

GIFTS EVIL AND GOOD

A FLASH FICTION ANTHOLOGY

/LIT/



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PREFACE

Each story in this anthology burns bright and fast. All but three were sparked by writing prompts, which are now the story titles. The authors are anonymous.

A RAVEN SPIES SOMETHING RATHER
PECULIAR DURING ITS FLIGHT

The air is still, the sky a yellow pre-dawn haze as Raven glides in the lazy wind stream. Her iridescent feathers flicker like dark motes of flame as she sails above the rows and rows of houses, all similarly square and dull. Raven has a name, but it's unsuited for the human tongue, so for convenience's sake, you will know her only as Raven.

She thinks this plane is a strange one. The people are engrossed in strict routine, always leaving just before the first peals of sunlight split the horizon, then sagging into their metal boxes and rolling off to God-knows-where. The people on the other plane are more interesting; they speak Raven's language and the language of all living creatures, and they have fascinating stories to tell. The Other people have very few trinkets, though. They are not vain; they do not hoard shiny things.

This is Raven's weakness. She covets chips of colored glass, discarded beads, silver coins. Her nest would make Magpie jealous, the way it glitters 'neath the sun, all of her things catching the rays and throwing back rectangles and diamonds against the bark—muted fragmentations of light. Beauty begetting beauty.

Her chest swells with promise as her keen eye catches a glint

from below, behind a house encircled by a faded brown fence. She tucks her wings and exits the wind stream, drifting downward in wide, cautious circles. The grass here is taller than behind the other houses, but not tall enough for a large dog to hide, so she lands without fear. She knows right away that this treasure is special: a silver band set with an impressive gem. Raven does not see this particular rock outside of human settlements. It's multifaceted and mostly clear, but contains tiny rainbows when turned against the sun. She plucks it with her talons, turns it this way and that, admiring the shifting colors. She is more than pleased.

Raven is about to leave to arrange her newest find amidst the rest of her varied collection, but the air grows cold and she can feel the unease of being watched. She cocks her head to the side and goes rigid with confusion.

It's one of the Others, its shape more a suggestion than a corporeal form, smudged around the edges because it does not belong here. This is the wrong place. Raven hops forward, lowers her head, says, "Kr-kr-kr-kr-kr?"

"Go 'way," the thing says in a small voice.

"You don't belong here," Raven counters, matter-of-fact. She straightens and puffs up a bit, just for show.

"Course I do. It's my house."

Raven turns to really look at the house, notices the mold creeping up manmade walls and the grungy glass door, far too clouded to see anything within. She has only ever heard stories of these Wanderers, the ones who refuse to follow the order of things. She'd always held a grudging respect, thinking them rebels, but doubted they actually existed.

She hops close enough to see the frayed, amorphous edges of this Wanderer. It doesn't draw away from her advance.

"What happened?"

"Mom and Seth had a fight," the Wanderer mumbles. "He threw me out here. There were loud noises... I don't know." The

voice is strained. Raven imagines Wanderer would be on the verge of tears, had it still possessed eyes. "I don't know," it repeats.

Then, quieting a bit, the thing gives the impression of craning its neck toward the treasure in Raven's grasp.

"That's Mom's ring!" it says, accusatory.

"Kree," Raven huffs. "It's mine now."

Wanderer shrinks back in a show of apparent defeat.

"Yeah, well, she said it was probably fake anyway."

Raven looks back to the house, now just a husk, and imagines the carrion feast within. Still, she does have standards. Even scavengers have morals.

"You don't belong here," she repeats slowly, deliberately. "But, I can take you to the Other place."

Wanderer makes a show of flickering around angrily, ricocheting between the fallen limbs and cattails, then eventually settles back to idly drifting.

"What's the 'Other' place like?" it sniffs.

Raven tells it about the Other people, how their world is safe and full of stories, how everyone is welcomed, from the crawling field mouse to the soaring eagle, and humans, too, all existing together and sharing tips for the next trip around.

Wanderer is silent for a long moment, then asks, "Are there video games there?"

"What are 'video games?'"

"Never mind," Wanderer says. "Okay, I think I'm ready." A pause. "Do I owe you anything?"

"Not as such," Raven answers, suddenly fond. "The ring is more than enough."

"Cool."

Wanderer drifts up on Raven's back, sending a chill through her spare frame, but she doesn't startle at the sensation. They take to the air together, and Raven could never tell you the way, but it is ingrained in her soul like instinct, this knowledge of

where to go. She chases the horizon until the houses and trees, highways and lakes and barren fields all fade into a bright white expanse, then goes farther still, finally breaching the veil.

There are Others waiting for them, and while they don't have mouths, Raven still somehow knows they're smiling. They clamor around Wanderer, showering it with compliments and questions, and the little thing brightens beneath their easy acceptance.

Raven nods, the deed done, and stretches her wings to take flight.

"Hold on," Wanderer says, breaking away from the Others. "Will I see you again?"

"Krrr," Raven purrs in response. "We all meet again someday." She turns to dig a beak into her wing, and with a grimace, plucks out her sleekest primary, and even in the strange light of this plane it shimmers an impressive, inky black. "Keep this," she says, laying the offering before Wanderer. "Remember me when you come back."

She's gone before Wanderer has the chance to thank her.

Much later, in a tree not too far from Raven's own, a grey speckled egg cracks open.

A TAILOR SUSPECTS HIS CUSTOMER OF PRACTICING WITCHCRAFT

She came in weekly for cheesecloths, yet was not a brewer or cheesemaker, and occasionally for fixes on robes that had been burnt or melted and smelled of foul innards and brimstone. Her face was kind but she wasn't used to people. Her hair was in a practical cut. I think it might have once suffered the same fate as her robes. She was blond and short. Her body was always hidden under robes and what she wore under them. But I know from my work that her clothes were for a fairly attractive girl, if a bit small.

I've offered her better clothes since hers were ragged. I even offered a discount, but she always declined. She must not see the need for clothes beyond practicality. It's an odd mindset for a young woman to have.

One day I paid a street boy who sometimes fetches clothes for customers to keep an eye on her for a day. I was just a bit curious, but I think I might rather have not put the pieces together. She purchased foul ingredients like fish eyes and guts and gathered the fallen scale from the smithy. What could these ingredients be for, but some dark witchcraft detrimental to all civilized folk?

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Tomorrow she'll likely come in again, as she always does. I plan to follow her to her home.

UNPROMPTED I

“*L*ooking over everything, I suppose the most immediately important thing to say is that Ethan's vision is completely normal and nothing to be concerned with—problems seeing the whiteboard are sort of par the course, especially as he's informed me that he's a bit of a gamer.”

“Yeah, 'a bit.' But when you say 'immediately important'—do you mean there's something wrong with him?”

