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IF YOU DON'T LAUGH, YOU CRY: STORIES AND ABSURDITIES

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ABSTRACT

If You Don't Laugh, You Cry seeks to explore the bizarre mix of humor and helplessness that we call absurdity. Each story introduces characters whose lives are like the warped reflection of a fun house mirror—there are images and scenes we instantly recognize, but something is undeniably *off*. These distortions are what happens when logical reasoning is applied to an illogical premise. For example: What would it be like to work in a hospital where laughter really is the best medicine? Maybe the doctors all wear red noses and carry around rubber chickens. Or maybe the phrase “dying of laughter” carries a heavier weight than we’re used to. In the realm of the absurd, joy, sadness, and confusion live side-by-side. The trouble is telling where one begins and the other ends.

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St. Murray's Institute for Comedic Therapy

LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE

The archway's crumbling message passed unseen above the interns. The faded bus, already coated in road salt when the interns boarded in Boston, spat gravel as it turned down the winding drive. The passengers, nine men and five women, had been whittled down from an applicant pool of over two thousand, the largest and most competitive in the history of St. Murray's. It was an assortment of raw talent as diverse as it was qualified.

The two Blue Collars sprawled across the bus's back seats. They wore denim and flannel and had beards like dried silage. One had grown up dredging oil in Texas, the other raising Buckeye chickens on the Iowa plains. They both spoke with a slow, side-mouthed drawl. At their request the driver had pulled over at a Sunrise Mart eighty miles back, and the bus now reeked of corn chips and teriyaki jerky.

The French Satirist perched two rows forward, a hook-nosed man who spent years wielding an acid pen at Charlie Hebdo. White-haired and approaching sixty, he observed the other interns with a cold objectivity, eyes unblinking as he peered over rimless spectacles.

The Improvisers were uniformed—blue jeans, Chuck Taylors, and solid colored t-shirts. The three women wore the primaries, the man plain white. Veterans of the NYC improv scene, they'd long ago convinced themselves that SNL was only for sell-outs. The troupe tried in vain to get a suggestion from the identical twins that specialized in Slapstick. The brothers were impossible to tell apart, save for the bruises and faded scars that served as reminders of bits gone too far.

Behind the bus driver sat the Observationalist, a Chicago native who could squeeze hilarity out of the mundane like clear water from a moldy sponge. He scribbled new material in a

spiral bound notebook (“Let’s talk about bus drivers for a second…”), but his thoughts were drowned out. The Parody Musicians, a husband and wife duo, had somehow managed to smuggle aboard a ukulele and accordion. They shared a seat in front of the Impressionist, a twenty-eight-year-old woman short of height and short of hair, with tattoo sleeves and the voice of a chameleon. She earned her living as a vocal counterfeiter, stealing the voices of politicians and movie stars.

The Cynic sat aloof, a Gothic reptile in his black knitted turtleneck and tortoiseshell glasses. Even the Impressionist could not identify his accent; it conjured images of Soviet concrete and rust-colored snow. He wore a permanent half-smile, as if daily existence was a private joke he shared with no one.

The bus jerked to a stop, ancient brakes screeching in protest. They had arrived.

St. Murray’s Institute for Comedic Therapy loomed overhead, a Victorian labyrinth of shadows, stones and spires. Tendrils of ivy slithered up the Institute’s face, burrowing into the time-softened grout. It seemed, at least to the Observationalist, that some giant squid was trying to drag the Institute into the depths of the moor. Apart from the thrumming of backup generators, St. Murray’s seemed displaced by two centuries and at least one ocean.

The slam of the bus door broke the interns out of their silence. Passengers scrambled for backpacks and duffel bags. The red shirt Improviser exited last and the door folded shut behind her. The four-wheeled monstrosity started crawling back toward the stone arch in the distance.

The fourteen interns gathered at the base of the Institute’s imposing staircase. Above them stood their greeting party—a single man in a white lab coat. His hair was full and neatly parted, and his athletic build put him anywhere between thirty-five and fifty. At first sight his face appeared creased by years of hard laughter. Upon closer inspection, it became difficult to

tell whether they were laugh lines or scars left behind by too many sleepless nights. The Institute's jagged rooftop cast a deep blue shadow, a border of sun and shade which reached toward the interns with ragged fingers. The host cleared his throat.

"My name is William Halsey. From this point forward, you will refer to me as Comedian Halsey." Plumes of breath blurred his face.

"Some of you may already consider yourselves Comedians. You are not. This is neither an insult nor an invitation to debate. It is a statement of fact. A Comedian understands what it feels like to have a patient die in your arms. Die because you weren't funny enough."

Comedian Halsey stared out past the interns, beyond the stone archway where the bus was only now turning off the drive. The trenches in his brow deepened. Somewhere in the ivy, a meadowlark whistled.

"Each of you has shown potential, a proficiency in some comedic discipline. But potential is not enough.

My job, over the next six weeks, is to push you to your breaking point. And you will break. Those of you who manage to put yourselves back together, those are the ones who stand even half a chance of becoming a Comedian." He checked his watch.

"Change into your scrubs and meet me in the East Wing in twenty minutes."

* * *

The exterior still clung to a hint of Victorian grandeur, but the inside of St. Murray's had been thoroughly gutted. The floors had once been clothed in a forest's-worth of pine, a patchwork of dark and knotted boards that swelled in the summer and groaned at first frost. Now the nurses wheeled gurneys across green and white sheets of checkered linoleum. Frowning Comedians marched past in silent urgency, one of them nearly trampling the tattooed

Impressionist as she turned a corner. The place smelled of antiseptic and stale linens. Pagers chirped incessantly.

Heaps of copper chandeliers—magnificent, hundred-armed behemoths—oxidized slowly in the dark of unused supply closets. Banks of humming fluorescents paved the ceilings, tuned at just the right frequency to trigger a migraine in the French Satirist. In a cruel twist the stone hearth remained, forced to preside over feasts of microwaved soup and over-wrapped sandwiches. There was only one other survivor of the Institute’s interior-decorating purges: a six-foot longcase clock, the dark walnut sentinel which guarded the East Wing. As its brass hands struck one-thirty, Comedian Halsey appeared from around the corner.

“With me. Keep up.”

The interns trailed behind, a line of ducklings following the falcon that ate their mother. A narrow window gave the Observationalist a half-second snapshot of a surgery in-progress. A masked surgeon bent over a spotlighted incision, gloved hand outstretched as an orderly reached for a rubber chicken. The anesthesiologist stood at the end of the operating table, tickling the patient’s foot with a long purple feather.

Around another bend the hallway terminated, a dead-end which marked the Institute’s easternmost point. Comedian Halsey turned into the last room on the left. The interns filtered in behind, but one of the Slapstick twins (impossible to tell which one) wobbled at the doorway, rubbing his nose like a mime who’s found an invisible wall. Comedian Halsey administered a two-fingered poke in the eyes and pulled him into the room.

The room was spacious, but fifteen left little room to maneuver. A large metal cot stood outlined against a latticed window. The beveled glass offered a distorted view of the east garden—wild roses, waterless fountain, a stone cherub sounding a broken horn. A saline drip and

oxygen tank flanked the upper bedposts, and an EKG monitor pulsed quietly in the corner. The faint scent of jerky still hung about the Blue Collars.

The bed's occupant was asleep. An old woman with tumbling gray curls, she was propped into a sitting position by a mound of pillows. A plastic tube ran from the base of her nose to the aluminum tank at her bedside. Steady droplets rippled the clear reservoir of IV fluid. Comedian Halsey unhooked a clipboard from the foot of the bed.

“Margaret Suffolk, age sixty-eight. Professor of Philosophy at Bowdoin College. Unmarried, no children.”

The Parody Musicians squeezed hands, tapping a silent tempo in each other's palms. If Comedian Halsey saw, he chose not to comment.

“Transferred over from Maine Medical four days ago. Suffering from non-cardiogenic pulmonary edema, attributed to acute respiratory distress syndrome. Blood oxygen hovering at eighty percent. Anything lower and we'll have to intubate.” He looked up. “Am I going too fast for anyone?”

The Parody Musicians dropped hands and the Gothic tortoise wiped a non-existent smudge from his glasses. Comedian Halsey frowned and flipped the page, although the clipboard was little more than a prop. The Observationalist wasn't the only one who could see that Comedian Halsey was reciting from memory.

“The team at Maine Medical ran her through a full cycle of preload reducers. No improvement, so they've passed the baton to us. We've had her on a steady dosage of sitcom laugh track—Seinfeld and Frasier, nothing too fancy—in addition to a rigorous knock-knock regimen. Not so much as a snicker.”

Comedian Halsey looked down at his patient for the first time since they'd entered, watching her chest rise in stilted, erratic breaths.

“Two more days and she'll be drowning in her own lungs.”

The interns crowded together in a half-circle, sharing an unspoken and unanimous decision to avoid all eye contact. A stream of oxygen hissed gently into Margaret Suffolk's nostrils. The French Satirist, his migraine approaching high tide, closed his eyes and massaged his temples.

“So,” he said, “you want us to...?”

Comedian Halsey rounded on the Satirist.

“Make her *laugh*, goddammit!”

Twitching of the eyelids, a tilt of the head. Margaret Suffolk was awake. She scanned the fourteen unfamiliar, moving from the tangled Blue Collar beards to the Impressionist's shiny, heart-shaped face. Her eyes refocused when she reached Comedian Halsey, and any lingering traces of dream were released in shaky sigh.

“Hello, Comedian.” It sounded as if she were speaking through a tin can telephone, one whose string was old and fraying.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Suffolk,” said Comedian Halsey. “How are we feeling today?”

When she spoke, Margaret Suffolk's lips balanced on a beam of perfect neutrality, never tipping toward smile or frown.

“Give me an hour...to catch my breath...and I'll let you know.”

The EKG blipped softly, and Margaret Suffolk sank back into the pillows. Her nostrils flared, and between shallow pants she sucked at the oxygen line. Comedian Halsey leaned in to adjust the IV flow rate, waving his other hand at the small crowd.

“These are our new interns, Ms. Suffolk. Not much to look at, but there might be a funny bone or two mixed in somewhere. How do you feel about a couple jokes?”

A rumbling, fluid-laced cough seized Margaret Suffolk as she opened her mouth. Hunched over the starched white linens, her thin frame heaved under a wave of wheezing tremors. It wasn't until the aftershocks subsided that she gave Comedian Halsey a tired nod.

Handing the clipboard to one of the Improvisers, Comedian Halsey lowered himself into the room's only chair. He swept out his arms, palms facing upwards, inviting the interns to begin. For an instant, the fourteen interns—from the turtlenecked gargoyle to the Iowa farmhand—all shared the same expression. It was the look of a two-bit comedy hack, one who's used to performing half-drunk at places named *The Giggle Cave* or *KomedyKabana*, who suddenly finds themselves dragged out of bed by masked intruders and shoved onstage at The Apollo. In the last room on the East Wing of St. Murray's Institute for Comedic Therapy, the fourteen comedians remembered what it was to feel stage fright.

The Observationalist stepped forward. The other interns retreated a half-step, carving out a little linoleum stage at the foot of Margaret Suffolk's bed. The lanky comedian cleared his throat, wishing for a stool or a mic-stand, any sort of crutch.

“So, uh, what's the deal with this hospital food?”

Five laughless minutes later, the Observationalist abandoned his set and slunk to the back of the room. The Slapstick twins were next. Their vaudevillian antics made frequent use of a chrome bedpan and an old banana peel they found in the cafeteria. Margaret Suffolk did not so much as snort, and even dozed off during the climax of nose tweaking and head bopping.

The Parody Musicians re-imagined a classic from Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, their version titled “Another Poop in the Stall (Pt. 2),” but earned nothing more than a noise complaint from

the patient next door. The Improvisers, after performing a series of trust falls to ensure they were in a collaborative mindset, asked their bedridden audience for a suggestion. Margaret Suffolk was either unable or unwilling to give more than a cough, and the resulting sketch—four hypochondriacs waiting in a doctor’s office—was stale and overly self-aware. The Impressionist, tattooed serpents peeking out from under her scrubs, did manage to get a laugh, just not from the intended target. The Observationalist cracked up at her uncanny impersonation of Comedian Halsey, but the two were quickly silenced by an authentic glare from the man himself.

The Blue Collars went up together, but their set soon devolved into bouts of competing flatulence. The cloud of rancid sulfur threw Margaret Suffolk into her most violent coughing fit yet, and Comedian Halsey kicked the offenders offstage. For his part, the Satirist uncapped a fountain pen and drew a series of political cartoons on unused napkins. He handed the finished stack to Margaret Suffolk, but an episode of labored hacking and wheezing crumpled the paper and smeared the ink with pale gray mucus.

Only the Gothic tortoise remained. The nihilist in Soviet-era spectacles had been poring over the patient’s medical records with a singular focus, oblivious to the humorless failures of his fellow interns. Only when the Satirist elbowed past, muttering French expletives, did the Cynic return the clipboard to its hook and approach the patient’s bedside.

“You are a doctor of philosophy, no?”

Margaret Suffolk regarded the dark, near-sighted specter with a frown. It was the frown she adopted when fielding questions from her brightest and most mischievous students. She nodded.

“Focus?” The comedian’s accent echoed of the Old Country, of forests and snow and eyes that glowed in firelight. Comedian Halsey leaned forward, hands clasped together.

“Continental,” she answered. “Nineteenth century.” Each syllable made a slow sucking sound, like mastodon bones being dragged from a tar pit. The tortoise smoothed a spot on the bed, next to the blanketed hills of Margaret Suffolk’s knees, and sat down.

“A story for you, then.” He paused, making sure his class was listening. She was.

“Friedrich Nietzsche is walking down the street. He is looking...distraught. A troubled man, Nietzsche. A friend approaches and notices that something is wrong. So the friend asks of Nietzsche, ‘What is the matter?’”

The storyteller stared at his patient, waiting. She inhaled through bared teeth. Pockets of fluid popped and crackled.

“What. Did he say. Was the matter.”

The tortoise smiled.

“Nothing.”

Above the bed, the punchline mingled with the scent of rubbing alcohol and lemon floor cleaner. A saline tear fell through the IV drip chamber. The Cynic stood, leaving behind a bony depression. The oxygen tank gave a mechanical sigh.

And Margaret Suffolk laughed.

It was a high-pitched laugh, the delighted shriek of a ten-year-old caught in a warm, blue sky rainstorm. Her eyes widened, surprised at her own amusement, and crow’s feet blossomed from their corners. White molars flashed at the back of her mouth.

“Nothing,” she repeated, before another spasm of laughter overtook her. She snorted so hard that the oxygen nosepiece fell into her lap. Comedian Halsey reached for it but she waved him off. She was cackling now, casting a mist of spittle across the bedspread. Her shoulders

trembled and her diaphragm bowed, and her laughter deepened as it crawled further within. The EKG whistled.

“Ms. Suffolk?” Comedian Halsey was standing now.

Margaret Suffolk howled—a wolfish, full-mooned laugh. Then she snickered, low and dirty, the kind of laugh that festers in the damp of middle school locker rooms. She chortled and she guffawed, her laughter twisting and writhing and growing, always growing, in volume. The Cynic was at Comedian Halsey’s side.

“I didn’t think...” The bed frame rattled; something was stirring far away or deep inside. The Cynic shook his head. “It wasn’t that funny.”

“Must have a...agh, goddammit...delicate sense of humor.” Comedian Halsey grappled with his patient, struggling to pin her thrashing figure to the bed. The EKG whined like a hornet’s nest. The Cynic lent his weight to restraining Margaret Suffolk, whose face shone with tears of laughter. Comedian Halsey lunged for the intercom above the bed.

“Get an Un-Amusement Unit to Room 198! We’ve got a patient in Class III Hysterics!”

Something in Comedian Halsey’s tone struck Margaret Suffolk as unimaginably funny, and she lashed out in uncontrollable joy. Her flailing limbs sent the Cynic’s glasses flying; he fell to his knees, groping blindly across the checkered linoleum. Margaret Suffolk curled into the fetal position, twitching and hiccupping as if tickled by an invisible feather. A crunch—the Cynic found his glasses. Margaret Suffolk’s hoots of delight were joined now by a faint whiff of urine. The Un-Amusement Unit was nowhere to be seen. Comedian Halsey made for the door, elbowing the unresponsive Satirist out of his way.

The laughter faded as Comedian Halsey sprinted down the fluorescent tunnel, his lab coat trailing like a white cape. He passed the silent clock at the opposite end of the East Wing.

Turning the corner, Comedian Halsey could no longer tell whether the echoes was laughing or choking.

* * *

The Satirist, the Blue Collars, and the Improvisers were on their way back to Boston. The remaining seven sat scattered around a long cafeteria table, swirling their yogurts and spearing limp salad with plastic forks. The Parody Musicians were tucked into a corner booth, leaning on each other with closed eyes and listening to Crosby, Stills and Nash through a shared pair of headphones. The Observationalist scribbled in his earmarked journal, stealing occasional glances at the Impressionist. She sat across from him, chewing ice from a Pepsi cup and balancing her chair on one leg. The Slapstick brothers practiced origami, folding Institute brochures into delicate paper fauna—swallows, giraffes, and stately Belugas.

