, knowing that I could spend the last hour before dark playing basketball in the safety and convenient proximity of our driveway. My innocence preserved. The disillusionment awaiting me beyond the pizzeria postponed.

I filled two grocery bags with miscellaneous, unsorted trash and took the elevator down to the labeled bins on the other side of the apartment's lot. The bins were labeled Food Particles, Plastic, Glass, Can, Paper, Vinyl, and the last was unlabeled. I began by reaching into the first of my two bags for eggshells, an easy Food Particle to identify and dislodge from the rest of the garbage. Most of the Papers were dirty tissues, from the head cold that had lingered the past month and was as I thought about it then certainly in some way related to the cancer. My building manager who spoke no English came up to me wearing a surgeon's facemask, as locals weary of the air there often did. From his gestures, it seemed he was trying to tell me I was throwing out the trash incorrectly. On another day, I would have apologized in his language and let him show me how he wanted me to behave. Instead, I dropped the half-emptied bags on the concrete and walked back towards the building, apologizing in English.

His daughter worked at the café downstairs. She spoke excellent English and was very easy to make laugh. She looked my age, but was

probably between five and ten years older. She made excellent coffee and excellent ham and cheese sandwiches. She made clothes in her spare time, right there in the habitually empty café. I told her I had cancer and would be going home in the next couple of weeks, and then I told her I was sorry for telling her, and then I told her that I wished we could have gotten to know each other better, that I thought she was great, very beautiful and nice, and speaks perfect English, and again, very beautiful, if I lived in another building I'd have asked her to dinner long ago, and then I left.

I put on a rap record from this year. There were three ways these next few months could play out, I thought. Three ways I could play it. The first would be to return home and spend my last months visiting everyone I should want to say goodbye to, door to door, visiting them to keep things interesting for me. The second would be to stay, or by stay, I meant stay away, not stay in place, I meant not go home and instead go visit every place I'd always wanted to see before I died, before going home. Because it wasn't all about finances, see. The third, though, might have been even crazier.

The clothes I'd brought from home filled the two suitcases I'd brought them over in. And then I thought it was stupid to pack both suitcases; I should donate one to the thrift store down the street. So then I unpacked both suitcases and rearranged the clothes so that the clothes I wanted to keep (or thought I should want to keep, because I didn't really care, it was more for my mom, maybe to give her the impression I'd brought all my good clothes home because I believed I would win against the cancer and need those clothes the rest of my long, healthy remission) all fit in the one suitcase I would take with me. Wasting no time, I took the second suitcase out to the street, walked down to the thrift store, and left it there.

The third way I could play it would be to return home but not visit anyone. To just return home and spend all my time remaining home, wherever home actually was, since a few years ago, a few years after my father died, my mother sold the house that I had always thought of as home, and moved west. But wherever it would be, it could be somewhere where people could visit me who really wanted to visit me and could stay as long as they liked and where I wouldn't have to worry about wasting my limited time visiting someone with less limited time who wouldn't visit me.

This way would please my mother, who would then at all times know my whereabouts, or my lack thereof. It would be like, at seven, returning to my driveway.

Tickets home, for next week, were all around a thousand dollars, which my school's allowance could cover. I took a cold slice of pizza from the fridge and ate it standing, pacing my cleaned, small studio apartment. At seven, found a five-dollar bill on the side of a road, at the edge of a puddle. At seven, attempted to, in my excitement, ride my scooter uphill, dreaming of the pack of basketball cards I would buy that could include what would be my second Michael Jordan card, dreaming of selling these two cards when I grew up and Michael Jordan was dead and his card worth a lot of money, dreaming of buying a really hi-tech walkie-talkie set with that fortune and giving one of the walkie-talkies to Ella Haverford, the new girl in Ms. Kelly's class. Dreaming. A ticket for next week to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where I'd wanted to go since hearing good things about it six weeks ago, was just three hundred dollars and included a twenty-four hour layover in Shanghai. And three hundred from Kuala Lumpur to Mumbai. And five hundred from Mumbai to Istanbul. An even hundred, there to Athens. A hundred more to Barcelona, my favorite city in the world, to see one last time, from the once-in-a-lifetime perspective of the dying. And finally, seven hundred more over the ocean. This cost only twice as much as flying home directly. And I had the money. I'd earned it. I could do it all in two weeks, maybe three, still be home in time to say my goodbyes, in plenty of time, perhaps in too much time, others might say, I thought, others, who didn't love the people they'd left behind like I did, might say...

At twenty-three, told Carolina de la Rosa I loved her. At twenty-four, heard Carolina de la Rosa tell me for the first time that she loved me in the middle of a soliloquy that seemed, by the very nature of its position enshrined squarely within the soliloquy, to demand no "I love you, too" in return, although I did remember later that night, before we fell asleep, to reassure her I did, just in case. At twenty-four, said all my goodbyes to all my friends before I left to teach abroad for the year. And now, at twenty-five, bracing to say hello again, and goodbye again, and whatever is said in between, which is anybody's guess and depends on many things, often including at least weather and sports. At twenty-five, bracing for Carolina

de la Rosa to not take the news well at all, bracing for anything. At twenty-five, remembering how, at seven, I'd realized while carrying the five dollars up the hill, in what looking back surely was no mere realization but a full-on revelation for a seven-year-old, understood that there were two ways to consider the five dollars: one, that it meant the next pack of basketball cards would be free; and two, that the pizza I just ate had been free. And how at twenty-five, remembering this early revelation, the consequences of which never materialized in a comprehensible way before, how I'd gotten cancer, given three to four months to live, and wondered whether what I'd done until now or what I could do over these next few final months was more valuable, to me and to everybody else. Do I go home and talk about the past? Or do I proceed into the future, and let them talk amongst themselves?