“Well, there's this sort of crystalline buildup near the ocular nerves, which increases the pressure on the blood vessels. It's not abnormal, exactly—”

“Like glaucoma? My mom had that—is he at risk for blindness?”

“No, it's not glaucoma, and it doesn't really impact vision the same way. It's worth keeping an eye on, but he should be fine. There are many cases of this occurring in childhood and then not progressing into anything serious. The only thing you absolutely need to tell him is that he can't ever take Viagra.”

A FISHERMAN HAS AN UNEXPECTED
CATCH I

*B*obbing, bubbling, bouncing, the white circle with no outline floated just on top of the almost-still lake, while the white circle above it stood frozen in space. The breeze soughed quietly and the leaves of the cottonwood swished just behind the short wooden dock; the foldable metal chair squeaked below the weight of its occupant, and the water below the pier was broken by a single line almost imperceptible in the failing light.

Today was the 715th day that Bill spent in that chair since he and his wife retired two years ago. Bill was a terrible fisherman, and every few days after the seven hours he was able to spend alone on the water, he would stop by the grocery store on his way home to pick fresh carp. The freezer in Bill's garage was full of carp that neither he nor his wife had any interest in eating, and it seemed to Bill that more carp left the house in trash bags than came into the house in grocery bags. Old grocery bags that Bill took out with him every day, never new grocery bags.

In 715 days, Bill had never gotten a single bite, and this was something Bill was immensely proud of—so proud, in fact, that

Bill knew today was his 715th day out on the water. He often wondered if there was a world record, and perhaps he had broken it, but he had no idea where to begin finding this information and was content with telling himself that once he had fished for a thousand days without so much as a nibble, he would be an internationally accomplished fisherman.

Bill stopped putting bait on his hooks on day 60. He stopped putting hooks on his lines after day 500. For the last seven months, Bill had been sitting in his foldable metal chair, holding the weights tied to the line on his rod in one hand and reading a book, sipping a beer, eating a sandwich with the other. At times, he set the rod down on the dock and used both hands with fingers intertwined to rest upon his gut and leaned back, closed his eyes and took a nap.

Bill really tried to catch fish for a while, and the long forgotten reason that he started coming out to the dock in the first place was to learn the skill he had been lacking his whole life. It was the reason he retired out here, the reason Bill saved twenty percent of every single paycheck.

It didn't take long before Bill realized he would never be a fisherman. His wife pestered him every time he came home empty handed. She wasn't nagging him per se, but Bill couldn't admit to his failure at the one thing he had dreamed of becoming for years. After Bill picked up the groceries on his way home one day, and did not correct the false assumption that the fish he brought home alongside did not originate in the same place, his wife stopped bothering him. She was excited because she had written down several ways to prepare the local fish; but once they exhausted the recipes, they had little interest in continuing their diet.

Two weeks later, the freezer in the garage was overfull. Bill thought about all of this as he watched the sun drop at terminal velocity, noting how much faster it seemed to move than at any

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other time of day. He looked down at his watch to find out how much time he had left before he would make his pilgrimage home, when, in his peripheral view, he saw large bubbles come to the surface as his line went taut.

A FISHERMAN HAS AN UNEXPECTED
CATCH II

*I*t was a fish with legs. It scrambled around, slipping like a deer on ice before falling onto the wooden pier. There was a pulsating. There was a writhing. In the end, it fell into a queer rigidity. It was dead. One eye remained open. The other was shut. Fish cannot wink. Here was a winking fish. It was a winking fish with human legs.

No one questioned it.

When Steve Kentworth brought it into the pub, he couldn't get anyone to pay attention to him. He kept bringing it up in conversations. They carried on talking about the football, interspersed with stale farts and racist jokes. He thought the legs were the selling point of this strange anecdote. A man catching a fish isn't interesting. Perhaps they misunderstood or didn't see the legs. There was still no reaction from them, even when pushing the legs against their faces.

Four long black legs. The fish had the legs of Usain Bolt and no one cared. Human legs, human-sized legs. They were ignored. He'd hoped the blackness of the legs might inspire some bigoted joke. Sadly, not even black legs were a novelty to

the pub. Black people, naturally, were a novelty to the pub. He thought if he'd brought a black man in here he'd suddenly gain a lot of attention. It'd be negative attention in this place, sure. This wasn't a town known for its progressive values.

Steve propped the fish against the wall, gave up on his quest for attention and decided to just drink. The fish retained its rigidity. The thought that fish can't experience rigour mortis briefly crossed Steve's mind, but he just as quickly came to the view that a fish with legs doesn't make sense anyway, so why shouldn't it have rigour mortis?

"What's that?" the bartender asked.

For a brief moment, Steve felt hope that someone else would finally recognise that there was a fish with human legs in the pub.

"You're gonna have to take that back home. I'm sorry, we don't let pets in here."

His hopes were dashed.

The bartender refused to accept that this was a fish with legs. He kept calling it a pet. He didn't say what kind of pet. When questioned by Steve, he said that he didn't care what kind of pet it was, he just wanted it out of his pub.

It was early hours yet, but Steve couldn't take being ignored at the pub. So, he took his fish home. There was no doubt in his mind that his wife wouldn't care. It'd been the same when he won £250 on a scratchcard. She didn't say a damn thing. At least there'd been more excitement from the pub crowd at that time. Of course, they just wanted a drink from his winnings. Steve knew that. Still, it was nice.

"Did you go to Co-op like I asked?" was the first thing his wife said after an obligatory loveless peck on the lips.

"I caught a fish with legs today," he replied.

"Oh, that's nice dear. But you bought the shopping, yeah?"

"It winked as well. Can fish wink?"

“So, I’ll take that as a no, then. You always do this. You always forget the basic things.”

She huffed and went into the kitchen. Steve followed and begrudgingly apologised, before promising to make it up to her by being the one to make dinner tonight.

The strangest thing about the fish was how good it tasted.

THE BRIDGE IS BLOCKED BY TROLLS
AND THEY LOST THEIR
RIDDLE BOOK

The man and his wife were almost at the end of their long trek. Through the burning woods, over the echoing mountains, and across the sea of doubt. Already, he had managed to tame a hungry bog monster, master the secret language of the owls, and trick a time-dragon into trampling itself as an egg.

He could see the town ahead, just across the bridge. They were almost there. He caught sight of a fence in the distance, and a large shape pacing about behind it.

The old man asked his wife to stay behind as he neared the town. She was used to it by now. She told him to stay safe, but she didn't need to fear. He knew all the tricks of this place. As a younger man, he bested both men and monsters with his strength and bravery—such a sloppy business. Now he found cleverness and wisdom to be a far sharper weapon.