The Cynic ate a popsicle. A wad of black surgical tape held his glasses together, and his lips were stained a deep blue. He bit down and slid the last piece of ice into his mouth, leaving it to melt on his tongue. Closing one eye behind his cracked left lens, the Cynic read from the popsicle stick.

“What is a musician’s favorite type of pastry?”

He took a silent survey of the table. The husband and wife shrugged in unison. The Observationalist shook his head, and the Impressionist crunched loudly on an ice cube. One of the Slapsticks opened his mouth in an ‘O’ and the other knocked on his brother’s head, making a dull, hollow sound. The Cynic read the punchline to himself. A rosy shadow crept up from beneath his turtleneck.

“A drumroll.” His accent failed to disguise his embarrassment.

A wet, sputtering cough erupted from the corner. The interns turned to see Comedian Halsey, seated alone at a small table, wiping milk from his chin and upper lip. The lines that framed his face seemed rounder and fuller than before, but they narrowed and deepened when he saw he was being watched.

“Can I help you?” he shouted from across the room.

When no one answered, he picked up his tray and crossed to the nearest trashcan. Tossing out his empty carton and milk-soaked sandwich, Comedian Halsey fixed the interns with a long stare. Then he whistled and pointed to his watch. As the table rushed to clear their trays, the Impressionist thought she caught a quiet chuckle.

“Drumroll. Ha. That’s pretty good.”

The Seawater Lighthouse: An Annotated History

Euphonious Smith, thirty-three-year-old lighthouse keeper of Seawater, Mississippi, fixed an appropriately blank stare onto the blank paper he held in his hands. *Petition to Save the Seawater Lighthouse*. Euphonious¹ groaned and leaned his head back. Strands of blond hair clung to his forehead in the humid air, and the low August sun stretched his shadow to pencil proportions. Ankle deep in crabgrass, he opened his eyes and breathed in the sight of his home.

Though weathered by nearly three decades of persistent heat and humidity, the Seawater Lighthouse never failed to impress. Alternating red and white stripes brought the tower to a height of sixty feet, making it possible to see the center of town from over two miles away. The glass cupola was encircled by a narrow balcony and housed a custom bulb rated for up to four kilowatts. The entire mechanical assembly had endured minimal wear, a direct benefit of having never been activated.

At the base of the tower stood a humble one-story cottage, whose front door featured a bronze door knocker in the shape of an anchor. The floorplan was limited to a single bed and bath, a large kitchen that doubled as the dining room, and a modest study, outfitted with an extensive collection of nautical volumes and assorted accounts of seaborne heroics.

¹A week after the birth of their unnamed son, and an hour after finishing most of a bottle of port, Mr. and Mrs. Smith agreed to let fate decide upon a name by opening the dictionary to a page at random. Fate did not appreciate the gravity of this task, and as a result Mrs. Smith mistakenly retrieved the family's seldom-used copy of *Wylock Sterling's Pretentious Dictionary*, Fourth Edition, an unbearably haughty text populated with entries such as antediluvian, chrysostomatic, and euphonious.

Surveying his dominion, Euphonious felt a surge of immense pride. When the sinking sun caught the mirrors just right, and the tower seemed to erupt right out of the surrounding swampland, he could almost forget that Seawater and its lighthouse were over two hundred miles from the nearest coastline².

The ring of a bicycle bell interrupted his brief moment of tranquility. Euphonious peered down Tanglewood Road, a dirt path that snaked through two miles of swamp and served as the only connection to town. A freckled teenager atop a rusted bicycle came huffing into the clearing, his face flushed with pained determination. He wore a mud-splattered shirt and a matching pair of white shorts that were a size too small for his chubby frame. A mess of red curls were topped off by a yacht cap with the initials S.C.B. embroidered in yellow. The thirteen-year-old dismounted and snapped off a sharp salute, his shoulders heaving with asthmatic breaths.

“Afternoon, sir! Bernard P. Russell, Vice Commandant of the Seawater Couriers Brigade!” The boy appeared to be on the verge of passing out.

“Bernie, you don’t have to do this every time,” said Euphonious. “I know who you are.” The boy remained at attention, his raised hand beginning to shake.

²In 1933, The United States Lighthouse Federation appropriated funding for the Seawater Lighthouse after mistakenly assuming that a town with such a name would have to be located on the coast. In actuality, Seawater was named after the dying words of its founder, Clark Bradford. Upon reaching the site of modern-day Seawater, a member of Bradford’s expedition observed that the festering swampland was entirely unfit for human habitation. In an attempt to disprove the skeptic, Bradford drank a glass of swamp fluid and remarked to his companions: “See? Water.” He then dropped dead from what would become the first recorded case of Super Dysentery. His final utterance was improperly transcribed, and the town was christened Seawater in his honor.

“Oh for the love of—at ease!” said Euphonious, returning a half-hearted salute. Bernie let out a ragged sigh and his saluting arm flopped to the side. With his other hand, he produced a crisp white envelope from his breast pocket.

“Dispatch from the Mayor’s Office,” said Bernie, finally beginning to breathe normally. He handed the envelope to Euphonious. “Priority Nine Communiqué.”

Euphonious hesitated before accepting the letter. “What’s Priority Nine mean again?”

Bernie began to recite from memory. “A Priority Nine Communiqué contains news of a disappointing and or regrettable nature, and is to be delivered by a member of the Couriers Brigade in order to spare the sender from having to witness the pitiful and or unpleasant reaction said message will evoke from its intended recipient.”³

“Well that’s hardly encouraging,” said Euphonious. “Would you at least like to come in for some water?”

“Afraid not, sir,” said Bernie, hoisting himself back onto his bicycle. “The Public Safety Commission just enacted another Emergency Mosquito Curfew. I have to be indoors by 1900 hours or I could lose my badge.”⁴

³ The Priority Nine designation originated the day after Collier T. Wax was elected to serve as the 34th mayor of Seawater. The first dispatch to receive this classification was a petition for divorce, delivered to Wax’s first wife by then Junior Cadet Bernard P. Russell of the Seawater Couriers Brigade.

⁴ Officers of the Couriers Brigade were initially issued a badge and a semi-automatic handgun, intended as a form of self-defense against the notoriously aggressive swamp gators. However, the entire force had to surrender their firearms after Cadet Hans Jorgssen shot Second Lieutenant Bryce Gordon twice in the foot. The subsequent Internal Affairs investigation revealed that Cadet Jorgssen was taking revenge for Lieutenant Gordon asking Margaret Broms to the spring Swamp Ball, when everybody knew that Jorgssen had been planning to ask her. A Couriers

“Another curfew?” said Euphonious. “That’s the fourth one this month.”

“It’s getting pretty bad back in town,” said Bernie. “Last week Mr. Gaddis ignored the sirens and ran outside to rescue his cat. By the time he got back inside his face was so puffed he couldn’t even talk. Had over three hundred bug bites. Doc Sapwell said the skeeters could’ve drained him dry.”

With a final salute, Bernie started pedaling back down Tanglewood Road and into the depths of the swamp. After watching the young Vice Commandant round the corner and disappear behind a curtain of Spanish moss, Euphonious gritted his teeth and tore open the envelope.

The letterhead was dominated by the official insignia of the Seawater Mayor’s Office: a sloppy imitation of the U.S. Presidential Seal, in which the bald eagle had been replaced by a massive mosquito⁵. Euphonious scanned the page.

*The Seawater Public Appropriations Committee has concluded their vote...funding for the position of Lighthouse Keeper has been suspended indefinitely...this was a fairly easy decision to make...as far as we can tell, nobody in town has ever even seen the ocean...quite honestly, having a lighthouse in the first place makes us feel rather silly...an inspector from the Seawater Zoning Board will arrive tomorrow morning to cordon off the property...Cordially,
Mayor Collier T. Wax.*

Brigade Tribunal expelled Jorgssen in light of his gross misconduct, but since Lieutenant Gordon was still in the hospital, former Cadet Jorgssen took his place in accompanying Margaret to the Swamp Ball.

⁵ The Office of the President would go on to issue sixteen cease and desist letters, file seven formal injunctions with the Department of Justice, and make one surprisingly rude prank call, on the grounds that the Seawater mayoral seal is blatant plagiarism. To cope with this legal harassment, Mayor Collier T. Wax established a policy of immediately shredding any form of correspondence which, in his words, “looks or smells like the Federal Government.”

By the time the letter hit the ground, Euphonious was already bounding up the lighthouse's metal staircase, spiraling upward two steps at a time.

“We'll show em!” The stairwell echoed his shout like a schoolyard posse. Euphonious took this as a sign of encouragement and decided to yell more words at nobody in particular.

“They wanna shut us down? Fine, but we're gonna show em what they're missing! We'll light this place up!”

Reaching the top of the staircase, Euphonious clambered up the short ladder and burst through the hatch that led to the balcony. He tore open the door to the control box and began to flip the dusty switches with gleeful abandon.

“What do you do?” he asked, flipping a switch at random. A steady hum sounded from inside the glass cupola, its pitch increasing as the large convex lens began to rotate.

“What about you?” he asked, using both hands to pull down on a large lever. “What do *you* do?!” Electricity coursed through the bulb's vibrating tungsten filament. Twisted wire glowed red to orange to white, forcing Euphonious to shield his eyes. Confused photons, guided by the curved mirrors that lined the interior of the cupola, organized themselves into a coherent beam and sliced through the hazy swamp air.

Euphonious let out a triumphant whoop and collapsed against the railing. The glowing column skimmed over gnarled tree tops, occasionally reflecting off the yellow eyes of the swamp's nocturnal inhabitants. The distant rooftops of Seawater were illuminated with every twenty second rotation. Gradually, the periodic sweeping of the beam lulled Euphonious into a warm state of content.

A curious anomaly coaxed Euphonious out of his drowsy stupor. The lighthouse beam seemed to be shrinking in length, whittling down with every strafe across town. Euphonious

squinted into the night. Some invisible darkness was approaching from Seawater, devouring the column of light as it went. A high-pitched whine pierced the stagnant air. The sound triggered an unconscious reflex, and Euphonious swatted at his ear. His eyes widened in an instant of understanding, but Euphonious's cry of alarm was drowned out by the crushing wave of black that engulfed the lighthouse.

As far as collective nouns go, *swarm* falls pitifully short of describing the sheer amount of mosquitos that descended upon Euphonious Smith. An *atmosphere* of mosquitos is far closer to the truth. Where oxygen had been moments before there was now only insect. Euphonious could feel his limbs growing heavy as thousands of mosquitos landed on his exposed skin to feed⁶. A yelp of pain admitted dozens into his mouth; Euphonious sputtered and choked, trying to expel the bugs from his lungs. Blinded by the impromptu plague, Euphonious fell to his knees and groped for the hatch. Feeling his fingertips brush against the metal handle, Euphonious threw himself through the opening and into the relative safety of the lighthouse interior.

In the light of the stairwell, Euphonious watched hundreds of throbbing red welts erupt across his arms and legs and felt a similar landscape forming on his face. He followed the railing in a downwards spiral, wincing with every step. It was only fifteen feet from the lighthouse to his cottage, but Euphonious didn't dare open the door. A small number of resourceful mosquitos were already squeezing their way in through the keyhole. Quarantined in the damp stairwell,

⁶ In the late 1980's, a team of scientists from the World Health Organization would arrive in Seawater to conduct a genetic survey of the town's population. It was discovered that after generations of living in a region with the world's highest mosquito density, the citizens of Seawater had developed an inherent immunity to the West Nile Virus. After analyzing the blood samples collected in Seawater, W.H.O. was able to synthesize a vaccine that has saved an estimated 4,000,000 lives to date.

Euphonious gradually fell into a restless sleep, his hands sleep-swatting at the bloodsuckers that managed to find a way inside.

* * *

Euphonious woke to a knocking on the front door of the lighthouse. The sound reverberated off the inside of his skull, stoking the embers of a rising migraine. The sensation reminded Euphonious of the morning after Mayor Wax's second wedding—the one with the open bar and dangerous surplus of Seawater Swamp Rum⁷. Fearful of another wave of knocking, he cracked open the door. Daylight stabbed through his swollen eyelids, aggravating his headache even further. Satisfied that the sun had cleared away the winged demons, Euphonious stepped out into the day.

Bernie puffed out his chest and gave Euphonious a crisp salute. He was wearing the same uniform as the previous day, except the initials on his hat now read S.Z.B.

“Good morning, sir! Bernard P. Russell, Inspector First-Class of the Seawater Zoning Board.”⁸

⁷ Mayor Wax's second wedding is still regarded today as the rowdiest party in the history of Seawater, a drunken spectacle that damaged countless reputations and over \$3,000 of public property. Two days later, when the chaplain finally sobered up, it was revealed that Mayor Wax had passed out in the bathroom before the vows could even be administered. A private ceremony was held later that week.

⁸ A detailed analysis of the Seawater public records system reveals that Bernard Russell held no less than fourteen civic titles during his teenage years. The more exotic among them include: Chief of the Seawater Dewey Decimal Society, Personal Poison Tester to the Mayor, and Honorary Town Bamboozler (there is no record of what this means).

“Don’t know why I was expecting anyone else,” said Euphonious. He returned the salute and whimpered when his hand brushed his swollen forehead. “I suppose they’ve sent you to close off the property.”

“Initially, yes” said Bernie. “However, I’ve been issued a new directive from the Mayor’s Office.” He reached into his pocket and read from a folded piece of paper. “To the attention of— are you alright, sir?”

“Hm? Yes, what’s the matter?” said Euphonious.

“Sir, you’ve been scratching your arms quite a lot. You appear to be drawing blood.”

Euphonious stared at his bloodied fingernails. “Oh, um, just a little itchy. Carry on.”

Bernie returned to the message. “To the attention of Mr. Euphonious Smith. In light of recent developments, the Seawater Public Appropriations Committee has voted unanimously to restore funding for the position of Lighthouse Keeper. This arrangement is contingent upon one condition: that every night, without fail, the lighthouse is to be illuminated so as to attract the violent swarms of mosquitos away from town, thus eliminating the need for the inconvenient Mosquito Curfew. Failure to comply will result in termination of your employment and immediate eviction from the premises. Cordially, Mayor Collier T. Wax.”

Bernie beamed at Euphonious. “Congratulations, sir! Looks like you’ll be staying here after all!”

Unfazed by the look of horror on Euphonious’s face, Bernie snapped off another salute, climbed back onto his bicycle, and began the long journey back to town.

Agents of the EPA

“Afternoon, ma’am. Mitchell Leopold, Environmental Profit Agency.”

Leopold produced a badge from the inner pocket of his dark suit. The tiny golden shield (plated with an Agency-mandated minimum of eighteen karats) bore an engraved Venus flytrap whose wispy fangs closed around a double-stroke dollar sign. The grip of Leopold’s angular SIG Sauer jutted out from base of his sternum like a fractured rib. “Near and dear to my heart,” he would joke to anyone within earshot, giving the pistol a gentle pat as his wraithlike colleagues drifted through the cigar-laced haze of the EPA locker room. Leopold gestured to his companion.

“And this is my partner, Agent Brower.”

The two wore matching suits—abyssal blue with coal pinstripes—that seemed to differ ever-so-slightly in the way they clung to the wearer. Leopold’s sleeves terminated an inch before the wrist, while Brower’s extended a single inch too far. Either their jackets differed by half a size or there was an imperceptible height difference between them. This contributed to the vague suspicion that, if you were somehow able to average out the two partners, you would end up with an entity that fell in the dead center of the bell curve. Mixing their eye colors— Leopold’s the color of brackish backwash and Brower’s reminiscent of surgery latex—would yield a shade of blue far less unsettling than the sum of its parts. Redistributing the slight paunch that rested on Brower’s belt buckle to Leopold’s concave cheeks would likely produce an individual smack-dab in the fiftieth percentile for body-mass index.

Leopold returned the badge to the depths of his suit and hurried to wrap-up the introductions.

“We’re with the Office of Resource Efficiency and Productivity Assurance. We’re here to streamline your ecosystem.”

The brown toad Leopold was speaking to blinked twice, but otherwise did not stir from its mossy perch.

Brower set his black leather briefcase down alongside the lichen-coated stump and removed a clipboard, dark blue fountain pen, and can of aerosol bug repellent. He uncapped the pen, handed the bug spray to Leopold, and began to flip through the thick stack of forms and procedurals.

“Okay, let’s get started here,” said Brower. “Biome type...” He performed a brief scan of the surrounding flora and fauna and gave a curt nod. “Temperate deciduous forest.” He turned to Form 32b and ticked a box in blue ink.