I tried my brother again. For a thousand bucks, I could make my mom happy and go home and be with her for three or four heartbreaking months. I turned down the rap and then turned it back up again. The image of my mom crying a year after my dad died as she admitted to me things I've chosen to forget, things that were feelings she was feeling and not anecdotes I could picture, things that perhaps it could more accurately be said I'd just forgotten involuntarily, was the same mom I foresaw reincarnated by my bedside next week and for the rest of my short life thereafter, and happy with me as could be, considering the circumstances. My brother said hello, and I turned the rap down again. Visitors would come and go, frequently and once. And but would this – letting them visit me – be more disruptive to their lives than if I visited them? And but who would tell Sarah Vasques? I would. I'd have to before it would be too late for her to visit.

I spent twenty minutes on the phone with my brother, by the end of the conversation assuring him I'd be home next week, at mom's, and probably the next few months, all the way to the end. At twenty-four, flying out to visit him at college. At twenty-four, in the summer, driving up to visit him with a friend whose sister lived in the same town that summer. At one, my mom says, meeting that friend, our moms recognizing each other in town as new moms, meeting because of us, then introducing us. I hung up before he could sense on the phone that I was crying just like him, and bought the thousand-dollar ticket.

The flight to the city of angels was twelve hours, three of which I slept. Three of which I watched a movie, which was pointless and one I wished I'd never watched. One of which I read a book. Five of which I sat awake thinking quietly to myself, not listening to any music, not watching any movie, not reading any book, though the movie played silently on the back of the seat in front of me and I had the book set open on my lap at the ready, should I ever be ready again. I contemplated the passengers in my aisle, each solving Rubik's Cubes, 3 by 3 and 8 by 8 Rubik's Cubes, always timing themselves, sometimes blindfolded. I'd felt an urge to write things down – the Rubik's Cubists, my final thoughts, feelings, anything I could think of – but the pens and paper I'd brought I'd also forgotten, left behind in my bag in the overhead compartment.

At the airport, I turned on my American cell phone and called my mom. She was with my grandma, her mom, already, waiting for me back east. I thought of calling some of my friends, all of whom knew by now, knew about the cancer, just to talk, since I had my American phone active again, but then remembered they would all be at work, and I didn't want to bother them, interrupt whatever they were doing. So I went to McDonald's and bought my first meal in America in a year, the last Big Mac I'd ever eat, to kill the time, precious time. The flight across the country took another six hours. This time I remembered to take out my pen and notebook. And we're landing.

My mom and grandma have just gone to sleep. There's nothing on TV. I think if there were something on TV, I wouldn't want to watch it anyway. I wouldn't be in the mood. It would feel like a waste. Like even if there actually was something on worth watching, I wouldn't be able to recognize it as worth watching. Nothing seems worth watching. As I write, a crime drama plays on mute. Between thoughts, I can't help glancing up at this crime drama, its muted screams, its muted gunshots, its muted laughter, all its muted details.

My mom picked me up at the airport alone. She said her boyfriend wanted to come but that she told him he didn't have to, and she told me she thought it was important for her to be alone with me, and her boyfriend would drive across the state to help out tomorrow night and is

sorry he's not here now. At my grandma's, they watched me eat like it was my last meal, but really it was just my first real meal back in America, not counting McDonald's. I spoke with my brother on the phone for almost an hour. He wanted to video chat, but I thought that would be too painful; I didn't want to risk him seeing me cry, or worse, me seeing him cry. He's in school, still, and I told him I didn't want to disrupt his semester, that I'm sorry he has to deal with this right now, this distraction. He said he bought a plane ticket already, and we should play basketball this weekend.

I try to remember what I should be remembering. So many memories. So many I feel like I should write down, not so much for others, but more for me, so that I can remember them more and more clearly, in more and more detail, the more I think about them. At seven, clutching the dirty treasure in my pocket, the muddy five dollar bill. At seven, remembering how I'd bought the slice with a dollar fifty in change from the downstairs closet, five quarters, two dimes and a nickel discovered beneath the wicker basket of hats, while looking through the old pile for a new one to wear, one I'd never seen before. At seven, finding the money, forgetting the hat. At seven, deciding to ride a scooter instead of walking, because, without a hat, I could wear a helmet. At seven, returning home with a five dollar bill and a dollar-fifty-in-change debt to the downstairs closet.

We ordered a pizza for dinner. My grandma asked me in front of my mother if I wanted a beer, she had beer in the fridge, she didn't know if it was the kind I liked or not, but it was cold. I looked at my mom. My mom was looking at my grandma. My grandma turned from me to my mom and back and said, oh, right, I'm sorry, you probably shouldn't, nevermind. And my mom said that my father's oncologist would come by tomorrow, Dr. Goldman you remember him? and we should wait to hear what he says, you don't need a beer right now this second, do you? and have another slice, here, and or have my cheese.

There's truly nothing on TV. Sports, which had always entertained me and provided me with relief, now just feeds my restlessness. Watching athletes younger, more successful, more known to people than I'll ever be makes me want to put my jeans back on. And no movie on represents reality accurately enough to warrant my attention, precious attention. And the news. God. What does it say about reality when the news represents

reality even less? I settle on a basketball comedy, watch its muted comedians trash talk and hit the deck.

At seven, admitting myself into my brother's room to show him the five dollar bill and asking for change. At seven, tossing him his wooden soldier piggy bank and asking him to open it. At seven, him refusing and then wrestling with him until forcing him to admit to me that he'd lost the key, and that yes, that meant that he, at five, was quite simply numerically broke. At seven, calling him a stupid butthead. At thirteen, a fuckface. At seven, wondering, on his bed on which I'd just beaten him, on which he now cried and on which I now consoled him and counseled him not to go running off now like a little baby and tell mom, wondering to myself whether or not I should just lend him the money, the fuckface, to keep his mouth shut.

