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PART-TIME: STORIES AND ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

The stories in this collection, diverse as they are, all somehow revolve around the college experience, and in particular the Penn State experience. Within the confines of that world, each piece explores terrain that is at once familiar and strange. *Part-Time* is centered about Jason, a full-time cashier in a university dining commons. A slice of his life at work, however boring and tedious his duties, nevertheless has moments of suspense and humanity. *The History of a Haircut* explores a similarly banal stretch of life, at least for most people, and suggests an alternative experience. *Subs*, being entirely composed of dialogue, takes this movement to the extreme, searching for the exceptional within mindless routine. Finally, *Larry* rounds out the project with a more conventional structure, detailing a student's extended confrontation with a homeless person.

I can only hope the reader finds these pieces worth her time.

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Chapter 1

Part-Time

On the evening of his fiancée's thirty-seventh birthday, Jason stood at the Hot Steel register, his second home six days a week, eight to twelve hours a day. Outside a blizzard raged. To Jason's left was the start of a five-person line, and behind him the young student workers, led by the red-hatted station manager Alex, himself a senior electrical engineering major, scooped out vegetable lo mein, fried, white, and brown rice, sesame chicken, and beef stir fry. Extra sesame sauce was available by request but otherwise kept out of sight in a box under Jason's register. The student-workers served their peers with smiles that dimmed by the minute, and Jason, the station's only adult hire, rooted to the same two by one rubber mat since the Early-Bird Make Your Own Omelette shift, nevertheless managed to be friendly. He was standing with his feet not quite perpendicular to the cash register but at a left slant, cheating out in the direction of the oversize window, which looked out to the parking lot. The heat from the station's enormous grill, only five or so feet behind Jason, somehow failed to counter the dining area's sub-seventy temperature. To compensate, Jason wore his bubble-lettered "We're Always Happy To Serve You" sweater, which he'd received upon being hired seven and a half years ago.

"OK, wait, wait, I've got one," said Alex from behind Jason's back, speaking to the part-time students Stephen and Rich while he bustled to and fro, restocking, refilling, and rushing back to the kitchen every so often when a student ordered tofu, "Here it is: two huge ants, gigantic, Godzilla-sized ants, fighting against one another in a desert, OK? A desert—nothing for them to pick up. Mano a mano combat. One of the ants, the slightly-beefier one, his mind's not

completely on the fight. With me? His (well, let's say it's a he) his mind's back home with his ant-family in their ant-town, where one of his ant-pals just died in a gory (or so the left-leaning *Ant Daily* would have you believe) ant-mobile accident. A tragedy that's destroyed, obliterated his focus. So that's on the larger ant's mind during the fight. Which ant wins? And further troubling the scenario is the..."

In the little cubby beneath the register Jason kept a book entitled "23 Minutes in Hell," which detailed Bill Wiese's firsthand experience of the afterlife. Now and then when Alex strode by to grab boxes from the kitchen or bus away dirty pans, or embark on similarly important red-hat duties, Jason would pull him aside and share a few of the gruesome and fleshy specifics, advising his work-buddy to read the literature for himself, if not watch the videos on Wiese's channel, and not to take his word alone. When Jason spoke he rarely made steady eye-contact, preferring to "keep his eyes active," as his fiancée Leah put it, and he frequently tipped his chin downward as if to swallow. Hell was a real place, he knew it for sure, and its pure awfulness, its unyielding and infinite horror, could never be understated. He wanted people to know so they could protect themselves and their friends and families, and even the random people they met, or maybe just have the chance to. Alex practically knew this lecture by heart, so he nodded and uh-huhhed as Jason gave it once more, saying he'd been very busy lately with other reading and Youtubing but he'd get to it soon. Jason's copy of "23 Minutes in Hell" was dog-eared everywhere and cracked at the spine and so inked in red that it was virtually unreadable. Also hidden in the cubby but further back in its shadow, carefully ordered and aligned in the corners, were some of Jason's favorite letters from Leah, like the one she wrote to him when she was trapped in her apartment's elevator, in which she mostly wrote about how much she needed to pee, the letters together spanning the six years since they met.

A young man who ordered half fried rice, half lo mein, and sesame chicken as the main portion (he opted for extra sesame sauce, which, against policy, Rich ladled out generously) hadn't been informed that the hybrid side option was pricier than the standard one-side option, and Jason tried to explain the logic behind that rule but couldn't find the exact wording that Steve the manager had used, which at the time seemed perfectly clear and straightforward but now he couldn't for the life of him remember. Meanwhile the cups desperately needed to be restocked, and Greg, the full-timer usually in charge of stocking, had left early to avoid bad conditions. Nearly every person in line had paid the extra \$0.59 for a drink, and with the sale of each cup Jason cringed a bit because if Greg was gone then he was now in charge of keeping the cups stacked at a height of two feet or higher, ideally at three feet and no more than three feet plus two cups, the manager Jill had been adamant about that. So as Jason explained to the young man their One Entree, One Side policy he couldn't help but count the cups stacked by the register and see one, two, three, four, five, only six of them left and swear under his breath. Usually Greg left plenty of extra stacks for him, but today the kids had been thirsty. Thankfully the student threw in the towel and handed over his meal card, which Jason then swiped. On a ripped piece of paper near the cup stack Jason, with his purple marker, added a single tally. The paper had been blank that morning. He swiped the meal card of the next customer, a short woman who misspoke and then laughed at herself, although Jason didn't understand why she found it so funny. When she walked away, he tallied again. The small sheet was more purple than white, some tallies vertical, others horizontal, many at strange angles or complexly overlapping. There had been a lot of students today, and Jason was excited to give Leah the final count, but only after she guessed a few times.

“...without bullets though, that’s the thing, no bullets. And if you think a grizzly can even pick up a shotgun, let alone shoot it, you must be as high as Evan over there on table duty. I mean, the clouds probably look so tiny to him up there, must look like the specks of dust on his box of Trojans. I know, I know, I’m sorry. No doubt he’s a nice guy. I heard he’s a real nice guy. But anyway, the shotgun’s still in the picture, and whether it’s the rabid grizzly or the man-sized toad who’ll capitalize is anyone’s guess. Best not to forget that the toad in question has a big-time phobia of fallen leaves, but since the battle’s on the deck of a high-end cruise that shouldn’t...”

Occasionally, students unfamiliar with the Hot Steel layout headed in the wrong direction after receiving their plate or take-out box, threatening to miss Jason at the register. However at any given time there were numerous idlers just outside of the food station with loaded plates or boxes, often waiting for their friends or chatting with someone they’d by chance run into, and because after a severe concussion at his last job (which had landed him in the hospital for a few days) Jason’s memory wasn’t quite what it used to be he frequently yelled at kids who had already paid for their food and asked whether they’d paid. Jason was down to three cups and trying to notify Alex, who could bring more from the kitchen, but the red hat couldn’t be pulled away from his back-and-forth with the students. In a matter of minutes the line had nearly doubled, and it now even curved back toward the tables. Increasingly, students who waited in the way back were caked in snow, whereas students by the register stood dripping wet. When Jason noticed this he turned his head to the ceiling and prayed, in the handful of seconds before the next student stepped up, that the roads weren’t too bad and that Leah was driving home slowly and carefully and that she wouldn’t be too afraid or have any close calls. The next person whose meal card he swiped had the longest, softest-looking hair Jason’d ever seen on a man. It was

fixed in a ponytail. If he got off at nine-thirty and packed up and left quickly, Jason guessed he could be at Leah's by ten-thirty at the latest.

They had met in the parking lot of a grocery store, by the rows of blue carts. Jason was putting his cart away when he saw Leah struggling with hers, so he went over and offered to help but it turned out that she just loved the sound of them all clanging together. He liked it, too. They hung out by the carts and smashed them together until the worker in the highlighter jacket told them to scram. Jason asked her to split a pizza with him for dinner that night but she had work at the mattress outlet. When Leah gave Jason her number on the back of his receipt, he gripped the wet ink and smudged it with his fingertips. Laughing, she wrote it again. On the walk back to his car Jason kept an iron hold on the receipt, keeping it in plain sight until he copied the number into his contacts. It wasn't easy, but he managed to wait an hour before he texted her, and two years before he proposed.

"...but see, you've underestimated the army of jack-o-lanterns, Stephen. You've underestimated them. That they would do terribly in a jungle setting is exactly what they'd want their enemy to think, and you can bet they'd cash in on the zebra's overconfidence—that you can bet on, Stephen. And somehow I assumed you'd know that. But here we are. Now, how they'd go about the attack itself is slightly harder to..."