As he neared the fence, he saw the figure behind it to be a large, disgusting-looking creature with scraggly hair and scaly skin. It looked both tired and frantic. Fearsome, certainly, but right now it was a viable candidate for supper. The monster was

using its great height to peer over the fences, clearly desperate for something.

“Hello, Beast,” called the man. “What must I do to cross this bridge?”

He knew the drill. The highwaymen and goblins usually demanded gold, the horse-men always wanted some sort of archery contest, and the mermaids requested either a kiss or a soul (you never knew which it would be...) This, he was certain, was a troll, and trolls just loved riddles. Dumb as stumps, as a general rule, but somehow they have a great mind for riddles. The world is truly a wondrous place!

The monster shot to its full height at his call—was that a look of panic in its eyes? It then bent down and came up a second time, holding a massive club in its hand and striking a menacing pose. “Riddle,” it said firmly. “Answer true and you pass safe. Answer false and I break your bones and eat your living heart.”

The troll paused a moment and added, “I suggest you flee while you still have legs to flee with.” It hadn’t ever deviated from the sacred challenge words before, but today he much preferred the man just be on his way to cross a different bridge.

The old man squared his shoulders and smiled up at the troll. “I am a wise and long-lived man,” he said, “and I fathomed many riddles of life. You have none that should frighten me”.

The troll looked down at the old man, frustrated by his defiance and smugness. “Very well,” he growled. “What does... the...” His voice suddenly trailed off.

The old man waited for ten heartbeats. “‘What does the?’ Is that the riddle?” he asked incredulously.

The troll paused for a moment. “No, that is just the beginning,” he said, barely keeping his wits about him. “What does the... do?”

The old man had never heard a riddle like this. It was either an extremely clever riddle or an extremely poor one. Either way,

the man projected confidence in his answer. “Why, ‘the’ does many things. It identifies the one from the many. It coronates ‘The King’ and condemns ‘The Wicked’. It—”

“No, no. That is not it,” interrupted the troll. It hadn’t the mental capacity to process the man’s words and was now far too anxious to keep its composure. It wanted to drop the whole riddle business and break his bones, but couldn’t discern either truth or falsehood in his response. “You should just flee now.”

This is ridiculous, thought the man. “Have I spoken false?” he challenged.

“I...” stuttered the troll, “won’t say. That wasn’t the real riddle, anyway. It doesn’t count.”

“It doesn’t count?” The man’s wife had overheard this exchange and was rapidly advancing to the bridge. “Troll, you are so plainly the worst at your trade. How has anyone entrusted this bridge to you?” The man shot her a look of sharp rebuke, but she was not about to let this foolishness draw out any longer. “So what’s the real riddle, then?”

This was infuriating—there were two of them now! How many other wives could this man have hidden in the bushes? Worried at the thought of being overtaken by an army of scolding women, he tried to recall his last riddle. “Time!” He boomed, triumphant.

“I believe that’s the answer to a riddle,” remarked the man, “and a rather good one. The riddle, itself, goes—”

His wife just shook her head. “Either try again or let us pass.”

“No, I want to try again...”

The troll knew he could not let them pass unless they answered true. The troll stood between them and the bridge, his brain hard at work. His gaze darted across the ground, over the fence.

An idea struck him, perhaps the cleverest idea ever to enter the troll’s mind, and just at his greatest time of need. Either

they will answer right, and his problem is solved, or they answer wrong, and he will gladly smash the man and all his wives. He was a genius among trolls!

“WHERE IS MY RIDDLE BOOK?”

The man stifled a laugh, the whole situation suddenly making perfect sense. He soon realized, though, that the troll had now enlisted them in the search. He opened his mouth, about to ask where the troll saw it last, when his wife stepped in front of him.

“Where is your book?” she repeated. “Lost.”

She then pushed past the troll and began to cross. Her husband glanced up at the troll quickly, and seeing no reaction from the hunched form, hurried after.

The troll could not stop them. He did not need a book to know the woman had spoke true.

THE MAILMAN REFUSES TO DELIVER
ME MY MAIL, AND HE WON'T TELL
ME WHY

For seven days the mailman has prohibited me my mail. I stand all day behind the curtains, watching him deliver letters full of love to all the mortals of this Earth—to all but me. And though I've never sent a single letter (since I've none who might receive it), if I did, then I presume he would refuse to bear my words. O why has he forsake me so?

Today, I watch him passing by my house. This act enrages me and fills me with a choler I have never felt before. I fling my door and run to him, and scream, “You whoreson, senseless villain! Why do you refuse to bring me my affected letters? Where is all the love that I deserve?”

These words I spit upon his face; the bastard flees without a word. His secret I shall never know.

AN APE FARTS LOUDLY IN THE
HUMAN'S EARS

“*M*ommy, look at the monkey,” little Timmy squealed as he ran toward the enclosure.

“Those aren't monkeys, dear, they're apes. See? They have no tail.”

“Look at the monkey, Mommy,” Timmy called back, unfazed.

His mother sighed as she sauntered over to the orangutan exhibit, watching Tim grab on to the thick bars and squeeze his face through in order to get closer to the great apes.

“Don't get your head stuck between the bars, Timmy,” she cautioned just a moment too late. The final syllable was interrupted with screams coming from the boy, who somehow managed to get his head between the bars and was unable to remove it. A nearby orangutan took notice of the boy and wandered over to him, which pleased Timmy and corked his tears.

“Monkey, Mommy.” The little boy happily turned his head that was past the bars to look at his mother, as she ran up to him. “See?”

While Timmy's head was turned, his mother froze two paces from the boy, as she watched the orangutan turn around, lean

over, and release deafening flatulence directly into the boy's ear. The orangutan calmly turned back around, gave Tim a wet kiss on his cheek, and aimlessly returned deeper into the enclosure, as if nothing of any significance had just happened. Timmy popped his head free from the bars just as his mother finally approached him.

“Are you all right, sweetie?” she asked as she picked him up in a hug.

“Uh-huh,” he replied. “Monkey is my favorite animal.”

PIRATES OPEN UP A FOOD SHIP

*W*e had been at port for a week when during a noontide rush I was accosted by one o' the customers. He were a strange sort. By dress an' accent, some well-born official from the home country; by his pallor, clearly a new arrival.

"I'm sure it's not improper of me to inquire into your occupation. Given how novel this occupation is, how did this all begin?"

"Aye, I'll tell ye the tale, but I've a busy afternoon before me. If ye return tonight, we can dine together, and I'll tell all ye need hear on it."

The customer smiled and pulled a book from his pocket, in which he made a note before quickly stowing it. "Wonderful, I look forward to it."

He returned to his meal, and I went about the decks for my orders. I went below, where tables and chairs stood in place of guns, with air once filled with smoke and shouts of orders now seeming soft with the clatter of cutlery and friendly conversation—a different kind of orders holding sway. The only shouting of orders now was in the once-quiet galley.