My father's oncologist is busy today but will come by tonight. During breakfast, I was able to appreciate every nuance of what my mom and maternal grandma prepared. The toast toasted evenly on both sides. The fried egg's underbelly checkered smooth and sharp and golden brown, like sandpaper, like little else. The spoon in the jam not your lazy oversized soup spoon. The melon peeled and cut to bite size to make it easier on me. Warm everything bagels sliced in half. A new package of smoked salmon opened. A new package of cream cheese.

There are crime dramas on at all hours of the day. The muted cop scenes are always better than the muted lawyer scenes, even the interrogations. After breakfast, my aunt and uncle visited, both of them in their eighties. I expected them to ask me questions I couldn't answer, like what the American doctor I haven't seen yet has said, but instead they asked me all about the last year, what I'd been doing, what it was like abroad. My uncle walks hunched over with his back almost parallel to the floor. My aunt said he refuses to use the walker she got him. The chase scenes are the best, muted. When my aunt and uncle seemed to run out of questions to ask me about my year abroad, I started asking them about what it was like growing up in the Great Depression. They laughed and said it was so long ago, it was before they had even met. The commercials, muted, are the worst. They said back then after you finished school you got married and became a professional or went to college and got married and

became a professional after that. They said their phones had been busy, ringing, and everybody was asking about me. This was difficult to hear and compounded my sense of guilt, which, unwarranted, I'm aware, nonetheless feels like it's here to stay. They tell me, these family members of mine, so simultaneously familiar and remote, like coins I'd collected and tossed into the sea only to years later on my deathbed have them handed to me accidentally in a cup of water, tell me who called and who's coming to visit and when. I watch them on the phone, thanking the muted voices.

At seven, offering to give my brother five dollars if he could beat me in basketball, in my room. At seven, this generous, one-sided offer working to relieve my sense of guilt at having hurt him, and but also, with a shrewdness that at seven could not have been so consciously calculated, as an excuse to hurt him more. At fourteen, remembering my parent's friends ring our doorbell an hour before we would usually eat dinner, bearing lasagnas, roasted chickens, homemade cookies, thinking and even saying aloud to my brother or mom or father dying of cancer, this can't be good. At seven, using my left hand to push down the top of my brother's head, to push until my brother was low enough to jump atop, leading with my knees, holding the foam ball the size of an apple in my right hand, and once I was sure he wouldn't get up until I'd scored, lunging for the plastic hoop that hung low from my door. At seven, retaining possession, fair and square, of the five dollar bill I'd found on the way home.

I've always believed I've always had an unusually difficult time processing my feelings in the moment. It's different when I'm remembering. When I'm remembering, I realize what I must have been feeling then, why I did those things I did. But like right now, as I wait for Dr. Goldman, I don't feel so confident articulating my feelings. Like, I can't tell whether I'm nervous or not. I don't think I'm nervous, I don't feel nervous, but at the same time it wouldn't surprise me if in five years from now I'd miraculously survived and were able to reflect on this moment, I would see how I had indeed been very nervous. But now I feel like, what could he say? What do I have to be nervous about? There's no hope for me, no expectation, nothing to be nervous about. It's the calm after the storm of living in uncertainty; it's living in certainty. It's returning to my driveway, knowing exactly what to expect, a car or two, a basketball hoop set at seven and a half feet, a light on in the kitchen, maybe in the

den, maybe in my brother's room, maybe in my room, if my brother's playing with my toys or watching my hamster run in place again. At seven, thinking that this, him playing in my room, upset me. At twenty-five, considering the possibility that this infringement actually in retrospect may have given me pleasure because it justified both my belief in the coolness of hamsters, my decision to own one, and also my right to yell at or beat him. At twenty-five, feeling nostalgic for times and feelings I hadn't known I'd had during those times, feeling greedy, holding such a wealth of memories I wouldn't have time to share before I died. At seven, my brother, face buried in my room's shallow carpeting, making crying sounds. At twenty-five, to play basketball with my brother for the last time, at some point. At seven, turning him over, expecting tears, seeing to my relief pure utter joy instead, wild laughter that had been muffled in the carpet and sounded, to my anxious ears, just like crying. At seven, laughing wildly together. At twenty-five, remembering what I'd forgotten but had clearly been there the whole time, from deciding just for the hell of it to keep thinking about the scooter that I'd remembered the day I found out my life would end soon and had seemed arbitrary for me to remember then. Remembering not at twenty-four, not at twenty-three, not at eight, but at twenty-five. And at twenty-five. And at twenty-five...

Maybe the best course of action for me to take now is to spend my final days just sitting here in front of this silent television, making my mother happy with my perpetual presence, making my grandma happy with my appetite and presence, appeasing my visitors' sense of loss, or whatever negative feelings they won't be able to process until long after I'm gone, with my presence. At twenty-five, present at last. At twenty-five, spending my final days just sitting here in front of this silent television, commenting in my notebook on the muted moving pictures, listening to songs I've listened to many times before, my favorites, writing down memories that I feel are important but will never live to understand why. We'll see what Dr. Goldman says.

5/28/13

Recurrence

I'm in a village, afraid, on a hill by an apartment complex, bored, and in a crowded loft with the girl of my dreams, all at once.

Her name is Charlotte. She's told me to meet her here. I am afraid because I feel as though I'm late for something big.

Three dreams, you could say. Three described as one. But, you might like to know, they are not one, and yet, they are not three, either. They are, you could say, recurring dreams, three recurring dreams or any number of dreams, you could say. Recurring dreams, and yet they are never the same, each time never simply recurring. Each recurring dream, really, a whole new dream, just as no two memories can ever be identical (if any two things can be in this world). There is no such thing as a recurring dream.

Everyone has fled but the Brave who must know and I who have only just begun to sense the mere possibility of my ignorance. The light rain and sun create illusions that turn fear to sadness and will be gone before I see Charlotte again. Desperately, I climb the muddy hill. I find and lose Charlotte in the crowded loft below, unable to outrun my ignorance of whatever it is the Brave hide from in defense.