“Thank god,” said Leopold, his voice filtering out through the dense yellow cloud which encircled his head. EPA field agents were equipped with a highly-concentrated DDT and sodium arsenite-based solution, a chemical cocktail which had previously spent thirty-five years as a Class II banned pesticide. Executive Order 13924 gave the green light for redistribution after field agents complained that their efficiency was being impeded by “these, like, super annoying bug bites.” There was brief concern that the new repellent (nicknamed “Agent Yellow” by the men and woman of the EPA) had not undergone the requisite clinical testing, but the research group which claimed to have found a positive correlation between Agent Yellow and fetal hydrothorax syndrome experienced an unrelated reduction in federal funding and was unable to produce results of any statistical significance.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong,” said Leopold. “That desert last week was the most organized and cost-effective ecosystem we’ve seen all year. Minimal labor force, impressively

low water-use, and not a single mosquito. But you can't go wrong with a little shade once in a while."

"Mm," agreed Brower, half-listening. He squinted at a nearby tree and frowned, glancing down to consult Form 12.2d.

"Excuse me for a moment," he said to the toad.

The toad partially inflated the soft white membrane that hung below its chin.

Clipboard tucked beneath his arm, Brower stomped toward the tree, trampling a small patch of purple and white wildflowers with his polished black Oxfords. Frown lines deepening, he used the capped end of his pen to pry off a chunk of gnarled bark, exposing a layer of soft pale tree flesh. With a look of growing concern, Brower prodded an uncovered root with the toe of his shoe, then reached up and snapped off a low-hanging branch with the prolonged crack-peel of living wood. Tossing the severed limb aside, Brower leaned his head back to peer at the green-veined canopy of leaves. He flipped to Form 29c, then to Figure 7.1a, then back to 29c, then finally called out to his partner.

"Hey, Leopold," he said, pointing at the tree with his pen, "What's this thing *for*?"

"What's that?" shouted Leopold. He had walked away in order to relieve himself and was trying to aim his urine stream at what he guessed was a snake hole. He wasn't sure if snakes lived in holes, but he suspected they might.

"This tree," yelled Brower, "What's it do?"

Leopold zipped up his fly and followed Brower's voice, giving the toad a professional nod as he passed by its stump.

"Be right back with you in a moment, ma'am. Appreciate your patience."

The toad licked its left eyeball.

“What’s the matter?” Leopold asked his partner.

Brower crossed his arms and walked a lap around the trunk, his gaze travelling up and down in search of some hint toward the tree’s function.

“This tree,” said Brower. “I can’t see a single way in which it’s benefitting the ecosystem’s bottom line.”

Leopold frowned. “Have you checked Form 12d?”

“Yes.”

“Figure 7.1a?”

“Yes.”

“What about 29c?”

“Twice!” Brower handed over the clipboard to let Leopold check for himself. “I’m telling you, this tree is bringing nothing to the table. I mean, I do see some profit potential if we were to rebrand it, maybe as paper or lumber or something, but right now? It’s doing nothing for me.”

Leopold scanned several of the forms, then loosened his mustard tie and put his hands on his hips.

“You’re absolutely right. This thing’s killing productivity.”

His suspicions confirmed, Brower leaned against the trunk and withdrew a lighter and a pack of Marlboros from his coat pocket. He lit one and handed it to Leopold before lighting one of his own. They puffed quietly for a minute, pondering the implications of this gross inefficiency.

“Come to think of it,” said Leopold, breaking the silence while turning in a tight circle to take in the sun-dappled forest around him, “Are any of these trees turning a profit?”

Brower froze mid-drag, pale blue smoke seeping from the corners of his mouth. For a moment the only sound was the gentle smolder at the tips of their cigarettes. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, the duo began speaking in unison, simultaneously racing along the path of logic that was laid out before them.

“If none of these trees are contributing to the revenue stream—”

“Then all they’re doing is racking up operating costs—”

“Decreasing productivity—”

“And wasting valuable venture capital.” Their rising voices pierced the cool damp air of the otherwise still woods.

“If we were to liquidate the entire division—”

“Reduce overheads—”

“Trim the fat, so to speak—”

“Then...”

“This forest could triple productivity by the end of next quarter.”

They paused, out of breath and flushed with excitement.

“Okay, okay,” said Brower. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We’ve gotta be sure on this thing before we pitch a top-to-bottom restructuring to the boys upstairs.”

Leopold nodded. “We need an industry insider. Someone who knows the ins and outs of the local ecosystem.”

Brower paused, then snapped his fingers and pointed a thumb over his shoulder.

“Well, let’s go ask her.”

The two agents of the EPA Office of Resource Management and Profitability Assurance flicked away the glowing stubs of their cigarettes and returned to the mossy stump. Brower

turned to a blank page at the bottom of his clipboard stack and prepared to take notes. But the brown toad nowhere to be seen.

Brower and Leopold stared at the empty stump, unsure of what to do next.

“So...” said Leopold. “You mentioned something about rebranding?”

“Yes!” said Brower, and the two turned down the trail that led back to where they’d parked the Escalade. “If we can rebrand then I think we could really turn this place around. ‘National Park’ is such an outdated concept. Here’s what I’m thinking: customers come out and get to hand-pick their own furniture! Something like, ‘Oh honey, wouldn’t that redwood make a stunning countertop for the new island?’ or ‘Darling, I know the endangered ones are more expensive, but I simply can’t imagine having a coffee table that’s not made of Catalina mahogany!’ Can you see it?”

“It’s brilliant,” said Leopold. “And once things have run their course, we can restructure the entire region into an entirely new ecosystem.”

“Exactly! I’m envisioning something along the lines of that desert from last week. One of the simplest, most clear-cut business models I’ve seen in a while.” Brower and Leopold trudged further away from the shaded glade, their voices fading as they brainstormed how to optimize the forest’s profitability.

In a leafy hollow at the base of the moss-covered stump, the small brown toad gave a timid spasm. A milky film clouded its pupils, and the pores of its permeable skin choked on the haze left behind by Agent Yellow and the agents’ cigarettes.

Moreland & Halifax: Well-Read Detectives

Scene 1

Stakeout! Detective Kurt Moreland is in the driver's seat of an unmarked police cruiser, surveilling the door of a dark building through a pair of binoculars. He is also crunching loudly from an open bag of Cheetos. Detective Margaret Halifax is in the passenger's seat, reading.

Moreland Whatcha reading there?

Halifax Joseph Heller. *Catch-22*.

Moreland Mm. "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you."

Halifax What's that?

Moreland Quote from the book. "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you."

Halifax Must not have gotten there yet. Hard to concentrate when you're eating so loud.

Moreland Sorry. *(Resumes eating Cheetos.)* "Some men are born mediocre, some men achieve mediocrity, and some men have mediocrity thrust upon them."

Halifax What?

Moreland Another quote from the book. "Some men are born mediocre, some—"

Halifax Okay, I get it, you have a photographic memory. Now will you let me read in peace?

Moreland Sorry, sorry, geez. *(More Cheetos.)* It's not photographic, you know.

Halifax What?

Moreland My memory, it's not photographic. It's just that my dyslexia makes me read slow, so I end up paying closer attention to the words. It's not photographic memory.

Halifax Mm.

Moreland *(Pause.)* Aargh! If I have to spend one more night watching this goddamn door, and eating these goddamn Cheetos, and—Jesus, look at my fingers! Look at them! Cheese isn't supposed to do that! What the hell kind of product is this? I...Aargh! *(Flails in frustration, showering Cheetos all over the car.)*

Halifax You seem tense.

Moreland Nothing's adding up! This whole case feels wrong. Two whole months of authors being killed off like clockwork, one a week, with no sign of it slowing down. And then we're assigned to the case, and what happens? Nothing. Trail runs colder than Christmas in Stalingrad. All we're left with is eight dead bodies and Hanson House Publishing.

Halifax It's a good lead.

Moreland It's hardly a lead at all. Hanson House is the city's second-biggest publisher, it's no surprise that all eight victims had submissions there. They're struggling authors for God's sake, they had submissions at nearly every publishing company in the tri-state area. Yet here we are, camped outside of an empty publishing office, freezing our asses off for the fourth night in a row with nothing to show for it.

Halifax We have something to show for it.

Moreland Oh yeah, what's that.

Halifax *(Points.)* That.

A dark figure in a trench coat approaches the door and slips inside the building.

Halifax Bit early for work, don't you think?

Moreland *(Cocking his pistol.)* I'm inclined to agree.

The duo exits the car and bursts through the door, guns drawn.

Halifax NYPD, Literary Crimes Division! Hands where we can see them!

The figure bolts to a door on the opposite side of the stage. The door is clearly marked PUSH. The figure struggles with the door for several moments, trying to pull it open, until he finally pushes it and escapes. Halifax follows him offstage. The sound of screeching rubber can be heard. Moreland slowly approaches a dark object in the middle of the room. Halifax returns.

Halifax Damn it! He had a car waiting out back. But he dropped this. *(Examines a piece of paper the size of an index card.)* I think it's a library catalog card. All it has is a call number: 813 FIL. Looks like the Dewey Decimal System. Moreland?

Moreland is crouching next to the object he found on the floor, shaking his head in denial.

Halifax Moreland? What is it?

Moreland slowly shows the object to Halifax. It's a copy of Moby Dick, with a massive butcher knife sticking right through the center.

Moreland Moby Dick, Halifax. It's Moby Dick. It's my favorite book. *(Breaks down crying.)*

Blackout.

Scene 2

Headquarters of the NYPD Literary Crimes Division. Moreland and Halifax are standing before a desk littered with papers and empty coffee mugs. The nameplate reads Chief O'Malley. The Chief stands across from the duo, a red-faced man known for his low height and high blood pressure.

Chief Goddamn it, Moreland! You're off the case!

Moreland But Chief!

Chief Shut it! This is for your own good, you know. You're too damn close to this one!

Halifax Chief, if you'll just consider for a moment—

Chief That's enough, Halifax! *(Deep breath.)* Look, Moreland, I know this is hard on you. Hell, I still remember the day when your application for the Literary Crimes Division landed on my desk. That was the best damn essay on Moby Dick I've read in my entire life. I still read it from time to time to remind me that there's still an ounce of beauty in this crime-ridden town. *(Points to where Moreland's essay is hanging on the wall.)* For Christ's sake, if I could write that well then I'd have a book out by now. You're one of the best, kid. You both are. Highest arrest rate in the department, and that's more than just luck.

Moreland Thank you, Chief. You taught me everything I know. I wouldn't be here today if—

Chief Don't try to butter me up, I'm not done. This isn't easy for me, but I'm ordering you on two-week leave.

Moreland and Halifax protest loudly.

Chief ENOUGH! *(They silence.)* Your judgement's compromised, Moreland. Nobody deserves to see that happen to their favorite book. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. But the fact of the matter is, this thing is personal now. You might think you're okay, but you're a liability in the field. I can't afford to have a trigger-happy hothead out there trying to avenge Herman Melville.

Moreland Chief, please. I need to see this thing through. I have to.

Chief Take a break, Moreland. Two weeks rest will do you well. Sleep in, catch up on some good reading.

Halifax I'll see this thing through, Moreland. I promise.

Chief No Halifax, you won't. I'm transferring you over to the Plagiarism Division while Moreland's on leave. He's not the only one who's too close to this thing.

Halifax Chief, that's not fair! Nobody knows this case better than we do!

Chief This conversation is finished. Moreland, your firearm.

Moreland draws his pistol from its holster, clears the chamber, and places it on the Chief's desk.

Chief And your bookmark.

Moreland opens his wallet with extreme hesitation and withdraws a bookmark from where a normal detective would keep his badge. He drops it on the desk.

Chief Dismissed.

Moreland and Halifax exit the Chief's office.

Moreland Goddamn it!

Halifax This is bullshit.

Moreland Why didn't you tell him about the catalog card you found?

Halifax Cause we're not finished here. *(Looking right at Moreland.)* I hope your library card's up-to-date, because we've got a book to check out.

Guitar power chord. Blackout.

Scene 3

The local library. Two bookshelves are lined up so that the audience can see down the aisle between them. Moreland and Halifax approach the librarian's desk.

Halifax Hi, we were hoping you could help us find the book with this call number. *(Hands him the catalog card.)*

Librarian Ah, of course. *(Stares blankly at catalog card.)* What's the call number?

Moreland It's on the catalog card.

Librarian Ah, of course. (*Hands back the catalog card.*) What's the call number?

Halifax Um...813 FIL.

Librarian Alright, 813. That'd be...American and Canadian fiction. Right this way. (*Leads the duo to a bookshelf clearly marked NON-FICTION.*) Here we are.

Moreland Um...this is the nonfiction section.

Librarian Ah. Um...(*Steps to the next bookshelf over, clearly labeled FICTION.*) Here we are?

Halifax Thank you. (*Librarian returns to his desk.*) Can he not read?

Moreland Oh he most certainly cannot.

Halifax Huh. Well, 813 FIL. Let's have a look.

Moreland Jackpot. (*Pulls a book from the shelf.*)

Halifax The Adventures of Admiral Nightwatch.

Moreland By Echo E. Fillmay.

Halifax Echo E. Fillmay...Never heard of him.

Moreland Neither have I. Could be a pseudonym.

Halifax Could be. Either way, we've got some reading to do. Got your library card?

Moreland Yeah, but I might need to borrow a few bucks. I have like forty-something dollars in late fees.

Halifax Are you kidding me?

Moreland The dyslexia makes me a slow reader.

Halifax That's no excuse for always having overdue—you know what, forget it. I'll use my card. (*Approaches librarian's desk.*) I'd like to check this one out, please.

Librarian Ah, of course. (*Scans the book and returns it.*) You're all set.

Halifax I've never heard of this author before, do you know anything about him?

Librarian Who's the author? (*Halifax shows him the cover. He nods and smiles.*) Who's the author?

Halifax Um...Echo E. Fillmay.

Librarian (*Visibly nervous.*) No, never heard of him. Have a nice day!

The duo walks away.

Moreland That was strange. (*Pulls on the library door which is clearly marked PUSH.*)

Halifax It says Push.

Moreland Damnit.

Halifax Wait.

Moreland What?

Halifax Last night, at the publishing house.

Moreland What about it?

Halifax When the suspect was running away, he spent forever trying to pull that door open when it was clearly marked Push.

Moreland Okay...

Halifax Why do you think he struggled so much?

Moreland (*Turns to look at the Librarian.*) Because he didn't know how to read.

Halifax Because he didn't know how to read. The usual?

Moreland The usual.

Halifax Good cop.

Moreland Bad cop.

The duo returns to the Librarian's desk.

Halifax I'm sorry, we didn't introduce ourselves earlier. I'm Detective Margaret Halifax and this is my partner, Kurt Moreland. If you wouldn't mind, we were hoping to ask you a couple quick questions regarding—

Moreland You sick murdering bastard! Why'd you do it? Moby Dick is a goddamn classic!

The Librarian freezes, then takes off running through the shelves.

Moreland Stop! (Reaches for his gun but realizes he handed it in.)

Halifax Give yourself up, there's nowhere to go!

The Librarian emerges from behind a shelf, holding a long knife and another copy of Moby Dick.

Moreland He's got another copy. Halifax, he's got another copy of Moby Dick.

Halifax Keep your cool.

Librarian Don't anybody move! I'm walking out of here right now, and I'm taking my friend Herman Melville with me. Either of you move so much as an inch and I'm going to carve this thing up from Chapter One to Epilogue.

Halifax (Gun drawn.) Put. The book. Down.

Librarian Get out of my way!

Halifax Put. It. Down.

Librarian I'll do it! I'll fucking do it!

Moreland Halifax...

Librarian I swear to God, I am going to rip this thing apart page by page if you so much as—

Moreland Take the shot!

Halifax fires and hits the Librarian center chest. Moby Dick falls to the ground unharmed. The Librarian collapses, a large blood stain spreading across his shirt.

Halifax Who are you working for? Who, dammit!

Moreland It's no use, Halifax. He's gone.

Halifax Goddammit!

Moreland picks up The Adventures of Admiral Nightwatch, which Halifax dropped during the standoff. He examines the cover.

Moreland Echo E. Fillmay. Dear God.

Halifax What.

Moreland I know this author.

Halifax What?

Moreland We both do.

Halifax Moreland, what's going on?

Moreland Halifax, this thing goes all the way to the top.

Blackout.

Scene 4

Back at the station. The Chief is working at his desk. Moreland and Halifax enter. The audience is addressed as if they're all officers who work at the station.

Moreland Well Chief, we did it.

Chief Moreland! Halifax! What the hell are you doing here? I took you off the case!

Moreland I know, I know, but we just couldn't help ourselves.

Chief Do you realize what a breach of protocol this is? I could have your badge!

Halifax Give him a second, Chief. I think everybody will want to hear this.

Moreland Thank you, Halifax. Now, let's review. *(Begins pacing the station, hands clasped behind his back.)* Eight authors, murdered in cold blood. Eight promising literary careers cut tragically short. And the only connection between the victims?

Halifax Hanson House Publishing.

Moreland Hanson House Publishing. Each of the eight victims had recently submitted a manuscript to Hanson House, with the hopes that their story would be picked up and published.