Jason stole a glance at the counter in front of him. Five hours earlier, the two napkin dispensers for which Jason held responsibility had been emptied at the same time. As it turned out, a large group of day-drunk students was to blame, having waged a balled-up napkin battle. This sort of incident was to be expected on a Friday, of course. Now, the ketchup seemed too low. Seeing this Jason smiled because ketchup grossed Leah out something terrible, and not on account of its taste but its color. She hated red in general, said it would steal her attention from

across a room for no good reason. “That’s why blood is red,” she’d told him, “because red can scream without a sound.” The next customer had bulging acne all over his forehead and nowhere else. Jason asked him about the storm, and the kid said that it was awful out there, you couldn’t see anything. Apparently they’d called a state of emergency. Then Jason discovered that the tiny white salt packets were disorganized by this time and sticking every which way, a couple of them spilled on the counter near the ketchup and napkins. No one had ever explained to him why they’d stopped using shakers. One day shakers, next day little packets. Could the packets really have been cheaper? They always had their reasons, like when Jason’d applied for full-time status and benefits, rather than simply full-time hours with a part-time wage, and they advised that he wait until the following year, and then the year after that, and so on. Jason hoped it’d work out for the coming summer.

He thought of what he’d cook for Leah before he drove over. Technically it wasn’t allowed, but on the nights when Chef Jordan wasn’t around Jason usually whipped something up in the main kitchen and packed it into a takeout box. They called it, Midnight Snack in Bed, and sometimes Leah even texted him whatever she was especially in the mood for. But tonight Jason would surprise her. On a sheet of paper, beside the one filled with tallies, he had been listing since 10 AM all the meals she might enjoy: “Beef and brocklee,” “Chickin tenders,” “Cheeseberger,” among many others. If he remembered correctly Chef Stephan had left early today, having glimpsed the forecast in the early afternoon, along with the office workers—including Beth, who was in charge of the dining halls employment, which was a shame because Jason wanted to see if the status of his full-time application had changed since that morning.

The last string of customers passed on cups, so there were still two left. When Jason found a moment to spare, he removed his cap and patted his forehead with the rag he kept tucked into

his apron. When he put the cap back on he tilted the brim down to its former position, so low as to conceal his forehead and angled just to the right. A familiar student, so much so that Jason knew him to be a regular and tried to recall his name, came up to the register with a plate of sesame chicken and two egg rolls, which he ordered daily. There were many such students, probably a dozen, and they were generally kind to Jason, happily engaging him in conversation. The student currently at hand, whose name was short and started with an A, smiled and asked about the house Jason had mentioned the other day, the house Jason was going to buy, where he was to raise a family. The place was in a quiet neighborhood, had two floors and four bedrooms because he and Leah would probably have at least three children, and hopefully twins—Leah loved the idea of twins—and a nice flat backyard. Jason told the student that he'd buy the house once university dining hired him full-time, which was right around the corner, and Adam or Austin or Andy nodded and wished Jason a good evening before heading out. Jason adjusted his glasses. His prescription was too weak, so he had to lean into the screen and squint to press the correct touchscreen buttons. Unfortunately the standing and the leaning was taking its toll on Jason's lower back, and he wished Leah were there because she gave the best back rubs, but more than anything he wished she'd made it home safe and sound, without a single heart-in-mouth skid, since she tended to remember those long after, and after glancing left and right he grabbed his phone and checked for a message. Nothing yet. Then he double-checked. Normally Leah would be home by now, but tonight she might have gone drinking with Hannah from work. Unless she had to stay late, as the department store often mandated following busy days, or her phone died on the drive home, or his message failed to send in the first place. Jason glanced both ways, checked again. The light above his head flickered as if blinking.

“...how rarely the robot actually wins, though. It’s because no one wants to see the robot win, Rich. Whether it would happen in real life or not, aside from movies and stuff, remains to be seen. But the point is, is you wouldn’t be able to finance the fight if the killer robot stood a pretty good chance of beating the Achilles-fin whale. Plus, if there’s one thing most Americans don’t want to see, it’s a whale going down. Let’s scratch the whale and go with a team of Great Whites, all with Achilles fins, against the robot, and let’s for the sake of argument say the robot can only be underwater for thirty minutes at a time and that it can’t swim well in the first place, just wasn’t built for that, you know...”

The first ring Jason slid onto Leah’s finger wasn’t too expensive, but he promised he’d buy another one as soon as possible. At this she started crying because she loved the one he’d given her and couldn’t imagine parting with it, so Jason apologized and hugged her, though he secretly planned to buy her a fancier ring anyway. A year after Jason proposed the two of them still couldn’t afford their perfect wedding. So Jason went down on a knee and asked if Leah would be his wife, and again she said yes. This time he’d bought a ring whose stone was nearly twice the size of the first, but she was protecting the old ring with her free hand, so he never bought another wedding ring after that. Proposed four more times, though, and always on the date of their original engagement, and usually around the same time, too. This year Jason’d been in talks with the grocery store in town, and after some nagging on his part they were willing to sell off a few carts, just enough to make a small line of them. For now they were hidden in a corner of his mom’s garage, since he didn’t have enough space at the apartment. Every now and then when he visited his mom he stopped in her garage just to make sure they were still there and not rusting, and they all fit together, split apart, and clanged as he remembered.

Jason wished he were allowed to pull down the shutters because one of the bright streetlamps in the lot outside was giving him a headache, but that was against policy. He was down to a single cup beside the register. However, despite not having looked at his watch, he knew he was in the final stretch. The next handful of people came and went, most with sesame chicken and white rice. Luckily no one requested a drink. In fact, they may have assumed the cup was his, but Jason was forbidden from drinking by the register. Rather, he had to find someone to cover his station—frequently impossible—then throw on a pair of disposable gloves and walk to the cooler in the kitchen and remain there while he drank from an employee cup, dodging the cooks and hot pans and dirty dish carts. And worse, Leah still hadn't texted. Jason swiped in two students, one with a low raspy voice that reminded Jason of a Disney villain and one who handed over her card and said nothing. The silent young woman had Leah's robin's egg blue eyes. When they were both gone and everyone was distracted again Jason snatched his phone and texted Leah, "You ok? I rilly rilly miss you." A rumbling sounded in Jason's head and he swallowed hard, then checked his phone for a response. His lower back was acting up, suddenly, but he couldn't decide how to stretch, which way to bend. Jason grabbed the brim of his hat, pulled it lower. The rumbling was so loud he worried Alex and Stephen and Rich would hear, but they were busy talking behind him. All the while the snow fell relentlessly, in sheets.

"...potato chip whose power is to identify someone's worst fear and then explain to them why, given the likelihood of the fear being manifest, they weren't nearly afraid enough (with insults thrown in here and there, personal verbal attacks), pitted against a pretzel who's a master at distracting speakers, so even the most impressive ones fumble with words in its presence. Put those two in a ring, actually make it a cage, then place a kitchen knife in the center (sharpened), then step back and see what, hell, listen to..."

Jason's watch read 8:53 PM, which meant it was only 8:43. He set his watch fast so he could arrive "on time ten minutes early" as Matt Mike liked to say. To loosen up, he rolled his shoulders and felt them crack. He thought of Leah's letters and how she liked to try out colored fonts. Treated like a flip book, the stack of letters in Jason's cubby had a beautiful rainbow effect. A lot of sweat had gathered on his forehead, saturating his eyebrows, but Jason resisted the temptation to brush it off because he'd have to remove his cap and he really wasn't supposed to do that because he might drop hair in someone's food or drink. One of the fans in the ceiling turned on automatically and moaned. Jason and Leah had agreed to wait until marriage but they hated sleeping apart, which their schedules forced three days a week. Jason checked his phone, turned up the text alert sound to maximum volume. His black shoes seemed a darker black than his pants, but perhaps it was the light. To him South Dining's grey shirts were light black, not quite grey. A single cup remained upside down by the register. When Jason saw the coast was clear he typed Leah another message: "Ur home rite?" which delivered instantly. Three more customers came and went, one of them buying a single egg roll. In the distance, probably from the buffet area opposite the building, someone dropped a plate and silverware, and the silverware clanged in the sweetest way. Jason checked his phone, checked that its volume was still maxed out. He didn't notice the person waiting to pay, who had fried rice and beef stir fry, and wondered how long they'd been waiting. Jason apologized to them, though it came out as a mumble. So he apologized again, this time for mumbling. The student looked at him funny before taking off. Maybe he'd call Leah and touch base, make sure she got back safe. He looked for a manager to hold his spot for a minute but couldn't see one anywhere, and Alex had gone back to the kitchen. They probably wouldn't have any more customers now, between the raging snowstorm and lateness of the hour, it being way too late for dinner in Jason's opinion. Closing

time should be eight o'clock, period. Where were the stacks of cups, wrapped in that ultra-thin plastic film he could tear apart with two fingers? Jason pocketed his phone, checked to make sure the line was empty, checked to make sure no one was walking toward the line or even glancing at the station as if wanting food, then left his mat and register and headed toward the restroom by the Drinks station, where he'd call Leah just to see for certain that everything was OK, and maybe ask what she wanted for the birthday meal.