There are ladders, ramps, steps of wood, sand. Charlotte finds my hand and leads me down by it to where they're crickets. Crickets compliment the thunder in the way that a bass guitar may be accompanied by a ukulele. Thunder, but the light rain is gone. Palm trees enveloping the downstairs patio. Charlotte putting a reassuring finger to my lips. The sound the wind makes is the sound palm trees make in the wind.

It's sunset, also our first true date. The Brave are silent, but their presence can be felt in the emptiness of the patio atop the hill beside the apartment complex overlooking the crowded loft. Charlotte turns from the sunset, squinting, her face a collage of what was never made clear to me by the millions of faces I've already seen somewhere. I hear drums, I smell

saltwater, but it's just the palms, the stairs, the wind, she says. They flow from the hilltop into the deserted village, stairs, the emptied party, the vacated loft.

One and infinity are one and the same. I repeat: there is no such thing as a recurring dream, though it may well be that in our dream state, our sense of *déjà vu* is heightened. Dreams, like memories, may remind us of other memories, or take place in a nearly identical setting with a nearly identical vantage point and nearly identical orientation of details remembered, but they may never simply, wholly recur. There is no such thing as a recurring dream. One and infinity are one and the same.

One and infinity are one and the same. Take one "dream"; now take "it" apart. Is each dream, as we define "it", recurrence or not (as we define it), even one dream? Or is "it" an infinite number of dreams? In the course of sleep, dreams bleed together, either infinitely or not at all, changing either by the smallest unit of time imaginable, or not at all. One dream or an infinite number. There is no such thing as a recurring dream. You might remember you could say that what we feel to be a recurring dream is more rationally our sense of *déjà vu*, sometimes somewhat heightened.

I ask her who she knows here, or who she knew here. Faces are carved in the trunks of the palms. The lot may be deserted. There is a car. There might be people.

Don't go, she says, and holds my elbow. Screams all the same from all apartment windows. One person is left, evidently, at least, back there, up there, implying infinity. I have to go, I say, running, retreating for where the staircase begins or ends, the foot of the staircase either way you look at it.

The car is empty. The screams persist, pulling, repelling. The more intense, the greater the inclination to save the screamer, the greater the risk, though no greater the hesitation, for the reaction time is immediate, more or less (immediacy being unfathomable), either way. Pulling, repelling. I decide on Charlotte. There is no going back. I am rotten. Three shadows emerge. Three shadows, all of which, all of whom, must be coming for us. Charlotte has hidden. Charlotte, the good girl I can't handle. Charlotte, the Brave.

The impossible task of fully comprehending a concept unfit for this world, concepts such as the fourth dimension or recurrence or the fifth dimension, is further complicated by the recurrence of “multiple”, the recurrence of more than one unit or dream, and by our inclination to classify, to discern, to relate to the finite.

Three recurring dreams, you could safely say (to more simply describe one infinite dream). Three recurring dreams: three elements of one continuous dream (one), or three discernible sets combined, each of an infinite number of dreams (or infinity). Four recurring dreams: one or infinity. Five recurring dreams: one or infinity. An infinite number of dreams: one or infinity. One and infinity. We eliminate the multiple.

One and infinity. Dreams bleed together. Since our dreams change by the smallest unit of time imaginable, and since we can always imagine an even smaller unit of time, we can say we dream an infinite number of dreams within any given timeframe. And yet we must accept the logic of those who call this infinite number of dreams we dream a single dream, elements of a single dream, one dream and one dream alone, those whose logic may be the same as those whose logic concludes the infinite, whose logic together concurs the conclusion that what you could say to be three recurring dreams is really one continuously developing dream developing in an infinite number of ways, either a single dream or an infinite number of dreams, however you choose to arrange the words of your definition, and that either way, recurrence never occurs.

The shadows coming for us have faces. Charlotte? The screams die out up there, as down here features emerge, tough, sullen features. Three men, tough and sullen. Three identical men wearing the same pathetic, terrifying expression. I brush back the bushes, desperately, my eyes searching, Charlotte, failing.

A whiff of the water, a woman’s screams, stairs without paths made clearly by man, stairs leading to and from one level of land to another, stairs made of wood, clay. Charlotte? Charlotte here, hidden, or Charlotte there, hidden, a Brave, Charlotte a Brave. Three men here in plain sight I admit I fear tremendously.

Retreat. Retreat is all we’ve ever done, all we ever will do. Stairs of

sand. Fish and salt and sunscreen, cigarettes, Mexican beer, even. The woman is falling from her window now. Three men catch her and recede. The woman is no Charlotte. Four shadows, retreating on foot. But I am able to approach, driven in a lost friend's car. Her face, from a distance, a collage of all the faces I've never seen.

And yet this is not an original idea. You may have seen it before. It may feel like *déjà vu* for you, as in a dream. And that is because this idea is the Big Bang, either a single, spontaneous occurrence, or an infinite undertaking, its lone occurrence enduring forever, expanding.

This idea is the story of the Fall, either the single occurrence of our ostracism, or our continual fall from grace, our recession from the womb towards infinity in life and infinity in death, deeper and deeper into the depths of history forever.

It is the story of human history, of your history, my history, an infinite number of infinite histories we may call one, dismissing the possibility of infinity, acknowledging the extant number one in an infinite numbers of ways, each never to recur. There is no such thing as a recurring dream.

There is no such thing as a recurring dream. There is such a thing as a recurring dream.

From the river's floor, where I've fallen with the fallen woman, I think not about what's caused the accident, but rather struggle to remember Charlotte's last words and whatever it was she might have said after those last words said to me, in her life without me, up to this moment, these last ten years. Her face said everything, nothing, back then. But, drowning, naturally choosing my one life over death, I stop thinking about Charlotte. I rise to the surface. In the hospital I will awake having dreamt of duality, how the only numbers are one and infinity, those two numbers alone, and remind myself how there is no such thing as a recurring dream for the fourth or fifth time.