Halifax But it's hard to get published when you're dead.

Moreland That it is, Halifax. That it is.

Chief This better be going somewhere, Moreland.

Moreland Patience, Chief, patience. Now, who would have a motive to start murdering would-be writers?

Halifax Someone else who wanted their story published instead.

Moreland Bingo. Another author wanted to thin out the competition. Their story spends months buried at the bottom of some stack on some editor's desk. But suddenly authors start dropping like flies, and next thing you know...

Halifax Our murdering author's on top of the stack.

Moreland Exactly. But who? (*Reveals The Adventures of Admiral Nightwatch.*) The Adventures of Admiral Nightwatch by Echo E. Fillmay. The book that matched the call number we found last night. A book that, incidentally, was recently published by...

Halifax Hanson House Publishing.

Moreland Now we're getting somewhere. But who is this Echo E. Fillmay? I've never heard of him. In fact, the name Echo E. Fillmay comes up completely empty on every database. So...

Halifax Must be a pseudonym.

Moreland It's gotta be. So it would appear that we've come up empty-handed. Except for one little thing.

Halifax What's that?

Moreland I'm dyslexic.

Chief (*Pause.*) What?

Moreland I'm dyslexic, Chief. Sometimes when I read, the letters get all jumbled around in a different order. So earlier today when I saw the name Echo E. Fillmay...(*writes the name down in big letters*)...my dyslexia mixed up all the letters. And the name I ended up reading was...(*rearranges letters*)...Chief O'Malley.

Dramatic cello. Moreland and Halifax momentarily freeze.

Chief This is an outrage!

Halifax (*Pulls Moreland's Moby Dick essay off the wall.*) Nice of you to keep Moreland's essay, Chief. You must've been sitting at your desk, wracking your brain for a way to get us off the case, when your eyes landed on the perfect solution.

Moreland Arrange to have my favorite book murdered, so you'd have an excuse to transfer us off the case.

Halifax You said it yourself, we have the highest arrest rate in the department. Just a matter of time before we closed in on you.

Moreland Halifax, read the Chief his rights.

Halifax You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say—

Chief You son of a bitch! *(Draws his pistol and aims at Moreland.)*

Halifax No!

The Chief fires and Moreland crumples to the ground. Halifax fires back, hitting the Chief in the shoulder. She kicks his weapon away and cuffs him.

Halifax Moreland! Moreland! Come on, Kurt, stay with me!

Moreland leans up, groaning. He holds up the Chief's book to reveal that it stopped the bullet.

Halifax You lucky bastard.

Moreland Well Halifax, I'm sure glad we didn't check out the paperback copy.

Extended laughter from the duo, looking directly at audience. Blackout.

The Gamemaker

Milton was beginning to regret the fact that he'd chosen a moonless night for his first grave robbery. Forced to rely on the kerosene flicker of his smoke-stained lantern, he leaned on a white marble headstone and squinted into the dark. The headstone belonged to the grave that Milton was in the act of desecrating, or more accurately, the grave he would shortly resume desecrating once he located his crowbar.

Tramping through the patchwork tufts of crabgrass, Milton probed the shadows for his misplaced crowbar. He skirted a mound of chalky Massachusetts soil, the product of his last two hours of frenzied digging. Oddly enough, there appeared to be a small pig's foot reaching out from the base of the mound. A closer look revealed that the foot belonged to a pig made of iron. Having never encountered any metallic swine, iron or otherwise, Milton concluded that he had found his crowbar. Every shovelful of earth he'd removed from the grave had apparently been going towards the burial of his own crowbar.

Milton excavated the crowbar with a pull and placed his lantern on the edge of the open grave. The shifting texture of shadows coaxed out a thinly carved inscription:

ADAM SAMUELS

1827-1868

A SIMPLE "REST IN PEACE" WILL DO

Milton shook his head. Springfield's engraver was insufferably literal; the man would carve into permanence whatever was written under the order form's *Epitaph* section with a blind sense of purpose that was almost admirable. Earlier that night, as he threaded through garden rows of marble and onyx, Milton had passed a stout obelisk inscribed with the laissez-faire declaration of an apathetic widower:

DOESN'T MATTER, SURPRISE ME

Another headstone was in the form of a large Celtic cross, except that the crucifix's right arm had been doubled in length in order to fit a particularly long-winded engraving. Due to the weight imbalance, a burlap sack of gravel hung from the cross's left arm to act as ballast. The epitaph that had necessitated this feat of graveyard engineering read:

NOT APPLICABLE. MOTHER MADE US PROMISE

TO LEAVE THE HEADSTONE BLANK,

EXCEPT FOR HER NAME, OF COURSE.

SHE'D SAY, "THE CROSS IS THE DIVINE SYMBOL OF FORGIVENESS

AND MERCY, WHY ON EARTH WOULD I TARNISH IT

WITH SOME HALF-WITTED CATCHPHRASE?"

SHE WAS A REAL CHARACTER.

SORRY FOR WRITING SO MUCH ON THIS FORM,

IT JUST FEELS GOOD TO SHARE THESE THINGS.

IT'S BEEN A HARD YEAR.

Taking a seat in the damp grass, Milton eased himself into the hole and landed in the narrow channel he'd dug alongside the coffin. It was noticeably cooler belowground. Milton removed his rounded spectacles and wiped them on his dirt-encrusted vest, a nervous habit which smeared a silty film across his field of vision. Then he reared back and wedged the crowbar's cloven hoof under the pine lid.

The coffin and its occupant had only been buried for three days. That wasn't enough time for rot or rust to set in, so it was only with significant effort that Milton coerced the knotted pine into releasing its hold on the two-inch nails. After he'd leveraged a gap wide enough to fit his fingers, Milton reached up and placed the crowbar in the orange pool at the base of the lantern.

Crouching in a wide stance, he gripped the inside of the lid and lifted with a grunt. An obsidian beetle landed from overhead and scuttled across the maroon ridges of his cravat, but Milton ignored it until the nails gave a final whimper of protest and the lid detached completely.

Milton greeted his pallid companion with the same curt nod he used when passing strangers in store entrances and on narrow sidewalks. He had met the late Adam Samuels once before, on the occasion of the latter's funeral. Milton had been monitoring the obituary section of the *Springfield Republican* for several weeks, and had immediately identified Mr. Samuels as a promising candidate. He attended the funeral in order to memorize the gravesite—through the wrought iron gate, past the groundskeeper's cottage, right at the limestone-walled mausoleum, then back left corner of the Samuels family plot, the one guarded by a leafless black ash. During the procession from church to cemetery, Milton was sucked downstream by the tide of mourners and found himself deposited at the edge of the open grave, caught between the grieving widow and the presiding minister. After sharing a fictional yet heartwarming memory of the deceased, "*I...er, there was one occasion where, the two of us, well, we really did share a, a really quite pleasant afternoon,*" Milton was enlisted to pick up a shovel and help inter the coffin of his newest lifelong friend. The burial sowed a field of blisters across Milton's palms, and three days later the tender bubbles sprouted just in time for Milton to tear them all open during his midnight un-burial.

Now for the unpleasant part. Milton held his breath and hooked his elbows under each of Samuels's stiff arms. He straightened and leaned back, his hands meeting and clasping together at the body's lower back. A limp head came to rest on his right shoulder. Milton noted that this was his least awkward embrace in recent memory. Shuffling around to face the shortest wall of the grave, Milton shifted his partner's dead weight and slid his hands up to the jacketed armpits.

He tried to avoid breathing through his nose, but still managed to detect bitter notes of mothballs, formaldehyde, and Renault's Patented Cradle-to-Grave Hair Tonic.

Glasses fogging from the heat of his exertions, Milton passed the weight of his dance partner over to his right shoulder. Then, with a squeal that conjured up images of undead piglets, Milton sprang from his crouch and hurled Samuels toward the surface of the pit.

Most of Adam Samuels, everything from the shoulders down, remained in the grave and on top of Milton. Above ground, Samuels's head lolled back and knocked over the lantern, plunging the gravesite into total darkness. Undisturbed by this new development, Samuels gazed upward through closed eyes, past the naked web of ash branches and into the gray ceiling above. Clumps of dense fog pressed down on the cemetery, as if the clouds had grown tired of holding themselves up and decided to crash land in heaps of misty wreckage.

Back below the surface, Milton sputtered and spit as an avalanche of loose soil filled his mouth and cascaded off his glasses. He was being buried alive by a corpse. Gripping the underside of Samuels's thighs, Milton pushed up and over his head, lifting the corpse's trunk to ground level. With a final push, Milton pressed himself into the damp wall of soil and slid the grave's former occupant away from the hole, walking his hands down Samuels's legs until all he could see were the pristine soles of the shoes Samuels had been buried in.

Eager to exit the not-quite-final resting place, Milton jumped and sank his hands into the carpet of crabgrass. Clawing his way forward and kicking his legs in the empty space below, Milton emerged from the grave looking more like a corpse than the one that lay beside him.

After searching his vest pockets for the matches and relighting the toppled lantern, Milton retrieved the black medical bag he'd left on the exposed roots of the ash tree. Kneeling beside the prone form of Mr. Samuels, Milton reached into the bag and withdrew a surgical scalpel. He

tested the instrument's sturdy blade, even though he'd sharpened it earlier that day. A silver glint played across the tempered steel. Satisfied, Milton adjusted his grip, right forefinger extending along the top length of the scalpel, and carefully made a four-inch vertical incision down Samuels's neck.

A thought pricked at the back of Milton's consciousness, triggering a flood of panic. *What if the embalmer forgot to drain the blood?* Milton's vision narrowed, deep waves of red anxiety framing the black slit he had just etched in pale skin. He waited, scalpel trembling in his grip. Seconds passed. Nothing seeped to the waxy surface.

Milton breathed a ragged sigh of relief and resumed his dissection. With his thumb and forefinger, he parted the severed Sternohyoid muscle like a tiny curtain, revealing a gleaming sheet of Thyroid cartilage below. He probed forward with the utmost delicacy, searching for a pink-gray gap in the layer of white. Finding it, he plunged the blade in and applied a steady pressure, until something gave way and his hand slid into the incision and up to his knuckles. He'd reached the trachea.

Milton withdrew his fingers, wiping the stale residue onto his trousers and leaving behind an oily stain. The smell was a blend of hospital and butcher shop; Milton could almost see old white-haired Dr. Aisley, listening with a stethoscope to a bloody cut of flank steak. Milton caught himself before he chuckled. This was not the night for daydreams. Peering into the open medical bag, Milton reached in and withdrew an apple.

It was a Roxbury Russet, light brown tinged with green like a sheet of copper that had begun to oxidize. Milton examined the apple for a moment, then, pleased with its proportions, shoved it into Mr. Samuels's neck. The hole in his trachea swallowed it whole. Petals of bloodless flesh folded over the stem as Milton withdrew his hand. Something about the scene

echoed vaguely of an early childhood memory, of helping his mother prepare the Thanksgiving turkey.

The next hour was spent cutting and placing. A sharpened pencil was tucked neatly between the radius and ulna, a shaft of yellow flanked by two pillars of bone. The Achilles thrummed with an elastic twang as Milton threaded through a small monkey wrench. A single slice of twelve-grain bread he sandwiched between the deflated stomach and the coiled snake of the large intestine. A dried Monarch butterfly, found dead in the windowsill of Milton's conservatory and pressed between the dog-eared pages of an anatomy text, fluttered into a cavity below the liver. The barred walls of the sternum became prison to a forked wishbone, another reminder of distant Thanksgiving tradition. A tin horse with an empty saddle, riderless since the day young Milton traded its cavalry officer for a deck of cards, galloped through the canyons of sinew and musculature that clung to a bedrock of femur.

The bag was empty. Milton stood to admire his handiwork, an internal game of hide-and-go-seek. He'd suspected the concept was sound, and now he knew. All that remained was cleanup.

Reburying proved much easier than unburying. Milton rolled the slightly heavier and significantly bumpier body of Adam Samuels into the grave, where the coffin welcomed him back with a hollow crash and the cracking of what was either pine or bone. Milton shoveled quickly, recalling the motions of burial from his three-day-old muscle memory. By the time he tamped down the soil the cloudbanks overhead had begun to dissipate, and dawn was reaching over the horizon with pink fingertips. A door slammed shut at the far end of the graveyard. Milton twisted his neck in the direction of the groundskeeper's cottage.

A lantern was approaching, winding its way through the checkerboard of graves. Cutoff from the main gate, Milton tossed his shovel, crowbar, and medical bag behind the trunk of the barren ash. Unsure of how much the approaching figure had witnessed, Milton used the cuff of his sleeve to thin the layer of grime that coated his glasses. He raised his hand in greeting, jogging forward in order to draw the confrontation as far away from the Samuels plot as possible.

“Who goes there?” spoke a cracked voice. The figure’s lantern lowered to reveal the bristled and craggy face of the cemetery’s groundskeeper. The old man squinted in the blue light of pre-dawn, his sunken eyes scouring Milton’s face.

“Good morning,” said Milton, using a warm tone that came quite unnaturally.

The groundskeeper’s eyebrows met in a thorny bramble at the top of his nose. His eyes disappeared into twin whirlpools of creases and crow’s feet.

“Is that you, Mr. Bradley? Pardon me asking sir, but what are you doing here? And at this hour?”

“Just taking an early morning stroll,” said Milton. “Helps me to think. Sometimes I let my feet take over and I end up in the strangest places.”

“I see,” said the groundskeeper, his clouded pupils climbing the outline of the empty ash tree. “I heard some movement outside and worried it might be grave robbers .”

“Heavens, does that sort of thing happen?”

The groundskeeper steadied himself on a gravestone.

“You’d be surprised at the kind of people in this world, Mr. Bradley.”

“Well,” said Milton, “I can assure you I didn’t see anything of the sort. Although next time I go for a walk I think I’ll stick to the land of the living.”

“Probably for the best, Mr. Bradley.” The groundskeeper turned back towards his cottage and Milton followed. The graveyard seemed a stone library of lifespans and epitaphs. They wound through the rows of *start date—end date*, lives neatly contained within a one-inch horizontal scratch, until finally they reached the wrought iron archway. The groundskeeper held the gate open and Milton descended the three stone steps to the cracked sidewalk below. A thought occurred to the groundskeeper and he broke the misty silence.

“Mr. Bradley,” he said. “My son’s little ones, John and Elizabeth, they greatly enjoyed that last game of yours. That ah...what was it called again? With the little red and black pieces?”

“Connect Four.”

“Yes, yes, Connect Four,” said the groundskeeper, as pleased as if he’d made the name himself. “The kids loved it, sir. Anything new in the works?”

Milton smiled. “You can tell John and Elizabeth that they don’t have long to wait. I’ve been working up something new, should be a heap of fun. I actually just finished fleshing out the details.”

Scratching a patch of dried dirt from his vest, Milton lowered his head and set off down the sidewalk. Behind him, the first cracks of daylight seeped down the faces of pale marble, illuminating names, then dates, then epitaphs. But Milton kept his eyes on the ground. Watching the landscape of the sidewalk change beneath him, he invented a little game. *Step on a crack, one step back, step in a puddle means your pace must double*. Milton played the whole way home, whistling as he leapt over puddles and skipped over cracks, the dulled scalpel nestled warmly in the pocket of his vest.

Crosswalk Buttons

“The angles don’t add up.”

Talking only to himself, Seth Larsson took a sip of coffee, remembered that it had been cold for over two hours, and turned to the next page. *Report of the Warren Commission on the Assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy*. A stapled stack of grainy, dog-eared Xerox copies, the report overflowed with illegible margin notes and left behind a trail of dried Post-It notes. Seth lifted his feet from the desk and leaned forward in his chair, the fatigued upholstery coughing up another chunk of yellowed foam. Wheeling backward to stretch out his legs in the cramped cubicle, he gulped down another mouthful of the oily dark roast and squinted at a photograph footnote.

“Grassy knoll, it has to be.” Seth uncapped a red felt-tip and placed a tiny ‘x’ on the black and white hillside, next to the faded shadows of the Dealey Plaza underpass.

An unseen telephone shattered the cubicle’s humid silence. The ringing yanked Seth out of 1963, dragged him half a century forward, and dropped him, breathless and confused, in the East 75th Street sub-basement of the Partridge Corporation. Despite his six years at the company, Seth still only had a half-formed idea of what Partridge actually did. He had applied with the impression that Partridge was responsible for the manufacture of those tiny umbrellas you put in daiquiris and piña coladas. This was never confirmed. For a brief period in 1999, based on snippets of conversation he caught while walking past the water cooler, Seth suspected that Partridge was somehow involved in a military coup that ousted Pakistan’s Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Like the daiquiri umbrellas, this too was never confirmed by middle management.

Whatever their function, Partridge still signed his paycheck every month, and Seth moved on to bigger mysteries.