The moon was shining bright and pale yellow over the dark water when the customer returned. We sat down to a meal above deck, right by the taffrail, an enchanting view over the waters. As we ate, I asked him of his life. I shan't relate it fully—a vigorous and bright lad of a wealthy merchant, his head full of naïve notions of adventure found through work off in the empire.

"I didn't come back just to eat and tell of my own life. Tell me, how did this business come about? Have you been on the staff a long time?"

"Most o' the 'staff' were part o' the crew before this life began. We were free men, back when yer navy weren't so strong in these waters. Captain then were a good man. Though cruel in anger, he treated us fair. We never grew too rich, but well enough whilst remainin' free of yer sort, meanin' no offence."

"Oh, I don't take it." He seemed too content with the state of his world to ever be offended. Outsiders were an amusement to him.

"As the imperial grip tightened and the seas grew less wild, we struggled on in spite o' the lessenin' pickings. Alas, a fateful day came across us when we were caught by a ship o' the line. Damaged though we were, we limped off. Most of us lived but the first mate was lost, cut in half by a cannonball, and the captain lay dying, ruined on the inside by splintered planks and metal."

I paused for a while and gazed out over the calm waves. The siren call of adventure still rang in my ears.

"Pox swept through us next—the masters and half the men were taken. None o' the old command was left, and those remainin' were too tired to fight for control."

"This seems a typical story of your kind. I don't see how it led you to your current, rather more unusual occupation."

"Don't interrupt me, lad. I'll tell ye all."

"My apologies."

I returned to the tale. "The cook took us over. Good fighter he had been, but aged. He wanted us to settle, and right he was."

"I suppose you all knew that much longer as pirates, you would all be killed or captured?"

"Aye, none o' the crew left were known enough to warrant bounties or recognition by any imperial navy. The cook wanted to sell the ship, set down an eatery or store in port, but we didn't much want to abandon our home. We came to an idea of this moving eatery, moving away after a few weeks in a port."

"Before the novelty could wear off for your customers, I presume."

"Aye, but moreso before the monotony could set in fer us. That were the plan at least. Most took to the new life well enough, enjoyed the safety and reliable money. Without the risk o' battle, we only need so many men as can sail us. Ain't hard fer 'em to work sellin' food."

"It seems like you aren't too certain of it."

"Aye, I miss the rush of risk and battle. But after half a decade o' this, I feel tied here. Tis a good enough life."

We finished our drinks and he made to leave. Before stepping off, he said, "I hope you find your life's joy again, my friend. It can't be so bad. I've heard of some other ships that've caught on to this idea."

I'd not heard o' them yet. I waved farewell, saw him eating with us a few more times as the weeks in port passed by. As we stowed the furniture and moved on to the next stop, I remembered his hope for me. I doubted the chances.

As we approached the waters of the next island, another ship accosted us. It looked to be lightly crewed, no guns in the holes. One of their men yelled out across to us, "Avast! This port is our sailing galley's home. Ye best not think of setting down to serve food here!"

The cook shouted back, “We’ve served here before and ye won’t stop us serving here now. We’ll fight ye for it if needs be!”

“A fight ye shall have then!”

Our two ships pulled alongsides. They jumped to ours and we pushed back to theirs. The fighting weren’t deadly and no weapon more hurtful than a chair were used, but the rush was as close as I needed.

A KNIGHT'S ARMOR COMES TO LIFE
AND ATTEMPTS TO SEEK GLORY
UNENCUMBERED BY ITS CHARGE

*A*h, I felt this sodden spasme, that for yeeres many have
I been aslepe, betwixt these shattered bone and flesh,
that from Engeland to Agincourt I had left. A knightes posse-
sion have I been, till a swordes hilt came to blow, and raptured
my masters head in gore. Like that many tradition that Celtes
left, to bury a lord with their flesh. Alas! my masteres bones are
gone to deep oblivione. For dayes, I wept, for twice times hath I
my master disappoint. But hath I not remembered the word of
Lord, abyssus abyssum invocat, Hellfire would engulf and melt
my unshined body. So then came I to this dreary place, that hath
one name of a hero of oulde, who brought faire Helen to Lydia.
The starry night did be covered, ashen and besmoken, ten
million peoples had I seen, from vile Saracens to dirty Ethiopes.
When, then I saw one damsel, captured I say, by Saracen looking
fiends, and when I took her away, she begged to stay and be
with her many lovers. And so, for God, I had enough, I drew my
sword and slew many Saracens, until mine sheen is seen
nomore, and had been painted with the blood of invaders.
Brutish screams I heard as the bodies piled on, no matter swart
nor hwite, they ran as though from agonie.

THERE IS A TERRIBLE ACCIDENT AT A PUMPKIN FESTIVAL

*M*ayfield residents are demanding answers following a terrible accident at this year's Tri-County Pumpkin Festival. What began as a day of family fun turned into a state-wide police investigation after a teenage prank turned deadly. Three individuals, all current or former students of St. Sebastian High School, were critically injured: juniors Nick McHenry and Sarah Hartwell, and freshman Joseph Gallo. All are being treated at Mercy Hospital. Gallo, 14, is currently in critical condition, while McHenry, 17, and Hartwell, 16, are being treated for serious but non-life-threatening injuries, and are both expected to make full recoveries.

The incident occurred on the final day of the three-day-long festival. In the early morning, before the festival opened, Gallo and a male friend entered the fairgrounds with the intent to hide Gallo inside one of the pumpkins sitting on display. It appears this was inspired by a viral trend on TikTok, the popular video sharing app. The "Pumpkin Jacking" hashtag, which gets its name from the animated film *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, involves a scarecrow or jack-o'-lantern apparently springing to life to lyrics from the film. Gallo's friend, who is

not being named at this time, has since deleted a video showing how the pair used a sawzall to conceal Gallo inside the pumpkin, where he remained all day.

Elsewhere in the fairgrounds, Juniors Nick McHenry, Sarah Hartwell, and Hannah Briscoe (all members of St. Sebastian's drama club) were also preparing a #PumpkinJacking. A local Mom's Club had created a diorama near the judging booth with five of the much-sought-after 12-foot skeletons dressed as scarecrows. One of them, with a cloak and pumpkin head, had been removed overnight by the students and stashed under the grandstands.

The trio constructed an elaborate costume using a portable umpire chair, which would have allowed Sarah and Nick to slip inside and control the arms while Hannah captured the video. Both were dressed in black and wore masks to avoid being seen as they entered the giant costume. Tragically, neither of these two social-media-inspired pranks would go as planned.

When the time came for the pumpkin judging, that afternoon, there was a sizable crowd. Due to social distancing, most parents were spaced apart on the grandstands, while many young children sat in a circle near the prize-winning pumpkins.

