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THE NICHOLAS DIGBY ACCOUNT

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ABSTRACT

The Nicholas Digby Account is...well, how could one categorize it? It is, of course, the story of Mr. Nicholas Digby, a New York City bookseller and intense Anglophile who becomes, as Charles Dickens terms it, an “uncommercial traveler.” Mr. Digby spends his time telling “you” about his strange affliction—he has begun waking up *inside* the various literary worlds in which he has so immersed himself in the past. His meetings with Sherlock Holmes, Hank Morgan of Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, Basil Hallward of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and, finally, with his own doppelganger lead him to a frantic questioning of the nature of literature, free will, and reality itself.

The Nicholas Digby Account is, at once, a series of found documents, a transcribed (and edited?) interview, a novella, a story of one man’s grappling with reality. And if it seems to complicate that reality, then, well, perfect. The account is presented to the reader so that he or she may consider his or her own place in the world and in the grand scheme of fate, or destiny, or whatever may propel life. It offers up some potential theories, but, ultimately, is meant to heighten the reader’s awareness that there is nothing, not even reality, that is entirely what it seems. After all, Nicholas Digby may not even be the most reliable teller of his own life story.

“But on second thought, someone who didn’t know how to ask wouldn’t know how to listen. And he coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now. Think about it: ain’t nobody really talking to you...Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own.”

—Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*

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THE NICHOLAS DIGBY ACCOUNT

THIS ACCOUNT HAS BEEN TRANSCRIBED SO AS TO PRESERVE THE ACCURACY
OF THE WORDS CONTAINED HEREIN. ALL THE DETAILS ARE RECORDED
EXACTLY AS THEY HAVE BEEN TOLD, WITH NOTHING CENSORED OR EDITED.
ADDED, PERHAPS, BUT SOMEONE HAD TO DISTINGUISH WHERE FACT ENDS AND
FICTION BEGINS. SOMEONE, HOWEVER, IS NO LONGER SURE THE TWO ARE
MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE.

NICHOLAS DIGBY AND THE FIRST IMPRESSION

“A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.” ~Oscar Wilde

Are you my author? I've never seen authors actually appear in their own work. Their points of view, perhaps, but never a bodily existence among characters. And if anyone can speak with authority on those who exist among characters, it's me. I suppose, then, if I were to apply my past experiences in a logical fashion to this present situation, I should conclude that you are not, in fact, my author. Yet your pen and paper make me pause. What interest have you in making notes on me if you were not intending to tell my story?

Would you excuse me a moment?

What is it? What, must I take them again? I assure you, I'm perfectly calm. Very well. Allow passion to overtake you one time and that's the end of it.

My apologies for the interruption. I have always been recognized for my manners and even in my present situation I would much regret to lose such an upstanding reputation.

No doubt you are waiting to hear all the particulars of my story; to be sure, you wouldn't want to represent me inaccurately. Well, I'm an open book, then (pardon the pun); you may ask me whatever you will, or, if you prefer, I can start at the beginning.

NICHOLAS DIGBY AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

“To say that New York came up to its advance billing would be the baldest of understatements.
Being there was like being in heaven without going to all the bother and expense of dying.”

~P.G. Wodehouse

I was born Nicholas Abraham George Digby to Everett Digby and Mary Digby (nee Mulshaw) on the eleventh of June in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I led a quiet childhood that consisted mainly of reading the books my father passed along to me—books which never found their origins in our home country—and walking with my mother along the Piscataqua River. I became especially taken with any work that came out of the United Kingdom, although it took me some time to be able to articulate the reasons. As the years wore on, I was labeled an introvert, but praised for my “homegrown good looks,” which I couldn’t always consider a compliment. Yes, I possessed the finely curved lips and crisp golden curls which had made Leo Vincey and Dorian Gray so memorably beautiful, but, as the science of physiognomy was long abandoned, no one who commented on my appearance ever connected my physique with my intellect. They read me as an all-American man who brought back memories of war bonds and apple pie, of simpler times, rather than a proper gentleman who rang for a chaise or reclined with a cigarette in an airy drawing-room. To them, I had read comic books as a child, not the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Dickens, or the poetry of Robert Browning. My completion of high school was, for some time, dubious, for, although I had been well-read since I had learned to do so, I found I had very little interest in anything other than works of English literature. When I finally completed high school, my mother and father were so pleased that they acceded to my dogged pleas for a trip abroad. I was so pleased that I acceded to the idea of taking a trip with my parents (I had at that time developed the traditional adolescent habit of considering them tiresome).

Oh, London! If she were a woman, she would be my betrothed. Never have I felt so comfortable or at home; it was as if the city had been waiting for me to wander along and complete it. I will never forget peering out the window as our flight left Heathrow Airport,

feeling as if I were making a grave mistake in leaving, as fatal as if I were attempting to rend the soul from my body. After college, however, I was destined—at least for a time—to a different world-renowned metropolis. New York City was a distant substitute, with a harsh grid of streets replacing the graceful curves of Regent Street and Leicester Square. Gone were the charming juxtapositions of skyscrapers with more ancient buildings; everything was cold, steel, angles. Riding the tube all day was out of the question. New York had only two things to keep me there: a pulse, and an open position at Bauman Rare Books.

The Madison Avenue location seemed as if it had come straight out of either my dreams or one of my favorite novels. It was less of a bookstore than the library one would find in any manor house. Dark wooden paneling nicely balanced a light wooden floor and was reflected in the lofty bookshelves and single long table that stood on a large red-and-white Persian rug. A single desk off to one side looked more receptionist than retail, and a high-backed brown leather chair emphasized the coziness. And the books! They were the most beautiful things I had ever seen. Arranged in similar-looking groups that could reach two stories from floor to ceiling, they had been lovingly bound in leather with gold-embossed covers. They were breathtakingly early editions, if not the very first, and, on the occasion I was called upon to unlock the glass-fronted cases, I couldn't help but run my fingers ever so gently over the spines, shivering with the delight of being so close to greatness. This store attracted a different kind of customer; while they tended not to come in droves, those who patronized it regularly were an elegant, educated lot, which I found very agreeable. I was liked well enough among my co-workers, although I can't say I formed particularly close relationships with them. Having read a significant amount of Bauman stock, I was able to discourse freely with customers, which I enjoyed and, admittedly, preferred to the genial small-talk I encountered during breaks. In the course of this small-talk, it

was determined that while I had read the most, I was also the most ignorant of any work published on American soil.

The men and woman I worked with were bibliophiles themselves, and couldn't help but tease me for what they considered my "narrow-mindedness." I pointed out the exceptional case of Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, referencing the night in which a few of us were closing the store and discussing the works we thought certain notable patrons would benefit from reading.

The lanky, bespectacled twentysomething who'd been hired at around the same time I had had laughed and said, "If it were up to you, Nick, the entire world would read nothing but British literature."

I smiled. "It doesn't sound like such a terrible thought."

He leaned against the leather armchair. "Don't you ever worry about missing out on a really great book?"

"No."

"You know what you should read?" asked my supervisor, a petite woman who always wore her hair in a braid down her back. "*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. It might be a good way to try something new without straying too far from what you enjoy. It's about an American man who travels back to Arthurian England."

I considered. "I suppose, for its historical context alone, it would be worth a try."

Because I'm an honest man I will admit that, when I first began to read, I enjoyed the way the tale was constructed. It begins in England (certainly a point in its favor), where an unnamed narrator receives a manuscript from a stranger he meets in a museum. The idea that I, as a reader, could peer over this narrator's shoulder as *he* read delighted me—but what I

glimpsed was less-than-delightful. Oh, the plotline was interesting enough—“Nineteenth-Century American Hank Morgan Finds Himself in Camelot Following a Blow to the Head”—but this main character, nineteenth-century American Hank Morgan, proceeds to weasel his way into King Arthur’s good graces with a few paltry parlor tricks. He sets himself up as “The Boss”—never mind the king—and works to use technology from his own time to “better” the medieval feudal society, sparking a war in the process. All gripping stuff, I assure you, but I nearly threw the book at the wall before I’d finished. It dripped with the kind of swaggering patriotism that was less noble than it was self-aggrandizing, the kind of know-it-all assumption that because the Land of the Free was such, it was infallible as an extension. How many times would I have to read disparagement of anything that wasn’t American society? *This* was narrow-mindedness. Closing a book before its tale had ended, however, was unacceptable, so with an effort at stoicism I forced myself through.

I was contented enough with my position in life, especially because, with the proper amount of saving, I was regularly able to escape across the Atlantic and spend a week or two in England. By my mid-thirties I had explored most of that country and even a bit of Ireland, but I was always drawn back to the great city of London. You mustn’t judge me too harshly. I readily admit that America provided for all my material wants. When it came to the very core of our respective personalities, though, the typical American man and I may as well have been facing each other from opposite ends of a magnet. Patriotism is a quality I am sometimes ashamed I do not possess—until I am reminded that the American brand of it is often taken to the extreme.

I distinctly recall standing inside the Tower of London complex on one of my English holidays. I had been resting against one of the gray stone walls, looking down into the water flowing through Traitor’s Gate, when I heard one of the beefeaters engage a group of tourists.

“And from where have you travelled, my friends?” he said.

The inquiry had barely been formed before a chorus of “USA! USA! USA!” rose from various parts of the crowd. My face burned, and I hid it as the tour passed by. I suppose I had been upset by Twain’s novel for much the same reason: I was ashamed at the American tendency to believe that no other country was quite as good. It didn’t matter that many parts of Europe and the Far East had been creating wondrous art, managing large civilizations, and developing innovative technology for longer than the United States had even been in existence. No, America was number one, and, although other places might be nice to look at, it was always a relief to return to where things were “done right.” The ethnocentrism was at times unbearable.

Of course, it would be unfair of me to say that I spent every hour of every day wishing I could move. As of my thirty-fourth year I only had the funds to travel, never to relocate. (I suppose if I had traveled less I would have had those funds, but, as we shall see, the question of my relocation proved to have a rather complicated answer.) I found escape, too, in books. What time wasn’t devoted to work or to the necessities of life was spent between the pages of William Wordsworth, Anthony Trollope, P.G. Wodehouse, even Jane Austen. In this way, I passed the time without much commotion until the day—it was a Friday, if I recall correctly (it seems so far away and, yet, as if it were only yesterday)—I became an “uncommercial traveler.”¹

It had been a particularly brutal winter, and the passing of the New Year had brought only deeper freezes. I was trudging past sooty-looking piles of snow on my way home from the store, preferring, as I always did, to stick it out on foot rather than endure a taxi or the metro. The sun had gone down much too early and had left a threadbare, ashen sky behind to blanket the city. It didn’t provide much protection from the mixture of snow and rain that dribbled from

¹A reference to several collections of sketches by Charles Dickens, first published in 1860.

lackluster clouds. I wound my scarf around my neck a second time and tucked it into the collar of my heavy black overcoat, though icy air still found a way to weasel inside.

In a display of perfect cruelty, Mother Nature hurled a particularly frigid blast of wind. It pushed against me, hard, but what nearly set me off my feet was warm, another person. He collided with my shoulder and stumbled backward a few steps before standing up straight, clutching his coat collar. “Sorry,” he grunted, hunching back over and barreling forward.

“Cheers,” I said, continuing on as well. Cinders and salt were eating away at thick, cloudy patches of ice on the sidewalk in front of me.

Every winter, I considered myself hardy enough to stand up against the elements, and, every winter, New York came closer to proving me wrong. I had managed to make it through most of the snowy seasons no worse for the wear, but this particular night made me long for the comparatively balmy temperatures of past seasons. It was the kind of chill that took every ounce of energy with it, that laughed at humanity’s efforts at warmth, that nearly made one wonder if he ever really knew what “cold” was. I was nearly delirious from it; a part of me wanted to laugh in the face of survival, to lie down on the pavement right there and give up the fight. There was a metro station across the street, and, although distaste crept into my mouth even as I did so, I yielded to the idea of heading inside.

I hesitated a moment on the top step before another gust of wind provided ample motivation. The cavernous mouth of the station was a few stairs away when suddenly my feet were no longer under me, and all sensation became a series of flashes: A weightlessness that made my lungs clench in fear, pain and an unnatural bending, stars splashed across my field of vision, and, finally, nothing.

When I awoke, I was not lying broken on the stairs, not stretched out on the sidewalk for a crowd of onlookers to whisper over, not even nestled in a warm bed. When I awoke I was being slung through the air.

There was no way for me to make sense of what was happening until I had made contact. Stretched out on a moving gurney, I was staring up into two serious faces, one attached to a pair of blue scrubs and the other to a lab coat.

When Lab Coat saw my eyes open he jumped straight in. “Sir, you’re in the hospital. You fell outside the subway station and hit your head so we’re taking you down to have an MRI.”

“You were out for a while,” added Scrubs, in what I suppose was an attempt at comfort. “We just want to make sure everything’s okay.”

Feeling sluggish, I nodded, and let out an involuntary moan upon moving. To call what I was experiencing a headache would imply a woefully inadequate vocabulary. It was as if the pain were physical, material, filling up the space inside my skull to the very limits. In fact, there was so much of it that it had begun spilling out into my other limbs and down my spine. Ceiling tiles streamed above me, their institutional current punctuated by lights that seared into my eyes. My stomach clenched and churned. Another groan escaped.

Scrubs looked down at me. “Lie still. We’ll get you sorted out as soon as we can.”

I shut my eyes, all too glad to adhere to his instructions. I had had an MRI once before, after I threw out my back hauling a box of books, and, to be honest, I was all right with the idea of settling into a prone position and relinquishing all effort at being awake. Despite the headphones the lab tech had given me, though, the jackhammering sounds of the machine—sounds which mirrored the jackhammering inside my head—kept me from a peaceful doze. By the time the massive magnet had finished its scan, I was a casualty of the war between

exhaustion and adrenaline. I did not bother talking or looking around as I was transferred back to my room; the effort was not worth it.

Sleep was waiting for me the instant I felt myself lowered onto the bed, but, again, it was held back by the beeping of monitors and the petite nurse who pranced into the room. Delicately perching herself near my feet, she pushed a few bronze strands out of her face and wrapped a hand around my wrist, feeling for the pulse that pummeled my brain with each beat. Satisfied, she moved on to torturing me with a blood pressure cuff and a stethoscope to the chest, murmuring to her companion, who was jotting notes on a clipboard all the while.

“Look straight ahead,” she told me, sitting up straighter and leaning in so that we were eye to eye. Producing a penlight, she flashed it into my left eye and then flicked it away. My grunt of discomfort still hung in the air as she similarly flashed it into my right. “Pupils equal and reactive.” The onlooker by the door scribbled.

“Okay, Mr. Digby,” she said, much too cheerily, “I need you to follow my finger with your eyes. Don’t move your head.”

Not moving my head I could do. I could also do with not moving my eyes, but, though it made the pain radiate all the way past my intestines, I apparently passed the test. She had me put my hands out next and squeeze hers, to which she remarked, “Bilateral grips are strong,” and the sound of a pen scratching drifted from the doorway.