Chapter 2

The History of a Haircut

As I stepped through the doors to a recorded chime, the smell of Supercuts—American Crew, Paul Mitchell, Redken—nearly stopped me at the entry. I pushed forward as a second chime chorused and stood on the SC-logoed welcome mat, beside the shampoo and conditioner wall-length shelf. The salon was much hotter than I expected. I wondered how far I could roll up my jeans without calling attention to myself, and whether that would cool me off much at all. Looking around, I noticed that the place’s size didn’t warrant its thirty-odd lights, including eight huge rectangular fixtures, aligned in twos all the way down the salon. I took a seat between two sleeveless-shirted, backward-capped guys. One of the guys, wearing the Greek letters of his frat down the street, had hair that was not only too short for a cut or even a conservative trim but already sharply defined, clean and greased left. The other guy had a quarter-inch buzzcut, so I assumed he was here to enjoy issues of *Sports Illustrated* from the early 2000s.

I must have been five or so when it hit me that having someone go to town about my head with a scissors every other month was a tough fact of life. My dad owned two do-it-yourself barber’s kits that he’d ordered from an infomercial hotline (two full kits for \$19.99—a \$60 value!) to cut everyone’s hair, except for my mom, who always opted out. He did his best with me, usually cutting very short because he’d make one mistake, even it out, make another, even that out, make a third, and so on. To his credit, he never became discouraged (though even my elementary gym teacher once asked if my father cut my hair, to which I proudly answered, “He sure did!”). Often my dad blamed the shape of my head for his worst performances, telling my

mom behind closed doors, while I'd listen at the crack or press a cup to the paint, that the curvature of my head was irregular and unpredictable and seemed to have bumped or swelled in different places at the time of each haircut, which made him feel like he was "cutting blind." One time around my eleventh birthday, he demanded that we get the haircut out of the way so he could hit the sack, which he looked forward to after a lousy day at the office, and I could do nothing but submit, cringing above the tiles as he electric-buzzed furiously, then snipped like a madman, and sure enough he sliced my ear and drew blood. When my mom caught wind of it and saw my mangled cartilage, she tried to close down his in-house salon permanently. When he resisted, she focused on getting my sisters off the hook and succeeded. But I was to receive his haircuts for years to come—all the way through high school, in fact. Of course, I'd protest more or less yearly through late-middle and early-high school, but eventually I accepted my fate. It helped that my dad did improve with all that practice, though more gradually than I would have liked.

At the sound of my name I set down an article, extensively reported, about Robert Downey Jr.'s practice of Wing Chung kung fu. The only available hairdresser was a young woman with pink hair pushed up toward the ceiling. Slowly, I made my way over to the chair. As I did so, I scanned the five haircuts in progress. Those seated all appeared at ease, relaxing in their black hi-chairs and evidently of the mind that for twenty bucks (sixteen ninety-five without tip) they might as well appreciate the head-massage, and not fuss over the end result. The Medium Fade guy had even splurged on a sudsy post-cut shampoo. I especially paid attention to those in conversation—what topics best served the strange hairdresser-hairdressee dynamic? Had I come for my first haircut years ago, there would have been a comfortable age gap between me and each barber, lowering the possibility of a real, mutually comfortable dialogue and excusing

from the outset my awkwardness and inexperience. That time had long passed, and now I was expected to have some amount of grace and suave. I couldn't begin to say how envious I was of the generic seasoned customer who was real-world confident and self-possessed and who went back and forth with their barber as if on script, their 20-minute haircut one of the day's footnotes.

I figured that most people in the hair business weren't awkward, having iterated over hundreds of cuts and witnessed the spectrum of personality quirks. In a 20-to-30-minute timeframe, they could probably steer so as to avoid the many social cliffs (politics, religion, finance, sex, armpit hairs and their occasional wetness, etc.). In some respects this was fortunate for me, but ironically I worried that the most extroverted barbers, despite their kindness and effort, could bring about more stress, their wide gesticulations and booming voices (here I pictured especially the older white men whose fathers and grandfathers were also barbers) and conversational handholding only further pressuring me to be good and talkative because, well, look how easy it is for them, how basic, how automatic. The guy who'd fitted my suit for prom the Spring before really wanted to talk sports, had the Red Sox on his mind and didn't clue in on how little I knew (despite my lackluster uh-huh responses and pink shirt), going on and on with the various RPIs and the who's who of the upcoming draft in such detail that I almost believed he or his son were a part of it. So engrossed in the topic did he become (arguing with himself on who was doping and with what) that my tux seemed the lesser priority, and I began to dread the moment when he'd ask for my stance on some obscurity, like the fourth game of Johnny Damon's '99 season (and how Damon's execution that day compared to the rest of the season) and I'd be exposed.

Fortunately for me, Debbie didn't seem like the type to ask about baseball. I felt reassured, sinking into the black-cushioned chair whose leather accepted if not welcomed my

folds, and loving that the whole seat bounced up and down with my weight, plus the chair swiveled without dizzying effects. I was temporarily at peace until I opened my eyes to the mirror. Debbie the hairdresser, nametagged, was fussing with my curls, her nails Firebird red and witchy. The instant combination of being touched, without permission, by a stranger and seeing myself with that stranger in a huge, crystal clear image was a bit too much. There was no escaping my reflection: once within the haircut-space, I was trapped in a funhouse, with mirrors front and back, but even funhouse mirrors have the decency to skew you unrecognizable. The Supercuts layout was merciless. Its flat mirrors brought everyone's gross imperfections (acne, ingrown hair, cuts, bumps, grease, red patches) to the fore. Presently I could see a constellation (a midsize dipper?) of white- and blackheads on my forehead, and looking closely (though perhaps it was the light's trick) one side of my facial hair appeared much patchier than the other and of a clashing density, especially in the right-cheek region, the difference so visible that I became humiliated on behalf of the earlier me up to and including the last few minutes where I'd naively assumed that my face's symmetry was not an issue, my right cheek not crop-circled and clownish.

My first hurdle was to explain the type of haircut I'd come for. Debbie'd asked with urgency, and I could see her face tighten as I struggled to answer. "Well," I said, sweating under the lights, "you see, normally my dad just..."

"Your dad cuts your hair? But don't you go to college here? Oh—well, that would explain why it's so long actually."

"On the top he uses the scissors I think, yeah he definitely does. He buzzes the sides with one of the middle extensions. Does 'seven' ring a bell? I'm remembering 'seven.' That sounds right."

Debbie started tapping the razer's body with her nail, shot a glance both ways. "Your dad cuts your hair, huh?" She laughed to herself. "That's funny. I don't know what he was using, but my extensions go from zero to six."

"Can I do number one? I'll do number one if that's the shortest. It just gets too poofy, you know? My dad never really tried to cut it short, and I'm tired of keeping it patted down with caps and beanies, covering my head for most of the day. But it just gets harder and harder to flatten, umm, takes too much effort. And you can see how, usually on the warmer days, it..."

"Number one will cut off the most hair."

"OK, maybe I'll go with the three, just to be safe. I don't know."

Debbie laughed. "You're nervous, huh?"

I nodded, blushing slightly. Yes, I was definitely nervous about the haircut, from how it would turn out to what she'd ask me to how else I might conceivably betray my newbie status. My dad's extensions ranged pretty high, apparently, from seven to ten or eleven if memory served, which I couldn't remember ever questioning. Were the different lengths of extension standard across the board? In the first week after buying the two kits, my dad had lost one of them, and I now wondered if he'd also lost extensions zero through six for the remaining one. Debbie was shuffling around, getting ready to start. I decided to memorize the number three for the next cut. That way, I could amble in and shout, "I'll have the number three buzz, please!" and be treated like a regular.