Terence Fournet, an off-duty officer and father of one of the children, noticed a piece of the skeleton beneath the bleachers, and went to investigate with two other concerned parents. "We didn't know what to make of it," says Fournet, "but at the time, we strongly suspected it was connected to Satanists or Antifa. I had seen on Facebook about them planting IEDs at small town fairs like this."

As the three were making their discovery, Gallo's pumpkin was about to be judged. While Fournet was unable to make out the "Pumpkin Jacking" song, he did hear the sudden screams of children and the banging movement of parents running from the bleachers above. Fearing the worst, the three drew their weapons and ran to confront the perceived threat.

They did not see the initial source of the commotion, but opened fire as two black-clad figures emerged from under a scarecrow. Police estimate that 15 rounds were fired, two hitting Nick, one hitting Sarah, and one critically wounding Gallo, still within the pumpkin.

Police, on hearing the shots, raced to the scene and called for medical assistance and backup. The bomb squad was initially contacted to search for explosives, but was soon dismissed when it was determined to be a Halloween prank. Gallo's accomplice, who initially fled the area following the resulting chaos, returned after realizing his friend was still in hiding. It was only after explaining the prank to the authorities that they discovered an errant shot had struck the pumpkin, and Gallo was unconscious inside.

Nick and Sarah were transported to Mercy Hospital, where they are now both in stable condition. Gallo is currently in critical condition. The Mayfield Police Department has placed Fournet on administrative leave pending the investigation. The two other shooters were detained, and are expected to face charges in the coming weeks.

The families of the three victims are understandably distraught, demanding to know why the men had brought firearms to the festival. The pumpkin festival's organizers have in the past addressed the matter by stating that the festival is not run by the county and is considered private property. While they could not be reached directly following the incident, the organizers have released a statement condemning the dangers of social media and anti-religious symbology.

St. Sebastian High School will be holding a vigil on Wednesday to both honor the victims and discuss the dangers of social media. The school has issued a warning that any students caught "Pumpkin Jacking" may face suspension.

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The Sun would like to retract its story from last week: "How

Satanic Radicals May Be Threatening Peaceful Gatherings Across Rural America". While the Sun stands by our fact-based reporting, we recognize some may have interpreted the piece to promote vigilantism. We strongly encourage all concerned citizens to report any suspicious activity to local authorities before taking direct action.

A MUSEUM OPENS WITH A SPECIAL EXHIBIT

The museum had a new exhibit, and it was the talk of the town. Everyone had either seen it or heard about it, and anyone who hadn't seen it was making plans to go to the museum as soon as possible. Talk of the exhibit was everywhere! It was discussed in family living rooms and coffee shops and schools and City Hall, and everywhere else you can imagine. Some people knew someone who had been to see the exhibit, and they had a reliable account. However, the vast majority of the town's population had only heard second-hand, misremembered, and embellished tales of the museum exhibit.

Reactions to the exhibit were mixed. Many people despised it and spent a good deal of time telling everyone they knew about how terrible it was, and how its mere presence was a disgrace to the town. Others thought that the exhibit was fascinating or beautiful or sad, or any other emotion you can imagine.

The museum seemed to share the town's belief that this exhibit was important. A large banner advertising the new exhibit was right over the entrance of the museum. Within the museum, bright signs pointed to the exhibit's location to ensure

that everyone knew where it was. The exhibit itself was in a spot of prominence within the museum, sitting right in the front just a few quick steps from the entrance. The rest of the museum seemed empty compared to that one section, and whenever someone entered the museum, they rushed right over. Finally, the exhibit itself was within a large glass box, and everyone was looking into it at the...

A TEACHING ASSISTANT IS
PESTERED BY AN UNDERGRADUATE
STUDENT

Raymond first saw her at Freshman Night, where he stood in the corner away from strangers already familiar with each other. There she was in the center, talking with people whose faces didn't matter, glowing brighter with every laugh and smile under the classroom fluorescent light. As the night went on and his paper cup grew warm in his hands, she only seemed more beautiful and unattainable, and he kept thinking of his pathetic reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Then, when she was at her most impossible, her eyes met his in passing. She took her leave and a pity and a few graceful steps towards his direction—closer, closer, only to stop to talk to another faceless individual a mere arm's reach away. Her voice melted in his ears. Her name was Renata, and she would be lecturing a module while finishing her PhD. Raymond quickly left the party, trembling with fear and excitement, and locked himself in his room. He knew which elective to take.

Raymond's rendezvous with Renata every Tuesday at 10 AM made his first year heaven. He watched her from the farthest seat in the back, feeling himself unworthy of the pleasure of proximity, where he could safely appreciate the curves of her

arm, the honey in her voice, and the memory of the scent of her flowing black hair. He was the first to sit and the last to stand, having to adjust his pants as he cursed the tower bell that marked the end of class.

Soon his desire outweighed guilt. In the second year, Raymond began taking seats closer to the podium. If she were truly immaculate, her radiance would simply burn off the filth of his presence before it could ever soil her skin. He began coming in late to bask in her sweet scent before taking a bold seat, so close that the contours of the straps that held her holy figure were burned into his eyes until night, where he would lock the door twice and claw at his sheets.

He was brave enough in the third year to begin leaving gifts and tributes in her office, sometimes a poem, a snack, a weed mistaken for a flower, or a faux silver earring. From the library across the faculty building, Raymond would stare into her window and see Renata opening his gifts, imagining her glowing smile like on that Freshman Night.

He had spent the night sleepless, composing his finest work yet: three stanzas of four lines, each line an obscure reference of her features to the constellations, and every twelfth letter spelled out her name twice. He spent the following night also sleepless, anxious to see that glowing smile in person the next day.

Renata came to class late and slammed the door behind her. Her face was straight as stone, chiseled like a Greek goddess but devoid of any glow. She took out Raymond's magnum opus, crumpled and beaten, and held it up as she launched a merciless tirade damning practical jokes and borderline bribery. The razor-sharp words coated with honey slashed at Raymond's chest and nicked his ribs, as she tore the paper apart and kicked the pieces off the podium. People behind him laughed at the comparison to a dog bringing dead things to its owner. It burned.

Raymond disappeared from the lecture hall minutes later,

went to his room, and locked the door twice, leaving his bag and pencils on the desk where they were left untouched and unnoticed for three weeks, until a janitor took them to lost-and-found.

A YOUNG GIRL ON THE WAY TO
SCHOOL FINDS SOMETHING THAT
SHE CAN'T LEAVE BEHIND I

“*H*ave you ever smoked a cigarette, or a cigar?” asked the cat to the girl. A paper bag blew down the alley and landed underneath a dumpster. The girl did not answer with any urgency. Her eyes glazed over.