“All right, then, Mr. Digby, we’re almost done for now.” She smiled at me. “I just need to ask you a few questions. Can you tell me your name?”

Could I tell her—? She had just addressed me! “Nicholas...Nicholas Digby,” I said. Even moving my mouth hurt.

“And how old are you?”

“Thirty...four.”

“Uh-huh. Where do you work?”

“Bauman Rare Books, of course.” I couldn’t help snapping a bit. Why could I not be left to lie catatonic?

She blinked but otherwise did not react to my moment of rudeness. “And how many fingers am I holding up?”

I sighed. “Two.”

I further confirmed that yes, I was nauseated, yes, I was dizzy, and, yes, I had a hellish headache. She nodded to her scribe to signify the blessed end of the inquisition and a thought struck me. “Is it possible for me to get some reading material?” Perhaps I could distract myself the best way I knew.

She raised her eyebrows, and I thought I detected a smothered giggle. “I don’t think so, sir. You’re going to have quite a headache”—perceptive, this girl—“and, unfortunately, we can’t give you any medication until the morning.”

“You’re sure?” I would be denied both external- *and* self-medication?

“Quite. We’ll need to keep a close eye on your vitals for at least twelve hours.” She pushed her hands in her pockets and rose up onto her tiptoes. “I’ll be back to check in on you again soon.”

She meant it. The hours squirmed around, bunching together and stretching out as I was further and further besieged with pain and fatigue and, later, hunger. Every time I was close to dozing, my flaxen-haired friend came back in and made me move my aching eyes and squeeze her doll-like hands. I suppose in some measure I got used to feeling sore, so that when, what felt like years later, I finally got sustenance, I was unprepared for the strain of eating and drinking.

Survival instincts won out, though, and the Jell-O and flat 7-Up disappeared before they had a chance to satisfy. When my still-empty stomach prompted me to pull an Oliver Twist, all I got for my labors was a cup of tea. “If you keep that down,” said my nurse, “you can graduate to a soft boiled egg, maybe some oatmeal.”

I tell you, I felt as if I were in prison.

But I was finally allowed some medication and some sleep, and that went a long way towards restoring my spirits. The headache shrunk down to a muted sort of fuzzy feeling, and I no longer felt like every extremity was made of lead. My checkups stretched out into longer and longer intervals, and performing for my nurse became less and less of a punishment. Allegedly I was still considered “fragile,” a concussion waiting to happen, and so I passed another night in the hospital—where, incidentally, I still could not get any reading material. Admittedly, I did still need to be gentle with my own head, which, if moved too quickly, could send my brains rattling around in a most unpleasant way, so I couldn’t justify putting up too much of a fight.

I was splitting a boiled egg with my fork the next morning (having graduated, you know) when my nurse came in to tell me I could go home. She must have seen the intent to leap up in my eyes, because she held up a hand and said in what she probably hoped was a stern voice, “You need to be aware of a few things first. You’ll still need to take it easy for a while. Don’t overexert yourself, just rest—and if your headaches increase in intensity, your vision blurs, you become nauseated again, or unsteady, or slur your speech, call 911 immediately.”

Quite honestly, she could have saved herself the lecture, because I experienced none of those things. What I *did* experience could never have been anticipated by any miracle of modern medicine. I promised I’d obey.

Fourteen or so dollars later, I was standing in my small Tribeca apartment. The hospital had been kind enough to call a cab against my will, objecting to sending a patient home unattended, especially one in such a still-precarious state as mine. As I looked at the rather bare rooms, I couldn't quite figure out what to do with myself. The whites and grays of the space usually served as clean backdrops for my more intellectual pursuits, but now, instead of potential, all I saw was emptiness. I could barely muster enough motivation to choose between taking a shower and lying down. The latter won out only because of pure biological preservation.

After napping a bit I called in to Bauman to let my supervisor know the situation, intending merely to make her aware that I would be moving slower than usual the next day, but she insisted on making me stay off my feet and said she would find more clerical work for me to do.

“Do you need anything?” she asked. “Why didn't you call me?” I pointed out that I was, at that moment, calling her, to which a short sigh came over the line. “Take it easy, will you?”

A word of advice—always be sure that, if you choose to be friendly with your bosses, it is something to which you have given deep thought.

Other than that, I cannot say the day passed much differently than every other Sunday, although it was in slower motion. I had gotten the hang of moving in a graceful, almost tai-chi-like way so that I did not jostle anything above the neck, and, in that manner, I was able to read a few chapters of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, roll some quarters, and even cook myself a modest dinner, which I ate with relish. Despite all the down time I had had in the past handful of hours, I slept soundly and woke up feeling refreshed, albeit a bit tender.

I was sitting on the edge of my bed, tying on a slate-gray tie, when a heavy feeling came over me, as if I were sinking further into the mattress. Then, oblivion. It happened so fast that my

eyes were opening before I had even realized the change. The sensation was identical to that of falling asleep; you tend not to be aware it is occurring until you have woken up. And when I did that, I was staring up at the ceiling, the tie still draped over my hands. I felt as if I had been roused from a dream which, playing just on the threshold of my unconscious, had evaporated the second I opened my eyes. Sitting up, I blinked a few times before resuming my morning routine. The episode had been nothing more than a tired body's way of recuperating after all the effort it had expended on healing. Taking it easy was sounding less and less like hackneyed advice and more like a good idea.

I arrived at work to much more attention than I was comfortable receiving. By the end of the day I never wanted to tell the story of my fall again. But it was gratifying to perform low-effort tasks; after the morning's episode I had no desire to be an exceptional salesman. The perfectionist in me squirmed at the less-than-hundred percent I was giving on the job, but the perfectionist in me was soon smothered by the invigoration steadily gained by relaxation. All the strain of the past few days was washed off, replaced with an energy that felt as new to me as if I had been brought back from the dead. As it grew, all traces of exhaustion were erased; I was confident the next morning would produce a neatly tied tie with no narcolepsy to get in the way.

How disorienting it is to be wrong in such confidences.

NICHOLAS DIGBY AND THE CONSULTING DETECTIVE

“Every man who knows how to read has it in his power to magnify himself, to multiply the ways in which he exists, to make his life full, significant, and interesting.” ~Aldous Huxley

I had not even gotten to my tie when it happened again. I had just finished buttoning my shirt when a leaden feeling inched through me, and I became lightheaded enough to lower myself to the floor with my back pressed against a chest of drawers. The last action I was aware of performing was dropping my head to my chest. As before, it felt very quick—although, if I think about it now, there is no way for me to know how long I was unconscious—and my eyes opened as if I had only blinked.

However, the scene that met them was so far from expectation they had trouble taking it all in. Gone were the white walls of my apartment, the black furniture, the bare windows. No longer was I even seated inside! I was slumped against the trunk of a large tree whose green branches flowed from the top like water from a fountain, settling onto the ground all around me in relaxed curves. With the breeze, they drifted across my field of view with a pleasant rustling sound, Nature's hair blowing in the wind, and made the narrow, oval-shaped leaves flutter down like so many butterflies. Through the branches I could see across an expanse of water that was itself dotted with trees to the opposite shore. Everything was shades of blue and green, and the foliage was abundant. Some of the brush gracefully drooped to the ground, as my shelter did, while some rose toward the sky, puffing their tops out in an effort to match the bulbous white clouds. Every now and then a group of ducks or swans floated past on the shimmering water. Though the temperature was cool, the scene was idyllic and peaceful—usually my ideal spot for an outdoor nap—but was soured by the acidic taste of fear, which had been mounting since I realized I was not where I should have been. The question was, where was I?

Another wave of the breeze rolled by my tree, and the branches parted enough so that I could see an elongated, lean man stroll along the water, wearing a cravat and a bowler hat. His head was bowed in a way that made him look lost in contemplation, and he puffed away on a

pipe as he walked. As there was no one else around but the swans that swam along next to him, I decided that if anyone could shed light on my situation, this man was the best candidate. Pushing myself up from the ground and dusting off my khaki pants, I hurried to catch up to him, as his long legs gave him incredible distance with each mellow stride.

“Pardon me,” I said, in the most unthreatening tone I could muster. He turned languidly, and a shock ran through my entire body when I recognized the face of the famous detective Sherlock Holmes!

For a moment I rejected the notion; but the sharp, piercing eyes that looked questioningly back at me, the thin, hawk-like nose and prominent square chin, and the ink stain on the hand that was balancing the pipe in his mouth convinced me that he could be none other. I foundered for a few seconds, attempting to grasp the meaning of what I was seeing, but ultimately thought it best not to drop the weight of my confusion onto one whom, though by all means familiar to me, had never made my acquaintance before. I began, “Pardon me, sir, but I’ve come from some distance and am unfamiliar with these surroundings. Would you mind me walking with you on your way to—?” I waved my hand in the air as I left the question open for him to fill in a destination.

“I have no time for trifles,” he answered, brusquely; then, with a smile, “Excuse my rudeness. You broke the thread of my thoughts; but perhaps it is as well.”² He paused, looking at my hand in the air, before supplying my answer. “Baker Street.”

“—Baker Street,” I repeated. Of course. “Perhaps I can better orient myself if I walk with you?”

He looked me up and down. “Very well.” The response betrayed nothing.

² Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (London: CRW Publishing Limited, 2005) 34.

We walked along the boating lake in a rhythmic fashion; if I could be accused of sneaking glances at my companion, he could be equally accused of sneaking glances at me. By this time I had had to draw some conclusions: If I was walking next to Sherlock Holmes, I must be taking a stroll through the late eighteen-hundreds. If we were heading toward Baker Street, we must be in London, and this must be Regent's Park. It also occurred to me that Holmes was not looking at me just to suss me out; my wardrobe must have presented something of a puzzle to him. It was plain enough—dress pants and a white shirt—but, compared to his outfit, was strangely simple. I had no vest, no long suit jacket, no cravat, and steered away from hats on any day the temperature registered above zero. Not only was I a stranger, but a stranger who appeared to have trouble dressing himself in the morning. How could I make myself less suspicious to the man who missed no details?

“So what brings you to Baker Street?” I asked, putting my hands in my pockets in what I hoped was a jaunty way, as if I hadn't a care in the world. I was just a traveler who had misplaced himself in the big city.

Holmes sent a puff of smoke from the pipe, which rolled past him as he walked. His face was all angles and determination, and, remembering that he was not given to talking about himself, I was about to give up conversation when a smile touched his lips. He raised an eyebrow as if in amusement and said, “I have just purchased some rooms there.” Another puff. “Would that I could find someone to go halves.”

I looked down to conceal an ill-timed knowing smile. “Oh, I'm sure you will.”

He stopped and stood ramrod-straight, peering at me. “And what the deuce have you observed to bring you to that conclusion?”

I stuttered, at a loss. “I just...well...these sorts of things usually work out one way or another.”

“Hmmm.” He began his slow pace again, I nervously following, trying to think of another way to engage him while the communicative fancy was on him. “It is a capital mistake to theorise before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgment, you know,” he mused.

“Right.” This was not going the way I had hoped. If I could not get answers from Sherlock Holmes, I would never know what was happening to me. Maybe I could lighten the mood. “Someone should tell that to the Emma Woodhouses of the world. We Mr. Eltons would have a much easier time of it.”³ I chuckled, but he did not reciprocate.

“I have never met the woman,” he murmured.

I tell you, I nearly gave it up. I would have to excuse myself. The thought gave me a feeling of desperation until I remembered Dr. Watson’s remarks on Holmes’s knowledge base: He was well-versed in every subject touching the industry of crime, but no other. Popular literary or cultural references would have no impact on him. Since I was well-versed in the industry of literature but not crime, the best way as I saw it would be to lay it all out for him to consider. After all, I had a mystery for him to solve, had I not?

“You may remember that I referred to having come from far away,” I ventured. He nodded. I soldiered on. “Well, I’m glad that it was your path with which mine crossed. I have a...well, a mystery for you.”

He raised an eyebrow, giving me a sideways glance that did not mask the spark of interest. “Go on.”

“I...I don’t actually know how I got here.”

³Reference to an 1815 Jane Austen novel, in which the titular heroine finds herself in the midst of many misunderstandings as a result of her attempts at matchmaking.

“You think you were kidnapped?”

“No. No, no-one was involved. I woke up under a tree here, but it’s not where I fell asleep.” Hmm. That did not come out correctly. The way I had worded it, it sounded like—

“And how much had you had to drink before you ‘fell asleep’?”

—like I was just a common drunk. Again, this was going less than ideally. He was peering at me again, his sharp eyes seeming to see right through me. I debated telling him the truth, say what it would to him about my sanity. “The truth is, some of my story is quite strange,” I hedged.

“It is a mistake to confound strangeness with mystery,” he said.⁴ We had paused in our journey around the lake, and he was facing me now, with his arms folded. “Pardon me for saying so, sir, but if this has no bearing on my life or my work, I cannot help you—”

“Yes, yes, you want no useless facts or thoughts crowding out the useful ones, I’m aware,” I said. “But this mystery is unlike anything you have ever seen, I can assure you.”

Holmes looked taken aback at my first statement, but smirked at my second. “There is nothing new under the sun. It has all been done before.”⁵

“I sincerely doubt that.”

Holmes shrugged and waved his hand. “I have no time or interest in playing games with you. I have business to attend to, so if you will excuse me.” He began to lope away, and I hurried after him.

“Wait.” I caught him by the arm. When he turned, his lips were pursed and his jaw was even more strongly squared. He was losing patience, and I had already lost too many chances. There was only one more card I could play. “Don’t you want to know how I knew you were the

⁴ Doyle 85.

⁵ Doyle 41.

one to come to with a mystery? I have never met you before—” (It was true enough.) “—and I have never lived in London.” (It was completely true, and completely sad.) He stopped, drew himself up tall, and looked down his nose at me, which I took as a cue to continue. I fought the smile that I felt spreading across my face. My reading habits were about to save me. Holmes prized logical conclusions drawn through extensive observation, and I held in my memory both the observations and the conclusions.

“First,” I said, “You were walking at a leisurely pace, implying that you had nowhere immediate to be. That you had nowhere immediate to be implied that you either weren’t employed or were employed in an as-needed industry. Your clothing is of a fine quality—” (I was reaching here) “—which rules out unemployment or common drudgery, and your lack of uniform suggests some occupation other than patrol officer. Since it is about mid-day, I can rule out shopkeeper and cabman. You have ink stains on your hands, which would suggest some sort of clerk or secretary, but, again, you are not at your workplace in the middle of the workday. Therefore you must be self-employed; clients must come to you when they need you, and pay you for the work you perform for them. You have a habit of walking with your head sunk upon your chest, a rather vacant expression in your face as if your thoughts are occupied with some sort of far-off analysis, except when you are considering the person in front of you, in which case you narrow your eyes and slowly comb over every inch of him. Clearly, you are cataloguing every detail of the world around you, and synthesizing that information. What independent, commissioned profession demands that? Why, private investigation, of course.”