7/1/13

The Night I Almost Die

I close the book and stare for a moment at the blinds. The common room is dark behind me. I flip off the AC, throw on a sweatshirt, and slip out, careful not to wake my roommates.

At the corner, on a whim, I exchange a dollar for an energy drink. I walk half a block west before turning back, deciding, on another whim, to take the subway.

On the platform, I pace, pausing only to re-read the subway map I've already memorized as well as any familiar face. I'm trying to understand where I'm going, where my whims are taking me, so late at night, where it was I must have had in mind the moment I closed that book, because I'm a big believer in this, that I must have had somewhere in mind whether I realized it or not, that destiny is imaginable but cannot be depicted until set out for.

It's not long before I realize that I am returning for the first time to the place where, six months ago, I almost died.

And once I do – once I realize this – that's when those memories of dreams and drunkenness, those so difficult to distinguish, really start to consume me. I pace more rhythmically now, settling into a thought process, head bowed, brow furrowed intently. I focus upon the moving spot on the platform upon which I will step three steps from now, and three steps later, six steps from now, and so on, my focus always three steps ahead. Only when the train comes is my trance briefly broken. There, I stand, unable to sit. I count a million eyes avoiding mine, times two. When I turn to face my reflection in the window, I see it's only my ghost, keeping pace effortlessly in the tunnel.

I transfer once, and there I am, within walking distance. I take the stairs two at a time, crush and throw out my energy drink, orienting myself. The river is east. The bridge is north, running east.

The bridge is as central to the night I almost died as the river. That night I almost died, according to my then-girlfriend – for I have no memory of that night, only clues, testimony – I was close enough to a

bridge to tell her over the phone, “I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!” So east I go, for the river, along which I could follow to the bridge.

I walk through Chinatown, empty enough at this hour for me to feel everyone besides me is drunk or lost or both. I make a left for every right, head north for every block east, surprised at how, in my sobriety, uncomfortable I realize I am walking due east for the water, away from the safety of the city’s brightest lights.

But zigzagging is fine, I tell myself. It’s okay to be careful returning to the place I was the night I almost died. Any combination of heading north and/or east will lead me to where the bridge meets the river, be it first to the bridge or first to the river. Plus, exactly where I was going – where exactly by the bridge, by the river, I was the night I almost died – could be anywhere between here and there. I am in the vicinity already.

And I can picture it. Even though I have no memory of that night, I have a picture of what it is I’m looking for – a baseball field. Because in the morning, on our way back from breakfast, after the night I’d almost died taking four-plus hours to walk the twelve blocks to my then-girlfriend’s apartment, I realized the dirt on my dress shoes was without a doubt baseball field dirt, and accepting that premise concluded that I had to at some point the night before, during those four-plus (five, six, maybe seven) hours stepped foot on a baseball field by the bridge. I pointed this out to her. She shook her head, saying she was just happy I was alive and that she didn’t want to talk about it. And until tonight, I was content with that happiness, too. Until tonight, I had no interest in returning to the place I’d almost died.

Except, now we’ve broken up again, and so tonight, here I am, looking for a baseball field by the bridge.

I turn onto a bright, wide, empty street approaching a granite archway as imposing as any Arc de Triomf. It holds up a bridge, but it’s not the bridge I think I must have been referring to when I told her “I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!” And yet, of course, considering the night I almost died, considering the four plus forgotten hours during which I could’ve gone anywhere in the city, this couldn’t be ruled out as having been the bridge.

A long building gives way to a high chain-linked fence, the kind of fence you see enclosing baseball fields, and through the fence, I see

bleachers. I squint, searching for dirt in the darkness, but it looks like just a fenced-in field of grass to me, with bleachers there at random or for some other sport.

So I power on through the archway, relieved, newly alerted, as if having just avoided an accident my own carelessness nearly caused, past the Manhattan Bridge.

The baseball field I am picturing, since I have no memory of the night I almost died, must be from another memory, another night, a night I cannot place, I think. Because I don't picture Yankee Stadium or my little league field or any of the fields I used to rake one summer, but an unknown field, a field from another memory, dreamt or otherwise, a stray visual memory lost in time, renting the empty space in the photo album of my mind between the hours of 1:00 and 7:00 am, approximately, on January 1, 2013.

I hear voices and laughter ahead, young people in a car talking to young people congregating on the corner. I look both ways to cross against the power of the streetlight, and hear gunshots. About a dozen of them. I look up. They disperse frantically, away from the idling car. But laughing, on the other corner now. I get that they were fireworks, Independence Day preparations.

Besides the fact that the field I am picturing might be dreamt up or from another city altogether, I don't have Internet on my phone, so I can't even look up where the baseball fields in the area are. And because I didn't realize where I'd been heading all along until I'd already left my apartment, I hadn't looked up anything beforehand. But that was okay. It was all okay, because I didn't have to work tomorrow, and I didn't have Internet on my phone that night I almost died, either, and so if I could find a baseball field then, I should be able to find it easily enough tonight, sober. It was, after all, a big baseball field by the bridge, on this side of the river. If I didn't hit it before I hit the intersection of bridge and river, I'd hit it soon after.

I walk through the last bit of gunpowder, hearing another dozen go off behind me, remembering how we'd watch fireworks from the hill, snack, play football with tennis balls until our knees bled or we'd hit a stranger in the back...

And here's the park. Corlears Hook Park. I look towards the river, two or three blocks away. This could be the park. I scan the darkness for

dirt once again. I see a chain-linked fence in the shape of a baseball diamond's backstop. It's a baseball field, but without dirt. I am relieved, again. I think that when I do see the field, I will remember everything. And looking out at Corlears Hook Park, I wasn't feeling that. So there's still hope for the real thing.