Having just unwound in the seat and cringed at my reflection, committing any single digit to long-term seemed like cake. I repeated the integer in my head a few times, then held up the corresponding amount of fingers to lock in a visual. But I suspected that once the buzzing or snipping began, the magic figure would vanish. Another concern: the buzzer-length ranges

probably weren't standard from salon to salon. While this Supercuts apparently offered extensions zero to six, another might use a zero to ten scale, while still other salons might only provide two or three extensions. Did they vary across state lines? Was it possible that even within this Supercuts, Debbie's buzzer had length options that the other two hairdressers didn't, and vice versa? Of course it was tempting to forget the number, flip through the Supercuts hairstyle catalogue, and point to the most striking hair model and say, "Make me look like that guy, and I'll also buy his teeth and smile. On second thought, can you put me in touch with him, on his personal line? I'd like to know more about his hairstyling routine."

Before I knew it, Debbie had covered me hands-to-ankles in the black trashbag gown (a Supercuts signature). She fastened the white neckband as a finishing touch, extra-tight. Two nights before, so went my luck, I'd watched *The Counselor*, an (overrated/distasteful—spoiler!) film with numerous sequences of graphic violence, written by the eloquent-but-deranged Cormac McCarthy, in which Brad Pitt's character, being hunted by the cartel apparatus, is in one horrifying scene murdered on a city street with a "Bolito" battery-powered strangulation device, whose particulars I was currently reliving. In the film, the Bolito ensures death--once dropped onto a victim's neck it can't be stopped or removed, despite the victim's frantic struggles (Pitt's character loses a few fingers trying to pull it off)—and I couldn't help but fear that Debbie had popped this deadly collar on me instead of the harmless neckband. In the heat of the haircut it seemed altogether possible. I frantically touched the band below my Adam's apple to double-check.

"Are you OK?" Debbie said, peering at me through the mirror. She spoke to my reflection, as hairdressers often do.

"Yep, yep, sorry."

“Is it too tight?”

“Nope, it’s fine. Thanks. It’s perfect. Sorry about that.”

Debbie got off to a rough start. My hair banded together as if gummed and resisted the buzzer, which made Debbie’s job tedious (her mood was on a steep decline) and my experience painful. Back in the day, my dad used to muscle through the stubborn locks, but thankfully Debbie sprayed my hair with what she said was water, though I found it pungent and eye-stinging and not nearly as clear, and began to knead my hair to loosen things up. Were the setting more private and my partner romantic, I might have loved the head massage (*might have* being the key phrase, since under perfect conditions I may have still been on-edge and twitchy). I might have benefited from it after a long day—especially, come to think of it, if I’d just returned from this haircut. As it was, Debbie’s cold, manicured fingers pulled every which way with impressive force, the harder tugs occurring at random, scratching here and there like a blind rodent. Her every yank was a jolt, whether sideways, up, or down. Though we were still in the pre-cut stage I worried about Debbie’s empathetic attention, and because Supercuts employees all profit from feedback (so claimed one in-store plaque and their site’s About Us page) I considered letting her know that the hurt from too harsh of a rub could unsettle the gentler customers for whom pain is mainly just pain, and thus the opposite of what a paid service at a successful nationwide chain should deliver. Maybe Debbie simply didn’t realize that her handwork was by my account too aggressive, or maybe she had much bigger fish to fry. I kept silent.

Supposedly, the redhead gene affects every other generation. My Grandma Barbara wore her red hair proudly, and when it turned white she built a hair dying session into her morning routine. Although her original shade was dark, closer to brown than bright orange, Barbara used

a tone that reminded me of carrots. The gene skipped her children, however, so they were all brunettes. I thought my dad's hair was the dullerest brown in the world, and was extremely jealous. He never worried about old women on the street pointing at him and saying, "Some people pay big money for that, you know," or "My friend Betty would *die* for that color!" However, I did inherit his unfortunate texture (coarse, dense, curly in sections) as opposed to my mom's soft and brown straightness, which she passed to my ungrateful brother. So in my view I had the worst of both worlds. What little coloration of brown I did have was on the edges of my hairstyle, in dark patches on my sideburns and squared-off back—I always selected this instead of rounded-off, still convinced of my dad's opinion that squared-off was sharper, and not only because of the right angles. He wasn't going to be thrilled that I went with another hairdresser in the first place, let alone if I trotted around the house with a rounded back.

Per usual the buzzer came first. Debbie's form was concise, as if she'd gone to the minimalist school of beauty. The number three extension (in my head I was still going *three, three, three, three, three, three* to absorb the damn thing) slid through my hair accompanied by the satisfying crunches and rips of the electric razor, and strand by strand my poofy sides began to thin. And they were poofy indeed. Unlike those other guys, both of whose caps were now off and hanging on the coat rack, I'd gone four months between haircuts, this hair-growing stint not to save money (because what college student needs more of that?) but to push into the most distant and vaguest future my first haircut without my dad. For a while, I managed to forget even the idea of haircuts, even to the extent that if I were to pass a salon or the eyesore of a twisting barber pole in the off-time I'd typically think, *Oh right, that exists*. For the past months, as my hair climbed up and up, grew thicker and thicker (my mom called it a tick's paradise) I began to wear hats, removing them only when I could feel for sure that the hair was

thoroughly matted down and unremarkable. Otherwise, after all that time I'd be a skyscraper—or, at best, Napoleon Dynamite. Knowing this, when I did finally summon the nerve to enter salon I felt a kind of cathartic relief blended with the anxiety. Debbie's shearing off the inches was in part a liberation from hair shame.

One of the problems with having pale skin and crippling insecurity was the constant threat of blushing, the fear of which is termed 'erythrophobia.' One of the few self-perpetuating phobias, this fear (which the American Psychiatric Organization admits is "relatively complex") serves as proof that someone up there is laughing at us. The victim of social humiliation or discomfort blushes involuntarily, and is then further humiliated because face-reddening is itself a form of visceral nakedness and social suicide (especially when the victim's already insecure and hemorrhaging Middle-School popularity by the day, and his supposed friend Ryan finds it hilarious to say "Look at how red he's getting" or "Watch out, he's gonna blow" or "Fire! Fire! Save the women and children!" at which time everyone focuses on how beet-faced their poor loser of a classmate has become and laughs at Ryan's antics, and the victim has no way to duck this so he takes the popularity blow head on, his only respite from the cheek-burning pain a fantasy of Ryan's brutal end).

"You doing anything for Thanksgiving?" asked Debbie, stopping my train of thought.

"No, well, not really. Going home to see my family."

"But with a fresh head of hair. Hope your dad won't be too angry with me."

I forced a smile and shook my head. He would probably crack a joke about it, something like, "So your old man isn't good enough for you anymore, huh?" and laugh it off.

Once she finished each side and confirmed that I didn't want to go shorter, Debbie started on the top. My front and center hair towered above the rest (at this stage, my dad used to rush me

to the kitchen and tell my mom and sisters, “This is him at 40”). Debbie picked up momentum, the end now within sight. She pulled out a clump, held it together, snipped, and repeated. To the claim that hairstyling is absolutely an art, this process offered a counterargument. She pulled, held, and snipped. Pulled, held, snipped. Debbie’s eyes were far away, her motions rote. Orange curls snowed down upon the floor, accumulating into piles. I consciously distanced the idea that they were in any capacity *mine*. As was expected, a strand or two drifted against my nose. Possibly it landed and had stuck. In either case it itched something terrible, and by instinct my hands pressed against the black gown’s folds, but they held fast. Debbie snipped on.

This was nothing new, and traced through all my dad’s cutting jobs. Because he had no proper gown to shield me with, I’d wear one of his extra-large shirts (otherwise used as a rag to wash the car) during hair appointments. He had a great sense of humor about the whole thing, usually saying as I slipped on the mass of fabric that I was “growin’ into it” by the month, but he knew that the makeshift gown was likely shrinking in the wash. So instead of buying a different shirt (or, ideally, a haircut gown) he stopped washing that one and solved all his problems. Unfortunately, the shirt’s collar was too wide and some weight of hair inevitably fell onto my chest and slinked down my front side. Also the shirt was itchy. Both of which led to my spending the majority of each session trying to scratch everywhere, which led to his unconditional No Scratching rule (“Give me five minutes, then touch yourself however you want!”). From that point on, I fought bravely in the mind over matter conflicts which dominated my consciousness in haircut-time. My dad barely noticed and was unsympathetic when he did. He didn’t take pity on micro-hardships.

The itch became more immediate by the second, more pressing. I shook my head imperceptibly but vigorously, with enough force to either release the strand or serve as a

makeshift scratch. I directed an exhale upward at my nose. I flexed and unflexed the muscles in that region, flaring and contracting my nostrils. Nothing worked. By now Debbie must have figured something was off, yet she minded her own business. Eventually I caved in and worked my hand around the gown (not a simple thing to do, since it had a strange and inconvenient magnetic property) and brought it to my nose, by which time of course the itch had subsided.