I do believe that, for the first time in his life, Sherlock Holmes was caught unawares. His mouth opened and closed almost without him knowing it, and he licked his lips and cleared his throat before replying. “I have underestimated you,” he said. “You are much more astute than

most of the human race, and your intellect appears to be one of the few which can measure up to my own. Indeed, I am a private detective—Sherlock Holmes, newly of 221-B, Baker Street.” He sunk his head to his breast, brows knotted, before stepping off the path to sit on the bank of the lake, laying his finished pipe next to him. Resting his elbows on his knees, he gestured for me to join him. “Your argument was a fine one. If you wish, you may make a full statement of the case as far as you understand it, and I will do my best to help you.”

What a victory! It was a rare thing for Sherlock Holmes to change his mind about any point upon which he had previously been decided. “I am much obliged to you, Mr. Holmes,” I said, “and pleased to make your acquaintance.”

He nodded, and I thought I caught a smile flash across his features.

“My name is Nicholas Digby,” I said, “And I’m from...the future.” There was no way to say it without feeling like a mockery of myself. Though the words were surely new to Holmes, I had had to put up with them in every time-travel narrative I had been unfortunate enough to come across. His eyebrows flew up his high forehead, but he did not respond, just pressed his hands together in a gesture of what usually would be prayer, and rested his chin against them. I recounted the story, much as I have to you, of that icy night outside the underground station, and of everything that happened afterwards. I made sure not to mention knowing him before I had approached. The question of my sanity was on shaky ground to start with; how would I justify telling Holmes that, in my world, he did not actually exist? Besides, he was sitting in the flesh next to me. I could reach out and touch him if I wanted to do so. How could I justify telling *myself*, anymore, that he did not exist? He sat next to me patiently, barely reacting to what even I thought sounded preposterous.

“I must have traveled through time somehow,” I said, stretching my neck from side to side until the joints popped. “By all accounts it seems as if the bump on the head played a major role, but I don’t have enough anatomical knowledge to accurately link the two.” Glancing sideways, I could see that he had fallen into his “thought-struck” state, eyes vacant but trained on a spot directly past his shoes.

“The plot thickens,” he murmured, almost as if I were not there. Then, smiling animatedly, “Do you have any bank notes on you?”

“Oh, ah, let’s see...” I patted my pockets until I discovered a crumpled-up five-dollar bill and a few quarters. Good thing I had not made it to the Laundromat yet that week. I handed the currency to him, and he inspected it closely, running his fingers over the coins and holding the note up to the sun to look through the paper. It happened in a flash, but I thought I saw him place a quarter between his teeth.

“Well, Mr. Digby, you have no visible signs of intoxication,” he said, passing the money back to me. “You exhibit no tics characteristic of a man who is lying. Your accent proves you to be a foreigner, and your strange dress would seem to support you in your claims. As for your financial holdings, I have to admit that they are quite unfamiliar to me, and that also adds to your story. I noticed when you and I first met you were jolted into speechlessness, as if you had not been expecting my face to be staring back at you. I may be singularly lean-looking, but I have seen many citizens of this city who are more disfigured than I; therefore there must be something about me in particular that sent you reeling. You claim to have never lived in London, and the portrait on your bank note bears particular resemblance to the late president of those United States from whence I deduce you come, so you could not know me, yet my presence presented a unique shock to you. Since the fashions overseas do not differ significantly from those here at

the moment I can only deduce that the United States from whence you come is not the same United States which I and my countrymen know.”

I blinked. “Are you saying you believe me?”

He chuckled, pulling out his tobacco tin and packing his pipe. “In elementary terms, yes.” Striking a match, he lit it and stuck it between his teeth, puffing out two small clouds of smoke as he replaced the tin and matches in his trouser pocket. I felt an overwhelming urge to throw my arms around him with passionate exhalations of gratitude. He continued. “However, I still do not think I can help you.”

The urge deflated. “What?” There was no holding back the dismay, bordering on despair, which had infused my voice.

“Mr. Digby, I prefer to not let extraneous thoughts crowd out the ones that will be useful to me for solving crimes.” To his credit, he did look more apologetic than he had ever done in Watson’s manuscripts. “In general, man’s movement through the centuries is not a subject to which I devote much mental exertion. Until today, there was not sufficient evidence for me to agree that such a thing was even possible.”

I tried to keep my breathing even, reminding myself that the theory of relativity was nearly thirty years in the making—that, in fact, Albert Einstein was still just a young boy—and that Twain’s heinous work on the subject of time travel would not be published for two years yet. Victorian England had not been inundated with the idea like my own age had, and, certainly, no case Holmes had yet come across had been committed by an inter-temporal traveler. Of course he would have no use for the subject. The thoughts lined themselves up neatly, sensibly, but still I railed against them. How was I to make sense of what was happening to me? How was I to put myself right?

“Furthermore, as no crime has been committed in this ‘mystery,’ which you somewhat improperly term it,” Holmes added, not unkindly, “I’m afraid I cannot be of much use to you. In the end, the venture would distract from the here and now work of solving crime.” He leaned back onto his elbows, his pipe hanging loosely, the tendrils of smoke swirling close to the bowl. “I find myself drawn to you, Mr. Digby; by all means we could be great acquaintances. Do keep me informed.”

I could barely believe it. Would he like to *know* how many of his cases could be solved in seconds with DNA technology? Why, with modern forensic techniques, their questions would be answered before they even landed on the doorstep of 221-B Baker Street. Here was a real mystery, a conundrum into which he could actually sink his teeth, a question that was most definitely not a waste of his time. As the thoughts crashed around inside my head, I could feel my neck getting hot and pulled on the collar of my shirt, trying to slow down my breathing. It was no use getting angry at him; he could not have any idea what detective work was like where I was from. The only frame of reference he had was the one in which he lived, and I did not fit inside that frame. A pressure began to build right around my temples, as if someone had placed a hand on either side of my head and was squeezing.

“All life is a great chain,” Holmes was musing, almost to himself, “the nature of which is known wherever we are shown a single link of it.”⁶ He tore a few pieces of grass from the spot next to him and looked up at me. “I have to say that I cannot be sure how your link fits.” He frowned and drew his brows together. Clearly, he did not like not having the answer.

⁶ Doyle 28.

“Right,” I said, miserably, drawing my knees up and resting my forearms on them. The pressure was becoming a dull pain and bringing lightheadedness with it. I put my head on my arms.

“However...”

My ears were ringing now, and I felt as if I were sinking into the ground. Everything was black; my breathing was slowing. One by one, my senses dulled, then muted. I realized what was happening on the threshold of unconsciousness.

The last thing I heard Sherlock Holmes say to me was, “I think there is more going on here than just time travel.”

Then, everything was gone.

My head jerked up off my forearms. I was still crunched into a ball with my back against my dresser; I was stiff when I tried to stand up. When I looked at myself in the mirror, there were lines in my forehead from where it had been pressing on my sleeves. My mind’s eye could bring images of Regent’s Park back to life, but only for a few seconds; already the details were becoming hazy. I felt as if I were trying to remember a particularly interesting dream so that I could relate it to my co-workers. Sherlock Holmes himself was slowly becoming a silhouette; his features were melding into a generalized archetype and I could no longer call to mind the exact lines around his eyes, the way the ink stains on his fingers mingled with the stains from his pipe tobacco, the way his vest hung off his nearly concave torso.

“No,” I said, wanting to grasp at the memories and hold them to me. The effort twisted my thoughts so tightly that I had to physically shake my head to be able to think straight again.

By now, the images were all but gone, leaving me with nothing but the knowledge that I had been somewhere very different than where I was now.

And right next to where I was now was a clock that told me I was very late for work. I grabbed my coat (fumbling with the arm holes) and keys (dropping them twice) and rushed out the door. There would be no minute Holmesian observations to get at what had happened to me; I could barely remember the basics. I hurried down the sidewalks with the strange feeling that the sun was not in the correct place in the sky. My internal clock was telling me I had missed no time that morning; that there should still be plenty of time for me to get to Bauman, but everything around me stated otherwise.

Given the events of the past few days, I didn't have to explain myself too much when I finally arrived; everyone was inclined to be sympathetic and flexible when it came to a fallen comrade. They let me slide into my work routine as usual, and I was glad for the familiarity, because I spent the day with a lingering unease. How hard *had* I hit my head?

NICHOLAS DIGBY AND THE CONNECTICUT YANKEE

“Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn't.” ~Mark Twain

The second time I found myself somewhere other than present-day New York City, I could not be sure at first whether or not I was dreaming. (You see, the last thing I remember was crawling into bed for the night.) The scene was not wholly different from the first—I opened my eyes onto a peaceful landscape, although instead of a lake to break up the green and the trees there was a curving dirt road. The smell of wildflowers hung in the air along with the sounds of bees and birds, and I judged the season to be summer, which made my present situation, albeit perplexing, a nice escape from my previously arctic life.

I was lying on my side in the grass, again under a tree; the blades tickled my arms to such a degree that I was forced to sit up and determine that it was not just my imagination that had traveled to this place. There were no tall men with pipes crossing my line of vision this time, as the road was empty across from me, but I felt as vulnerable as if there had been an entire tobacco-consuming army. While in Regent's Park I could have passed off my white dress shirt and khakis as a newfangled style, I was now wearing nothing more than a gray t-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms. In any case, I determined that I could not stay under this tree dressed as I was. The best course of action as I saw it would be to follow along the road as best I could until I came across a Good Samaritan. Maybe I had not traveled much farther than a season, and my savior would be only a little surprised at my appearance and deduce nothing more than a rough night out. I prayed it was so, and felt a renewed push to diagnose and heal this inconvenient disorder.

There was still no one in sight on either horizon as I gained the road, which, upon experiencing close-up, I discovered was not much more than a winding path. The sandy gravel was not too uncomfortable upon my bare feet, although at places it was mixed with twigs and brush that forced me to place them daintily with each step. I could distinguish no other footsteps

upon the path, but here and there were hoof-prints, and as I made my way forward I picked up on a correspondence of these prints with indentations in the grass on either side that had probably come from some sort of wheel. The hypothetical season through which I had traveled was beginning to lengthen, and I gulped. Where I had before been relieved by the solitude into which I had entered, now I wished to meet someone, anyone, and determine once and for all when I was.

The trees began to lessen in favor of grassy hills, and as I scaled one of them, a town came into view below. The roofs of the compact-looking cabins appeared to be thatched, and both cabin and roof were situated among variously-colored fields and gardens through which this very road wound and branched into crooked alleys and a confusing mess of directions. Even so, I hiked up my courage and my flannel pants and carefully made my way inside the little hamlet. The first dwelling I passed was quiet except for a small, naked child playing with a dog whose ribs were sticking out and whose fur was matted in places which it kept craning its neck to bite at. I made sure to walk slowly and casually by, and attempted to smile at them both, but the dog just growled (at me or at its own flank, I was not quite sure) and the child scampered around behind the hut. Not to be thrown off course, I squared my shoulders and continued on, coming into the town proper and very much regretting my wish to see anyone else.

For here there were plenty of anyone else-s for me to talk to; but they all stared at me with such shock and suspicion that I wanted to shrink away. For a start, they all looked dramatically different; everyone wore knee-length robes made of what looked like rough linen, and the older ones among the men had hair as long as the women, tangled down below their shoulders in unkempt tendrils. Many had beards to match. Their stares hooked mine; once I had made inadvertent eye contact it was impossible to look away again. None of the villagers spoke

to me, even to tell me to get out; their lips were set into fierce lines that did all the speaking for them. Dogs were yipping and fighting between houses, and I almost tripped over a hog settled in a puddle of mud in the otherwise dry road. Here and there were brown piles of disquieting odor and shape, and the smell overall set my stomach churning. I tried to follow the road in a single direction so that I could pass through as quickly as possible, but as it wound around windowless houses and doubled back on itself, I was starting to get the feeling that I was hopelessly—and dangerously—lost.

No matter which way I turned, I met with dark stares. All the townspeople must have pulled their friends and neighbors out of their houses to glare me out of their territory. With the bright blues and greens of my plaid pants, I was the most colorful thing among them; there was no way I could move about without attracting attention. I followed a curve in the road, keeping my head down and eyes drawn away from my audience, when there was a shuffling among the crowd accompanied by grunts of annoyance. This was it. Someone had finally come forward to get rid of the wandering, strangely-clad potential pillager. I did not slow down, but I did brace myself for the blow.

It was the lack of one, though, that made me stop in my tracks and chance to look up into the eyes of my hostile surroundings. They were no less hostile, but when I faced forward again, I jumped. Standing in front of me was a beardless, elderly man whose gray hair was spiraling out in all directions, with his hands on his hips in what would much later become known as the Superman stance. He didn't have a look of defiance on his crepe-y face, though, but something much more intimidating: a smile. I had no idea how to proceed, it disarmed me so. By all accounts, this particular smile was relaxed and friendly, as if he were proud to welcome me to his unwelcoming hometown, but I could not stop myself from interpreting it as laced with

menace. You know the kind: It is the smile that greets you in every clothing store on Fifth Avenue—how can we help you, and what can we get for you today, and if you are not going to buy something we are going to personally murder you for wasting our time. We stood there in this farcical standoff until he jerked forward. It was pure reflex that made me spring backwards into a fighter’s stance, but he just laughed wheezily and clapped me on the shoulder, reminding me of an eccentric prospector back in the time of the Gold Rush. Yes, I could picture him in britches and suspenders and a floppy black hat with the brim turned up. But now was not the time to be distracted; he was leaning in and grinning and breathing fetidness in my face.

“Come with me,” he said in a watery old-person voice.

I hesitated; was that really the safest thing to do? The onlookers were no longer glaring; rather, they had begun whispering to each other, chuckling, and dispersing. This old coot had broken the tension somehow, and, after all, I had virtually no other options. When he strode to our left, I followed.

He led me to a cabin beyond which was a patch of sunflowers, a few hills, and what looked like a spire or two sticking out from the top of them. I strained to see more, but he beckoned me inside. I entered into a rectangular room with a clay floor and a hollow in one wall that, judging by the ashes scattered around it, was a rough sort of fireplace. A mound of straw was heaped in the corner across from this, and covered with four or five pieces of hide or coarse fabric. A small wooden table and bench rounded out the major furnishings and served double duty as storage space for one or two root vegetables, a wooden bucket filled halfway with murky water, a wooden bowl, and a jagged, thick piece of wood that lay next to a small knife which was just beginning to show signs of rust. My host made as much use as he could of the copse from which I had come, if his possessions were any indication. As the thought passed through my

mind, he settled himself on the empty part of the bench with the knife and jagged piece and began carving with a sniff.

“Make yourself comforable,” he told me, gesturing vaguely with the knife and running his tongue over his crooked teeth.

I looked around; it was the floor, hearth, or straw pile for me, and as I thought I saw a tiny black dot jump from the pile, I determined that the floor would be the least malignant. In a few steps, I had crossed to the opposite side of the room and was about to settle myself under a window that was no more than an opening in the wall.

“I wouldn’ do that if I was you,” my host said without looking up. “That’s where the ‘eifer lodges.”

“Uh...pardon?” I had not pegged him for a married man, or, if he were, he surely would not be for long if his wife were anywhere within hearing distance.