The sub-basement's storied history was largely what kept Seth out of the loop (if there was even a loop to be kept out of). In the early 80's the building belonged to Suncroft Investment and Consulting, a firm which spent nearly a decade perfecting the fine arts of embezzlement and money laundering. Suncroft Investment invested solely in Suncroft Consulting, and Suncroft Consulting advised Suncroft Investment to "just keep doing what you're doing." The SEC finally caught wind, and when the FBI showed up at their door with a warrant, Suncroft's enterprising janitor bypassed the water main and flooded the sub-basement records room in four feet of sewer runoff.

By the time Partridge bought the building in '93 and scheduled the place to be drained, the sub-basement was a vibrant aquatic ecosystem home to two species of endangered frog and enough mosquitos to briefly reintroduce yellow fever to the Upper East Side. Now it housed what Seth assumed was the IT department. He had never actually spoken to the occupants of the four other cubicles and had no idea what function they performed. For all he knew, Seth *was* the IT department.

Seth owed his endless supply of free time to the inefficiencies of corporate bureaucracy. During his first day of staff training, a misplaced parenthesis in one of HR's infinity of spreadsheets resulted in the removal of Seth's name, e-mail, and phone number from the company directory. Above the sub-basement's water-stained ceiling, only a single employee at the Partridge Corporation had any idea that Seth existed.

Ms. Veronica Maddox, thirty-three-year-old secretary with a stunning cascade of red curls, had a desperate and unanswered need for corrective eyewear. On her first day, squinting at

the blurred elevator panel, she hit the S for sub-basement instead of the 5 for fifth floor. Seth helped guide the disoriented Ms. Maddox back to the elevator, but not before she requested her savior's e-mail address and phone number. To Seth's delight (those red curls were really something), Ms. Maddox called him once a month to come clear the viruses from her petri dish of a desktop. No matter how many times he warned her, Veronica could not resist clicking "here" to claim her prize after learning she was the website's hundredth visitor. Seth would arrive on the fifth floor, drag out his thirty-second chore for as long as possible, laugh at Veronica's every syllable, then return to his corner of the sub-basement.

At first glance (a fleeting, one-eye-closed-in-a-dimly-lit-room kind of glance), Seth's cluttered cubicle seemed to belong to the Partridge Corporation's most industrious employee. An illusion, one which shattered upon a half-second of inspection. While Seth often worked double-overtime in a Zen-like trance of utter focus, none of what he did pertained in any way to the company in which he worked.

The cubicle's padded walls were layered thick with newspaper clippings, photocopies, computer printouts, photographs, and hand-drawn sketches. Strands of red yarn, pinned down by sturdy brass thumbtacks, connected documents and photos like the erratic web of a coked-out spider. Seth's desk groaned under the weight of countless reports, journals, and eyewitness accounts, with the occasional half-empty coffee mug providing much-needed structural support. A sophomore archaeology minor would have no problem analyzing the mountain of paranoia, would be able to date Seth's obsessions like the sedimentary layers of a primordial cliff face.

Last October it was the Roswell Incident, with a transition to Apollo 11 mid-way through November. New Year's to Valentine's Day was spent reconstructing the events of September 11, and April saw the close of Seth's inquiry into fluoride's presence in the water supply. As for the

JFK assassination (or, as he liked to call it, the CIA coordination), Seth was just now entering the peak of his research phase.

So when Seth dropped the Warren Report and scrambled to find the source of the noise, it took him over five rings to unearth the telephone from his landslide of conspiracy. The phone was a Cold War relic, a cradled handset atop a console of flashing pushbuttons, connected by a cord that seemed too tangled to possibly admit sound. It had been a few weeks since Veronica last called for tech support, and Seth raked his fingers through his hair before picking up the receiver.

“Hello?”

There was a rustling on the other end, then a voice, raspy and muffled.

“Seth Larsson?”

“Um, yeah. This is Seth.” The only reply was the crackle of static, or of someone opening a lozenge. “Veronica? Is that—”

“For the sake of time, Mr. Larsson, I will ask that you refrain from speaking. This line may not be secure.” Seth tried to stammer a question but the speaker continued.

“For years I have followed your online blog with interest. You seem to possess two qualities that are increasingly rare in today’s world: an analytic mind and a justified skepticism. The theories you have put forth, while not entirely correct, demonstrate an unyielding dedication to the truth.”

“Oh,” said Seth. “That’s very nice, thank you.”

“Your long-held suspicions are correct. The American people are being lied to. And I believe you can provide the evidence needed to expose our government’s systemic deception.”

“I’m sorry,” said Seth. “But what exactly are you—”

“There is no time! The net around me tightens with every hour. The forces at play will go to great lengths to maintain their deception.”

“How did you get this number?” asked Seth. “I thought I was taken off the company directory.”

“51 Nellis Ave. Ten o’clock.”

A click, then the droning buzz of dead air.

Seth leaned back, his chair bleeding another drop of padding, and let his eyes wander across the walls of his cubicle. They followed the strands of red from conspiracy to conspiracy, a multi-dimensional network of dizzying suspicion. Six years of seeking truth in a sub-basement.

Draining the last of his coffee, Seth reached for a pen and scribbled down the address.

* * *

The night was empty, and as Seth climbed the concrete steps he greeted the sky with a nod. He hated the subway, shivered to think of the tunnels crisscrossing the city like subcutaneous needle tracks. Spring was well underway but the nights still held a memory of snow, and Seth zipped his windbreaker to the neck.

Nellis Ave was an eight-block walk. Seth passed one cat and one human on his way; of the two, the cat seemed more likely to strike up conversation. The man simply tucked chin to chest and doubled his stride. At one time it had been a rough neighborhood, that much was obvious, but now it just seemed tired. Sodium-yellow washed down from the streetlamps, giving the pavement a sallow, jaundiced look. The only vehicles parked on Nellis were a hubcap-less sedan and a graffitied plumber’s van with bars over the back windows.

Hurrying down the cracked sidewalk, Seth counted off the street numbers on his right: forty-seven, forty-nine, fifty-one. He stopped in front of a narrow one-story shop. A metal grate

reinforced the front window, through which Seth glimpsed a faded comic book rack and toppled action figures. The sign above the door was peeling, shedding thick leaves of lead-based paint.

Empire State Comics!

Seth knocked twice, aware that every second he waited was an argument in favor of going home. The door's pollen-dusted pane rattled beneath his knuckles. Because it was so immediate, Seth almost didn't notice that the door was now open a tentative inch. A chain prevented it from opening any further, but through the crack Seth could see a bright eye caught in the sliver of streetlight.

"Are you alone?" A woman's voice, hoarse and hurried. Seth looked back at the abandoned street.

"Um, I think so. Yes."

The door closed. Seth heard the chain slide out, then the door reopened and the woman took hold of his sleeve, craning her neck to survey the street as she pulled Seth inside. Apparently satisfied, she shut the door, replaced the chain, and worked her way down a doorframe's-worth of deadbolts, latches, and padlocks. Motioning for Seth to follow, she shuffled down an aisle of plastic-wrapped comic books and passed through a doorway, disappearing behind beaded strings of blue and green.

Brushing the beads aside, Seth found himself in a small backroom furnished with a card table, three foldout chairs, and a couch that reminded Seth of his malnourished office chair. A copy of the *Watchmen* graphic novel was propping up one leg of the table. The room shimmered with a pulsing orange glow, courtesy of a large lava lamp in the corner. Overlapping comic book posters from the 90's were the room's attempt at wallpaper. Faces from his teenage years stared down at Seth—Hellboy, the Joker, The League of Extraordinary Gentleman.

The reappearance of Seth's host interrupted his childhood reunion. She was carrying a steaming mug, and had an overstuffed manila folder tucked beneath her arm.

"I do apologize for all the cloak and dagger. One can't be too careful in these matter, you know."

She set the mug and folder down on the table and pulled over two of the fold-out chairs. Noticing Seth's hesitation for the first time, she fluttered over in a blur of hand-wringing and eased him into a seat.

"I'm so sorry, don't have guests very often. Fixing a cup of tea just for myself—where are my manners? Would you like any? It's chamomile. Very soothing. I've been drinking gallons of the stuff since our phone call, that raspy voice is no good for the vocal cords. I had some lozenges somewhere but I can't seem to track them down..."

The oozing glow of the lava lamp allowed Seth to better appraise his mystery caller. The woman was at least sixty, but she thrummed and flitted about with a hummingbird-like energy. She wore round, wire-framed glasses, and her eyes matched the floral blue of her blouse. Seth imagined her forty years earlier: bell-bottoms and a lazy peace sign, Crosby, Stills and Nash playing in the background.

"Sorry," he said, "but I don't think I caught your name?"

"Janette," she said, and took a sip of chamomile. "First name only, if you don't mind. Not that I think you're with them, of course, but a little anonymity never hurts."

Seth nodded absently, watching the steam from her mug fog Janette's glasses.

"Janette," he said, "I don't really understand why I'm here."

Janette smiled and folded her hands. "We're here for the truth. Why don't you take a guess?"

Seth frowned, sifting through his mental archive. “You said you read my blog, right? Is this about last month’s post? How fluoride in our water is masking the dispersal of micro-toxins?”

Janette clicked her tongue and leaned over to pat Seth’s hand.

“Oh, no dear. The fluoride’s just there to keep our teeth clean. Dentists might be bothered by the decrease in cavities, but that’s hardly anything to worry about.”

Seth slouched, slightly deflated, then straightened with a new idea.

“Is it my Apollo 11 theory? How the footage was shot in Hollywood and directed by Sergio Leone?”

Janette chuckled. “No, no, Sergio would have been far too busy with the on-site shoots for *Once Upon a Time in the West*.”

Seth accelerated, rattling off every conspiracy he studied in the Partridge Corporation sub-basement.

“JFK? The CIA set up Oswald to take the fall for a second shooter?”

“Pardon? Oh heavens, no. The Warren Commission got it right the first time.”

“Roswell?”

“Air Force weather balloon, nothing alien about it.”

Seth pushed back from the table and started pacing the room. He snapped his fingers and pointed to Janette.

“9/11, South Tower, controlled demolition.”

“Come now, you can’t be serious about that one.”

Seth held out his arms, every pocket of suspicion turned inside-out.

“Well what the hell *is* the government lying about?”

Janette took a slow sip of chamomile, eyeing Seth through her clouded lenses.

“Crosswalk buttons,” she said.

* * *

Seth closed his eyes, kneading the lids with his knuckles until he saw purple. A dull headache was beginning to rumble in the space between his temples. He sighed and took another look at the heap of documents spread out across the table.

“You’re going to have to explain it again.”

Janette smoothed her blouse and tipped back the last of her tea. When she spoke, it was with the rehearsed authority of a professor teaching the same introductory course they had for twenty years.

“The year is 1962. The U.S. and the Soviet Union are on the brink of a full-blown thermonuclear exchange. Relations with Moscow are, to put it lightly, strained. Less than a dozen people control enough destructive power to plunge the planet into an endless nuclear winter. People are scared. And rightfully so.

“The average American feels helpless, vulnerable. Their lives are being used by politicians and generals as bargaining chips in a global game of blind man’s bluff. They are slowly awakening to the inherent madness of the arms race. So what do Mr. and Mrs. Everyman start to do?”

Janette waited, eyebrows arched, but all Seth offered was a shrug. She forged on.

“They start to dissent. They begin to protest nuclear weapons and the entities that control them. They’re tired of having their fate decided by faceless agents with no accountability.

“The establishment, as one would expect, does not appreciate this new trend. They have control and they’d very much like to keep it. So a solution is proposed, one whose origins can be traced back to the top-secret labs of the Department of Transportation.”

Seth leaned forward in his seat and held up a hand.

“The Department of Transportation. It’s just—I don’t know if secret labs are really their thing, it seems like—” But Janette rolled right over his protest.

“So the sinister agents from the DoT propose a solution: give the people the *illusion* of control. Let them delude themselves into thinking they have some say over the course of their lives. Permit them this simple fantasy, and they’ll happily hand over the rest of their liberties.

“Seemingly overnight, the DoT installs crosswalk buttons across our nation’s largest cities. Suddenly, every U.S. citizen can control traffic with the push of the button! The morning walk to work becomes a reassurance, a reminder that we *do* control our destinies. A single button brings intersections to a stand-still, bends the flow of traffic to our will. Free will restored!”

“Okay,” said Seth. “See, now this is where you really start to lose me, the part about—”

“But our government has locked a damning secret within their halls of power. These crosswalk buttons, these saviors of free will...” Janette paused for a sip of chamomile; realizing it was empty, she settled for locking eyes with Seth.

“They don’t work. Don’t do a damn thing. Placebos, every single one of them. They’re not, they’re not even connected to the traffic lights. Pushing a crosswalk button influences traffic just as much as a ceremonial rain dance.

“The Cold War may have ended, sure, but the illusion of control has multiplied. We now have crosswalk buttons in every single American town. And as the government continues to

relieve us of our freedoms, we comfort ourselves with the fact that we still have everyday power. We can still halt traffic with the push of a button. But it's all a lie. It's all one goddamn lie."

Janette's voice was quivering, and her bony shoulders shook as she worked to regain her composure. Seth bobbed his head in a rhythmic nod, looking past Janette and to the doorway.

"I uh, wow. Janette. This is all so...illuminating." She was grinning at him now, reflected lava lamps floating in her eyes. Seth nodded some more, then glanced at his lap to check a nonexistent watch.

"Well Janette, it's getting pretty late..."

* * *

Crouched in the back of the surveillance van, Special Agent Ainsley Crane was the image of government-issue. He wore a nondescript black suit, shapeless enough to hide the outline of his Glock—a Model 23, tucked snugly inside his Kevlar chest holster along with fifteen .40 caliber rounds. His shiny helmet of gel-hardened hair had not a strand out of place. While Crane kept watch through the van's barred windows, his partner climbed out of the driver's seat and into the back.

Special Agent Ava Leary—or, to use the name she adopted for her six years undercover, Special Agent Victoria Maddox—pulled back her red curls and tied them with a rubber band. She was wearing thick shock-proof glasses, as she always did during fieldwork, and primed a hypodermic needle with a vial of clear liquid.

"Any movement?"

"Nothing yet," said Crane, his eyes fixed on the dark storefront. Leary grunted.

"Unbelievable," she said. "The Department's every resource at my disposal, and I still wouldn't have found the bastard if I hadn't hit 'S' instead of '5' that day."

“Doesn’t matter how you find the leak,” said Crane. “Just so long as it gets plugged.”

* * *

Seth shivered as a midnight breeze funneled down Nellis Ave.

“Senile old bat,” he muttered. “Crosswalk buttons. I mean, for Christ’s sake.”

In the streetlight’s yellow halo, he opened a fistful of change and tried to count whether there was enough for the subway fare home. As he passed the graffitied plumber’s van he heard a door open, and before he could turn a pair of strong hands hooked him from behind and dragged him inside. Loose change skittered across the sidewalk. Seth shouted and flailed in the dark interior, until a knee caught him in the chest and an elbow pinned his neck to the metal floor.

“Hello, Mr. Larsson. Having a nice evening?” Agent Crane’s smile was more like peeling back enough face to expose the teeth behind. Seth spasmed under Crane’s cold weight, choking on words and fear.

“I-I-I’m not sure what you mean. How do you know—”

“How do we know your name, Seth?” Agent Leary’s face appeared upside-down, a hanging strand of red almost brushing Seth’s forehead.

“Jessica? I don’t—what are you doing?”

“My job.”

Seth stopped struggling, his every cell reassigned to processing Jessica’s presence.

“Your job? This is a secretary thing?”

Now it was Agent Leary who pressed down on Seth’s windpipe. With her other hand she unclipped a badge from her belt and held it in Seth’s face.

“Does this say secretary? Does it? No, it says ‘Special Agent, De-part-ment of Tran-spor-ta-tion.’”

Seth's eyes rolled partway back. The van started spinning, and for a second he thought he could smell chamomile. He managed to sputter a single word.

"Partridge...?"

Leary giggled, which scared Seth even more than the syringe she was now holding.

"Yes, very good, Seth. Partridge. You really think the DoT wouldn't station a couple of agents to keep an eye on the nation's biggest manufacturer of crosswalk buttons?" She eased the pressure from his neck, but Seth found that sentences still eluded him.

"Didn't. Know."

"Right," said Leary. "A life-long conspiracy theorist who just happens to work at the Partridge Corporation. Coincidence, I'm sure."

She stabbed the needle into Seth's upper arm, watching the rubber plunger on its slow descent, then crawled back toward the driver's seat. Crane was back now, his dagger smile unzipping within the field of Seth's narrowing vision.

"Get a good long look, Larsson. I want you to remember this face as you rot in whatever godforsaken hellhole the boys upstairs decide to toss you in."

The engine started and Seth felt the van peel away from the curb. He thrashed in the dark, groping madly for a handle, a weapon, anything, but a synthetic silence was seeping into his muscle. Crane stood, leaving Seth motionless on the floor. The van turned a sharp corner and his head lolled to one side, exposing a sliver of the outside world through the bars of the back window.