The backward-capped guys had left by the time Debbie asked me what I thought, indicating my reflection.

“It’s perfect, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I hated it. She’d done a nice job, though. For its uneven sections I blamed the shape of my head. Fortunately, they had lollipops galore at the desk, so I grabbed a handful for the dorm (“My younger brother loves these”) and exited the Supercuts to the sound of the now-familiar chime whose source I couldn’t quite place. Against my shorn top, the street’s breeze was wonderful.

Chapter 3

Subs

“Hey, there! How can I help?”

“Italian with American please, toasted.”

“You mean Italian bread?”

“Oh, uh, herbs and cheese.”

“No problem at all! And you said toasted?”

“Toasted.”

“Some people say Italian and they mean white, so I wasn’t one-hundred-percent sure. My bad.”

“You’re OK. Could I do mayo?”

“Mayo it is. How’s that look? Cause it looks delicious to me, I have to say. I mean, my mouth is watering.”

“It looks fine. Italian, please.”

“Sure thing!”

“No, wait, what are you—Italian meats, I don’t want the dressing.”

“Oops. Sorry about that. Should I do a new roll?”

“Nah, it’s probably fine.”

“You said Italian meats, right?”

“Actually you know what, yes, if you don’t mind. I’d like another roll.”

“I’ll keep them coming! Herbs and cheese?”

“Toasted, with mayo and Italian meats.”

“I’m sorry about all the confusion here. Wish I could say it’s my first day, but I’ve been here for months now.”

“Can I get pepperoni on that too?”

“A little or a lot?”

“A lot.”

“All right, but that’ll be an extra meat upcharge.”

“A little, then.”

“Sure, sure. Yeah, those upcharges--that’s how they get you.”

“I’ll do cheddar and provolone.”

“Half and half or double cheese?”

“Half and half.”

“Great. That’s exactly what I do.”

“Do you mind changing your gloves? You just touched your hat.”

“Did I? Oh, man. Yeah, I’ll do that right away. Was it my left hand?”

“Maybe just change both.”

“One minute...OK, so...”

“Toasted.”

“Yep, yep. It’ll be a few seconds.”

“Mmm-K.”

“Any veggies on...excuse me, over there? Any vegg...excuse me? Hey! In the sleeveless...hey, over here! Do you mind getting his attention?”

“What’s up?”

“Would you like any veggies on this?”

“Lettuce.”

“Anything else?”

“Hmm. I’ll do tomato.”

“That all?”

“Cucumber, just a few banana peppers.”

“Will do. Is that everything?”

“What’s that red paste?”

“Well, I forget the exact...something to do with...ugh, I always do this...”

“Never mind, then.”

“I know it’s very hot. Relish, something. Red pepper relish!”

“No thanks. I’ll do onions though.”

“Sliced or diced?”

“Red onions.”

“I think they’re both red.”

“That one. And just a little oil.”

“Nuts! I’m sorry. It comes out really fast.”

“Salt and pepper, oregano, basil.”

“Uh huh, no problem. Would you like this cut in half?”

“Why not?”

“You’re not allergic to pesto, right?”

“Nope, why?”

“I have to ask. Allergy thing. It’s policy.”

“Not allergic to pesto.”

“Alrighty. Here you go. Enjoy your afternoon!”

“You too. Wait, you forgot a pickle on the side.”

“Oh no, we only do that if you ask for it.”

“I thought this place was called *And a Pickle*.”

“Here, I’ll give you a pickle. Mind holding it?”

“Can’t you just unwrap...”

“OK. There you are.”

“See ya.”

“Can I take the next person...Hey, there! What’s it been--a whole day? Wait, wait, don’t tell me. Don’t tell me. I know the sub is white and that you don’t get cheese, and what’s that veggie you get? I want to say pickles, lots of pickles.”

“The sub’s toasted—with mayo and Italian meats. No pickles, just onions.”

“Alright, cool. You said just onions?”

“Just onions.”

“Cut?”

“Yep.”

“Can I help you?”

“Alicia, c’mon...how is that even...yeah, I’ll do a toasted white footlong. Of course it’s unfair. Of course it is. No, no...but don’t you realize what that does to me? I mean, I’m in line at

Pickle and we're having this conversation, right now, because you said it couldn't wait like one second longer..."

"Do you want any sauce on this?"

"...talking to me and I can't even hear him because I'm focused on this Alicia, I'm being rude in public because I care about us. What more do you...oh, OK. I see. No, no, it's all so clear to me now. I'll tell you this: next time I shovel out three hundred bucks on a ring, I'm buying the fucking insurance. I will not hesitate...it has everything to do with that—why else would it keep coming up?...me again! Always me! Well, I'm glad you finally admit..."

"Excuse me—any sauce on this?"

"...telling me to calm down. I'll do hot sauce. The hottest stuff you have, drown it...no, sweetie, that wasn't about you—imagine: something that isn't about you!...sure, sure, you're totally right. But at least I say when it's about me. Like right now, I'm saying...yes, that sounds like Jeremy. Good old Jeremy, little Jeremy who tells Alicia what she wants to hear in his stupid littlekid high voice, who conveniently 'isn't into anyone right now.' He must have told you that at the bar last night...Lisa and Ian both told me, separately. Now you should've expected that Ian would talk—that guy loves me—but Lisa, my God, I thought Lisa was your friend..."

"Did you say what meat?"

"...never going to happen. Not in a hundred years. Chicken tenders, four of 'em. Besides, she only talks to me because I know Andy pretty well...oh, but if you could see the look on her face when she asks about him, God, you wouldn't be...honestly it seems ridiculous that we're even discussing...but I have every reason to ask about Jeremy—when's the last time I hit the bars with someone who's into me...fine, *used to be* into me..."

"Cheese? I just need to know what cheese."

“...dumb, highschoolish haircut. It’s like he went in and said, I don’t care if you use the buzzer or scissors, just make sure I’m a doofus by the end of...yes, I’ve seen it. I ran into him on campus the other day. He just stared right through me, I swear, Alicia, totally saw me but stared right through...no, but I like the guy. I do like the guy. Really. And I’m sorry I said that stuff about him, I’m just mad about the...he said what? He said I’m the one who...OK, OK, well, let me tell you about your good friend Jeremy, he’s the whiniest, most useless, and plus the guy looks like he’s thirteen...”

“Cheese? You want cheese on this? If now isn’t a good time, you can always circle around to the back. It’s just that people are starting to...”

“Gimme double cheese, cheddar and swiss. Criss cross it if you can, please...sound exactly like your mom—I’m sorry, but she even uses the same turns of phrase when she’s going at it with your dad...fine, you bring my family into it then. Go ahead. Fair’s fair. Not like you ever pull punches against my dad...so the guy likes to have a joint now and then...because you’re too nice for that, you mean. It proves you care about me more, that you don’t bring up *my* family, that you’re so much more considerate...but of course it does!”

“Veggies?...veggies? We’re almost there, just let me know the veggies!”

“...don’t remember that at all, not in the least. And if you know me at all, which I like to think you do by this point, you know that my memory just doesn’t betray me like that...the important ones, though, the important ones stay with me. I know it and you do too. And that one would have stuck, unless of course you said that when I clearly wasn’t paying attention...here we go again! What is this—round fifteen this week alone.

“And the veggies? Excuse me...uh huh, the veggies?”

I'm sorry, man. Just throw a couple tomatoes on...nope, that's false. Entirely false. I'm an amazing listener—this talk, the last ones? I could probably recite the last few to the word...sure, but when's the last time I gave you a quiz on what I said..."

"Bye now."

"...bet you're with him right now, because of course he's always there for you, always waiting for the right...I can't say that I do believe you, actually. You too, man. Take care...you think I don't have shit to do? I probably have twice, no, three times..."

"What do you need?"

"Hi! Could I do a half sub?"

"Unfortunately, we don't do half subs. I could cut a big one in half, but you'd be charged for the full sub."

"Full sub, then."

"Mom, you have to say white or wheat."

"Is that all you have, white or wheat?"

"We also have herbs on white, asiago cheese on white, ciabatta rolls, pretzel rolls, and croissants."

"Oooh—are the croissants fresh baked?"

"C'mon, we have to go. The tour's gonna leave..."

"No, I wouldn't say so."

"OK, I'll do wheat. Half sub wheat."

"They don't do that, Mom. Remember?"

"That's right, my mistake. Tell you what Ali, we'll get one sub and split it."