“Etheldreda. The milkin’ cow. She’s taken that spot for herself, and I don’ know but that she’s nothin’ against doin’ her naterly business there.” He pointed the knife out the window.

Broken as the speech was, I got enough of an idea to jump up from my low crouch and content myself with sitting among the ashes. Fleas menaced me from the right, and invisible cow-urine from the left. Charming destination, this. From my new position, I glanced out the window and could see the rump of a cow the color of chocolate pudding parked in front of a strip of sunflowers, occasionally interrupted by a flash of tail flicking into view.

“Been meanin’ to do some tidyin’ but I never got around to it.” Curled strips of wood were falling around his feet and the micro-log in his hand was taking on a more streamlined shape. He rubbed his nose on the back of his fist and peered up at me. “All them townies think

my wits is rattlin' around in my 'ead, but I keep tellin' 'em, we're 'oggin' all the dirt and should put it back where the Lord made it."

Either this man was crazy or he was truly my savior, the one person who might give my story a chance. (Of course, it was also possible that the two were one in the same.) I mean, correct me if I am wrong, but I do believe I was hearing one of the earliest arguments for hygiene in medieval England.

For I was beginning to put together the pieces into a coherent time and place. The dwelling structures, the spires in the distance, the practice of bringing one's livestock in for the night—these were all common practices of that period, and I, having read as many Arthurian texts as I could get my hands on (including the infernal Twain volume), was fairly confident that I had hit the mark.

To test my theory, I asked in a casual way, "Are you aware of the year, brother?"

"Well, I can' but liarly say that I'm missin' the fact of the exact date but for the letter recently received by my only livin' son from the castle, but as you can likey figger that was not as close to this day as it is far away. Still, I'd be flung from my frippery if it wasn' the self-same year now."

"And that year would be?"

"Why, 528. Says so in the letter."

I fought the impulse to defend myself against the offhand way in which he flung the answer at me. It was an answer, at any rate, and, as the date firmly took hold, I nearly laughed out loud. Where was Mark Twain to document *my* comings and goings in this place? For I had figured out another reason why these surroundings looked so familiar: They had recently set the stage for a different traveler, one whom I should like to hit roundly in the face if I ever met him

in the street. I wondered if he had taken over as The Boss yet, if he had performed his “miracle” in the Valley of Holiness, or if he had even received the Herculean crowbar to the head that had sent him here in the first place. Yes, most definitely had I landed in the fair kingdom of Camelot.

“Most kind thanks,” I said. “And even kinder thanks for rescuing me from the mob.”

“It was nothin’. I liked the look o’ you, you remind me of me as a young’un, not givin’ one jot what them fellow tongues be waggin’ on about. Them all are bare as born ‘neath their gowns, no different to you and I, so what injury does it them for you to fashion yours the way you fancy? Say as I like to do, at least you don’ run around like the little early-agers.”

Convolved as the grammar was, I was gratified. The old man caught my eye and smiled, making his leathery skin crinkle from lips to eyelids.

“Would you mind my asking your name, brother?” I said.

“I don’ see the way or why I should,” he replied. “My mum found fit to title me Tybalt Terrowin Bolbec Fendrel, and I find fit to title myself the same.”

“It is indeed a noble, fitting title,” I said. “But for interests of time, may I call you Ty?”

He screwed up his mouth and tilted his head to the left, considering. “Ty.” Looking down at his carving, which had slowly been morphing itself into a miniature of Etheldreda: “Ty.” Finally, he stretched his face into a smile once more. “Tis a fine circumbendibus in my opinion.”

“Ty,” I was grinning now, too, at the turning of the phrase. “I’m called Nicholas Abraham George Digby.”

“Nickohlas Abram George Digby,” he repeated, nodding as he experimented with the words. Then, with a wicked glint in his eye, “Can I call you Kohl?”

An image of Pennsylvania miners popped into my mind, and I did not stop myself from laughing that time. “Sure you can.”

“Whoops.” He had taken an especially vigorous swipe at Etheldreda’s effigy and nearly severed a twisted gray lock from its neighbors. “Now that woulda been most two-steps-back.” His shoulders jumped mirthily a few times at his fortunate escape.

“Would it?” I asked, curious as to the ways in which a haircut could be so deterring.

His eyes traveled over my mussed blond topper. “Sure as the boat-landin’ spot. Myself, I can’ grasp what my eyes is givin’ me. ‘Ow are you still on live with no dirt-swishin’ acooterminants?” When all I could give him in return was a blank stare, he put his arms on his knees and, peering at me, said, “You mean to gaze me into believin’ you don’ need long ‘air to keep clean?”

“That...is exactly what I mean.”

“But sure as the edge of the river any man with wit in ‘im knows that a good stretched-out mane dusts ‘im off quite cleanly-like. If my ‘ead returrgigates the rememberances right, my pelt’s not been shorn since I came into the world, and as a next-step I ‘ad the years ‘eaped upon me til I sit ‘ere facin’ in your direction with jus’ as much fizz as I was gifted with from the start.” He thumped his chest. “I keep tellin’ and tellin’ them others that short locks is short lives, and if you ‘ad your eyes open while you were skulking around, you peradventure grasped their generalwise agreement. Best victory I ever won with those thickheads.” His head dropped again to the cow in his hand and he grumbled, “I should rightly think the victoriousness of one opinion would lend the others some reliance.”

I decided it would not be right of me to inform him that their first acquiescence probably had more to do with the difficulty of cutting hair with the tools available to them than with their concern for cleanliness. After all, his intentions were tending in the right direction. Everyone else

was content to draw water from the same creek where, a few yards upstream, they had dumped their calls of nature.

A thought struck me. “If your hair keeps you clean” –which, by my observances, was less a physical phenomenon than an optimistic one— “why do you shave your beard? Wouldn’t that keep the front of you clean as well as the back?”

“Never did grow,” he said, chewing on his lip in a regretful way, as if he could have done something to change the fact. “But, ‘course, the top of my ‘ead made up for that.”

“I see.” I was beginning to rather like Ty.

We were quiet for some time as he focused on Etheldreda II’s facial features, an Anglo version of Giovanni Bernini. The lazy buzzing of bees among the sunflowers outside made a pleasant, earthy white noise, and I stretched my pajama-ed legs out, avoiding what I estimated to be a cow-sized section of the floor. Ty’s nose twitched and he peered past his sculpture at me.

“‘Course, wit you well that I said it don’ make me undo my day either way ‘owever you choose to blanket your back, but methinks we oughta do well to find you somethin’ more along the lines of the fellow-back blankets you come across ‘ere. Not every man can open up ‘is mind enough to let someone else’s thoughts take up residence, and I’d be ‘ard sore to ‘ear about you runnin’ into unpleasantry.”

“You make a compelling point, Ty. Where can I get a more acceptable outfit?”

“I don’ suppose it would do any ‘arm for you to make use of one in my possession.”

I scanned the scanty space, feeling as if to do so would be to take this man’s only other means of clothing himself. “I wouldn’t want to impose on you.”

He snickered. “Me? I don’ think it would be me who would any imposition be done on.”

“But if I take your—”

“Not *my*, Kohl. I wouldn’ worry, sure as the coast of Eng-lund, Etheldreda won’ be needin’ any extra padding in this ‘eaty season.” He balanced the miniature version on the corner of the table and looked satisfied.

I didn’t know how to respond to this, but I attempted a, “Oh—she won’t mind?”

“Nah; she won’ even miss it. ‘Course, she’ll ‘ave to ‘ave it back betimes, but for now I can give assurance for her generous spirit.”

And so I was outfitted in a robe made for a cow, which, as you might imagine, gave off the appropriate amount of fertilizer scent. I could barely stand to be within breathing distance of myself, but Ty seemed quite pleased. He tied a leather strap about my waist to hold the ensemble together (Etheldreda being rather more endowed in that area, you know), stepped back, and nodded his head.

“Seein’ as ‘ow you’re now what most of them thickheads would call ‘rightly covered,’ tis a nice occasion for us to lay into some victuals,” he said.

While I had not thought I was particularly hungry, when he pushed aside the bench to reveal a wooden barrel of ale and a clay pot out of which he pulled a dark loaf of bread and a hunk of cheese, I found myself eagerly anticipating a meal. He pulled the wooden bowl forward and, blowing the sawdust off his knife, scored two pieces each of the bread and cheese. This being done, he reached again under the table and produced two wooden cups, which he used to scoop us each a portion of ale. He settled himself on the far end of the bench, indicating that I should take the near, and handed me a piece of the bread. I took a large bite without realizing how long it would take me to dispose of it. The bread was very heavy, you see, and required such an amount of chewing that by the end of my first bite I was sure my jaw had become quite toned. The cheese went down with less effort, but it took me some time to get used to the salt content,

as it was a condiment that I generally stayed away from in my day-to-day life. In any case, it was a satisfactory refreshment, and I thanked my host for his hospitality.

“Tis my own ‘appiness to be ‘ospitable to you,” he said, chewing his bread thoughtfully, as I imagined Etheldreda did with her own meals. “Now that my posterity is livin’ up at the castle, I’m glad for the companionableness.”

“Do you miss him terribly?”

The jaw moved even more languidly as he considered. “Seein’ as ‘ow ‘e and I ran around together from the time ‘is mum gave ‘im to me—the Lord bless ‘er soul—‘e feels like ‘e’s missin’, but I do all right with Etheldreda, and ‘is letters remind me of the lengthywise chats we performed as customary.” Finally, a swallow. I watched his subtle Adam’s apple bob up and down. “It would be most liarly of me to profess, though, that I was displeased with your arrivance.”

I smiled, but felt a shadow of sadness I could not readily explain.

“From where did your arrivance proceed, if tis not too trouble-ous for you to describe?” He looked at me, not with any hint of interrogation, but with an innocent kind of curiosity that made me want to tell him the truth.

I could not do it, though. Something about the simplicity of his life and the uncomplaining way he went about it made me hesitate to introduce my own anything-but-simplicities. “A very far-off land,” I said, surprising myself with a note of wistfulness I was not conscious of feeling. “It’s unlike anything you’ve ever seen.”

“*That* I’ll accept when my own eyes are presented with it. ‘Ave you gone nomadic, then?”

“Something like that.”

Here we were interrupted by a knocking at the door. Ty scratched his head, putting his bread down most hesitatingly. He opened it a crack, then stepped back to reveal a richly-dressed man holding a folded piece of parchment. They nodded to each other, neither saying a word, and the man passed out of my view. Ty swung the door shut again and turned to me, clutching the parchment to his chest beamingly.

“Special post from my son,” he told me. “I wasn’ lookin’ out for one at this particular point in time due to the previous parcel to which we ‘ave referred. Somethin’ must ‘ave ‘appened!”

When I had assured him I was most interested to know what that something was, he looked pleased and began to read. I moved closer to him so that I could see the loopy handwriting over his shoulder.

“My dear father, I ‘ope this letter finds you in a floor - a flower - a *flourish*” –He remarked somewhat sheepishly that he was still trying to pick up on the skill of turning the eyes’ bounty into the tongue’s— “and I very much enjoyed the carvin’ you sent me when you returned my last. We ‘ave ‘ad such a day around the Table Round, I had to tell you as soon as I could. Today was brought in a pris’ner by Sir Kay the Seneschal, who is, as is customary, to be ransomed after bein’ presented to ‘Is Royal ‘Ighness, King Arthur, our liege. As you may be thinkin’, this in and of itself is not surprising news, since Sir Kay is renowned for ‘is pris’ner-takin’ abilities. The pris’ner in question, though, is exceedingly strange in ‘is phys’cal aspect. Just observe what ‘e was clad in when ‘e entered the castle. A jacket and rather loosely-fittin’ stockings were decorated with a multitude of crisscrossin’ lines that made the line of sight twist and knot as one tried to contemplate it. These covered ‘im from neck to ankles and reached all the way down to his wrists as well. I can’ imagine the amount of wealth this pris’ner must ‘ave

come from to be in possession of such linens, which you would believe would suffice for your 'ouse'old above three turns around the sun. 'E 'adn' stopped there, either; on 'is 'ead was a strange kind of 'elmet that stopped right above 'is brow bone (it would be of no use in most day-to-day knightly activities) and, rather than culminate in a plume or impressive point upon the top of the 'ead, merely rounded out in a flat sorta way. 'Twas a shiny sort of ebony color that matched 'is slippers; these made cloppin' noises on the stones of the floor like 'e was outfitted the way our 'orses are. Sir Kay was of the opinion (which 'e backed up with the story of 'is conquest) that these outfittins were enchanted; why, 'e even described a series of remarkable feats the pris'ner performed whilst under 'is control, and it was readily determined that an execution on the twenny-firs' was the only end the saga would allow. The 'ole time the court was speaking, the pris'ner 'ad a 'aughty bearing and didn' seem to understand the gravity of being a pris'ner of Sir Kay; rather, 'is facial canvas bore a smirk as 'e observed the traditional recountins and replies, and once I thought I saw 'im laugh to 'imself. I know I wouldn' be laughin' if I were facin' the same fate 'e is! Still, I 'ave to say there is somethin' about 'im I like; I believe 'is mind to work most dext'rously, though 'e 'asn' said much besides wonderments at Sir Kay's accomplishins and some small questions that yet could be simply answered. 'E calls me 'Clarence,' which I do not much mind, since it 'as the feelin' in it that we could be good friends. 'E 'as been taken to the dungeons at this point, but I plan on takin' a visit to 'im—that is, if Merlin 'as finally lifted 'is infernal curse. I shall 'ave to ask 'im again to remove it. 'E is such a vengeful old fiend. My light dwindles. I am lookin' forward to 'earing your thoughts on this piece of entertainment, and on the event of its sequel I will be sure to keep you up to date. Til then, I am your ever-lovin', ever faithful son, Amyas."

The name touched a chord for me. “Amyas?” I said, barely giving Ty a chance to fish the last syllable from his throat. “Amyas le Poulet?”

“Why, that is in its consideration correct,” he said, looking up from the parchment. “Ow are you familiar with ‘im?”

Here I received a mild shock; I had spoken without thinking, and now would have to improvise. “He is said to be an exceptional page,” I said. “Praise for him can be heard in all corners of Camelot.”

As expected, once the parent was proud, his questions were forgotten, and he jauntily folded up the letter and placed it on top of a thin pile of its peers, which sat on the windowsill opposite me, anchored with a bovine carving I had not noticed before. (This one had a remarkable Dada-esque aspect.) I was grinding away at my mental gears; if I were not much mistaken, the execution day was tomorrow. It made my throat clench with distaste, but I became more and more certain that speaking with Hank Morgan was my main priority while I was here. Maybe you know the feeling—it is equal to that one experiences on the point of telling a woman who insists on worshipping him that he would rather spend his days with a cow named Etheldreda than bond his soul to hers in holy matrimony. One would rather avoid the unpleasant task, but knows there is no other way to the desired result, and so must pluck up the courage and charge forward. Sitting in Ty’s hut, I found it necessary to give a forceful pluck before the old courage rose to the occasion. Perhaps this sounds melodramatic of me, but I can assure you that, in thirty-four years of life I have hated no one except Hank Morgan. That Hank Morgan should be the one to potentially fix my situation was nearly intolerable.