The van stopped at a red light. Murky shadows flitted across his vision, but through the window Seth saw a white-haired man paused at the same intersection. The man scowled at the line of cars and upturned his collar, then jabbed a crosswalk button with the foot of his cane.

The light changed and the van rolled forward. Seth's eyelids began to collapse under their own weight, but before they shut he caught one last glimpse of the old man's face.

He seemed content to wait at that crosswalk for the rest of his life.

The Holy Ghost Halloween Sock Hop

Sister Margaret's shadow flickered in and out of existence as she sprinted through the arcade of gothic arches. Her sandals slapped against the rough-hewn stone, and clouds of breath rose from beneath the hood of her brown robes. To save time, she vaulted over the short wall and into the courtyard, cutting diagonally beneath the two-hundred-year-old yew tree that stood watch over the cloister. Reaching the southern corner, she strode straight to a heavy oak door. Grasping the iron handle with both hands, she pulled open the chapel door and entered the oldest room at the Monastery of John St.

Margaret was relieved to discover that the morning service had yet to begin. The chapel was still filled with the quiet murmur of early conversation, and the morning light filtered blue and purple through the stained glass along the east wall. Twenty rows of modest pews were divided down the middle, and a simple stone altar stood below a large wooden cross. A vaulted ceiling rose high overhead, supported by the same gothic-style arches found throughout the monastery.

Margaret craned her neck to look for an open seat. Spotting one in the front row, she jogged down the center aisle and slid into the worn pew. She removed her hood, revealing a pale freckled face framed by shoulder-length hair, and stretched out her legs while trying to catch her breath. The robed figure seated to her right glanced over and nodded in greeting.

“Sister Margaret.”

“Brother Christopher.”

“Have you written our father a letter? His birthday is next week.”

Margaret frowned. “Christmas isn't for two months.”

Christopher sighed. “No, not Our Father, our father. Dad. His birthday’s next Tuesday.”

“Aha,” said Margaret, “that makes more sense. Gets a bit confusing with all the ‘brother and sister’ business. Thanks for the reminder, bro.” She put her younger brother in a playful headlock and started giving him a noogie. Christopher’s face was leaner, and he tended to both speak and move in a slower, more deliberate manner, but there was an unmistakable resemblance between the two.

“Cut it out!” said Christopher, trying to keep the laughter out of his voice. “Brother Derek is about to start the morning service.”

On cue, a tall middle-aged man with graying hair, clothed in the same brown robes as the rest of the congregation, stood up from his pew and walked to the lectern that flanked the stone altar. He held his hands up and the room quieted down.

“Good morning, brothers and sisters. I’ll get right to the morning announcements so I can hand things off to Sister Lucille and her choir. Their voices certainly sound more pleasant than mine. Ha Ha!”

The congregation didn’t stir, except for Christopher who donated a chuckle in the interest of preserving Brother Derek’s self-esteem. Brother Derek unfolded a sheet of paper and donned a small pair of reading glasses, which combined with his hooked nose to give the impression of a short-sighted bird of prey.

“Just two quick announcements today. Sister Claire would like everyone to know that we’re still one volunteer short for our annual Bodies of Christ calendar. This year’s theme is ‘Dashing Disciples,’ and we still need someone to portray Judas Iscariot for the month of July. Any volunteers can speak with Sister Claire after morning service.

“Also, a reminder that tonight is our highly anticipated Holy Ghost Halloween Sock Hop! The festivities will start right here in the chapel at eight o’clock with plenty of food, refreshments, and musical entertainment. Everyone’s favorite house band Funk of the Covenant will be rocking out as usual, and this year our own Brother Brian will be dropping some beats as DJ Bethlehem. Prizes will be awarded for the best group costumes, as well as the best Old Testament and New Testament-themed costumes.” The chapelgoers had yet to stir from their stupor, but Brother Derek’s enthusiasm had long ago evolved an immunity to ambivalence.

“Now for some exciting news. This year, winners of the costume contest will be receiving a very special prize. Last week I sent an email to the Vatican to ask for authorization, but since I haven’t heard back yet I’m going to assume that Pope Francis will give the go-ahead once he has time to sort through his inbox. So before the suspense builds any further, I am pleased to announce that all of our costume contest winners will be given a voucher that absolves them of one minor sin.”

The dull murmuring that usually carried on during Brother Derek’s morning announcements dissipated in an instant. Brother James choked on the bran muffin he had smuggled in, spewing crumbs all over the back of Sister Susan’s habit. Brothers and sisters began shouting questions at Brother Derek.

“Does Scripture allow this?”

“Who’s going to be judging the contest?”

“What factors will we be scored on?”

“Does adultery count as a minor sin?” yelled someone from the back row.

As Brother Derek tried to calm the unusually alert congregation, Margaret turned to Christopher.

“We need to win.”

“Sure, let’s go for it.”

Margaret clenched a fistful of Christopher’s robes and pulled them nose-to-nose. “No, Chris. We *need* to win.”

Christopher leaned back and pushed her away. “What’s the big deal? It’s just one minor sin. We’re human, we sin every day. Absolving one won’t make a difference in the long run.”

Margaret looked around to see if anyone was listening. Brother Derek was still struggling to restore order, and the members of the congregation were all preoccupied with getting the details of the competition. Margaret grabbed Christopher’s arm and yanked him out of the pew, dragging him behind as she marched toward one of the confessional booths tucked into the chapel walls. She slid open the door and disappeared inside. Catching on, Christopher took a seat in the booth’s other half, separated from Margaret by a thin wooden wall.

Margaret spoke in hushed tones through the wire mesh opening.

“Listen, I’m only going to say this once, okay? I need this voucher. Like, *really* need it. There’s a specific sin I need to get rid of.”

“Margaret, what’s going on?”

“Remember when we were in seventh grade, and you told Mom and Dad that you wanted to join the monastery?”

“Of course.”

“And then the next day I told them that I wanted to join too?”

“Yeah, I remember. What’re you getting at, Margaret?”

Margaret took a deep breath. “Here’s the thing: I lied. I never wanted to join the monastery. I still don’t. I hate it here. I only told Mom and Dad that I wanted to join because I saw how happy they were about your decision. I didn’t want to be the disappointment.”

“So…” said Christopher, trying to keep up, “You never actually wanted to join the monastery?”

“No! Of course not, this place is pathetic. I mean, for Christ’s sake, the Monastery of John St.? The Monastery of John Street?! The Monastery of Saint John was already taken, so what do they do? They just switch the order and name it after our street address! Who does that?”

“I always thought the name was kind of fun,” said Christopher.

“And now I’m stuck,” said Margaret. “I can’t just bail, it’d kill Mom to know I broke my oaths. But if I can get this sin absolved, this one tiny little slip-up, then I can leave without anyone needing to worry about my eternal soul.” She caught her breath and waited for Christopher to reply.

“So let’s see,” said Christopher, “you lied to our parents…which falls under bearing false witness.”

“And technically, I guess I kind of dishonored our Mother and our Father…”

“Margaret, that’s Commandments Four and Eight! I don’t think this classifies as a minor—”

“The only question is, which category should we enter under? Old Testament, New Testament, or Group?”

“Margaret, I really think you’re mistaken about—”

“I think group is our best bet. Everyone loves the New Testament because it’s all feel-goody, so that category will be overly competitive. Plus, I’ve never actually read the Old Testament.”

“Neither have I,” said Christopher. “Could never make it past the third day of creation.”

“It’s settled then. Tonight we sweep the group costume contest, and by tomorrow morning my soul will be wiped clean and I’ll be out of here.”

* * *

The siblings arrived to find the chapel completely transformed. The pews had all been pushed to the perimeter of the room, and three foldout tables housed an impressive array of snacks. Brother Brian was in the process of setting up his turntables on the altar, and the organist for Funk of the Covenant was performing his last sound check. Some member of the party planning committee had hung a plastic skeleton on the oak cross, and big fuzzy spider webs had been draped over the stained glass windows. The confessional booths now contained silly props and a large camera that dispensed reels of Polaroid film. The marble holy water font had been repurposed as a punchbowl, and a sign listed the flavor as “Blood of Christ.”

Brother Derek approached the lectern and borrowed a microphone from Funk of the Covenant’s lead singer. He was wearing a pointed white bishop’s hat, and his typical brown habit was replaced by a black and white checkered shirt.

“Looks like it’s time for this chess piece to get a move on! Ha Ha!” His voice came in over the sound system and Brother Brian turned down the music. “Okay, okay, quiet down everyone. It’s time to announce the winners of the costume contest. And in case you missed it, all of our lucky winners will be receiving vouchers that absolve them of a minor sin of their

choice! So without further ado, it's time to announce the winner for best Old Testament-themed costume...drumroll, please!"

Brother Derek pointed to Funk of the Covenant and Sister Lucille snapped off a quick roll on the snare drum. Selecting one of three blue envelopes from the altar, Brother Derek tore it open and removed a sheet of paper with a theatrical flourish. He donned his reading glasses and squinted, then flipped the paper over to the other side. Frowning, he scurried over to the judges table to confer with them in hushed tones before returning to the lectern.

"Pardon the delay, brothers and sisters, just had to clear something up with the judges. They're not quite sure why, but it appears that nobody entered the costume contest under the Old Testament category."

The chapel lapsed into an awkward silence.

"This may be a silly question," said Brother Derek, "but everyone *has* read the Old Testament, correct?"

There were a few scuffles of feet on the stone floor, and someone near the snack table coughed.

"It's very long," ventured a voice from the back corner.

"All the characters have weird names," said another.

"All the feel-good stuff's in the New Testament."

"Hold on," someone said, "that David and Goliath business was pretty solid."

"Is that in the Old Testament?"

"I think so."

"Yeah, it's sometime after the Book of Genesis."

"Everything's after the Book of Genesis, moron."

“Screw off!”

“Moving on to the New Testament!” said Brother Derek as he opened another envelope.

“The competition was fierce, but this contestant impressed the judges with his clever take on that Roman governor we all know and forgive! Everyone give it up for Brother Donovan as...Pontius Pilot!”

Brother Donovan trotted up the center aisle, high-fiving brothers and sisters on the way. He was dressed in a traditional Roman toga and laurel wreath, accessorized by a pair of aviator goggles and a long red scarf. Brother Derek clapped him on the back and handed over a slip of paper that looked like a shiny silver ticket stub.

“And as promised,” said Brother Derek, “here’s a voucher to absolve one minor sin of your choosing! Well Pontius, I think we can all agree you *executed* this costume perfectly! Ha Ha!”

Christopher leaned over to Margaret. “Pontius Pilot? That’s some pretty soft wordplay. Not sure how I feel about this judges panel.”

“Relax,” said Margaret, “the New Testament’s a weak category. The pool is much smaller for group costumes, we stand a good chance.”

“Last but not least, it’s time for the best group costume!” announced Brother Derek. “Our judges were in lengthy debate over who would take the title in this closely contested contest! Ha Ha! Let’s call up the finalists and give them a nice round of applause! First up we have Brother Charles, Sister Claire, and Sister Brittany.” A group of three, each wearing white sheets with large holes cut out, approached the altar.

“For those of you a little slow on the uptake, it appears that tonight we’ve been graced by the presence of the Hole-y Trinity! Ha Ha! Simply brilliant, you three. And as for their

competition, it looks like we have a brother and sister pair who are actually brother and sister! Ha Ha! Isn't that fun? Everyone give it up for Brother Christopher and his sister Sister Margaret as...Abel and Cain!"

Margaret sprinted to the altar dragging Christopher in tow. Christopher, dressed as Abel, wore all-white robes, a blue ribbon that said *#1 Son*, and carried a report card with straight A's. For her Cain costume, Margaret wore a black leather jacket and torn skinny jeans, smoked a cigarette, and whipped around a butterfly knife with a suspicious level of confidence.

"Alright!" said Brother Derek. "The siblings going as siblings! Ha Ha! I love it guys, although hopefully Sister Margaret doesn't channel her inner Cain tonight! Ha Ha! Seriously though, that knife is scaring me a little." He shuffled to the far side of the lectern.

"I'd say we've waited long enough! Let's see which group will be walking away with our prize this evening!"

Sister Susan provided the requisite drumroll, and the chapelgoers froze to attention. Margaret dug her fingernails into Christopher's arm, but he was too busy saying a last-minute prayer to notice. The three members of the Hole-y Trinity held hands and bowed their heads.

"The winner is...the Hole-y Trinity!"

Sister Brittany screamed in delight, and the trio embraced amidst the audience's applause. Brother Derek handed out their silver vouchers, and they waved to their friends in the congregation. Margaret struggled to hold back tears, and Christopher squeezed her hand.

"Well, brother and sisters," said Brother Derek, "looks like that's the end of our costume competition. A big thanks to everyone for their participation. Now, let's get back to the party! I'm sure—" the sudden presence of an old, stooped figure at his side stopped Brother Derek mid-sentence.

Sister Muriel, the oldest member of the Monastery of John St., stood up on her tiptoes and whispered something into Brother Derek's ear. He nodded, and she shuffled back into the shadows of the confessional booths without another word.

"Brothers and sisters, I've just been made aware of some interesting news," said Brother Derek over the speaker system. "According to Sister Muriel, the story of Abel and Cain is actually part of the Old Testament. And since nobody else entered under that category, I'm pleased to announce that Brother Christopher and Sister Margaret have just won two of our special vouchers!"

The siblings embraced and the congregation burst into applause, relieved that at least one among them had read the Bible's first half. Brother Derek sidled over to where Christopher and Margaret were celebrating and produced two more silver tickets. He beamed at the audience and rested a hand on Christopher's shoulder.

"Congratulations, you two," he said, presenting Christopher with a ticket. "As promised, here is your prize voucher, valid for the total absolution of one minor sin. Now before I move over to Sister Margaret, tell us, Brother Chris, will you be using this voucher now, or do you plan on saving it for a *sinny* day? Ha Ha!"

"Hmm," said Christopher. "You know, I hadn't really considered it. To be honest, I thought it was a longshot that we'd even win. I'm just...I'm just so honored, Brother Derek. Wow. What a night! There's so many people I'd like to thank. Margaret, of course, and then there's my mother and my father—you know, it's actually his birthday next week, and—"

"Oh for Christ's sake!" said Margaret, elbowing Christopher out of the way and taking the other ticket from Brother Derek. "I'd like to redeem mine now."

Brother Derek gasped. The audience's applause terminated mid-clap. Over in the corner, Funk of the Covenant's sound engineer dropped his mic, and a high-pitched whine echoed off the vaulted ceiling. Christopher flinched and tugged on his sister's leather sleeve. Margaret turned to look out over the stony-faced congregation.

"What's going on?" she asked under her breath.

Christopher coughed. "Margaret...you, uh...you took the Lord's name in vain."

A low grumble rippled through the audience. Sister Susan tutted disapprovingly, and stern looks gave way to shaking heads. Someone near the snack table started booing, and half the audience soon chimed in. The heckling quickly evolved into a flood of angry shouts.

"She doesn't deserve to win!"

"Take the prize away!"

"Make her say the rosary!"

Brother Derek attempted to calm the crowd. "Now, now, everyone, let's all just take a moment to—" A flying sandal hit him in the face and he dropped to the floor. The congregation-turned-mob began hurling anything they could get their hands on: sandals, cupcakes from the snack table, pieces of costume, hymnals taken from the pews. Brother Derek huddled behind his lectern, while Christopher and Margaret took cover behind the altar.

"You've got to stop this!" shouted Christopher. "Someone's going to get hurt!"

"What am I supposed to do?" said Margaret.

Christopher looked at the silver ticket in Margaret's hand. She followed his gaze and clutched the ticket to her chest.

"No way! There's no way I'm wasting my one chance to get out of here!"

Christopher reached over and put his hand on hers. He looked into her eyes. “Sis, look around you. Only you can stop this.”

Margaret poked her head over the altar and surveyed the scene. Brother Derek was rolled up in the fetal position behind the toppled lectern, the microphone still clutched in his hands. He appeared to be reciting the Lord’s Prayer, and tears streamed down his face. The bass drum from Funk of the Covenant was rolling across the floor with a massive hole kicked in the side. One of the confessional booths was engulfed in flames. The choking scent of incense filled the air. The pews had been pushed into a provisional barricade that blocked the only exit to the chapel. Sister Susan was sitting cross-legged on the floor, singing Joy to the World and ripping the pages out of a stack of hymnals with a crazed smile. A collection plate soared through the air and cracked one of the stained glass window panes.

Margaret sunk back below the altar. She held her head in her hands for a moment, then turned to Christopher with a rueful smile. Leaping to her feet, she sprinted to Brother Derek’s shuddering form and wrested the microphone from his hands.

“Everyone STOP!” she screamed into the microphone. The animalistic growls and shrieks from the congregation lapsed into surprised silence.

“I hereby redeem my prize voucher and absolve myself of taking the Lord’s name in vain.” She tore the ticket in half. “There! It’s done. Now can everyone calm the hell down?”