“Are you sure? Because that’s a family coupon you have—it guarantees both of you a sub.”

“Nah, we’ll just do one.”

“Are you serious? Why on earth would we do that?”

“Ali, we just ate ice cream two hours ago. Listen, I’m sorry about this—could we get pesto, grilled chicken, and mozzarella?”

“Who said I wanted that? At least tell him to go light on the pesto.”

“Oh! Well, that’s my fault. It comes out really fast. The students here tend to get a lot of pesto, actually. I normally just load it on. I don’t know, must be a college thing.”

“Really? How gross. Can you just start over and do less pesto?”

“Mom, don’t make him do that. We’ll just have it the college way! Extra pesto, please!”

“If you’re doing it the college way, then you’ll also want this extra-hot red pepper sauce.”

“Definitely not. We hate spicy foods.”

“Speak for yourself, mom. I’d like some of that sauce on my half.”

“Ali—I’m sure you have no idea how hot that sauce is.”

“If it were so unbearable, then why would all the students love it?”

“It is very popular. I’m scooping this stuff out for every other student, practically.”

“For veggies, could we do lettuce and tomato?”

“No problem. Just to let you know, most students top these with garlic salt and red wine vinegar.”

“Ew! Ali, trust me, you don’t want that.”

“I don’t know...it sounds worth trying.”

“Personally, I highly recommend it.”

“I’ll do it, then!”

“Will do...there you go! Have a good one.”

“You too! Have a great day.”

“Can I help you?”

“Hey, man.”

“Know what you want?”

“Whoa, look at all this cheese. Let me see if I can name them: OK, here’s American—love how they’re triangles by the way, what a shape that is—and here’s Swiss with and without holes. Swiss without holes? But is it still Swiss?”

“Usually we start with the bread.”

“Alright, but listen, listen. Can you lean in—it’s a secret. Thanks, thanks. *I already know that I’m getting Swiss with holes on either side, with one slice of holeless Swiss in the middle.*”

“Good deal. You know which bread?”

“Man, I always come here and I always get wheat. I go up and say, ‘Wheat, please.’”

“Are you sure? Because I remember you, and you always get asiago cheese bread.”

“Wait, but I don’t even like asiago cheese. Do I really get that all the time? Wow, that’s wild. Do me a favor—next time I ask for the cheese bread, give me wheat instead. I like wheat better, I think.”

“All right, but this time you’re going with asiago.”

“You know what, why not? Oh! And what are those things called?”

“Spinach wraps?”

“Asiago cheese bread with the wrap inside of it. Don’t bother folding the sides, I want them to flap out like green wings.”

“That might be a slight extra charge.”

“That’s fine.”

“Extra five dollars, I think.”

“What?!”

“I’m just worried they’ll count this as two sandwiches and charge double.”

“That’s fine, I’ve got plenty of dining dollars. A hundred extra, I’d say. In fact, could you actually throw two wraps in there? Do an orange one for the second. Awesomes, man. Awesomes.”

“Meat in this?”

“Look at this, it says ‘Fresh Grilled Chicken.’ Now what does ‘Fresh’ mean exactly?”

“‘Fresh’ means dunked in sanitizer. Now, you wanted the chicken?”

“Well, that’s hard to hear. They just have a big bucket of sanitizer and they dunk it in? Like hand sanitizer stuff? I don’t want that. Also, you’ve seen the chickens they use, right? Fucking monsters, that’s what they are. We have no idea what they’re capable of. Fifty years, and they’ll have us in those one by one cages. No, no ‘Fresh Grilled Chicken’ for me. I want the opposite of fresh, call me unnatural. Give me the oldest, most chemically treated piece of meat in the kitchen. Something like one-percent chicken and ninety-nine percent preservatives and warm yellowish liquid—yeah, that’s the stuff. Delicious. Half a scoop of chicken and four scoops of the yellow mixture. Drench it for me.”

“Really good choice.”

“Oh, absolutely. I want this sub to go down easy, mostly liquid would be perfect. You know what, I’ll do one more scoop of the yellow if you can manage it. Yes! That ladle should do the trick. Until the wraps are soaked. We’ll call it double meat!”

“How about cheese? Oh, and did you want this toasted? I’m just worried the toaster will blow up again.”

“Skip the toast, then. We can’t risk that right now. I can’t imagine who’d put wraps in a toaster. Actually, you know what, I bet they’re not so bad toasted. Great, even. Tell you what, toast that sucker. Let’s roll the dice.”

“Cheese? Oh, right you wanted Swiss.”

“Holes, no holes, holes. Three slices clean across. Jesus Christ you’re an artist.”

“One sec while I toast this. Cross your fingers.”

“Do you mind leaning forward again for me? I wanna, lemme just, here, yeah thanks. *One of my roommates has a gun and sometimes when we’re alone in the apartment he takes it out and points it all around the place, which he thinks is really funny and stuff, and so I laugh along but he points it at me too and I don’t know what to do so I keep on laughing, but it doesn’t always feel right, you know?*”

“Jesus Christ. I don’t even...oops, the bread!”

“You should get that, man. Don’t want to burn my double wrap sub. They should really change the beep pattern on that thing, it’s way outdated. I went to Subway the other day, theirs goes boopboop boopboop like a UFO landing or something. Dang, that sub’s a beaut. It wasn’t that color to begin with, right? Am I losing it?”

“Don’t worry about that. They always look disgusting like this.”

“Thank God, I was worried for a minute there. By the way: I have a thing with gloves I think. Do you mind changing out of your gloves? Yeah, if you can just toss them, that’d be great. Oh no, no, don’t bother with new ones. It’s fine.”

“I can ask, but I’m pretty sure I have to wear gloves no matter what.”

“Fuck gloves. They stand in the way of decent sandwiches. You have to feel the ingredients against your skin. That’s where you get the once-a-shift, ‘Wait, let me try this because I’m trusting my brain and bare hands,’ which can fail and be terrible for the customer who just wanted a turkey sub with American, I admit it, but on the off-chance the idea’s a good one, well, that’s a real thing you’ve created there. Fast-forward twenty years, thirty years, to the deathbed, and that person will still be desperate to re-taste that sandwich creation. The managers are like, let’s have them sketch with rubbers over their pencils.”

“The veggies are all a few days old, so you probably don’t want them.”

“No! I really do. One cucumber, five pickle slices, a tomato slice cut in half, with that knife if you don’t mind, no, I meant that one, nah it’s fine don’t worry, two full pickles lining the inside of the wrap, perfect, and enough lettuce so that a good half of it will fall out when you wrap it.”

“Want me to cut this masterpiece?”

“Yeah, but can you make sure that it’s still annoyingly connected at the bottom so that when I go home and forget about this and I unwrap the sub and try to take one half, the bottom part catches and toppings spill off either side, mostly on my lap? Thanks, man.”

“Hope to see you again soon.”

“Hey.”

“I just have a question. Wait—you guys have pesto today, right?...OK, good. And is anything here too old, like you wouldn’t eat it?”

“We do temperatures every hour or so.”

“I know, I know, but is there anything that if you were out here right now you wouldn’t order?”

“Umm...I don’t know how to answer that, since I wouldn’t eat any of this. A lot of people get white subs.”

“Because let’s say you or a coworker sneezed into the red onion an hour ago and no one bothered to replace it. Maybe one of the cheeses has been on the line for days, and if you don’t sell it this shift they’ll definitely pitch it. The cheddar sort of looks like that right now, actually.”

“The cheeses are all fresh. What did you want to order again?”

“Or there could be a meat that’s consistently been failing the temp cutoffs, and instead of changing out the whole batch when you’re already busy and plenty stressed, someone’s just tweaking the numbers—not much, but enough. And I’m guessing that you take deli slices from the top, right?”

“Me, or whoever else works here?”

“Both, please.”

“I always do. Can’t speak for them. Were you going to order?”

“But you temp from the bottom, which is of course the coldest part—usually by a lot. I’d be afraid to get the roast beef, because those top three slices must be infested with...”

“I can flip the stack. So you want roast beef?”

“Oh, don’t bother. I hate roast beef.”

“I see. What bread did you want?”

“Was it all baked this morning?”

“Don’t know. Probably not.”

“Hmm, well I’d rather not take it on faith. Could you ask someone?”

“Yep. Hey, Susan?”

“Yeah, what?”

“Was the bread all baked this morning?”

“Not the ciabatta.”

“The ciabatta isn’t fresh.”

“The white or the multigrain? I was gonna get multigrain.”

“I don’t know, and I’m not going to ask again. Sorry.”