Sherlock Holmes’s words welled up before me: “There is nothing new under the sun. It has all been done before.” I had not given him much credit for them at the time, but they applied

quite well at present. After all, if I were a rational man I would have to admit that this travel of mine actually *was not* singular to me; one other person had experienced a jump through literary time, and that other person was Hank Morgan. With the exception of believing he was in a lunatic asylum upon his arrival in Camelot, he had not expressed much confusion at finding himself launched back thirteen centuries, so it logically followed that he had at some point in his story come upon the answer. It was in pursuit of that answer that I would push aside my character analyses and seek him out. Furthermore, he was a self-described inventor, could “make anything a body wanted - anything in the world, it didn’t make a difference what,”⁷ if memory serves me. Perhaps he could find time between performing sham miracles and trying to change a wonderful cultural landscape to invent a little device that would put me right. It was inevitable, then: I would be getting myself an audience with The Boss. (Tonight my bags are packed; tomorrow I’ll walk these tracks that will lead me acro-o-ss the border!⁸)

“Ty,” I said, “might I be able to see this prisoner’s execution?”

He paused in the act of pouring the ale we had not consumed back into the barrel. “Don’t get enough in the way of entertainments where you’re from, eh?”

“Not like this.” It was technically true.

“Well, on the usual the seats are arranged by ways of rank, you see, with the title gettin’ shorter the higher up the eye travels. Folk like me would be so high up in the air the seats would fall down from the pressure of the clouds, so generalwise there’s not much room for us at fancy events like executionings and what-not. Besides,” he continued, “sometimes the life-juice of the

⁷ Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books Ltd., 2003) 19.

⁸Nick’s way of making fun of Hank’s pretentious nickname, which is shared by American singer-songwriter Bruce Springsteen. The sentence is a lyric from Springsteen’s song “Across the Border.”

condemned is spilt in a, ah, unobservant way, and sometimes you come ‘ome more decorated than you’d left.” He shuddered visibly.

I had to give him credit for his rather progressive observations, but that didn’t stop me from coming back with, “How possible would it be for only one individual—say, for instance, myself—to slip in among the other viewers and not cause much of a stir?”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Are you sayin’ you want to go to the execution?”

“You have hit it exactly, Ty.”

He rubbed his beard-less chin. “If we leave ‘ome not long after the sun has done the same tomorrow, I think you shall find yourself in the appropriate spot with just the right amount of time remainin’. I will write a note to my son on the back of this I ‘ave just come in possession of, and you can be my appointed letter-carrier, which will allow you access into the castle. Amyas can show you the way from there.” He paused. “Yes, I think that is a cap’tal scheme.”

I tell you, I could have jumped up and thrown my arms around the man if it weren’t for his animosity toward dirt and my ashy exterior.

He had not been kidding about our time of departure. The sun was just clearing the eastern horizon by the time we were out of the village, which, as soon as I had passed what I guessed to be the border, I was glad to leave to the realm of memory. It took us about an hour on foot to reach the castle suburbs, and, as we wound through yet another series of tangled streets and alleys, I noticed an increasing upward grade as I followed Ty. We climbed and climbed, and I avoided the glances of any of the town’s inhabitants even though I was now dressed as they were. (To this day, I can no longer make eye contact with anyone I pass on the street.) Finally the castle loomed in all its solid splendiddness, and, with a squeeze on the shoulder from Ty, I was sent forward to parley with the men-at-arms around the battlements until they opened the

massive gates and lowered the drawbridge. I skittered along, trying not to look at the moat on either side, until I had reached the overextended arches that marked the inside of the castle proper, where a man clad in a chain mail tunic and helmet bid me wait for my accomplice.

Presently he appeared, and I was struck by a feeling of acquaintanceship, much as I had experienced upon first meeting Sherlock Holmes. With his extreme whippishness of figure, tights that made him look like a flamingo from the waist down, and yellow curls that matched the curve of the feather in his pink satin cap, Amyas le Poulet (whom I had to restrain myself from calling Clarence to his face) was as familiar to me as Holmes had been. Now, as then, I worked to keep that familiarity in check.

“Amyas le Poulet?” I said, smiling in an encouraging sort of way. He nodded. “I have a letter from your father.”

He looked surprised, but held out his hand, saying, “Prithee give it me.”

I did, and watched as he unfolded the parchment and scanned it. The chain-mail guard stood like a statue next to us, pretending to stare off past the outer castle wall. It would have been a convincing stance had he not every so often flicked his eyes at me in an admonitory sort of way. Clarence, having finished absorbing his father’s message, nodded at the guard and said to me, “This way.”

I shot a disarming smile behind me at the guard, who glared at me in response. Clarence led me through an expansive paved court with turrets sprouting up in every direction, sometimes even from one another. The daylight was brilliant, and I had to squint as it penetrated the forest of towers in healthy, robust beams. To our right was the great hall in which resided the Table Round; as we bent our steps in the other direction, I craned my neck and could just make out the very bottoms of the colorful banners suspended from the lofty ceilings, and thought I even

glimpsed an outer edge of that famous piece of furniture. But we were turning left now, and emerging into the castle's enclosed court, which reminded me of a miniature coliseum fitted into a little courtyard. The arching colonnades that separated interior from exterior were butted up against the world's earliest stadium seating. This was already nearly full, and a riotous mass of color and noise made my spirits fizz in my veins. Across the yard, near the king's box, was the stake, with a fuzzy halo of sticks heaped around its base, and a monk standing as rigidly next to it. If I focused with a concentrated effort, I could see what looked like a completely naked man flanked by two soldiers at the far end of the court. Clarence, too, seemed to have perceived him; in a flash he was away and speaking to the prisoner, whom I knew to be Hank. After they had exchanged a few words, he was paraded toward the stake and any remaining sounds from the crowd were smothered. It seemed as if every member of the audience had been turned to rather dismayed-looking sculptures, even the king and queen, who were standing in their box with their hands folded over their sumptuous costumes as if in funereal prayer. Hank was chained to the stake, and the soldiers piled even more sticks around him, until the pile reached his knees. The executioner made his entrance and lit a torch, bending down while the monk began muttering. Out of the corner of my eye I saw something small and black flick into the path of the sunlight. It was the eclipse which Hank would use to make his escape. Almost in the same instant, the rest of the crowd noticed it, too. Their forward-straining gazes now were directed with equal intensity upwards as a rounded hunk of the sun was languidly obliterated. I knew enough of what was about to happen to be the first to return to Hank, who was looking annoyingly dramatic and stretching out his arm to point toward the sky.

“Stay where you are!” he boomed out in a bottomless bass that I’m sure he thought was quite impressive. “If any man moves—even the king—before I give him leave, I will blast him with thunder, I will consume him with lightnings!”⁹

I rolled my eyes and folded my arms, waiting for the melodramatics to be over. The crowd, though, needed no further evidence: this prisoner had powers that could destroy them all. They cowered back into seats I don’t think they noticed they had left, while the king and Hank conversed and they threw in petitions and shouts of “Mercy!” for good measure. The darkness got darker.

Hank, well into character, addressed the king in a tone clearly meant to carry beyond them: “I have reflected, Sir King. For a lesson, I will let this darkness proceed, and spread night in the world; but whether I blot out the sun for good, or restore it, shall rest with you.”¹⁰ He outlined his terms, terms that only he and I knew would turn Hank Morgan into The Boss, the king’s second-in-command-but-not-really-only-second. The crowd, relieved by any proposal that would spare them, backed him with applause that sounded more to me like masochistic raindrops slapping themselves against a windowpane.

The bile was rising into my throat, where it burned and made me salivate to a rather disgusting extent. I spat in the dirt as the king proclaimed in his best sovereign voice, “Away with his bonds, and set him free! and do him homage, high and low, rich and poor, for he is become the king’s right hand, is clothed with power and authority, and his seat is upon the highest step of the throne!”¹¹

Hank exchanged some more sentences with the king as the darkness became more and more complete. Soon, the entire sun was upstaged and the people were all buckets of distress

⁹ Twain 62.

¹⁰ Twain 63.

¹¹ Also Twain 63.

once more. Inadvertently, I shivered; the warm day had turned cold with the approach of untimely night. Linens rustled in the breeze and I contented myself with seeing if I could identify any constellations among the anachronistic stars. I was the only one who enjoyed the little foray into midday-midnight, for cries and wails blossomed from every corner of the stands. When Hank lifted his hands, making himself the centerpiece of the scene once more—detestable man!—a hush crashed down again, flattening even the whisper of the sticks settling into each other around him.

“Let the enchantment dissolve and pass harmless away!” he shouted.

My skin crawled as, at that very moment, a slivered crescent of white light emerged and the stands emptied themselves around the man who had supremely cheated them. A great wave of heads washed up to the stake in front of which he had planted himself in an arrogant stance, and I busied myself with finding Clarence and seeing if I could persuade him to arrange an audience between us.

I admit I indulged in some melodramatics of my own before our meeting commenced. As soon as Clarence’s pink head disappeared at the end of the hallway, I slipped into Hank’s unlocked chamber and stowed myself upon a great chair of oak that was situated in the most shadowy corner and waited, admiring my surroundings. The walls and floor were of gray stone, but from the ceiling were suspended kaleidoscopic banners that shimmered with the drafts meandering through the open-air windows. I got lost among them for a bit but presently directed my inspection to the rest of the room. There were more chairs of the kind in which I sat, with carvings adorning the arms and legs; and on the wall above the bed was a tapestry that in some places had been darned and that was tinted with an interesting palette, almost fauvist in nature.

The scene depicted in this tapestry turned canonical ideas of proportion on their heads, and I smiled as I reflected on the number of artistic movements I could identify in this age, centuries removed from even the earliest of them. As for basic necessities—beds and washstands and such—the room was not lacking; but I noticed that an oval-shaped metal piece was propped against the wall in place of a mirror, and, instead of lamps, bronze dishes filled with butter and burning rags hung at intervals on the walls. Who was it Hank compared himself to upon sight of his grand suite? Robinson Crusoe, I think? Narrow-minded little snit.

The narrow-minded snit made his appearance, and I choked back a laugh at his dress. It was certainly very fine, as far as the standards of the kingdom went, all silk and velvet and royal violet and gold, swallowing his adolescent-esque frame and making him furrow his brow in concentration when he wanted to move around. What made him look ridiculous was the hat he had perched in what I can imagine he thought was an important way on his head; the best way to describe it is to call it what it was: a top hat. Somehow this ethnocentric nineteenth-century visitor had managed to procure for himself a shiny black hat identical to the ones in fashion in his home year, and had simply attached three bulbous feathers to it. I could picture him saying to himself, “Yes, this will do; these simpletons won’t even notice the discrepancy. They will be too distracted by the grandness of these feathers.” To me, though, he looked like he had affixed to his skull a particularly dirty fountain. Each time he moved, the feathers swayed to and fro as if they were trying to dislodge a quantity of dust from the ceiling. Our gypsy biker, indeed, had come home¹².

He stood for a while, slouching with his hands in his pockets, the very picture of suffering. I could hear him mutter to himself about the “animals” with whom he would now have

¹²Reference to the Bruce Springsteen song “Gypsy Biker.” Again, Nick is making fun of Hank’s penchant for calling himself “The Boss.”

to live, and reflect on the possibility of inventing some conveniences to make this “society” (said sneeringly) more bearable. As I had predicted, he compared himself with the most impoverished castaways, and, if I caught his self-talk correctly, Mr. Crusoe was foremost among them. When I had had enough of the complaints, I rose from my chair, giving him a very satisfying start.

“Sir Boss,” I said, keeping my distaste down enough to remember the manner of address he was used to. “A word?”

He sighed as if a tiresome date had been foisted upon him by an overbearing, authoritarian aunt. “What is it? How did you get in here?”

“Clar—uh, Amyas le Poulet showed me in. I was told he had informed you of our scheduled conference.”

“Yes, yes,” he said, waving his hand, disrespectfully pushing my words to the side and striding forward past them. “Must everyone take such an immense interest in me?”

I ground my teeth. “The miracle you performed, sir, scared the British world almost to death.¹³ You are spoken of as a mighty magician—greater than Merlin, even. There is not a soul in the kingdom who would turn down an audience with one so great as yourself.” My God, I could make myself vomit.

He squared his shoulders and rocked back onto his heels in a self-satisfied sort of way. “All right, then, what is it which you would like to discuss with me?” He crescendoed until the “me” came out with a resonating strength.

Do. Not. Roll. Your. Eyes. “Actually, Sir Boss, you and I find ourselves in rather similar circumstances, and it is these which I wish to discuss.”

¹³ Twain 70.

The imperial eye traveled up and down the length of me, and he smirked. “Think you so?”

“Wit ye well, I know it.” Damn the man; he had me speaking in his own bombastic tone. I recalibrated, aiming for matter-of-factness. “I, too, have lived most of my life in a century subsequent to this one.”

I couldn't help feeling like I had scored a point when he paled. (I swear upon my life one of his feathers drooped as well.) He stuck his face into mine and hissed, “What do you mean by that?”

I straightened up so that we were nose to nose (well, my nose was just a bit above his, but of course that's immaterial). “I know that you were not born in this year. I happen to know that you came from the year 1879 after an unfortunate confluence of a man named Hercules, a swinging crowbar, and your own head.”

His own head was turning purple. “How do you know that?” Honestly, the theatrics. I'm surprised the words didn't burn his tongue on the way out, with all the venom injected into them.

It was a dance to me now, almost enjoyable. I took my turn to smirk. “You're not the only magician in Camelot, you know.”

He staggered back, reaching an arm behind him for the chair in which I had been seated. Upon finding it, he dropped down, looking sapped of strength. “Is that how you got here? Magic?”

“That is what I want you to answer for me.”

“Me? Why would I hold that kind of information?”

“You’ve shown little surprise at being here, no questions as to how you got here or how you could possibly get back. You mean to tell me you *don’t* therefore have enough information to put your mind at ease so?”

“That—that’s exactly what I mean to tell you.” He jumped from the chair and held his hands up in an almost supplicatory way. I would be lying if I told you it wasn’t exceedingly gratifying; and by this point in my story, I should hope my facts will have proven me anything but a liar. “I remember being hit, and coming to under an oak tree, but nothing in between.”

“And it didn’t bother you at all to find yourself situated so differently?”

He faltered a few times before shrugging and replying, “One thing at a time, is my motto—and just play that thing for all it is worth, even if it’s only two pair and a jack.”¹⁴ Then, drawing himself up, “And I don’t see that what I do or do not question is any of your business.”

“Then what do you have to say about my following in your footsteps?” A note of desperation had crept into my voice, confound it. “How do you explain that?”

“Why should I?” He crossed his arms and looked at me defiantly. “Must we quarrel about something so humdrum? Participate in yet another one of those insipid Round Table duels between people who have never been introduced to each other, and between whom exists no cause of offense whatsoever?”¹⁵ It is just perpetuating the idiotic ways of these uncivilized children.”