Sister Susan looked down at the torn pages that littered the floor around her. She shuddered and stood up, then went to comfort Brother Derek. Brother Donovan and Brother Brian stopped wrestling on the floor and looked at each other in confusion. They helped each other to their feet and started disassembling the barricade of pews. Sister Claire used a torn tapestry to extinguish the confessional booth fire. All around the chapel, brothers and sisters

snapped out of their violent rages. A newly recovered Brother Derek walked over to Margaret and reclaimed his microphone.

“Alright you godly ghouls and worshipping witches, let’s get things back on track! Ha Ha! Hit it, Brother Brian!”

Brother Brian, an ugly gash across his forehead, started fiddling with his turntables. The Monster Mash blasted through the speaker system and cheers erupted from the audience. Christopher emerged from behind the altar and patted Brother Derek on the shoulder. Sister Susan spasmed and shook in a manner vaguely reminiscent of the Twist. Laughter leaked out into the night through the broken stained glass windows, and within moments the rest of the congregation was dancing along.

Over by the altar, Margaret sighed and shook her head. She walked over to the tabernacle, where the Eucharist was typically stored for Mass, and opened the gilded door. She reached in and removed the chalice used for Holy Communion, then turned and made a beeline for the punch bowl.

101 Places to See Before You Die

“Ladies and gentleman, this is Tour Guide Mike Dolan. We’ve just arrived at Vista oh-four-three and should be sightseeing in just a moment.”

The bus’s PA system snarled with static, the scripted announcement cut with white noise.

“Procedure here will be the same as every other Vista. Please remain on the Automated Sightseeing Pathway for the duration of our visit. A friendly reminder: each of you must take in the beauty and grandeur of this stunning natural wonder. Protocol dictates that in the event—”

A whine of audio feedback pierced the airwave; hands fluttered to ears in protest. Tour Guide Dolan pounded the receiver against the dashboard and cleared his throat.

“If this is your last Vista, then I would like to take a moment to thank you, on behalf of all of us here at the Bureau of Sightseeing, for your patience and cooperation. For the rest of you, expect to hear back from the Bureau in three to four months with the itinerary for your next trip. Thank you, and please enjoy Vista oh-four-three.”

The bus smelled stale and sweet, droplets of sweat evaporating from sunbaked vinyl. Sarah zipped her backpack and edged into the aisle’s line of waiting passengers, knees popping in relief as her legs stretched out. A head-rush followed seconds behind, cloudbursts of electric purple and the howl of unseen blood flow. Instinctively, Sarah reached out and gripped the shoulder of the passenger in line before her. The passenger turned with raised eyebrows, and as Sarah’s vision cleared it revealed to her a woman’s face, smooth and creased, framed by loose white curls.

“What number are you on?” asked the woman, turning to address Sarah directly.

“I’m sorry?”

The woman tsked, then reached into her woven green handbag and brandished a thick paperback.

“The Vista,” she said. “What number is it for you?”

Sarah didn’t answer at first, her eyes still fixed on the object held in the woman’s knobby hands. Sarah didn’t own a copy, not anymore, but she had known what was coming before the woman even withdrew her hand from the purse. The book’s cover was stained by use, frayed at the corners and faded by years of travel, but Sarah knew the title without looking: *101 Places to See Before You Die*.

“What number,” repeated Sarah. “I’m not sure, I haven’t kept track.”

The woman’s forehead wrinkled in surprise. “Well,” she said, nodding toward the bus’s front, where Tour Guide Dolan frowned into a walkie-talkie, “I suppose they’re keeping track for you.”

Sarah followed her gaze. The bus’s feeble air conditioning had given up hours ago, Dolan’s suit jacket now draped across an empty seat. A two-foot rod—Dolan’s Motivator, black metal with a vulcanized grip—swung lazily from the Tour Guide’s belt. Sarah folded herself back into line. Despite the ninety-degree heat, goose bumps pushed her freckles upward, her skin a contour map trying to actualize its implicit dimension.

The old woman was leafing through the ear-marked pages of her travel book, the margins overflowing with pen and pencil notes. Finding the page she’d been looking for, the woman read the entry slowly and deliberately, carving a path across the page with a bony finger.

“This will be my ninety-eighth,” she said, eyes not leaving the guidebook. “At least, I think it will. At my age they all start to...” She trailed off, bending the book and pressing down with her thumb, sending the pages cascading in a blurred montage. Eiffel Tower, Niagara Falls,

Great Barrier Reef. By the time the pictures could be processed they were already fifteen pages behind.

“Blur together,” she finished.

In the cramped shade of the bus’s interior, Sarah sensed the presence of more years than the woman’s frame seemed to hold, its posture intact but the spirit it housed stooped by the weight of excess memory. The line lurched forward, the distraction giving Sarah’s feeling the chance to escape, and Sarah found the woman smiling at her once more.

“I’m rather looking forward to it,” she said. “I’ve always dreamed of seeing the Grand Canyon.”

“You won’t be disappointed,” said Sarah, momentarily forgetting the forest of non-disclosure agreements she signed at the government’s bequest. “It’s incredible.”

The woman frowned for the first time, almond-pale skin pinching in confusion. “You mean to say you’ve been here before?”

“Once,” said Sarah. She pointed at the travel guide. “Before that was ever published.”

Now it was the woman who held Sarah’s shoulder, spindly fingers pulling her close with a surprising grip. Clay-brown eyes, reminiscent of the desert powder that settled on the bus like ash, scoured Sarah’s face.

“Have we met before?” the woman asked.

A rusty screech; the bus doors unfolded to let in a plume of dust and the smell of heat. The white-haired woman released Sarah and whirled around to face the front.

“My mistake, dear,” she said over her shoulder. “Here we go!”

The line of passengers inched up the aisle, a clumsy-footed caterpillar emerging from its diesel-scented pupal stage. Per Bureau regulation, the bus had pulled directly to the boarding

point for Vista 043's Automated Sightseeing Pathway. Sarah stepped off the last step and onto the wind-scratched metal, the dry air sunlight stinging her eyes. A mechanical hum reverberated through the soles of her shoes, and the moving sidewalk that formed the heart of the ASP ferried the tour group across the scrubland. The artificial river flowed in a straight line for two minutes, then veered to the left and slowed, stretching the sightseers out along a horizontal strip of desert. She'd promised herself she wouldn't, but Sarah gasped anyway.

It had been so long, so unnaturally long since the last time she visited, but her body's reaction to the canyon was every bit as visceral and uncontrollable. Her heartbeat reverted to one of nature's hardwired rhythms, the one which marks a default setting for all mammals whose senses of depth and proportion are stolen away. Sarah's brain, still operating under the day-to-day definition of *life-size*, screamed through innate calculations of distance and scale, and when the numbers made impossible sense it blamed her eyes for misinformation. Storm surges of adrenaline battered at her perception, sharpening every sensation in an attempt to find coherence in the alien landscape. In short, it was one heck of a view.

The Automated Sightseeing Pathway shuddered to a complete stop, leaving the line of passengers spaced out evenly across the ridge. Sarah watched a red-tailed hawk plummet in the distance, swallowed by the canyon's maw until it burst upward with wings outstretched, banking and soaring atop a spiraling thermal. She scanned the gouged horizon, dimly aware of an internal untethering, of something cut loose by this tear in the desert.

"You there! Open your eyes and take in the goddamn sights!" The shattered earth echoed Tour Guide Dolan's order: *Goddamn sights, damn sights, sights.*

"No!" A tear-stained scream, one of the passengers further down the line. "I only have three left! Please!"

Sarah counted the crimped layers of sediment, every tendon in her neck taught against the skin. Sandstone and limestone and dried-blood shale.

“Please!”

The sound voltage being discharged, a bright blue snarl, then a muted whimper from down the line. Applied to the base of the neck, one of seven points the Bureau of Sightseeing trained their agents to target, a Motivator could paralyze facial muscles for up to ten minutes, more than enough time for eyelids to be held open and landscapes forcibly appreciated. The wind carried notes of singed hair along the canyon rim. Sarah stole a glance to her left, checking to see whether the episode had upset the white-haired woman.

The woman had no interest in the violence of her surroundings, may not have even heard the pain unfolding just thirty feet away. Standing on the fissure’s lip, her avian frame dwarfed by the power of rock and river and time, the age-bleached woman shed her years like feathers. She moved her hands in steady little waves, letting the wind thread between her fingers—cool, sunlight thread that did the opposite of bind. Her white curls, pulled back and straightened by the playful air currents, trailed behind her like a snowy comet. She turned to Sarah and laughed, crow’s feet turning her face into a canyon-scape of its own.

“It’s better than I could have imagined!”

Sarah grinned. The woman stretched out her arms, a laughing tree alone in the desert. Sarah shielded her eyes, squinting into the sun for the hawk she’d watched earlier.

A quiet, almost delicate thump. Sarah looked over and screamed.

She was face down in the dust, outline blurred by a rising cloud of rust-red. Her right hand hung inches over the void, the wind still wrapping itself around her fingers. An updraft

whipped the mass of white curls into a vertical dance, an invisible sibling trying to tug her up by the hair.

Dolan was waiting with a gurney. The BoS always briefed their Tour Guides on which group members would be seeing their one hundred and first sight. For the second time that day Sarah found her sense of balance slipping; she fell to her knees as the gurney squeaked away, a pair of narrow tire tracks trailing in the dirt.

A low mechanical groan, the ground beneath Sarah began to flow. The Automated Sightseeing Platform retraced its path, snaking through the scrub and toward the waiting bus. Sarah dared a one-second look—this was the desert after all, a land of mirage and fever dream. But instead of a woman there was only a small, dog-eared paperback, fallen from a loud green handbag and ignored by a preoccupied Tour Guide.

Sarah half-expected the book to burn her hands, and almost wished that it had. Instead she turned the pages to number forty-three. The Grand Canyon. Tucked below the photograph, the one showing the spot where Sarah was just now kneeling, a neat cursive note read: *101? Can't remember. If so, heck of a finale.*

Sarah tore out the page, tore out entire chapters by the fistful. This wind had never known autumn, never had the chance to carry red and gold leaves, and it snatched the fallen papers with a greedy enthusiasm. Sarah ripped and crumpled until a single page remained. *About the Author.* Shaking with silent tears, Sarah stared down at the black and white photograph of her own face.

The girl in the book was young. She had no idea, could never begin to dream of what happens when you mix words in just the wrong way. And how could she? The girl in the book just wanted to travel, and to write. She hadn't expected any publishers to show interest, and

when they did, she never expected it to sell. She never expected it could be so (for lack of a bigger word), *convincing*.

A travel book, a spell book, whatever you called it, the reality remained that the paperback's precise combination of words, of *her* words, triggered something deep and ancient and long ago lost. Maybe it made her a good writer, the fact that her little book convinced every single reader—or if not the readers, then at least their bodies—to cling to life like a disease, never letting go until they visited all one hundred and one sights.

The girl in the book had never heard of Vistas, or ASP's, or Motivators. This girl, this energetic, globe-trotting author—who one day would drown her precious globe in a sea of undying readers, would single-handedly turn sightseeing into the only method of population control—simply smiled up from the page.

Wordlessly (for words were what go her here), Sarah reared back and hurled the book's empty husk into the canyon void. She was back on the bus before it even hit bottom.

Warm Front

You wouldn't know it from looking, but this time of year every cloud is a tinder nest, waiting patiently for that one sunbeam with enough heat to spark ignition. I've been climbing for fifteen minutes now, hand over hand, and inside the helmet my face is slick with sweat. On top of that my visor's too fogged to see, but at this point it's not really an issue. Each rung is exactly two feet above the last, a fact my arms memorized a long time ago. This will be my third drought season since leaving the academy, and it still annoys me that the hottest part of the year is also when we have to suit-up the most. Something about this heat feels familiar, reminds me of the first time I saw a live burn. The simulations might drill in the basics, and there's definitely value in the controlled burns you face at the academy, but nothing prepares you for the first time you look up and see a cloud burning in the sky...

The call came in from a housewife in the suburbs, and when we pulled up in the engine she was waiting out by the hydrant with a pitcher of lemonade. Just standing there casual as you please, leaning against a shady trunk, as if there wasn't a chunk of flaming sky half-a-mile overhead. A Class II cumulus, if my memory serves me, nosediving slowly and bleeding smoky streaks of gray. They don't fall, burning clouds—they sink, like a submarine taking on water. I stood, craning my neck up in awe while Ramirez helped herself to my glass of lemonade. Kovacs was on ladder that day, and as usual he hammed it up with the heroics. Afterwards he disappeared inside for twenty minutes to “cool off” with the housewife. Ramirez was on weather duty, eyes glued to pixelated Doppler frames. I was in the cab, monitoring the array of pressure gauges and their flickering needles. I was also in the cab last month when the windshield caved in, turned opaque by a spider web of crimson cracks.

My right hand reaches up and grabs onto nothing, dissolving my memories in a fog of adrenaline. Shit. I lean face-first into the ladder's topmost rung, my helmet all that saves me from a broken nose. Have I been climbing for that long? It's a solid half-hour to reach the top, and I dimly recall Kovacs telling me I only had to climb halfway, that this Class I stratus was at an easy altitude and we'd be done by lunch. But here I am, nearly a mile of ladder below and nothing but blue above. Must've zoned out.

That's what the simulations are really good at: getting you used to the monotony. Forty-five hundred feet is a lot of ladder pegs; it's easy to lose focus once you're halfway up and the chatter of the ground has faded. That's why they drill in that stupid mantra at the academy: *One-two-three, please save me*. A mind-numbing earworm, a reminder to reattach your harness after every three rungs. Or you could use Ramirez's version: *One-two-three, fuck safe-ty*. She stopped using her harness the day after graduation, said it slows her down too much. Kovacs gets a kick out of it, and I've given up trying to convince her otherwise.

The hose is draped over my shoulder, and the muffled flow of water reminds me of the white noise machine I used to play at home to drown out the overpass. The track's called "tranquility brook" or something equally insipid. Ramirez couldn't stand it, said it makes her need to pee in the middle of the night. I soon found I didn't need it anymore, that the warm rhythm of Ramirez's heartbeat had become my soundtrack to sleep.

I can't remember the last time I was up this high. Usually by the time we arrive on-scene the clouds have limped down to the lowest levels of the atmosphere; it's rare that we have to climb past the thousandth peg. But here I am—the very last rung. I unhook my harness (*one-two-three, fuck safe-ty*), pull off my helmet and balance on the top bar. The breeze peels sweat-soaked hair off my forehead, cools the back of my neck. The wind feels nice up here.

Normally I despise windy days. A twenty-minute climb, panting under the weight of a full suit-up, only to have the cross-winds shift and blow the burning bastard to the next county over. Then it's another twenty minutes down, followed by a whiplashing scream across town, Kovacs sticking his head out the window with a pair of binoculars, shouting directions to Ramirez who drives like you'd expect. She used to show some degree of restraint, braking for turns at least, but then we failed to catch that Class III cumulus, arriving just in time to watch it touch down on a dog kennel. Since then she's developed what Kovacs calls "stop sign blindness."

I wedge my boots under the bar at my feet, and now if I lean back and close my eyes it's like I'm lying in bed, at least for my upper torso. The sun projects a kaleidoscope on my inner eyelids, pulsing patterns of blue and red. My back's being warmed from below, like when I purposefully take a long time brushing so Ramirez's body has time to heat up the sheets.

From the helmet in my lap I can hear Kovacs yelling something through the headset. I can't make out what he's saying, the static almost sounds like crying. But Kovacs never cries around people, not even last month when the cab windshield caved in.

I felt a twinge of excitement this morning when I found out the call was for a stratus fire. Stratus clouds are my favorite. They're long and thin and from below it looks like God spilled milk across an invisible tabletop. But when they ignite it's a Renaissance cathedral ceiling: twisting, licking brushstrokes of yellow, red and orange. Cumulonimbus are the ones that get the cadets all gung-ho, but once you're in the field you realize it's hard enough to extinguish a floating fire without lightning to worry about too. Ramirez puts on an extra swagger whenever we respond to cumulonimbus fires, but I know she's nervous because she always makes the same dumb joke:

“Well boys, looks like we got a real warm front coming in.”

Kovacs interrupts over the radio, his voice a crackled slur:

“Ackerson? ... *kzzk* ... goddamn it, Ack ... *zzkz* ... too high—”

So much noise. I let the helmet roll off my knees, watch it bounce off the ladder once before everything is quiet again. I probably should've checked below, don't want it to hit Kovacs or some rubbernecking passerby. Because of last month's incident the department made us sit through a four-hour safety and protocol seminar. The cadet's mantra even made an appearance. *One-two-three, please save me*. Asked to repeat it back, Kovacs took one look at me and smirked.

“Sure thing, sir.” He cleared his throat and smiled sweetly. “One-two-three, fuck safe-ty.”

The two of us doubled-over in bubbling laughter, tears pooling in our eyes as we fought to catch our breath. The safety instructor was less than amused, muttered something just loud enough for me to hear:

“Well if she'd learned the goddamn rhyme we wouldn't be here right now.”