“Ugh—OK. Let me do a spinach wrap with pesto, not toasted.”

“Uh huh.”

“Eww, wait, that consistency seems wrong. Is it still thawing? Don’t you guys have one that’ll like squirt out of the bottle?”

“That’d be nice, but no.”

“Forget the pesto. Can you grab me a different wrap? I’ll do the caesar and grilled chicken, still not toasted.”

“Yep.”

“That’s my default backup. Can’t go wrong with caesar...wait could you actually scrape a little of that off? Sorry, I just...perfect, that’s perfect. Thanks.”

“Cheese, veggies?”

“Provolone, please, if it’s not too dried out. I came here the other day and I swear the provolone crunched near the edges. No cheese chips, thank you much.”

“Looks fine.”

“Hold one up for me? Sweet, now just wiggle it a bit. I’ll be able to tell pretty quickly.”

“Listen, there are a lot of people behind you...”

“Great, I’ll do it. And for veggies, lemme get spinach, tomatoes, onions, pickles, banana peppers, and a tiny bit of lettuce. Also salt, black pepper, oil, and red vinegar. Wait—no cucumbers, could you take those off?”

“I swear you said cucumbers. Never mind. Salt, pepper, oil, and vinegar, right?”

“Yeah, and can you grab roasted red peppers from the other side?”

“One minute...”

“Could you do one that’s a little less slimy?”

“They’re all slimy.”

“OK, great, that’s everything. Just cut it, please.”

“Yep.”

Chapter 4

Larry

Having just grabbed two gourmet waffles from Sadie's bakery, I was walking back to my dorm room, a large single that I scored after my roommate bailed, when I heard a shout.

Stupidly, I looked into sky to look for its source. Then it came again, closer this time, and I strained my eyes for its owner. As gruff as it was frantic, the yelling broke the calm of the fall morning.

The two women who were walking ahead of me, both preoccupied on devices, slowed, and I followed suit. They were also confused about the sound, glancing left and right. One of them wore a striated knit sweater, the other a turtleneck covered with a down vest. The sweatered woman must have spotted the man first, for she grabbed at her partner's upper arm and pulled her across the street and away, their Uggs dragging against the pavement.

After backing up a few paces, I looked beyond the nearby McDonald's and identified the man who'd apparently been responsible for the commotion. He wore a navy blue puffy jacket, patched in places and dirtied with overwear; a pair of workman's jeans, ripped and stained; and had a green pack, the weight of which slanted his torso forward. He was tall, at least six feet despite his hunched back, and broadly built, which made him hard to ignore.

He shouted again, raising his right pointer as he did so, like a golfer testing the wind. The college town's noise made it hard to decipher his words, but he was clearly hoping to get my attention. I was the only person in sight, after all. Regarding me with enthusiasm, he began to lumber over, shouting all the while.

“Hey!”

I stood very still as he approached. Not knowing what to do, I checked my iPhone. Per usual, there were no messages. I considered faking an important call and speeding away. He wouldn't chase me, I figured if I were to dart across the street, scale the fence, and melt into a crowd on campus. From there, my dorm would soon be within sight. The fence was low, so it wouldn't require more than a few seconds to climb.

“Hey there!”

He had an unusual stride—it was as though his left and right legs couldn't decide on a single direction, making each step a sort of compromise. Often, he'd wander off the curb, perfectly oblivious to the danger, and passing cars would swerve toward the yellow lines to avoid him. Surprisingly, the man was equally comfortable on the busy street, sometimes even remaining there for a few moments and waving at passing cars. One black pickup honked twice, its twin blares tearing through the air. However, the stranger just lifted his hand in apology and continued, narrowing the distance between us with each passing moment.

“Morning, man! There another church around here?”

The man's graying hair was held up with a white bandana. His salt and pepper beard was full and unkempt, with curled hairs jutting every which way. His teeth were yellow, crooked, and half-submerged in his gums. His cracked lips smiled down at me.

“Over there,” I said, “I think St. Peter's is a few blocks away,” and I motioned with my hand. Despite my quick reply, I had no clue as to whether St. Peter's was a few blocks to my left or to my right, and by instinct I directed him opposite of my intended route.

He glanced in the direction I'd pointed with little interest.

“You go to church?” he said, his focus down the street.

It was Sunday, I realized.

“No.”

“I don’t blame ya man,” he said, fixing his attention on me and stepping forward. He seemed to expand as he did so. “Bunch of hypocrites.”

Nodding, I had a hunch that this was some kind of trap, a ruse to shame me for not attending Sunday services. Shame—that’s what many of these homeless people depended upon, I knew. Once, while visiting Manhattan with my aunt and uncle (just prior to my first Broadway show as I remember, an impressive production of *Rent*) I’d made eye contact with a grimy homeless man who said that Jesus loved me, and my uncle had rushed me past, whispering that they all just want you to feel awful so you give them change.

As I considered my next move, the man dug into his jacket pocket and retrieved a Poland Spring water bottle, surprisingly unweathered. Before I could resist, he’d placed it in my hand. I was surprised that it was nearly full, and even relatively cold. But then again, that morning had been a freezing one.

“I don’t need this,” I said. “Thanks, though.”

“It ain’t yours, man. Don’t want you to run away.”

He might as well have glued us together. I needed to run, to escape, to end this bizarre confrontation, this hyper-reality of sorts, but I would not steal from a man with so little. He was aware of this, naturally, and taking advantage. Technically, I was free to go. I thought of leaving the bottle on the street and taking off. He’d probably just pick it up and lend it to someone else.

“The place I tried, they didn’t even let me in the door. You believe that, man?”

“I’m sorry. Maybe it was full?”

“Bet you would’ve gotten in.”

I thought of the three chapters of *Principles of Economics* I had to plow through before Monday morning, and I was hoping to dedicate one hour for a chest and core workout that, if nothing else, would justify my showering for thirty minutes or so. After all, I'd recently discovered that blasting classical music in the shower via my Bose bluetooth speaker, the larger of two birthday gifts from my mom, reduced my stress dramatically, and I was now finding excuses both to prolong and to increase the frequency of my showers.

He shuffled a bit closer, halving the space between us. I could smell him, and began to inhale through my mouth.

“You know man, you know, people don't care. They say they do, but they don't, man. I mean some of them spend all this time pretending to care, and they just don't.”

I nodded, wondering how anyone could go through all the motions while only pretending to care, while only feigning sympathy for the disenfranchised. I envisioned myself leading him to the nearest restaurant and sponsoring his meal, anything on the menu. Knowing my luck, I'd run into one of the few people I knew and would have to explain myself. Worse, another homeless person might witness my kindness. Then they'd be on my tail.

“My name's Larry,” he said, offering his hand.

It was coarse as firewood and I had the impression of my fingers being swallowed. Mercifully, he shook with only a fraction of his strength, but I still had to exert myself to match his force. Finally, he released me.

I hadn't given him my name. So rarely did I meet people that I'd completely forgotten. To be sure, he wanted money—not names.

“Listen, man. I'll be honest with you. You know that motel over there?”

I nodded rather than explain that it was a hotel, and a hotel of decent expense, which would be far beyond his means, financially and otherwise.

“I’ve almost got enough for a room. I mean I really gotta clean up, you know? I can’t remember the last time I had a room, man.”

I began to retreat slowly—imperceptibly, I figured. A few students passed between us, and the man wished them a good morning. I found myself hoping they’d pause, at least one of them, and speak to him for a moment so I’d be relieved, free to continue my day. Perhaps he’d lose himself in another conversation and forget about me. At the moment, I would have enjoyed being a transparent presence, cloaked in my normal invisibility.

“I don’t have cash on me at the moment. See?” I removed my Bank of America debit card, whose lettering glinted in the light, and showed it to him. I made sure to keep the card just out of his reach, and held it firmly. “If you just let me run to my room and grab some cash, I could meet you back here.” I found myself inching backwards again.

He looked above me with an empty expression. “Man, you ain’t coming back.”

I stopped. Clearly, he’d had it with such promises. Was it possible, having ensured him of my immediate return, that I would betray his trust and ditch him, as had many others? He obviously thought it possible. More than likely he was wrong, of course. I would have returned. I like to think I would have returned without hesitation, in fact. Without even a second thought.

“If you walk with me to the motel and help me out, I’ll leave you alone, man. It’s just a few blocks up the road. They won’t even let me in, man.”

“I can’t buy you a room, they’re expensive. I’m sorry.” The thought of us entering the lobby side-by-side filled me with unease. Would I even be allowed in, with him?