The idea of running him through with a sword looked less than humdrum to me. “How dare you stomp right through this culture, which was functioning perfectly well before it had even heard of you, and treat it like it is something less than that which you would scrape off your shoe?” I was wandering away from the more pressing topic, but I had had enough of his

¹⁴ Twain 30.

¹⁵ Twain 36.

superiority. “The people of Camelot were doing just fine—quite charmingly, in fact—without you. What right do you have to impose your out-of-date ways on these innocents?”

He snorted. “Out-of-date? Try cultivated. Try progressive. Try actually *intelligent*. My modern American technologies will be like miracles to such an infantile population.” He gestured to the mirror and lamps, his lip curling until it matched the sweep of his long and rat-like nose.

Perhaps calm presentation of logic would be more successful here. (Holmes would certainly favor it.) “The people are not the imbeciles you make them out to be. Just because their culture differs from yours doesn’t make it any less valuable.” He was looking at me with an expression that, while I couldn’t decisively call it open, was not completely closed off, either. Onward. “Haven’t you noticed? There is a fine manliness in almost every face; and in some a certain loftiness and sweetness that rebuke your belittling criticisms and still them.”¹⁶ I thought of Ty, working away at his carvings. When Hank hadn’t responded, I took the seat next to him, seizing as much of an unbiased ear as I could. “How long do you think you can keep up with this charade? Certainly you’ll be called upon to perform a miracle again.”

He pushed himself up straighter with a dignified expression. “I’ll have you know that I have my next miracle just about planned out. I dare say it’ll keep them quiet for as long as I require.” And, jumping up: “These animals don’t reason! They never put this and that together, and all their talk shows that they don’t know a discrepancy when they see it.”¹⁷ He began to pace in front of a great, empty fireplace, swishing his robes around grandiosely. “Here I am, a giant among pygmies! A man among children, a master intelligence among intellectual moles, by all

¹⁶ Twain 37.

¹⁷ Twain 56.

rational measurement the one and only actually great man in this whole British world!”¹⁸ He rounded upon me, shaking his finger fiercely in my face. “I am going to rule this land, will fix it and bring it up to modern American standards, and I have every right and power to do so.”

I slumped back. He was hopeless. I will take the upper hand and admit that the prejudices of one’s breeding are not gotten rid of just at a jump. Arguments have no chance against petrified training; they wear it as little as the waves wear a cliff.¹⁹

“All I want to know,” I said, as gently as I could manage, “is how you got here. You may be content to make your fortunes, but I want to go back.”

To his credit, he looked genuinely apologetic when he lifted his hands and replied, “I would not be able to tell you that even if I wished to do so. All I can remember is what I told you before: It was during a misunderstanding conducted with crowbars with a fellow we used to call Hercules. He laid me out with a crusher alongside the head that made everything crack, and seemed to spring every joint in my skull and make it overlap its neighbor. Then the world went out in darkness, and I didn’t feel anything more, and didn’t know anything at all—at least for a while.”²⁰ If I knew the mechanism that allowed me to make this journey, you can be sure I would have exploited it by now.”

“But you—” Oh. Right. *I* knew that he was going to return to America, but *he* didn’t yet. Of course he couldn’t know how he had done it, since...he hadn’t. Something warm and hopeful in me began to deflate. It seemed I had no other choice but to wait until my special brand of fatigue overtook me and sent me on my way. But if I couldn’t control it, how long would that

¹⁸ Twain 83.

¹⁹ Twain 123, 169.

²⁰ Twain 19.

take? Already I had spent much more time here than in Regent's Park. There *had* to be something I was missing. There had to be. For my very sanity, there had to be. If Hank could return, damn it, so could I. What was I overlooking?

The answer was waiting for me when I woke up in my bed, where not a strand of straw could be found, thank goodness.

The frame! Hank's story doesn't start the second he opens his eyes upon Camelot; rather, in the opening pages, he is seen through a different person's eyes, a person to whom he *gives a manuscript*. The only way he could have done so was to return to his present—so it could be done!

Stumbling as I jumped out of bed, I made my way clumsily through my shadowy apartment, flipping a light switch as I dropped to my knees in front of my bookshelf. I ran my fingers along the spines until I found what I wanted, pulled it out, and almost viciously turned the pages. (The memory makes me cringe, just a little. I still have the impulse to apologize to the book, even if it told a tale I hated.) “Miracle”... “miracle” ... ego ... more ego ... war (serves him right) ... there! He was back in the narrator's presence. But—wait—? I turned back, reading the transition between chapters again. Transition isn't exactly the word I want, because, to my utter dismay, there was none! Much as I was experiencing firsthand, one moment he could be seen in Camelot, and the next, he was raving in a bed in the nineteenth century.

I sat back on my heels, letting the book slip to the carpet. So I was stuck; I had no way to know when I would be seized, and no way to know when I would be spit back out. Thinking about it, I realized that I hadn't even been aware of the change this time. One second had seemed to follow another without even the slightest bump, and yet the difference between the two seconds was the difference of fifteen centuries. It was lunacy, really—how could I possibly

remedy any of this? No doctor would let me sit in his examination room for ten breaths after hearing what I've told you, and, really, would I even have the courage to calmly stare him in the eye and narrate such an unbelievable story? *Why hello, square one. It's nice to see you again.*

Maybe this was the one point in which Hank wasn't totally off his rocker. Maybe the best course of action was to play whatever hand I was dealt.

Struck by a sudden thought, I picked the paperback up off the floor and found the chapter describing the eclipse. Paging a bit forward, I came to the scene that should have unfolded right after I had made my exit. Surprise, surprise, the man cheated the people again with another fake miracle, and was none too modest about it, either.

Maybe I should have warned him what he would unleash with his monstrous ego. If I could have made him see the wasteland into which he would turn the quaint land of Camelot, maybe I could have prevented suffering that hadn't had to happen. I skimmed the next page:

"To be vested with enormous authority is a fine thing," Hank had written. "But to have the on-looking world consent to it is a finer." (Ugh.) Then, further down: "There was not anyone in the kingdom who would have considered it good judgment to meddle with my matters."²¹

On the other hand, maybe I would have gotten nowhere. I put the book back in its place, turned off the light, and shuffled back into my bedroom, where I spent a blessedly dreamless rest of the night.

²¹ Twain 76.

NICHOLAS DIGBY AND THE FATED PAINTER

“All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.”

~Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

When I opened my eyes onto what I knew right away to be Basil Hallward's studio, I resolved that, by the end of this scene, I would have some concrete answers.

I should probably pause the flow of my narration (I hope you're finding it agreeable) to explain how I could have known where I was so quickly. You see, I had spent many long hours lost among Hallward's canvases, listening in as he and Lord Henry had their philosophical discussions, finding myself enraptured by the presence of Dorian Gray. In short, the story of Basil Hallward and his eerily beautiful subject topped the list of my favorites. I would know Basil, Dorian, or even Henry, anywhere, you can bet upon my life. They were real to me even before I bodily entered their world.

By this time, I had grown so familiar with my travels that finding myself in these new surroundings produced little more reaction than, "Ah. A change." I had begun to even enjoy my sojourns, but, at the same time, I wanted to know my role was in them. *Why* was I finding myself in these scenes, at these points in the stories, with these characters? Was I supposed to exert an influence on them, or were they supposed to change me somehow? It was no longer about a way to stop. I was to be an uncommercial traveler—and, by all accounts, I was the only one who existed. I accepted my fate. Now it was time to learn more about my destinations at their very cores.

On the surface, this destination was much darker than the others—it seemed that I had arrived this time upon a night scene. The studio was in shadow, although through the wide window I could see that the sun had not completely set yet. The windowpane hovered a few inches above the sill, letting in lilac- and rose-scented breezes that made one of the silk curtains sway and almost upset the tubes of paint and brushes scattered across a small painting table situated underneath. The other was pinned behind a Persian divan. I could see a forest of

canvases propped against the far wall, each other, and a piano. A raised platform marked the center of the room, directly across from which a color-spotted canvas was clamped to an easel. I walked up to it, leaning in so I could see what had been painted there. Nothing recognizable revealed itself except for the artist's name in long, vermilion letters in the lower left-hand corner. This could be a background, color study, or wholly uninspired attempt at creativity. A short wooden stool stood awkwardly in the middle of the sitter's platform, looking exceptionally out of place. If I was completely still, I could hear the roar of London on the evening air, a muted, soft reminder of life. The combination of details produced an overall soothing effect, perfect for me to contemplate my next move.

Not much contemplation was completed before the door to the studio swung open and Basil Hallward visibly flinched upon seeing a stranger standing in his studio, contemplating.

"Ho! Who are you?" The grave, deep voice matched his rugged, intelligent face and inky hair perfectly. With his substantial brows knitted together, Basil Hallward exuded a seriousness and strength that gave me pause. "Did we have a meeting? I was just on my way out." His eyes traveled the length of me, and the brows came even closer to touching.

"No," I said. "But I have come to speak with you."

A brow lifted. "Have you?" He hovered with his hand still on the doorknob. "Parker didn't inform me."

"It was a last-minute decision." And how.

"How did you get in here?"

Confound it. "It...was open."

He glanced down at the doorknob, then past me to the garden doors. Finally, he seemed to have made some sort of decision, because he stepped further into the studio and gestured for

me to take a seat on the divan. He set his Gladstone bag just inside the doorway but didn't remove his gray ulster as he lit one of the lamps affixed to the wall. It deepened the crevasses around his unsmiling mouth as he turned to me, standing ramrod straight and crossing his arms. "Sir, it was most unfortunate of you to have called tonight. I have pressing business to attend to, not to mention a train to catch. Furthermore, it is rare for me to entertain visitors at this hour unless I know them intimately."

"You may not know me," I said, holding up a hand. "But I can assure you I know you. Quite well, as a matter of fact."

Again he looked me up and down, his skeptical brow rising ever higher, giving him an air of haughtiness that I knew he had picked up from Dorian, much as it would pain him to hear it.

"Unfortunately, I have only your word to take for that, Mr.—?"

"Digby."

"—Digby. And I really must be going, so I will just have Parker show you out." He reached for a small silver bell that hung on a nail next to the door.

"No!" I cried, jumping up, but he had already rung it. "Please speak with me. Please."

He replaced the bell and ran a hand through his hair, staring up at the gilded ceiling as if in supplication. "I really must go."

"Don't!" I cast around for something, anything that would convince him to give me the chance that, if I were in his shoes, I wouldn't even consider. "You are much better than you pretend to be."²²

He whipped around, staring at me rigidly. The brows were no longer overhanging the eyes, but had crept up the forehead. It provided ample space for his eyes to grow wide enough

²² Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003) 73.

for me to see the reflection of the lamplight in them, along with unfeigned recognition. My words had hit the mark; he remembered saying them exactly as I had, to someone he as well had very much wanted to listen. Stiffly, he took a step toward me.

“I know that the things I’m going to tell you are going to sound extraordinary,” I ventured. “And I have no proof for them. But I need someone reasonable to listen.”

“No artist desires to prove anything,” he replied, slowly. “Even things that are true can be proved.”²³

I took that as a go-ahead. “I know you because, many years from now, your story will have been read by men and women all over the world. And I...I am one of them.”

By all external appearances, the words took a moment to register, and, once they had, they made him reel ever so slightly. “My story?”

I nodded.

He tossed his head back in that way that, as I recalled, used to make his friends laugh at him at Oxford.²⁴ “What about my story anyone would want to read is beyond me,” he said, almost to himself, with a kind of bitter snort. Then, fixing me with a piercing gaze, “How many years?”

I paused. “Nearly a century and twenty.”

He seemed to deflate a little as if my voice had punched him in the stomach. “You—you’re—”

“Not from here, let’s say.”

²³Wilde 3.

²⁴Wilde 6.

The utter confusion that poured from his face gave me a flash of what Sherlock Holmes must have seen on mine the first time we met. I suddenly felt bad for Basil, and for myself in Regent's Park.

"But...how?"

I shrugged. "I'm still trying to figure that out."

He staggered forward to sit on the edge of the divan. I moved aside, putting my hands in my pockets and looking at the multitude of fireflies that was presently growing in the dusky garden. It was a lot to take in, I knew, but I hoped that my dress and the fact that I hadn't stolen anything yet would be credit enough.

The door opened again and a gray haired man in a charcoal suit appeared, inclining his head toward Basil. "Sir."

Basil waved his hand. "Would you be so kind as to bring my guest and me a spot of gin, Parker?"

Another incline. "Yes, sir."

"Thank you."

As soon as the door swung shut again, Basil leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and breathing out slowly through his nose. "So...you know of Dorian, as well?"

"Yes."

He smirked, again with that tinge of bitterness. "Then it shouldn't surprise you that I was on my way to speak with him when our two paths crossed."

I shook my head, having known as soon as I saw the Gladstone bag. I also knew when his train would be leaving, and for where. And a few other more unpleasant things. My stomach began to sink, and I took a seat next to him.

“The only thing I want to do before I leave for Paris is speak to Dorian,” he said softly, looking at his hands. “I know that the work I have done, since I met Dorian Gray, is good work, the best work of my life. But in some curious way—I wonder will you understand me?—his personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before.²⁵ I have this great picture in my head, but the distressing thing is that, now, the one thing that has truly inspired me—the one thing that is absolutely necessary to me—has begun to decay, to let himself fall from his former glory. If I’m ever going to express this picture, I have to leave London.” He shook his head. “But first I must speak to him. He may still possess some hope of being recovered.”

Another wave of what I can only identify as dread passed over me, but I just nodded encouragingly. This exchange had begun with my need for him to hear me, but, as it turned out, the greater need rested with him.

“I thought it would be easier to leave,” he continued. “I have given my whole soul to someone who treats it as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity, an ornament for a summer’s day.²⁶ But it is still my whole soul. How does one go about getting something like a soul back? If I knew, I would most surely retrieve Dorian’s for him, too. He is almost unrecognizable to me, though his appearance has not been touched by any single mark of time. He exists as two in my mind now—the Dorian Gray he is and the Dorian Gray he used to be, to whom I gave my whole self in painting him. At this point” –and here he paused, overcome— “the Dorian of canvas and oil paint is the real Dorian.”

²⁵ Wilde 13.

²⁶ Wilde 14.

“Word goes around about the remarkable number of acquaintances who rapidly change from intimacy with Mr. Gray to complete avoidance,” I said. Not that I had heard any of this personally. I didn’t need to.

“Yes!” He said, turning to me with eyes on fire. “That’s exactly it. Some of those who were most close with him now pale as soon as he enters a room, and sometimes they even have to remove themselves from it. For all the charges against him, though, he—and many others in his ever-changing circle—is content to turn a deaf ear upon them. He still has his charm, his boyishness, his youthful good looks, and that is enough for most to ignore anything they hear, until they, too, begin to hide their faces at his approach. He is too good for this. Someone needs to tell him what is being said.”

I was possessed with the desire to stop him in his fatal mission. “Does that someone have to be you?”