But since the park is open, and since I still want to go north, I decide to cut through it anyway.

I walk down a wide path lined with benches and active gaslights. A couple walks their dog. A public urinator emerges from the bushes by the locked public restroom. I sit for a moment, to rest and take in the image of what I see and what I am imagining – the line of benches, the turf baseball field, the highway, FDR Dr. (the whishing of cars upon which sounds like the ocean), the East River, my neighborhood across the river, the Atlantic Ocean, the Strait of Gibraltar, Mecca...

In that unplaced memory I've unconsciously retrieved to fill the emptiness of the night I almost died, I am at a baseball field at night, watching a friend of mine climb a chain-linked fence and run off, leaving me behind. We'd been drinking and there were others, and yet he left all of us behind to climb a fence we couldn't or dared not try to. I am not ten feet away from him when he makes it over, but the fence that divides us resembles an eternity.

Somehow, the path ends up meeting FDR Dr., the highway I thought I'd been walking parallel to all this time. A pleasant surprise, considering I've avoided heading due east for the river, but needed to get there eventually.

And there, just a few blocks north, is the bridge.

But where is the baseball field? Could I have missed it, with all my zigzagging? I thought I would've hit it by now, somewhere along the way, thinking I would never actually wind up all the way at the end point of my route, the exact intersection of riverside and bridge.

In that unplaced memory, I can't make out much beyond the baseball field. There are no landmarks in the distance that might clue me in as to where this unknown baseball field is. I don't even know if it's by a river.

I don't know what it is I'm looking for anymore.

The whole thing reminds me of another night I almost died, another night involving this bridge, but I don't want to think about that night right

now. That night has nothing to do with the other. Instead I think about how, compared to the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, the Williamsburg Bridge looks way more modern, like way obviously more modern, like without any intention of hiding its modernity, but not in a new-and-improved state-of-the-art way, just in a cheap-alternative sort of way, the way fakes proceed originals. And yet, it's my favorite bridge. Tonight, I decide, I must walk home across it again, after I find what I came here for, whatever it looks like exactly.

I take a picture of the bridge from below, with my phone.

"I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!"

I think back again to when my then-girlfriend told me I'd told her that. I think back to that often. And then thanking her, calling her an angel, apologizing.

And I know that the unplaced memory has to have been from before the night I almost died, not just since my friend climbing the fence in the memory had left the country by then, but because, thinking back now, I remembered that memory that same morning after. I'd noticed the dirt on my shoes, identified the dirt as baseball dirt, tried to remember a baseball field, and thought of my friend climbing the fence! The association was essentially instantaneous, the visual of my friend filling the void in my memory before any other visual could.

And yet I am still lost. I still have no clue as to where to go from here, from this intersection. I head west, walking along Delancey St., under the bridge that continues overhead for blocks before leveling with the street, ready for a baseball field to pop up at any time.

I pass a homeless man sleeping, and remember how lucky I've been with the weather. I think that if I were a homeless man, sleeping outside under a bridge on a warm, dry night wouldn't be so terrible. Half a dozen homeless men later, I realize that, yes, all homeless men must share my sentiments.

The bridge meets the street, becomes level with the street.

I consider heading back home over the bridge right now, on a whim. I haven't found what I want, but walking the bridge always makes for a productive night. I realize I can be as whimsical as I want, whenever I want, now, without a girlfriend or a job.

But on another whim, I think, no. Walking the bridge is a reward. I

need to stick to that. If I can't find a baseball field that I found when I was blackout drunk and certainly unable to walk straight, then I am an unworthy loser deserving of nothing more than the shame of riding the subway home alone on a beautiful summer night. So north it is. I haven't looked everywhere. I haven't looked north of the bridge.

And now that I think about it, that's where the baseball field probably had to be anyway, north of the bridge. Because north of the bridge was where the final memories I've retained of that night are set. The nightclub in which I'd lost my friends was on Houston St., not Delancey St., just three blocks north. And I realize that, assuming this was the mistake, I had to have been on the baseball field *before* making it to the bridge. It's a key realization in the piecing together of my night. I imagine myself as a shark sensing blood, imagining which senses they use if not all of them, and using all of them!

I walk up Clinton and make a right on Rivington. The field could be anywhere within this rectangle I can visualize: Houston, Delancey, Clinton, and FDR Dr., as its four sides. And yet it was still a substantial rectangle, too large for a man standing on its plane to trace with his naked eye, the size of more than a dozen baseball fields at least, still, so it was no use second-guessing my decision to turn onto Rivington, on a whim, there being so much ground to cover.

A chain-linked fence ahead, sporting darkness beyond, looks promising, but as I approach, I see it's just a playground, without dirt, a really nice playground...

And I remember what must've happened.

What must've happened was that after exiting the club on Houston St., I must have mistaken Houston for Delancey, Delancey being the street that turns into the bridge. I must have decided, lethally drunk, to walk home over the Williamsburg Bridge to reward myself for not merely remaining faithful to my then-girlfriend who I'd been arguing with and who was also working that night, but also outlasting – outpartying – all of my friends at the nightclub, making sure I got my money's worth at the expensive open bar, just drinking drink after drink until closing. I must have walked east down Houston, mistakenly, not east down Delancey as I mistakenly thought I must've done, but east down Houston to the river or to where I must have been when I finally did realize my mistake.

I make a left now, decisively.

There are people congregating outside a bar on Houston. I am tempted to buy a beer, or to at least ask someone there if they know of any baseball fields around here. But I put myself in their shoes and decide not to bother.