“Uh,” said the girl without finishing any thought. She looked at the flower patches on her denim jacket, then back to the cat.

“Would you like to?” asked the cat, gesturing his little head towards the dumpster.

“Uh,” said the girl again, remembering then what her father had said about smoking, and about strangers.

As she was thinking, the cat dove into the green receptacle and came out with a cigarette in his mouth. It didn't matter to the girl, but it was an American Spirit. This cigarette was one of many in a pack thrown away by a manic college student earlier that day.

The girl took the cigarette from the cat. There was no lighter. A dog down the alleyway barked through a fence. Other dogs joined in for a minute, and then stopped. All that remained was the sound of rattling metal.

“Bunch of goddamn cretins,” said the cat.

"Are you a Cheshire cat?" asked the girl. She had read Alice in Wonderland once before. An abridged copy, reprinted for children. It had hit all the marks, but wasn't as wordy. She'd also read books like Tom Sawyer and Oliver Twist, also children's editions.

The cat jumped into the receptacle again without responding. This time, he emerged with a knife in his mouth. "You pompous bitch." The cat, now indignant, lunged at the girl.

A split-second reaction sent the girl's foot into the cat's stomach. She ruptured his spleen in an instant.

"I am dying," the cat realized, out loud. It was more of a question than a declaration. Sort of like how a question can be more of a comment, except the reverse.

"No," said the girl. She took a lighter from between the crayons and protractor in her backpack. "You've definitely got a few lives left." She lit the cigarette and placed it between the cat's teeth.

As he lay dying, the cat closed his eyes. He heard the sound of footsteps, which he recognized as the girl leaving. With his last bit of strength, he opened his eyelids. He saw the girl's feet disappear behind a telephone light, and crows circling overhead.

A YOUNG GIRL ON THE WAY TO
SCHOOL FINDS SOMETHING THAT
SHE CAN'T LEAVE BEHIND II

Sophia was seven years old, and this was the first time she had been allowed to walk to school on her own. Her parents had conferred and decided that since this was her first day of second grade, she was old enough to go without anyone else.

Excited to finally make the trip on her own, Sophia grabbed her bag and skipped out the door. As she ran down the steps, she took a quick look around. Her destination was the small trail winding through the woods to the schoolhouse. She immediately set off in that direction.

Once Sophia reached the forest, she began walking down the trail, enjoying her new freedom. However, she suddenly felt an immense presence surrounding her. It was the essence of all things that were missing. It held what had passed out of the reach of even memory. It was infinite objects and places and sights and sounds and people and ideas, all forever gone. It was every moment that had ever been forgotten, the embodiment of all that would never be known again, and it wordlessly offered her a choice: to stay and wander on and forget what she had

seen, or to become one of the lost. Sophia knew at that moment that it was no choice at all. For better or for worse, she could never leave this behind.

And so the young girl made her choice, and the young girl was lost forever.

A CHILD FINDS SOMETHING THAT
WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE SEEN

There wasn't a single babysitter available that night, so Davis's parents decided that being nearly six years old would have to be old enough to stay home alone, just this once. After all, tonight was date night, and they hadn't slept together in over a week and desperately needed this. Davis knew how to use the telephone, and his mother had taught him a song to remember her cell phone number. He was a nice boy that his father knew could handle himself at home for the night.

"You better behave yourself tonight," said his father with a wink, "and don't be throwing any parties."

"Yes, sir," the boy beamed back at him, feeling very grown up to be left at home all alone and especially excited to stay up past his bedtime. "What time will you be back?"

"Now, wouldn't you like to know," his father replied. "Just be in bed by 9."

His mother teased, "We'll be home after your bedtime... probably around 9:10."

With a kiss on the forehead and one last I love you, Davis's parents drove off, leaving him all alone in the house, free to

room. He sat himself happily down on the couch and turned on the television.

After an hour of uninterrupted screen time, Davis's jaw was slack and his eyes glazed over as the bright colors danced and flashed around the room, all until a loud thump ripped the glue from his gaze. He turned the volume down on the television and heard the thump again, coming from upstairs. He tiptoed up the stairs and towards his parent's bedroom. Thump once more, coming from the closet. He inched closer, careful not to make a sound, and eventually his hand rested on the knob. The closet door creaked as it opened, and Davis walked in.

He turned on the light to the expansive closet but didn't see anything that could have caused the noise. As he took another step into the closet, the door closed behind him. Davis was about to turn around when something out of place caught his eye. He dropped to his seat, as his hand reached toward it.



Davis's parents returned, each holding a slight buzz, and well after 9:10. The lights were still on, but that wasn't especially strange until Davis's mother noticed that the TV was on too. She sobered up instantly and ran to the boy's bedroom.

To her husband, as she returned, "He isn't—he's not in bed." Then to the whole house, "DAAAVIS!"

They split up and searched the house for the boy, checking every corner. His mother was reaching for the telephone to dial 911, when his father shouted that he found him. She rushed up the stairs, ran through the master bedroom to the open closet door and gasped as she clapped her hands to her face in shock, having a hard time processing what she was looking at.

"His birthday surprise is ruined," she muttered to her husband and watched the little boy playing with his present.

THE DAILY LIFE OF AN ANCHORITE

*H*e wakes before daybreak to a mournful purple sky. With a pure heart and clean mind, he washes at the basin. After this ablution, done out of love for God, the anchorite takes to his knees. On the cool stone floor of his shack-like hermitage, he prays and supplicates. Out of love for God the Father, he prays and supplicates. Singing from Psalms in his cracked reedy voice, he prays and supplicates. Wrinkle-backed hands together, pressed to the floor during prostration, pressed together again. This is the first office.

When the day breaks as a cover lifted from a steaming toureen, the anchorite dons the iron garment. The little grass door of the hermitage opens silently to a rush of gray light. The lake before the hermit, sleeping late, reflects the ashen clouds. The iron-clad anchorite wades in. Only the swishing chinking of his iron mail can be heard over the soft puppy lap of the lake's mouth, and the breakfasting birds. Praying and supplicating and giving glory up to God in heaven, swaying in place like a slender shaft of kelp, buoy in heavy water, he performs the second little office. The clouds in transit cast shifting values over the swaying man, bobbing in the water.

A GREAT TREE WATCHES THE PEOPLE AROUND IT

The tree was born! It sent roots down into the ground and gradually thrust up from the deep soil over many months. Sending out small sprouts of leaves, it sought the sun! It grew slowly but steadily. The tree made its way through every season. It fought through torrential rain and freezing ice and howling gusts of wind in its quest to grow! As the years passed, the tree grew by inches and feet up towards the sun. It spread its layers of leaves and caught the light as best it could. And while this tree aged and grew, it began to watch.