He looked at me as if hurt. “Mr. Digby, the rest, including Henry, are content to consider his outward looks a perfect response to the slights against his inner life. They will allow him to continue on whatever destructive path he has chosen to take, while I am the one who cares about him enough to try to help him find the right way again. I am the only person who loves him enough to tell him that I hear these hideous things being said against him. When I first heard them, I laughed. I hear them now, and they make me shudder.” He jumped up, and began to pace as his words tumbled out, sometimes tangling up with one another in his passion, which made itself known in frenzied gestures of the hands and tugs of the hair. “One has a right to judge a man by the effect he has over his friends. His seem to lose all sense of honor, of goodness, of purity. He has filled them with a madness for pleasure. They have gone down into the depths, and he has led them there. I want him to lead a life that will make the world respect him as I did,

and in some ways as I still do. I want him to have a clean name for a fair record. I want him to get rid of the dreadful people he associates with. I want him to give me some answer to these horrible charges that are made against him. If he tells me that they are absolutely untrue from beginning to end, I shall believe you. Deny them, Dorian, deny them! Can't you see what I am going through? My God! Don't tell me that you are bad, and corrupt, and shameful."

My lungs had begun to clench together in a way that made my head swim and my stomach lurch. This speech had been hard enough to hear when it sounded only from a page. His passion had clearly made him forget to whom he was speaking, and now I was filling in for Dorian. Hearing the harrowing pleas weighted me down with pity, especially since I knew what the response would be. His earnest intensity made my heart hurt. Basil Hallward was a good man who deserved to love someone better than Dorian Gray.

Parker reappeared with a tray, decanter, and two glasses, which I jumped up and accepted, trying to block Basil from his view. He tried to crane his neck to see around me, but I just stood up straighter and said, "Many thanks."

He glared at me, but when no supplications had come from his master, he said, "Yes, sir," turned on his heel, and stalked off.

I shut the door and set the tray on the sitter's stool, pouring out some gin for Basil. He had stopped pacing, but his chest was still rising and falling in a heated way. He blinked a few times as I handed the tumbler to him, and took a long drink.

"Forgive me," he said shakily. "I forgot myself."

"Quite all right." If only there were something I could say to fix this for him. My soul was aching for him.

He took another gulp of the gin before stepping up onto the platform to refill. Swilling the clear liquid around, he murmured, “You know, when I first met Dorian Gray, a curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life.”²⁷ Another drink. “And yet, there was so much in him that was good, so much in him that was noble.”²⁸

“Perhaps those things are still there.” It was a flimsy, clichéd thing to say, but something needed to be said.

“I have to warn him,” he said, speaking less to me again and more to himself. “I have to try to get him to give up the life he’s been leading. Society, civilized society at least, is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich and fascinating. Lord Henry will not speak up, no one will speak up, so for Dorian’s sake, I shall be the one to do it.”

Images flashed before me: Basil, holding a candle up to his portrait in Dorian’s attic—the candle falling—Basil, dropping into a chair and burying his face in his hands—Dorian rushing at him with a knife—plunging it into his neck, just behind the ear—Basil, stretched out across the table, all the life gone out of him for his attempt to restore life to the person he loved most in the world. “You can’t, Basil!” I cried, jumping up. “You can’t.”

With a new show of the strength that had impressed me so much throughout the novel, the painter smiled sadly and simply replied, “I want the Dorian Gray I used to paint.”

“You can’t change him,” I said, desperately. “You shouldn’t.”

²⁷ Wilde 9-10.

²⁸ Wilde 107.

“Shouldn’t I?” he rejoined. “It seems that I am in actuality the perfect person for the task.”

I grasped at anything I could think of. I couldn’t just sit back and let him go to his death. “It’s dangerous—you don’t know how he will react—he might not take it well—you might lose the friendship that you value so much—” *It’s useless, you’re just spinning your wheels.* I knew it, I did—but I felt like I was watching from a lifeboat as Basil’s ship slowly slid beneath the surface, just sitting there when I could save his life in any combination of ways. The biggest lifesaver was propped against my foot; I could tell him point-blank what was about to happen to him. But he was being gracious enough, accepting my story at face value. He’d had even more reason to throw me out after I had told him, but he had chosen to confide in me in a way I never realized I craved before. I had an enormous amount of respect for him. Did I really want to ruin that with morbid prophecies? If I only had minutes left with Basil Hallward before he stepped onto Destiny’s path, did I really want to leave him thinking I was a lunatic after all? Or, on the other hand, did I really want to risk messing with something I still didn’t understand? What would happen if I tried to change the course of a plot that had been written 120 years before I had intruded? If the clichéd versions of my situation had taught me anything, it was that you can’t turn back the hands of time. Universal unraveling would inevitably be the result.

Apparently during the course of this internal monologue I had been wringing my hands or making some sort of pained face, because when I returned to the present—unsuitable as the word was anymore—Basil was watching me with an expression that took me some moments to read. He still had traces of the intensity and determination previously displayed, but now he was looking at me almost paternally, with affection and compassion. He topped off his glass and poured a new one for me, handing it to me as he took a seat next to me on the divan.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” he said in a subdued voice.

I just looked at him, not trusting myself to interpret him correctly.

“I’ve been trying to save Dorian Gray since 1891,” he said, sipping his gin. “And, as you so perceptively pointed out, I can’t change any more than he can.”

Now I was not just looking at him, I was staring. Gaping might even be a more appropriate word. It was all I could do to keep my mouth from hanging open. “You...know?”

He studied the liquor, swirling it around in his glass and watching the drops roll back to the surface. “To say that I *remember* doing this over and over would be inaccurate, but I’ve had a feeling of déjà vu so many times in my life, and so strongly, that it became impossible to believe anything I’d done was unique. Sometimes I would get flashes—forward and back—images that I either recognized or would recognize as I was living them. Once, I was sitting in my studio—right after I had finished Dorian Gray’s portrait, as a matter of fact—and I saw myself begging Lord Henry not to try to influence him. Not ten minutes later, he was shown in, and we went into the garden, where our train of conversation led us to that very subject. These kinds of things occurred so often that I could come to no other conclusion besides this: My life has been set for me by someone other than myself. Is it fate? God? That I cannot know.”

I couldn’t help but smile at what Oscar Wilde would say to this.

“But you were correct when you said that it is not possible for Dorian Gray to change. The reason my adjurations will ultimately be futile isn’t because Dorian necessarily likes the track he is taking, or even because he has become comfortable in his habits, but because he has been appointed that track to travel, and no other. He was ordained to lead the life that causes me so much pain to observe, just like I was ordained to try to deter him from it. When I met him, I

felt that we were destined to know each other. As I later came to understand, it was because we were.”

“But—if you know all this, why don’t you do something about it? Why do you continue to torture yourself, to embark on such a futile course of action? It’s unnecessary, and unfair! Have you no will of your own?” I was broken from my frustration by a chill at my right ankle, upon which I realized that I was clenching my pant leg in a fist.

Basil, too, had noticed this, and he put a hand on my shoulder. “I can only believe that if this life was ordained for me, a purpose for it was ordained as well.”

I remembered Oscar Wilde’s statement that “All art is quite useless,”²⁹ and, for the first time, I really disliked him.

“And, in any case,” Basil continued, “what purpose would life have if we were all to run around willy-nilly, caring only for ourselves instead of working toward a greater good? What value would life have if it were a solitary venture instead of a team effort?” He chuckled. “I’m sure Lord Henry would have a few derogatory things to say about my ‘idealistic views,’ but I’m also sure that, deep down, he would agree with me wholeheartedly.”

“You think?”

He tossed his head back. “Well, we’re all really just pieces of whoever created us, set free to perform as he ordains it, so it makes sense that, at our cores, all of us must believe in those things in which he himself believes.”

“Some freedom.” I felt trapped just listening to him.

Basil shrugged, half-smiling. “You know, when I first met Dorian Gray, I had a strange feeling that Fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows.³⁰ It seems I was

²⁹ Wilde 4.

³⁰ Wilde 10.

correct.” He finished the last of his gin and held out his hand to take my glass. Walking over to the tray, he set the tumblers down and said, “What’s done is done, and will be done again. And now, I really, truly must be going.” He pulled his gloves back on and readjusted the sleeves of his ulster before picking up his bag. “Feel free to stay as long as you’d like tonight; I daresay our conversation would rattle the man with even the strongest nerves. I don’t know how you will return to wherever it was from which you came, but you are welcome to rest here until you do.” He held out his right hand, and I stood up to shake it. “It was a true pleasure meeting with you.”

“There’s nothing I can say to make you change your mind?” It was all I could do to keep my voice from cracking. It was like watching an innocent man go to the guillotine while the real criminal stood next to me in the crowd. “You must go to Dorian Gray’s?”

“You know I have to,” he said gently. Then, and I was surprised to see an almost mischievous sparkle in his eye, “You know I will.”

He let me walk with him to the front door, where I watched him tip his hat to me and walk off into the night. Shutting the door quietly so as not to alert my presence to Parker, I stood with my back pressed against it for a moment or two before collapsing in front of the umbrella stand and vomiting.

“We shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly.”³¹

I slammed the book shut, only seven pages in. In one of my more masochistic urges, I had pulled *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from its coveted top spot on my bookshelf and revisited Basil Hallward the only way I could now that I was miles and years away. But I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t enjoy the drama of it all, knowing that at least one of the actors was aware of his

³¹ Wilde 7.

identity as such. I could no longer be okay with what I had once seen as a satisfying ending; I could no longer agree that the story had to unfold the way it did. It all seemed unnecessarily cruel.

And, while I still performed tolerably well at work, I could no longer sell books with any of the zest I used to feel. They now seemed to me miniature prisons where the inmates, sometimes *aware* of their incarceration, were forced to perform at the will of their overlord no matter how much pain it caused them. They were forced to endure whatever afflictions would make for the best plot device—and this now seemed to me a wholly unequal purpose. I would get into work and stare at the bookshelves listlessly, filled with bitter mirth at the glass that encased them even further. I felt trapped myself, railing against the principles of a world I could do nothing to change. Once it was written, then it was done.

I would never be able to read Basil's story again, but, perhaps more self-indulgently than I am proud to admit, I was relieved. While I may have had my own situation to deal with, it would never be as hopeless as his. Once I figured out how to stop traveling, I would be free to do so. I, at least, had a choice.

NICHOLAS DIGBY AND THE HOSPITAL INCIDENT

“Reality leaves a lot to the imagination.” ~John Lennon

After my encounter with Basil, I no longer wanted to enter the world of fiction. Even though I could remember Holmes, Ty, and even Basil with fondness, it was always tinged with the sour taste of frustration for their sakes. Because I enjoyed free will, I mourned for those who couldn't.

I was fortunate enough to not have to take another trip for a while after meeting with Basil. If I kept myself on the surface of life, performing my role much as he had done—without complaint—I could get through days that now felt endless. Every time I sold a book, I felt like I was supporting the tyrants who trapped good and noble people between the pages of their own whims, but if I treated every transaction as just that, as cold, emotionless business, I made it through with a little less guilt than the day before.

The last time I traveled, I distinctly remember sitting in our staff room at work, attempting to eat a peanut butter sandwich. We were already having one of our most profitable days that spring, but I was having a hard time participating in my fellow workers' excitement. I could no longer bring myself to read at mealtime—one of my favorite habits—so I had spent half of my break staring at the anemic slices of bread in my hand. As you may guess, it did much for the appetite.

The door to the room opened as I took a bite, my supervisor popping her head in. "I know you're on a break, but do you have a minute?"

I stretched my neck toward her to swallow the congealed lump of wheat and peanut butter. "Sure."

I followed her onto the floor, where it occurred to me that there should be more people there. She never interrupted me on break unless we were lucky enough to have more customers than salespeople. Instead, my co-workers were sitting around the long mahogany table, looking

our way. When we came to stand at the head of the table, they all stood up. It was then that I noticed the smiles on every face, including my supervisor's. Squeezing my arm, she dashed behind the sales counter, producing a red-and-gold wrapped package.

"I'm sure this comes as a surprise to no one," she said, taking her spot next to me once more. "And I'm very happy to institute this award on behalf of the man standing next to me. I think you'll all agree that it's been a long time coming."

I, who had been distracted by the multicolored spines trapped behind glass doors all around, turned to her to catch the last half of the last sentence. When everyone around the table began to clap and she presented the package to me with a huge grin, the pieces finally fell into place.

"Congratulations, Nick!" she said, while everyone else's clapping became a monotonous white noise. "You are Bauman's first-ever Employee of the Year."

I nodded to her and the rest and dutifully pushed back the paper on the box in my hand. When it had fallen away, though, the box was not a box at all, but a book. Turning it over in my hand so that the gold-embossed leather spine glinted in the store lighting, I discovered that my co-workers—the closest things to what I could call friends—had gifted me the first edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

I looked up. My left ear began ringing.

And then I was standing in a fluorescent-lit hallway that was vaguely familiar to me, although something about it wasn't right. I looked all around, seeing no one, until my gaze was on the ceiling. An image of that same ceiling, blurring by above me, popped up as something else blurred by.

A gurney whipped past me, pushed by a man in a white coat while another man in mint-colored scrubs hurried along next to him, speaking in staccato sentences: “Unresponsive for twelve minutes. Has not regained consciousness. Pupils unequal with the left nonreactive. BP 164 over 90. Pulse 98 and thready. Respirations 14 and shallow. Peripheral reflexes normal, no obvious signs of trauma.” White Coat nodded tersely to each, looking much too grave for my comfort. They had nearly barreled out of view when I caught a glimpse of the patient, and everything in me froze and spasmed at the same time. (It’s an unforgettable sensation, let me tell you.) Was that—?

Feeling disconnected, as if I were in a dream, I fell into step behind the (mostly) energetic group, Mint Scrubs still rattling off statistics. They banged open a pair of swinging gray doors with soap-opera dramatics, making a bald man in navy scrubs turn from his computer screen. I slipped inside before the doors swung shut, hanging back, craning my neck to get another look at the prone form. And, before you ask, no—it never occurred to me that what I was doing was odd in any way, or frowned upon. Part of my reasoning had been switched off when I saw the patient’s face, and all I wanted was a double-take.

“I want an MRI of the head and neck,” White Coat said to the bald tech at the computer, “so we can rule out subdural hematoma.”

“Sure thing.” The bald tech stood up and all three men positioned themselves around the gurney, heaving the body onto the MRI table while the machine’s yawning mouth stood open and ready. I shuddered as phantom aches bloomed all over my skull at the memory of being inside a machine just like this one. It was an awkward movement, moving the patient—his arms and head kind of flopped out of reach, and, as his head lolled around between the bald tech’s and Mint Scrubs’s shoulders, I was able to get a distinct view of his face. That’s when chaos began

stomping around inside me, shaking me up until I thought I was upside-down and inside-out. Because the peaceful-looking, blissfully unaware expression that revealed itself was attached to *my own face*.