I don't remember what happened next. Suddenly Kovacs was yanking me back by the shirt collar. The instructor scrambled to his feet, a stream of thick red leaking from his nose.

That little episode, combined with the results of our mandated psych evals, earned the two of us a three-week leave of duty. Before I tried to restructure his face, the instructor reiterated some basic scare-scenarios. A dropped helmet can fall fast enough to crack someone's skull, a dropped oxygen tank will hole-punch a rooftop with ease. He didn't mention what a dropped person can do to a windshield.

And now I'm starting to feel guilty about letting that helmet drop. Just a quick check, a once-over to make sure it didn't hit anything.

Ah. I see. That would explain what Kovacs was shouting about.

When we arrived on-site this morning the two of us measured the prevailing winds and determined that I only needed to climb up halfway, could perch around two thousand feet and wait for the target to blow into range. It was only a Class I stratus so I'd have plenty of time to douse the thing before it moved in too close. Neither of us expected me to climb all the way to the top, to ditch my radio and take a nice little nap in the sun. Now I'm seeing what was warming my back so comfortably from below.

I've always loved the serene semi-terror you get from standing in a cloud's burning shadow, but until now I'd never glimpsed one from above. And this is something else entirely.

It's like I pulled a daring jailbreak from Hell, just shoved a ladder up through the lake of fire and climbed on out. When the smoke parts I can glimpse writhing knots of flame, whip-like tendrils that tie themselves end over end over end. A stained glass whirlpool of orange and black and red. I could try extinguishing it from up here, could angle the spray downward from my perch on the last rung. But I think I'd rather just watch. A drink would be nice though—I spin the screw to open the nozzle, ready to quench my thirst with a face-drenching jet. But the cloud must have melted through the hose because all I get is a face-full of steam that smells vaguely of plastic.

Burning clouds can't rain. That's a common misconception—many people think that they can, but that's only because we're spraying so much water from up on the ladder that it sometimes seems like the cloud is responsible. But if the cloud's big enough, if it's been burning long and hot and bright enough, then anything we spray at it hisses into steam upon contact. Depending on how long it takes to extinguish the fire we sometimes even get secondary cloud

formations, wispy little bundles of vapor that condense overhead, formed from nothing but evaporated hose water.

They can't rain, but burning clouds do occasionally snow. Flurries of gray-white soot (Ramirez calls them "skeleton snowflakes") will dust the ground and sprinkle flecks of white in Kovacs' dark curls. One time, after a three-hour battle to extinguish a Class III cirrus, Ramirez took my hands and we laid in the ash, making snow angels and watching the singed husk of cloud above. A cloud that's been on fire looks like a cotton ball left too close to the stove, melted and shriveled into an empty shape. Usually I'm reminded of the scarred patients down at the burn ward, but that day, making snow angels with Ramirez in the false sunlight, I couldn't find a reason not to smile.

It's almost imperceptible, but I can feel the ladder starting to tilt. Somewhere inside that boiling cloud the ladder struts are softening, are beginning to cry dirty teardrops of beaded metal. Eventually the tilt will become a lean, and then a bend, and then I suppose break is after that. It'll be like going off the high dive at last summer's barbeque, the time Kovacs got stung by a hornet and I first saw Ramirez in a bikini.

The smoke's getting blacker, and there's enough of it now that the fire floating beneath me is brighter than the sun above. The coughing's getting worse too. Kind of wish I hadn't dropped that helmet, although I'm glad I don't have to talk to Kovacs right now. I'm not really sure what I'd say.

Yep, there we go. Definitely at a lean now. The ladder's so hot it's singeing little black holes in my suit—third-degree polka-dots. I hook my ankles and lean back again, this time trying to minimize my contact with the metal. Closing my eyes, I try to recapture that feeling of lying in bed, but the cloud's hungry hiss is getting louder.

I hope my helmet didn't hit Kovacs. It probably didn't, but it would be nice to know for sure. Even if it did, Jake's a tough guy. Last month he tried not to cry in front of me because he said I had more of a right to, which is stupid because that's not how things work. I wonder if he'll cry more openly this time. But there won't be anyone left to hide it from, so at this point I guess it's sort of a "*If a tree falls in a forest...*" kind of a deal.

I've stopped sweating, that's new. Not sure if it's because my body is out of water or if the water still inside me has realized there's no point in going outside. *Attention body water, this is a public service announcement. There's a heat advisory on for today, you are strongly encouraged to remain indoors.* Feeling a bit light-headed. Starting to get pretty warm.

I miss Ramirez.

I can't tell if my eyes are opened or closed. Both are just as dark, but one stings more from the smoke so I guess that's open. Ramirez hates the dark, always turns the bathroom light on so a crack of yellow seeps in, which is ridiculous because she buries her entire head under the blankets when she sleeps. Wait, shit: *Hated* the dark, *turned* the bathroom light on, *buried* her entire head. Hated, turned, slept. I should have the tenses down by now, it's been a whole month. A month since she dropped like a wing-clipped angel, floated down onto a bed of laminated glass, leaving me and Kovacs and a burning horizon.

Cadet Ackerson, what are the three ingredients for a fire? "Heat, oxygen, fuel, sir!" Cloudfuel—gotta fight water with water. Breathing's getting real tricky. Ramirez, Erin darling, think you could manage to lighten the mood? Help relieve the tension and whatnot?

Looks like we've got a real warm front coming in.

Yes, thank you. That's perfect.

Knick-Knack Necromancy

My grandfather has always sent his belongings ahead of himself. In 1947, as he and my grandmother prepared to emigrate from the Netherlands, two boxes of blue and white Delftware arrived on a Santa Barbara porch, where they waited three weeks for the young couple's arrival. Twenty years later, having accepted a draftsman position in Pennsylvania, Opa dispatched his youngest son, my father, on a cross-country delivery run. It was imperative that the family's cookware, furniture, and Golden Retriever were all in place by the time the rest landed at Philadelphia International. In preparation for Opa's final move, this time to an assisted living facility in the Great Smoky Mountains, my father once again accepted the role of one-man advance team. Waving goodbye from the door of his now-empty garage, my grandfather watched our minivan reverse down the driveway, weighed down by a retirement's-worth of handkerchiefs, lozenges, and nail-filled coffee cans.

Wrapped in newspaper and rattling around empty biscuit tins, my grandfather's collection of bric-a-brac was always one step ahead of him, preserving familiarity despite relocation on any scale. From Amsterdam Oud-West to the Tennessee hills, Opa followed a trail of scattered knick-knacks, a Hansel-and-Gretel path paved with decades of gas station receipts and rotisserie chicken coupons. Which is why, considering the sudden reappearance of all his junk, I think my grandfather is preparing to return from the dead.

It began innocently enough, when my dog Chestnut gutted our kitchen dishwasher. An overweight Aussie with tri-colored eyes and a missing tail, Chestnut was in the habit of licking the plates and bowls as we loaded them on the lower rack. When his collar caught on the silverware basket he bolted out of panic, dragging the dishwasher chariot through a house-long

circuit as he tried to outrun the sound of shattering ceramic and glassware. The GE replacement was still tucked within its shipping box, and fruit flies hovered in a shifting cloud above the sink. Whatever cups survived Chestnut's rampage were buried beneath a week's-worth of crusted plates and gestating spores. So it was in an early-morning fog, already late for my summer lifeguarding job, that I groped through the corner cabinet in search of a clean coffee mug.

It was an all-purpose cabinet: coffee filters, loose tea bags, packets of mixed nuts from third-tier raffle baskets. It was also where my father stored the Dutch sweets he grew up with: stacks of thin caramel *Stroopwafels* and clothespinned bags of *Zoute Drop*, the salted black licorice we fed to unsuspecting visitors. And there, hiding behind a tin of expired cocoa mix, was a mug I hadn't seen in years.

It was khaki-colored and ostensibly plain, until one rotated to inspect the other side. There, beneath a thick-lined title—*WANTED*—perched the black silhouette of a stenciled squirrel, a profile view showing a perked, bushy tail and stubby snout. A red-lettered caption read the charges: *FOR THE MISSAPPROPRIATION OF BIRDSEED*.

My grandfather's bitter campaign against the eastern gray squirrel, *Sciurus carolinensis*, was a well-documented vendetta. An avid birdwatcher, his Pennsylvania backyard had boasted a forest of birdfeeders, and the birdhouses he built in his garage workshop soon outnumbered the human houses that lined the cul-de-sac. Through this hobby he developed a visceral hatred for the common gray squirrel—the conniving rodents, never satisfied with an honest living, dropped onto his birdfeeders from branches and telephone lines, gorging themselves on the seeds reserved for cardinals and blue jays. They even developed a taste for hummingbird nectar, chattering through the trees in a sugar-fueled high.

As the war ground on into its third decade, Opa took me on a tour of his seed-littered battleground, hoping to recruit a young field marshal for the cause. I was seven years old and fascinated by the long, metal traps, hidden under rotting logs and baited with smears of peanut butter. He showed me the spring-loaded trap door, demonstrated how the enemy imprisoned itself through sheer gluttony. We walked through Oma's sunflower garden and Opa rested a thick hand on the brimming rain barrel.

“And once they're trapped, this is where we drown them.”

After I stopped crying, my father stepped into the garage to have a word with his dad. But Opa already knew everything he needed to—his grandson didn't have the will for this war.

I was surprised to see the mug after all this time, but it didn't strike me as overly odd. I'd assumed most of his everyday items were donated or thrown out after the funeral, but the mug must've had enough character to catch the eye of one of my parents or sisters, someone who brought it back from Tennessee before tucking it away in the kitchen's Dutch quarter. My relief at being able to drink my morning coffee outweighed any lingering questions, and it wasn't until dinner that I asked who rescued the mug from Goodwill.

“Wasn't me,” said my dad, reading the tiny *WANTED* sign from a nose-length away. “Glad it turned up, though.” My mother shook her head, and neither sister claimed to have any memory of the mug.

After the mug's appearance I started to notice more. That night I spied a dented Folger's can on a shelf above the dryer, found it was filled with two hundred pennies, all of them dated 1947 and engraved with two ears of wheat where the Lincoln Memorial should be. Two days later it was a cigar box under the bathroom sink, opening to reveal a sea of three-eyed buttons and a lead-painted toy car. The cigar box struck me more than its contents. Though he smoked

Marlboros until I was ten, at which point they were no longer worth the coughing fits, my grandfather never had a taste for cigars. But this never stopped Opa from assembling an endless supply of cigar boxes, which he apparently valued for their ability to imbue wood shavings and newspaper clippings with a distinguished aroma of allspice and wet leaves.

Entire chapters of our family lore are dedicated to Opa's thriftiness. My dad tells stories, from Christmas day in his childhood home, of Opa retreating to the garage with bundles of freshly-opened wrapping paper. There he cleared a spot on his work bench, and, spreading the paper out in sheets, proceeded to slice away the sticky tabs of Scotch tape with the needlepoint of an X-Acto blade. Then, folding the wrapping paper until it was the size of an index card and thick as a novel, he reached for a stack of empty cigar boxes, boxes which would remain buried in a damp corner of the garage until next December. One year, realizing he could store more wrappings per box if he smoothed out the creases, Opa excused himself in the laundry room and nearly burned down the house while ironing a swath of six-year-old holiday paper. Despite this refusal to part with anything of even marginal value, by the week's end I began to discover the detritus that even Opa deemed useless enough to throw out.

I flushed the toilet, and pumping the soap dispenser I caught movement in the corner of my eye. Something was bubbling to the surface of the toilet, a septic artifact released by the U-bend's fickle currents. A cigarette butt.

Neither of my parent's smoke, both my sisters are in middle school (which I'd like to think excludes them), and in the case of my attitude toward cigarettes the DARE program hit a home run. As far as I know, nobody has smoked in our house in over ten years, not since Opa and Oma still lived in Pennsylvania and came over every Sunday for dinner. Opa was quitting for his fourth time in as many years, and every week he excused himself to the bathroom

between dinner and dessert. The next person who needed to go found themselves walking into an icebox, the window wide open and a faint layer of ash trapped in the mesh screen. My sisters and I took it upon ourselves to catch him in the act, but the evidence never amounted to more than circumstantial. Listening at the door we heard the window slide open, then, five minutes later, a toilet flush. No sign of any hand-washing but that was far from conclusive, especially given the man's unpredictable commitment to hygiene (he liked to crack open chicken bones at the table and slurp out the marrow with a cross-eyed look of focus).

"Pop," said my dad, waiting until Opa sat back at the table. "Pop, we know you're smoking in there. You gotta cut it out."

"Ehh?" grunted Opa, fiddling with his hearing aid without actually adjusting anything. "No, no. I quit."

Any benefit of the doubt I'd afforded him as a child was now dispelled by the singed stub floating in our bathroom toilet. It looked like it'd been flushed only minutes before—the waterlogged filter still held its shape, and the last specks of charred tobacco drifted down, settling on the sloped porcelain like a gray snowfall. I pressed the lever and watched a spiraling current suck the butt down with a wet wheeze, back into the depths of our house's plumbing. Patting my hands dry on a washcloth, I leaned over and peered into the bowl. Two cigarette butts, rotating lazily in the clear water. I've since moved my sister's goldfish net into the bathroom, and the potpourri tray now hosts over a dozen soggy cigarettes.

But it wasn't until yesterday that the reappearance of my grandfather's knick-knacks transitioned from odd to unsettling. I was in the living room, reading, while my parents divvied-up the Saturday errands and Chestnut took my sisters on a walk. From my regular seat, a low, mid-century armchair, corduroy cushions with smooth teak armrests (an item my father *did*

remember bringing back from Tennessee), I smelled something burning. I ran into the kitchen, socks sliding across the tile, and spotted a haziness leaking through the dining room's French doors. On the corner coffee table, dangerously close to the window's gossamer curtains, stood a wide-necked vase and a bouquet of flame. Pulling my hands into the sleeves of my sweater, I hoisted the vase and carried it to the kitchen sink, leaving behind a trail of smoldering petals. My father had finally installed the new dishwasher, leaving enough sink space for the entire vessel of fire, which splintered into fragments of smoky glass as the spigot turned on with a steaming hiss.

Returning to the coffee table, I lifted a Yankee candle from its coaster and surveyed the scene. The candle had certainly been close enough to the clump of dried hydrangea, but the evergreen wax was firm and cool to the touch. I returned the candle to its spot and was backing into the kitchen when I noticed something wedged between the wall and the table's back leg. Sliding the table forward (I should have lifted, but my dad wasn't around to hear the hardwood squeak), I kneeled down in the dust of un-vacuumed floor space. It was simple pine box, held together by staples driven deep in the wood, the simple label *50 sigaren* stamped into the lid. Inside: a square of paper, folded over and over until thick as a Bible, with faded cartoons of long-eared elves and glowing reindeer.

Even this, the most brazen episode in a week of metastasizing improbability, even this I was willing encircle with that all-flexible word *coincidence*. But then this morning, and I have run out—run out of rational, daylight explanations, of anything except a silent anticipation of what will come next.

Skimming the leaves from our pool is my principal Sunday chore. It's one that serves me well in summertime—scoop three leaves, maybe kill a spider, and you're done—but by the time the pool closes in early September the task expands to swallow hours by the mouthful.

“Goddammit,” I said to Chestnut as we walked out onto the deck. The pool’s surface was nothing but brown and orange-yellow, a crème brûlée crust of fallen foliage. The mid-morning quiet, empty of mechanical clicks and hums, confirmed my suspicion—the pump had jammed, blown one of a hundred gaskets only my father knew how to find. With the pump disabled I’d be working until well-past noon, forced to fish out every leaf with the pole net. Unless—

I stood before the pool’s circulatory system, William Harvey surveying an exposed network of arteries and ventricles. My eyes followed coils of mud-spattered tubing, PVC pipes that branched and forked, bifurcating into chlorinated veins that all led to one place. I approached the pump, a fiberglass-dusted heart that I needed to start beating. The pressure gauge needle twitched feebly at zero.

Turning a black knob, I loosened the aluminum bands that encircled the pump and kept the lopsided hemispheres in place. The shape was that of a giant pill: tall and oval, with a narrow seam that divided the sections about two-thirds down. A sigh of escaping pressure and water trickled through the seam in thick rivulets, my sneakers soon soaked by the expanding puddle. Squatting in the mud, I curled my fingers under the base and lifted with a grunt, fighting surface tension as I slid off the pump’s outer shell.

They tumbled out in a spray of water and fur. One, two, I couldn’t keep count—the pump’s outflow washed as many as eight dead squirrels into the puddle at my feet. It must’ve been my yell that summoned Chestnut, because there was no smell. I watched him sniff the tiny bodies, poking them gently with the tip of his pink-brown. Unimpressed, he padded away in search of something to chase, nails scratching on the pool’s halo of brick.

Left alone I leaned in closer, half-expecting them to scamper into the hydrangea once they sensed my presence. But not a single squirrel moved, and as I saw the birdseed matted in their fur, I knew they never would.

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