Animals were always a part of the tree's life. From the squirrels that hid in its growing branches to the insects that scarred its bark, it knew the animals of the forest well. A far more interesting sight was humans. The tree sat on the edge of a field, and people would often come to sit and eat or play or wander the forest. The tree watched them. It even grew to know them in a way. The tree loved seeing the humans and waited impatiently through each winter, waiting for the spring that it knew would bring people to the field.

As the tree sat and slowly grew, the decades passed. Hundreds of different people visited the field, and the tree saw

every one of them. It watched as the same humans visited the meadow again and again. The tree saw them grow old and bring their children to the grassy field. The tree watched as the humans grew old and finally died. And it remembered them. While they did not know it, they had always had a friend in the old tree, and it would carry their memory through the centuries until it finally found its own rest.

A SOLDIER GETS MIXED UP AND
FORGETS WHERE TO POINT

Crown Prince Haakon of Norway knew nothing of the world, so he bought every tome he could find and commissioned a library for his palace. Red-faced Nordmenn, hardened by blasting arctic winds, worked their fingers to the bone; rosewood and mahogany came by ship from Brazil, silk book binding from Bhutan; and piece by piece the library grew. And then, suddenly, the palace was closed, and no one was ever again allowed inside. In fact, all of Troms og Finnmark was placed under Emergency Protocol and denied outside visitation.

It was really the archivist's fault. He had designed the library with only books in mind and failed to account for the building storing them. Although it was a palace in name, anyone passing by would comment, "my, what a grand castle!" and continue on their way. Behind the gilded bookshelves and painted wood panel walls lay ancient grey stone that focused the arctic winds more than it obstructed them. It was in essence a palace as cold and brutish as Haakon, which may account for why he took no notice of the harsh, sandpaper air.

One day he entered the library alone and grabbed a book to start reading, only the book wouldn't come. It was frozen in

place as sure as concrete, along with every other book in his collection. A single volume was eventually removed by hammer and chisel, but when the prince opened it—the archivist breathing fearfully behind his shoulder—the pages shattered like glass and fell to the floor. Each piece was carefully collected and fit together like a puzzle. When it was done, one faint, broken line appeared: “Norway and its allies made war with the Axis... Japan a significant threat.” He regarded it as an oracle of the highest order. His library had not been in vain; the shattered book was fate directing him to Japan. It was an island, he had been told, and soon it would be his.

The archivist was executed the following morning and dumped into the Norwegian Sea. The prince lived in isolation for many years, and when his dreadnought navy was complete, he jumped aboard the flagship and set sail through secret Arctic corridors, where icebergs loomed mountain-tall and the ships remained undetected through their journey to Wakkanai.

The fleet attacked an hour before dawn. Concentrated artillery fire blasted the entire city to rubble in minutes. But when the Japanese military arrived, the dreadnoughts were gone. They spread out to find the prince’s fleet and left behind a small contingent of sailors in case he returned. It was the coldest night on record when the dreadnoughts emerged from beneath the waves and bombarded Wakkanai for the second time. The sailors left behind were wiped out—except for a young man named Ishirō, who ran for twenty-seven miles to report the attack.

“Stop running, you’ve made it!” the officer told him. Ishirō looked around madly, as if expecting the dreadnoughts to emerge at any moment. His ears bled from a severe concussion and he kept walking into walls. “Tell us which way they went. Have they gone to Teshio? Rishiri?” Ishirō had indeed watched the fleet move out from Wakkanai. It was all clear in his head.

But the second he opened his mouth, he became confused and stopped with a terrified expression.

“He’s shellshocked,” the officer concluded. “Tenshio is that way,” he said, pointing across the room, “and Rishiri is that way. Which way did they go?”

Ishirō raised a trembling hand and extended his finger straight at the officer, who shook his head. “No, that can’t be right... Are you certain?” He swore as Ishirō collapsed to the floor and was taken to the infirmary. Left with no choice, he called it in and prayed the shellshocked soldier was correct.

As it turned out, Ishirō had no idea what he was doing. A descendant would reveal decades later that Japan’s national hero had no memory of meeting the officer. But in the days following the attack, Ishirō woke in the infirmary to a gaggle of reporters and the Marshal Admiral, who told him that he had saved Japan. He was given The Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum and from that day on lived as an international celebrity. Business magnates sought his direction, and after a string of good luck he became BlackRock’s chief financial advisor. The theory, supported by breakthrough medical science, was that concussive blasts from the artillery fire had scrambled Ishirō’s brain in just the right way for him to detect micro-movements in the electro-magnetic field. He was most sensitive to the movements in the first ten minutes after waking. A pointing room was built in a wing off his bedroom, where he lived on the top floor of BlackRock’s New York headquarters. Each morning he stumbled inside to a panoply of aggressive bar charts and company logos. His aides sat in complete silence while Ishirō sipped his coffee, and when he pointed, it was always straight forward.

THEY BUILD A TOWN AROUND
WHERE THE TREE FELL

The tree had stood in the field longer than any of them could imagine. Hundreds of their generations passed by in its branches and leaves, along its roots and trunk. They had loved the tree, their world. The Humans had loved the tree too (though it was just a small part of that larger world), often resting their huge forms against it in the warm summer.

The Humans were gone now, and the tree's inhabitants could not understand how it might have happened. Some now believed the Humans made the catastrophe, while others held the old belief that the catastrophe had been born in the sky amid those innumerable bright lights. Whatever had killed the Humans must have felled the tree and blasted the surrounding field. Nearly all of them had perished as well, surviving on detritus and what scraps of vegetation remained. It was a calamity they could not fathom, as they huddled in the broken trunk and petrified stump. It did not matter anyway; they would never know how it happened, or why it had begun to change them.

It was the old instinct that drove them at first. Just to survive, they clustered around the old dead tree, still a source of

food and shelter. Beetles were there already, feasting on the decaying wood amidst the terraces of fungi. As the tree's wood fed them, the tree's life returned to the soil. Plants began to sprout again around the tree, and more of them returned to repopulate their former home. Grasshoppers and aphids came to feed on the new leaves. Ants came to herd the aphids and to farm the fungus growing in the broken trunk. Ladybirds arrived to feed on the ants' herds, and they fought as the predator and the herdsman always have. Before long, many flowers grew up around the fallen tree, the butterflies flew back, bees came to build a hive and make honey in the remnant of the tree. The tree's children began to grow across the field. No Humans would prune the saplings again.

The change moved them. A force they could not understand or even detect was dictating their actions, a pull towards community and structure. Wisps of thought began to coalesce in them, ideas and plans where once there was only instinct. They compromised, disparate groups that once fought worked together, compartmentalised into what each group might do more capably. They exchanged what goods they had between each other and trade came back to the world. They carved roads across the earth and tunnelled shelter farther into the petrified wood of the old tree stump. Tunnels were delved beneath the earth, reservoirs and drainage. The soil was raised above the surface, hardened into complexes of rooms and halls; more homes for a growing community and safe places for food in times of hardship. Some had once made noise. Now they sang together, a wondrous harmony. They thrived and their home grew.