I reach the club, the club I remember as the club at which I lost my friends and then my memory. I face east, trying to connect what I see now to what I should've remembered seeing six months ago. And what I see, as suspected, is that Houston St. does indeed look very much like Delancey St. Though there is no obvious indication of a bridge in the distance, as there is on Delancey, Houston's slight upward slope adds its own slight element of mystery: the mystery as to where it leads, as to what can be seen from the point at which its uphill slope comes down. I sympathize with my drunken self, with all drunks suddenly, so easily mistaken and misled, so quick to mistake one busy street with another more familiar busy street, so helplessly foolish, lost.

But so then there's the bridge again, extending to the river. From here I can see clearly that this road I'm on, Houston St., however still sloping mysteriously upwards, runs not into but merely parallel to the bridge. I question how even my worst drunken self could've failed to notice what seems to me now so obvious. On a whim, or attempting to channel my drunken self, I make a right for Delancey and the bridge, only a block or two from the intersection of Houston and FDR.

I cut through an apartment complex called Baruch Houses and find myself again at the intersection of Delancey and FDR.

I wonder if, maybe, it hadn't been baseball dirt, after all. Or maybe it had, but not from a baseball field. Like a pile of baseball dirt on the side of the road somewhere...

So I hurry back along Delancey, looking for a pile of dirt, hoping something jogs my memory, remembering yet again how I'd told her, "I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!", the memory of her telling me that that's what I'd told her being one of my favorites. And I know I must really have been on a bridge at some point that night because I wouldn't have lied to my then-girlfriend when I also told her, also according to her, that I'd crossed the bridge already but was hurrying back to meet her, this just approximately half an hour before claiming to have jumped off it for her,

telling her, “I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!”, allegedly having been on the line with her all that time, she directing me out of death, she pleading with me to call a cab or stay where I am so that she could come and get me.

“I crossed the bridge, baby!”

“I jumped off the bridge for you, baby!”

And I recognize the spot. Not the pile of dirt on the side of the road, but the spot on the ramp leading up to the bridge off of which I vaulted myself over the side and onto the sidewalk, an eight foot drop about, landing first on my feet and then on my ass, then talking a cab driver out of giving me a ride home for free, from my ass, too sore to get up immediately, sore not just from the landing on my ass but from also the last four or so hours of drunkenness spent circling the space between the club and the bridge, looking for somewhere to take a piss, and then storming back and forth across the bridge, too proud to accept a ride, especially for free, especially from such a kind cab driver and offered out of pity, when it was I who was strong enough to stay out the longest on this great annual tradition amongst friends, I strong and brave enough to take care of myself after they’d all left me alone to walk home over the bridge and through the neighborhoods in my borough across the bridge they would be too scared to walk through even during the day, alone or accompanied, man enough to pick myself up from my ass, hold my liquor, and find my way to my then-girlfriend’s apartment that was only twelve blocks from the club anyway, a twelve minute walk, or three minute run, so no thank you very much.

And then getting out of the cab, my then-girlfriend helping me out of the cab outside her apartment, me tipping the cabbie who’d offered and then insisted on the free ride, tipping him everything left in my wallet, he looking at me, concerned, me laughing, unconcerned, because what’s two more twenties on New Year’s Fucking Eve? and my then-girlfriend asking if I’d remembered to tip, and me shrugging and she saying she’s mad at me, I scared her to death, and me laughing, passing out immediately in her bed only to wake up the next morning to later find on my best dress shoes what else but baseball dirt.

And being at the baseball field that night I’d almost died, perhaps later on that night in my drunken dreams, watching my friend who’d left

the country already climb a tall chain-linked fence, too tall for any of us to climb, and run off with the last of the whiskey.

It's 1:50 am.

An inflatable whale is left out on the street like old furniture. I think about deflating it and fitting it into my sweatshirt pocket, or else carrying it over my shoulder like a wet towel. But tonight, I exercise restraint. I walk on. I pass what's got to be a little girl and her father carrying his laundry home, way past her bedtime. I can't help but smile and imagine the little girl asking her father what someone like me could be doing wandering around under the Williamsburg Bridge at this hour with such a stupid smile on his face. I laugh a little to myself, even.

And but then I realize – I'm realizing a lot! – I can just look for the field from the bridge, from above! I could see the whole lower east side from up there. I'd be sure to find the field.

I hurry up the ramp, feeling raindrops. I look both ways.

The way the lights are, I have two shadows. They meet at my feet and form an acute angle. It's like they're chasing each other, chasing myself. This seems important, though I'm sure I'll never find out or be able to explain why.

Upon intersecting FDR Dr. from above, the pedestrian passageway forks off. I check both sides. From the south side, I see nothing, just apartment complexes, FDR Dr., and the riverbank flush with forestry. On the north side, I get in the way of bikers biking over the bridge, bartenders in Brooklyn, chasers of the uncatchable, or professional bikers, all of them.

The evening view is almost exactly the same as it is from the south side. The Baruch Houses, FDR Dr., and a wide, dark riverbank with just a bit less trees.

I remember how I never made it to the riverbank on the north side, how I'd turned in from Houston still a few blocks from FDR. I scan the riverbank for signs of a baseball field, but it's just too dark to see. I try to judge whether the size of the gaps between the heavy shadows (trees) are large enough for ball fields.

Unable to judge, back down the ramp I go, to get a closer look. By now, it's raining too hard to walk all that way home across the bridge, anyway.

Back I am at the intersection of FDR and Delancey, essentially the

intersection of the bridge and the river. I climb a footbridge to cross the highway. The sign on the footbridge tells me it's a two-minute walk to cross the footbridge. The sign on the other end of the footbridge says East River State Park closes at midnight.

And yet, it's as open as any park in the city.

The footbridge brings me to a wide path lined with gaslights running parallel to the river and a narrow park of some kind in between. I try to look ahead, to see how far the path runs, but can only make out so much. In any case, it runs as far as I can make out.