First I stumbled backward, away from this incapacitated double, until I hit the wall behind me and began to stumble forward. Nothing was changing about the scene but it was becoming more hellish and the roaring in my head was deafening and confusing. “Stop,” I croaked. “Stop. Stop! *Stop!*”

Having successfully laid...me?...on the table, Mint, White, and Bald all spun around, looking shocked at the presence of another person. Mint and White, both rather solidly built, stepped together so that their collective shoulders made a kind of wall between the me standing in front of them and the me on the table. Bald looked poised to spring, or something, but I was barely noticing all this. I was reaching toward the man-wall—the chaos inside my head was pouring out of my mouth in desperate, confused phrases that sounded louder than I meant—all I wanted was to get to that double, to lay a hand on his arm, to make sure he was actually there—and then all I wanted was for one of them to lay a hand on my arm, to reassure me that *I* was actually there—and then one of them (maybe both) *had* laid a hand on my arm, except I realized that it was flailing, along with the other, possibly in response to the fact that they hadn’t moved the first time I tried to push my way past them. Mint had grabbed my left arm, and White was reaching toward the right. I tried to shake them off me. “No – no – stop – *wait!*” And Bald was springing, though not at me (either one), but at the doorway. He smashed his hand into a red button mounted on the wall, making a wailing alarm sound over and over and over, lending its power to everything raging around in my head until I thought it would blast apart.

MRI security alert, room 1891 MRI security alert, room 1891MRI security alert, room 1891 MRI security alert, room 1891. What is happening? MRI security alert, room 1891MRI security alert, room 1891 MRI security alert, room 1891. Where am I? MRI security alert, room 1891 MRI security alert, room 1891. How is this possible? MRI security alert, room 1891 MRI security alert, room 1891MRI security alert, room 1891 MRI security alert, room 1891 MRI security alert, room 1891 MRI security alert, room 1891. “Get off me!”

Two more burly men who resembled TSA agents (perhaps with less gold bars on their shoulders, or something) tore into the room and joined what was now a human whirlwind. Mint and White would not let me get at the second me, and I would not let them stop me. Various limbs were swinging around, trying to reach out, trying to pin down, trying to get free, trying to entrap, and the two security guards muscled in without hesitation. I was suddenly strait-jacketed by a pair of arms that were more like the Anaconda of Ceylon and his clone betting each other who could smash my ribcage into more pieces. They actually squeezed the air out of me, and the shock of suddenly being oxygen-less forced me to stop thrashing for a moment, which was enough for one of my attackers to jab something sharp into my leg. Though my arms were now pinned to my sides, I took this new escalation of violence as a cue to start struggling again, trying to shake the gambling anacondas off me. I only managed a few less-than-successful shoulder jerks before a haze drifted through my mind, making the roaring fade and a wave of drowsiness wash over me so powerfully that I felt my knees quit for the day. I slumped downward, but the anacondas lifted me up—so far up, in fact, that someone else—at this point, I couldn’t see who, and I didn’t have the energy to lift my neck up far enough to look—grabbed hold of my feet and swung me onto the stretcher the other me had just been on. My eyelids were fluttering in an

effort to stay open, and I doggedly tried to get any one of them to tell me what the deuce was the big idea, restraining *me* when, clearly, they were the ones involved in some shady dealings, possibly having stolen a few organs I didn't know about to clone me into some sort of evil version of myself who could get the real, nice guy, good neighbor, good worker me into some real trouble, and no one would believe my story when I told them the truth. I don't know how successful I was in communicating with any of them, as my lips got heavier and heavier along with my eyelids. My tongue started getting confused about where it should go, so it eventually gave up and decided to lie still, propped against my front teeth. I fought to stay awake, to see what they were going to do with the future-Terminator-me, but whatever brainwashing serum they'd given me was powerful, and it was fast. I finally surrendered to the blackness, but, this time, there was no one waiting for me, no English destination on the other end. It was just black.

NICHOLAS DIGBY AND THE RULES OF THE GAME

“Good artists exist simply in what they make, and consequently are perfectly uninteresting in what they are.” ~Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Well, that brings us to the present. *This* present, of course. I haven't been here that long—or maybe I have, it's very hard to tell as the hours tend to meld together—but I've had plenty of time to meditate on the experiences that brought me here. Would you like to hear the conclusions to which I've been able to come? I can't promise them to be entirely worked out, but perhaps they can bring us into even deeper conversation. I find that I very much enjoy talking to you.

When I first really sat down and tried to work everything out, I decided to channel Sherlock Holmes and look at the facts. Whenever I traveled, it was to an English destination. Well, this could be explained easily enough, given my personal preferences. I spent the majority of my time on that fair isle in thought or in daydream, so it made perfect sense that, when I began to travel, that should be the destination. It took nearly no time at all to satisfy myself upon that point. The specific settings in which I was placed, though, presented more of a hearty question on which to chew. If I suspended mainstream disbelief, I could readily say that each scene into which I had been admitted was populated by characters who, up until that point, had only existed between the pages of a book—and, therefore, must have come from that very book.

It seems to me that every time throughout this world's history that a man has sat down to a narrative, in his act of literary creation, he has inadvertently played God somewhere in the universe. I have been afforded the opportunity to be the first explorer of the multitude of worlds created throughout literary history. You may tell me over and over that Sherlock Holmes and Basil Hallward are not real people. You cannot reach out and touch them; they may be visible down to the last detail in your mind, but they can never speak to you in measurable sound waves or react with your physical world in the ways which Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein have dictated. But I tell you—every last soul I met on my excursions was as real as you, sitting right in front of me. I could have held a Basil Hallward original just like you are holding your

notebook and pen right now. Was it Descartes who said, “I think, therefore I am?” It’s immaterial—I saw them with my own eyes, heard them with my own ears, therefore they are.

I can see in your eyes the logical question—if I was traveling to real places populated by real people, how could I not be aware of the actual journey? How could I pass from one realm to another but barely know it? It is my opinion that there exists a property of the body called the transmigration of consciousness. As I sat here for hours left to the workings of my mind, I considered the similarity between my travels and falling asleep. I think I have mentioned it before—they were the same in that I wasn’t totally aware of their having occurred until they had already done so. One is not able to chart the progress of his or her brain shutting off piece by piece as they turn in for the night; in the same way, I was not able to chart my progress from one setting to the next. When one begins to dream, one’s conscious mind enters a new level of existence (in psychology I believe it is called the “subconscious”). It is my opinion that my consciousness was moving, not to the sub-level, but to a whole other plane entirely. This might be a bit much to wrap your head around (or to accurately capture with that pen of yours), so think of it like this: When you wake up in the morning, you return to being aware of your surroundings—your body ensconced in your pillows and sheets, the light streaming in through the windows, the sounds of your alarm clock and birds singing outside your window if you’re lucky. Your consciousness returns to you, which, by logical extension, means it had to have gone somewhere else during the night. Mine went to an England previously unknown; only, due to my bump on the head, I didn’t need to be asleep when it happened.

I suppose you could take this argument a step further and use it to explain how an author’s work could make new worlds spring into an actual existence somewhere. In the act of creating a story, the author uses his imagination, his conscious mind, to put together the pieces

into a workable whole. The place, the people, the time, the path are all products of his consciousness. We could probably think of them as tiny pieces of his consciousness that he has left behind. And, if his consciousness can travel, as in dreams or as in my situation, it would make sense that the products, the pieces of his consciousness, can travel as well. Maybe one day we shall have ourselves a visit from Ty or Holmes. Wouldn't that be wondrous?

...Of course, if I follow my line of thinking as far as I can, I have to consider the possibility that the reason I was able to travel in this conscientious manner is because *I* am the product of someone else's consciousness. An infant form of this idea had occurred to me when I saw myself lying on the hospital bed, making it the best explanation for why I began to rail about it. After all, up until that point I had only traveled to places popularly considered "fictional," and now I had traveled to a scene from my own life. What else could then be said about my life? Was my life something the inhabitants of another universe considered to be the work of imagination? Was someone out there reading my story as a nice bit of fiction to enjoy with a cup of coffee and a biscuit?

This consideration wouldn't have been so distressing, I think, had it not been for my discussion with Basil about the implications of being someone else's creation. If I am indeed a piece of another's consciousness, that means that I, like Basil, will commit the same actions again and again because they are what has been planned for me. I can think I'm making my own decisions when what I am actually doing is choosing a path I've been set up to choose. When I think I am my own man, I am really just a character.

And if I'm just a character, then—and I'm sorry to have to break this to you—you are as well. It makes a lovely, tragic sort of sense, doesn't it? We are always talking about the meaning of life, life's purpose. Why are we here? Why do our lives unfold in certain ways, while others'

turn out so differently? The answer is that we are all characters in a script we have not written; we have no choice but to do what we do.

Please try not to be too upset. All is not lost. I have figured out a way to exist under these circumstances without going insane. This is the secret I have come up with: Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations.³² Why be afraid to indulge if your fate will be the same no matter what you do? Your ending has already been written; nothing you do in the moment can alter it; if anything, your choices now will dictate whether yours will be a short story or a series. But, I can assure you, after having thought over these things for some time now, your end will be the same every time.

Words! Mere words! How terrible they are! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One cannot escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic is in them! They seem to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of our viol or our lute. Words! Is there anything so real as words?³³ I think not. It is not atomic particles that are the foundation of our existence, but words. Without words, no-one that I met on my travels would have existed—no Holmes, Ty, Hank, or Basil...not even Etheldreda! Without words, I would not exist. If it weren't for my author, who gave them to me, who writes down my story so that I am able to live it, I would not be here.

...But you. You are writing down my story. You are giving me words. *You*. You *are* my author, you gave me life, you suspend my life between your whims, it is up to you what happens to me. Oh, have mercy on me! Please! Don't let my words run out! I am ever grateful to you for them, and I think I have admirably shown that, while I have cottoned on to your game, I am willing to accept the plot you have mapped out for me. I am a good character, and I will be a

³² Wilde 25.

³³ Adapted from Wilde 22.

good character, as long as you keep writing me! I'll say it! I want to exist! Please don't stop writing me! I want to exist!

No, no! I don't want to take it again! I've finally figured everything out. I want to keep talking to my author. Don't you see? I have to convince her to keep writing me, I want to exist! I don't want to pass into oblivion! I want to exist!

Please! They're going to take me away, but it will be okay as long as you keep giving me words. I'm going! Please! I want to exist! Don't stop writing me! *Don't stop writing!*

PATIENT ID: 6745231

RE: ADMISSION/TREATMENT SUMMARY

On the fifth of November, at approximately 1330 hours, Dr. Catesby and I were wheeling an unconscious patient to MRI. Patient had had 8 milligrams intravenous Decadron in the ambulance to prevent swelling in the brain, which the EMTs believed to be of high probability due to Patient's concussive fall five months previous and his complete loss of consciousness on that particular day. Patient was unresponsive for a total of twelve minutes by the time he arrived and still had not become responsive in the ER. Given that his pupils were unequal, with the left one nonreactive, we suspected a subdural hematoma and took him right away for an MRI. Just as we were about to begin scanning his head, however, a man wearing a white shirt and khakis, who had somehow managed to get into the scan room undetected, leapt forward and tried to assault the patient. Dr. Catesby and I did our best to hold him back, which was difficult as he seemed to be experiencing a full psychotic break:

- waving his arms
- screaming, sometimes incoherently. Occasionally we could make out names like "Etheldreda" and questions like "Are you the ones sending me away?", "What are you doing with me?", and "Why did you choose me?" as he made repeated pushes toward the patient
- an inability to be manually subdued
- an expression of abject fear such as neither Dr. Catesby or myself has ever seen, interspersed with expressions of extreme confusion, occasionally rendering him completely speechless

- need for chemical intervention.

Mr. Wintour, our MRI technician, activated the security alarm, shortly after which two guards came to our assistance. With our collected energy we were able to stop his hysteric movements; I directed Mr. Wintour to hand me 10 milligrams intramuscular Valium, given in the quadriceps femoris. For a moment we were concerned he would renew his struggle, but the drug began to take hold and the security guards were able to tie him to a stretcher, where he soon fell asleep. I left Dr. Catesby with Mr. Wintour and the patient to complete the MRI, while I wheeled the man up to the psychiatric floor and told Dr. Percy there all that had occurred. It was she who later informed me that, as he lay in his bed that night, he also began to show symptoms of a subdural hematoma. He had been fairly quiet until an orderly entered his room to take his vitals, upon which he again became agitated and began shouting various names and questions similar to those listed above. He was shaking, as in fear I'm told, and looking wildly around, when suddenly he appeared to reel backwards and stare at the orderly with a vacant expression. She had paged Dr. Percy, who describes him as "disoriented, with a deviated gaze" when she entered. He was still mouthing nonsense, but when it became slurred, she discovered that the pupil in his left eye was enlarged and unresponsive to light. He was taken for an emergency MRI, which indeed revealed an accumulation of blood in the outermost meningeal layer of his brain. While chronic, not acute, this blood had clotted and was increasing the pressure inside his skull. Dr. Percy had him taken immediately into surgery, where the clot was successfully removed. After a week's recuperation, Mr. Digby was transferred to the nearest psychiatric facility.

WILLIAM AUSTIN, M.D.

SEARCH FOR MISSING MENTAL PATIENT CONTINUES

NEW YORK, NY - Investigators are baffled by the disappearance of Nicholas Digby, a patient in the psychiatric center of Lenox Hill hospital who was last seen two weeks ago.

Officials say there are no signs Digby, 34, tried to escape from the institution, where he was transported after a psychotic break in the MRI room of Mount Sinai Medical Center. At the Center, it was discovered that Digby's delusions may, in part, have stemmed from extensive bleeding in his brain, which emergency surgery was able to stop.

Digby appears to have taken nothing with him, and there are no signs of foul play, say police. But other sources say there are no traces of him at all. He has not been seen at his former workplace, said Elizabeth Howard, manager of Bauman Rare Books on Madison Avenue.

"We're all worried for Nick," she said. "He was never the same after he fell outside the subway station and hit his head."

The last person to see Digby was one of Lenox Hill's nurses, who preferred to remain anonymous. According to her, Digby had spent the day quietly, but with signs of agitation.

"He wouldn't stop wringing his hands," she said. "He just kept looking out the window and wringing his hands. When I asked him if there was anything I could do to make him more comfortable, he just looked past me and said, 'If she just keeps writing, everything will be okay.'"

The nurse was unable to determine who "she" was.

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“UPUA Vice President Colleen Smith,” March 18, 2010

“Twenty Ten Interview: Raye Lederman,” April 4, 2010

“And I’d Only Been Up for an Hour,” August 27, 2010

“8 from Penn State: Guilty Pleasures Edition,” October 11, 2010

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www.hercampus.com/PSU

Valley Magazine

“Valley of the Booty Calls?” Spring 2010

“WE ARE...All Penn Staters,” Fall/Winter 2010

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Lehigh Valley Marketplace Magazine

“In Defense of Social Media,” Early Fall 2010

“The Retail Diet: Enjoying Shopping in Moderation,” Early Fall 2010

www.lehighvalleymarketplace.com

Other Leadership/Volunteer Experience:

Movin’ On, Penn State’s Annual Music Festival

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