Years ago on my then best friend's fifteenth birthday (we've since completely lost touch), he and his family had invited me to Fire and Ice in Boston, and as we walked back to the car after the meal we passed a man sleeping on the street with a cup by his side. Without much thought, I threw a few dollars into it, and my friend's mom turned back to me, teary-eyed, saying that I was so generous and so selfless, and I enjoyed a warm sense of pride in my chest throughout the car ride home.

Larry put his hand on my shoulder. He leaned forward, his face huge and creased with wrinkles from what I imagined was hardship laced with something like sorrow.

"Look at me, man. Look in my eyes. You see my eyes?"

Was he carrying a weapon of some sort? I didn't see why not, and immediately felt naive for never having considered it. Did the homeless tend to be armed? This could be it, I realized, this was how it might end. It would probably be a knife. I'd always wondered what it would be like to get stabbed, a blade plunging through my body, rupturing soft organs. Shots at the doctor had never bothered me, which was my only metric for that type of pain.

"They're brown. Dark brown, man. Just like yours. Don't you see that? We're brothers, man."

I nodded. However, I was somewhat confused. My eyes were light brown and his were of a different shade, much darker I think. He was mistaken, it seemed, perhaps colorblind. Better not to correct him, I figured.

"I'm just like you. But you don't have a tan like I do, man," he said, chuckling. "That's everything, you know. People like me got this tan and people like you don't."

"Let me go to an ATM," I said. "I can give you twenty. There's an ATM a few blocks away."

“All right, man.”

With that, we began walking. I was briskly pacing, my attention directed forward, while he ambled along, arms spread wide, beaming, and he paused to greet everyone who passed. Each time he did so, I avoided their sympathetic glances by checking my iPhone. As they'd walk by, chatting happily in groups, one outspoken member would often answer Larry with an enthusiastic tone, but invariably they'd be on their way before Larry could respond. In one instance, Larry followed up on his greeting with a group of young men, asking how they were. So swiftly did they depart from earshot that his question hung in the air, exposed.

“People don't care up here, man. Down in Georgia, they talk to you. Here, no one talks. I mean, half these people won't even look at me. Everyone's so busy, don't care to waste time with you.”

I nodded, striding ahead. He was a few feet behind and to my left, and I kept checking my speed, taking smaller and smaller steps, so as to avoid the impression of his following me or being roped to my heel. It would be better, I thought, if we were side by side.

“You're very social,” I said.

“Yeah, man. I love talking to people. Don't you?”

My weak response was lost in the wind. We continued in silence. With each step forward, I became increasingly eager to be rid of Larry. He was relentlessly slow, however, and made no efforts to match my clip. It was as if he misunderstood time, and how time was limited, and how the clock was always ticking. On and on we went, Larry introducing himself here and there, yet the ATM sign remained out of sight.

“You hear about that shooter in South Carolina? Killed nine people. Killed a pastor, man.”

“That’s awful.”

“Didn’t you hear about it?”

I lied and said yes. Larry’s Poland Spring felt heavy now that we were moving, and with each step I was reminded of the burden, of his depositing it in my care. It was at four-fifths capacity. Every last drop of it would be of value to him, I knew, so I tightened my fingers around the bottle’s ribbed surface. I fought off an absurd impulse to take a swig, assuring myself that I’d buy one later, or even a two-dozen package for my room.

“Look at how beautiful these people are, man.”

We were passing a trio of suited young men handing out pamphlets. They grinned at Larry, who was offering both arms in their direction, and slid their church’s literature into his hand. He flipped through it excitedly.

“See this, man? Nice boys here, spreading the word of God. Spending their whole Sunday out here.”

I nodded. The ATM was now in sight, but Larry’s progress was more tedious than ever. Occasionally, he’d stop altogether and turn in place, admiring the sights and sounds around him. Another homeless man ran by with a cart, his long beard dipping in the wind.

“Even that guy, man. He’s beautiful too, you know.”

In fact, I had seen the man with the cart before. Two days before, I had been on the way from one bar to another, alone, when I came upon him sleeping against a building. I hurried past, looking down at my phone, then forcing my attention across the street, toward campus. Until I saw him again, that day with Larry, he’d completely slipped my mind.

“Where you from, man?”

“Near Boston.”

“Me too. I was up there a little while ago. You know, they don’t give a shit up there.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked, regretting it instantly.

He stopped and looked at me. “You know, man,” he said, “I lived in Boston once. Lived there for a couple years. No one talks to you in that city. No one cares much. It’s so lonely that I came back down here.”

“Some people give a shit, though. You said no one does. Some of us do.”

Larry shrugged.

We were a block from the ATM. I wanted to ask him something else, anything that related to Boston, our commonality, but nothing surfaced. Feeling obliged to contribute, I changed the topic.

“Where are you trying to go?”

He stopped, and traced his facial hair in contemplation. “Heaven.”

I nodded, smiling, and approached the ATM. Before I could do so, he took me by the shoulders. I turned to face him. The wind had shifted, and I now received the full impact of his stench, which was unbearable.

“You don’t have to do this, man. You don’t have to trust me. We can go in over there,” he said, gesturing to the motel, “and you can be sure that I’ll use this money right, that I won’t just buy alcohol with it. I know you might think that. Please, you don’t have to trust me.”

“I trust you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I trust you.”

He released his grip and collapsed onto a bench opposite the bank. I flew to the ATM, removing my Visa debit card with purpose. I then misentered my PIN twice before finally

selecting fast cash and waiting for the bills to emerge. I tried not to look back at him on the bench behind me, and when I did he was staring holes into the ground, still as a statue. The green pack, which he hadn't removed, slumped him forward even while he rested on the bench. I watched as a brown napkin, darkened with what must have been condiment stains, lapped against his boot until he kicked it away. I hadn't realized he was miserable.

After withdrawing sixty dollars, planning to use the remaining forty as cash for the week, I stuffed two twenties into my jacket and turned to face Larry, the last twenty snaked between my fingers. His eyes hadn't left the ground, and his posture was unchanged. It was as if he'd been switched off.

I sat beside him. Beyond the two-lane street, a brilliant lawn sloped up and connected with the university's four-pillared library, which towered in the distance. Snarling gargoyles flanked the entrance, alight in the sun. Everything was alive and awake. It was such a lovely morning.

"Man, do I smell OK?"

I was tempted to nod, hand him the twenty, and take off. Yet I didn't. Instead, I sat there and hesitated while Larry examined me closely. We were together, he and I, together on that bench listening to traffic and watching the people who passed just before us, everyone hurrying about their business.

Just as I was about to answer, Larry nodded.

"I know." He reached out and straightened my beanie. "I know."

I waited for him to speak again, but he kept quiet. There was nothing for me to say. I removed a twenty from my pocket and handed it to him. He thanked me.

"Might take a bus and get the hell out of here."

He turned his head to me, as if expecting some kind of protest. I found myself saying, “It’s not so bad here. You should think about staying for a while.”

He shook his head. “I dunno, man. I dunno.”

“Here,” I reached into my pocket and pulled out another twenty, holding it out to him. “It’s yours.”

“I saw you take out sixty, man.” he said.

Getting up from the bench, I ripped the final twenty from my pocket and offered it to him, but he turned away. I considered sticking the bills in one of his coat pockets, then noticed that they were all zippered shut. After a few moments of waiting for him to turn back, I gave up and wished him good luck before walking off. Ten feet from the bench, I looked back, as if expecting to find him ambling in pursuit, possibly enraged.

I was almost disappointed to see that he still hadn’t moved a muscle.

Leaving him there, I felt as if I’d forgotten something important. I resisted numerous urges to turn around and go back, to reseat myself beside Larry, converse with him. Would anyone else talk to him? I hoped so. Already beginning to dissolve in my mind was his final expression of dejection. That’s a horrible thing, I reflected, that anyone could be so lonely. The thought of it clawed at me. Yet I remembered that pages and pages of reading were waiting, plus a workout and shower. I couldn’t help but check my smartphone multiple times on the way, as if anticipating an urgent message. Zero notifications, indicated its vacant white screen, no texts, no calls.

When I’d almost reached my dorm I noticed, to my horror, that his Poland Spring was still clenched between my fingers, my grip having caved in the bottle from its center. In a cold

sweat I rushed back, alternating between sprinting and jogging, my Sperrys clunking to a frantic beat against the pavement. Out of breath, I finally came upon the bench.

It was empty, and Larry was nowhere in sight. I thought to trash the Poland Spring but passed each garbage can without doing so. I returned to my room, bottle in hand, and chucked my wallet against the wall.

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