I pass a chain-linked fence through which I see basketball courts. I cross under the Williamsburg Bridge, and pass more chain-linked fences through which I see tennis courts. Then the fences end, and I walk off the path. I pass public restrooms. I have to piss real bad – the rain doesn't help – but I'm not comfortable walking near the building, by which desperate people I suspect might be seeking shelter. Before the river, there's a promenade parallel to and wide as the path I followed and left. East River State Park, so far, has been more concrete than grass, with steps and flower beds, multiple paths and plazas, benches and trees emerging randomly, it seems, like a series of patios between highway and river.

I'm careful not to slip in the rain or trip in the dark, also careful of patrolmen and desperate people. I see shadows now and then and try to gage their path, and then avoid that path, keeping close to the trees.

I walk around yellow caution tape beyond which I see a pile of dirt. Baseball dirt. But I don't even have time to consider whether this was the exact spot I was looking for, because through the next chain-linked fence is an actual dirt baseball field.

The chain-linked gate is open. The field is empty, so in I go.

I try to remember.

Nothing.

Nothing coming back to me.

But there is another dirt field within this same chain-linked enclosure, and so I walk towards that one, through the shared outfield grass.

In the middle of the second field's infield, I stop to look around, to try to remember. I look at the water, through the raindrops, at the Williamsburg Bridge, at the first field, the path through the chain-linked fence, and onwards. There is a gate at this end of the field, too, also open.

I am back on the path now. It still goes on as far as I can see, in both directions. I wonder if I've already passed the point where the path would hit Houston St., imagining Houston like Delancey, as a street leading onto a bridge of its own, as I must've thought that night.

I consider following a ramp on the side of the path that leads up to FDR Dr., to check where I am in relation to Houston, but the next field distracts me. Through the chain-link, I see a soccer goal, facing north, but instead of seeing a soccer field, I see a baseball diamond that is, somehow, without puddles. I slip through another open gate. The diamond is clay, like a tennis court. But also, unlike the last two dirt fields that failed to jog my memory, this clay diamond faces the riverside fence directly, so that the outfield is shallowest to dead centerfield.

The view, I must add, is incredible. The rain over the bridge over the river, together with the ambient light of "the city that never sleeps" and the lights from the bridge and from the promenade and now lightning, make rainbow blotches.

I think of my friend climbing this fence before the river, and I remember rainbow blotches there, too.

And I think of the fireworks I watched as a kid.

And I keep going. And I think I find the field I've been looking for, the field that is both the unknown field emerged from my unconsciousness and the field on which I found myself the night I almost died.

The field is identical to the clay diamond I'd just passed, except that the diamond on this field is dirt.

There are bleachers on either side. I want to sit down, but I think of the lightning and thunder, of the bleachers' conductive nature.

"Don't worry, Mom!" I want to shout. "I love life too much!"

Instead, on a whim, I sit down in front of the bleachers, in a young, invisible puddle between two deeper, more obvious ones. I observe the path of the Williamsburg Bridge amongst the rainbow blotches and imagine the right field line extending through the fence and over the river, meeting the bridge invisibly somewhere on the other side, maybe at my apartment.

Then I picture my friend climbing the fence on the other side of the field, one hand holding the last of the whiskey, the other doing all the climbing work. The two images are not an exact match, but how could they

possibly be?

I try to remember coming here the night I almost died, but my only memory of a field from that night is of that morning remembering my friend climbing a field from another night. So I just don't know. The dirt was just as likely to have come from either of the first two dirt fields, too. I need to find Houston St. Also, the longer I sit in the water, the more I increase the risk of ruining my phone.

So I get up, I speedwalk down the path, and I speedwalk up the ramp by the clay diamond.

And there I am, right at the intersection of FDR and Houston.

So I speedwalk back down the ramp, except that I stop halfway, this time better understanding what I see.

I see an open Park, grass to piss on, bleachers to sit on. And I see the bridge like a rainbow beltway or galaxy over the river, over which, as the rainbows dim, the sun will rise.

And I am drunk again, forgetting everything, forgetting my friends, drunk again on the weightlessness of zero responsibility. I clasp the fence and gaze out, eyes rainy with praise, eyes reflecting the reflecting pools of Mecca. I have to piss so bad I run out onto the field and just let wail a lightning bolt. Rainbow has never looked so golden, and Brooklyn, on the other side of that bridge, never so heavenly. I want to run to Delancey and Clinton, and up onto the pedestrian passageway, and up into the sky amongst those lights, over everything, a victory march into the dawning of a new age ruled under a new set of half-year resolutions, all enacted to prevent what happened before from happening again too soon. My friend sitting atop the fence tosses me the last swig of the whiskey and hops off onto the other side, disappearing as the bottle shatters. And I realize it's not really him, but everyone who's ever left me, my then-girlfriend, my friends I'd been with that night. And that all I'd been doing at the park that night was looking for something familiar, a familiar face or familiar place that would bring back memories of familiar faces, anything to connect me with reality and remind me who and where I was. Something like the Williamsburg Bridge. And so, I feel I must have thought, in my drunken delirium, that night, logically, in a sense, if not impractically, what better way to find the bridge than to first find the river?

I take my phone out of my pocket and sit for a moment.

I sat for a moment expecting the sun to come over the river at any moment, admiring everything, the bridge and everything. I wished everyone who'd ever abandoned me would return, and bear witness with me what I've found, or was about to see, what I would see alone but couldn't have found without them.

There was still one way to top this.

You could hike to heaven the long way home. You could. You could do anything on a whim, in your health, with what little you have to do tomorrow. You could get off your ass, pass through the chain-linked fences where they opened, walk the footbridge, climb the ramp to watch the sunrise, come down to tell the world, leap over the rail for your baby, and if you fall on your ass again, roll away from the erratic light that will be from the flashlight of a patrolman approaching you, roll to where you can, from where you lie for cover in the mud, away, to watch your now-girlfriend sleep like an angel, her back to you, in her cocktail dress from the night she wants only to forget.