The change spread out from the town, reached into the burgeoning minds of others. They were drawn to the town, and here the change took root for them to return home, forming their own communities. Word of civilisation grew out from the town around the dead tree. Someday they might encircle back, a

network spanning everything that they could reach, a world much larger than a single tree. They would continue to be drawn through that world, into the town.

The bright moon sat low in the sky, shining a pale yellow light on the beetle's back. He walked along the dusty path, towards where the town must lie. The change had not invested fully in him yet, only enough to pull him to the town without his understanding, passing by smaller settlements of mud domes and leaf canopies without any knowledge of why or how they might be constructed. He saw the stump from far off, surrounded by curious spires and the fluttering wings of moths. The change grew within him, and he felt an apotheosis waiting for him in the town around the fallen tree. The dust beneath his feet gradually turned to a cobble road of pebbles. His pace quickened as the town loomed greater in his vision, and he heard the soft grasshopper song on the breeze. Comprehension entered him; he understood the spires, how leaves and fibre from the new growth were shaped around the sapling children of the old tree.

The moon was high and bright, casting shadows with the buildings of hardened earth as the beetle entered the town. He was greeted by a medley of ants and beetles in varying sizes. The moths had told them of the new arrival. They welcomed him and he understood them, learning their history as they led him in an arc through the town, toward the stump where the beetles lived. Their road passed by towering plants, covered in herds of aphids, guarded by ladybirds and ants side by side. It wound around earthen towers and domes of increasing size, leading to the large but hollow remains of the great tree. They passed through the broken trunk, beneath the golden honeycomb and between the fungal terraces, with the site of the pale stump at the far side.

The beetle's mind took shape within him. The achievement of the town imparted inspiration to him, knowledge of what

could be. As they approached the stump, the ants broke off, the beetles alone leading him on, up the tangled paths, across the ancient roots, and into the stump. Inside were hundreds, perhaps thousands of rooms carved into the wood, connected by paths spiralling up and down what remained of the tree's once-great height. They led him into a hollow of his own; he would see more of the town with them in the morning. In his wooden hollow, the beetle settled down to rest and began, for the first time, to dream.

A MAN WAKES UP IN THE MORNING
FOR THE LAST TIME

From deep inside the memory foam, a dough, bubbling, with gusts of air, until reaching, at the surface, a Pacific breeze, rises up, out of the depths, warm, a volcanic crypt, a titanic forge, into which, under so many moon-clad skies, hundreds of backs were catapulted, Olympes, Empedocles in plural, not to mention seminal sacrifices shot, without, however, burning the dough to a crisp, except for the crust of the crater, a well-worn temple, rises up, from this mattress, under so many nights, illumined only, through the light, not thick enough, screen drawn over the one window, in the cell, cell of isolation that is, not officially monastic, a small space that, the screen drawn, stays dark, on the contrary, in the daytime, with the foamy mound, of rest, in the center, and: on the periphery? that is to say outside, outside that window, if even window there is, or behind that screen: what? nothing? in wastes outstretched? in white, all too bright lighting, where the room with the mattress is a small crystal covered, edges softened, by fine pebbles, also white—who knows, but rises up, gathering heat, losing steam, cooling, until the dough of the pizza reaches an even surface, but without withal enveloping

him in any other weighted material, fabric, sauce, gauze, a man, if scarcely the figure, albeit without figure, can be called that, blackened, the skin, from the dark and the heat, a light crispy gray, that, however, brushes off easily, unlike the browned, greened dead skin, forming for aeons, having enlarged him a centimeter all over, dead skin is all he is, yet that does not mean he is not in a waking state, for he has just awoken, awoken with a start, in an eruption even, the eyes, the lids, shot open, a hard glass (Squidward...) in that rising up, from the inside of that upside-down parachute, a beige berth, and now he has woken up, and a bit too hard at that, that he himself thinks too, and what thinking! what power of ratiocination has just been triggered, even though he is but all scales, squames, such that it, the thinking, hurt, hurts! or perhaps it is the thought, the thought that hurts, or the content of the thought, that hurts, or the waking state, a jet lag, an insomnia, that hurts, for he knows that now, this time, he will never sink down into the cradle of flour, will never again slip into a gentle coma, or a gentle sleep, knows it by virtue of knowing, for he had never known something before, and had taken great delight in that, not knowing, which was his life, and in that way the sleeping was joyously alternated with lying on the mattress, aimlessly, looking, with eyes half open, at the hallway onto which his room, if it were known that it was his, opened, at how it trailed off, in his myopia, and then he would cock a small smirk, and emit a few bubbly words, and sometimes shake himself a bit, such that he could feel himself buzzing, for moving proper he was incapable of, which also brought him great delight, the shaking and the buzzing that is, and not necessarily the not moving proper, though that, too, was part of it, he figured, but it was nothing more than figuring, until the heavy, crushing, without sinking thought or thinking came upon him and consequently also the knowing, which for the first time had replaced his feeling with hurting, and asserted that that pain was that of waking up for

the last time, announced, in this whole series, with a kind of waking that was a first, both the waking up and the lying there, there now, disabusing him of all his curious habits and living, and giving him instead this... this waiting encumbered by thinking and knowing, which, in all probability, it could not be expected to extend to moving, or what have you, reinforcing even the lying there, and the stammering—he never stammered, for his words, as said, were round bubbles, the most precious and eloquent—such that he was made to wonder, “What... what... who knows... why... the dough overcooked as it did was that what it was is the screen dough too or is it sauce which color I never gave it much thought as the hall as farther down the hall as the screen as what’s behind it indeed what indeed it doesn’t matter but recede into the mattress that looks like it’s not going to happen again and therewith I won’t sleep and that I know for I know but with knowing I cannot shake anymore can’t buzz anymore the only buzzing going on is in the dead skin the scales the squames which color I never gave it any thought just like the pebbles on my crystal I know it all don’t think I don’t see how long I can keep this up baking won’t be an alternative and so I’ll have to do this raw oh! it adds to the hurting no one ever lost their head from hurting did they all those people I don’t know them yet won’t know them baked I’ll have to do it raw peopling that is I will spend some time peopling that I’ll do instead of sleeping and I’ll think of their colors and their textures feathers and leaves like peacocks under a jungle’s night sky canopied of course just like my screen but that never stopped anyone from peopling not I certainly not now that I lie here,” at which he, not closed his mouth, for it could hardly be described as open in the first place, but stopped wondering and, knowing, started peopling.

A FISHERMAN HAS AN UNEXPECTED CATCH III

The fisherman rewound his fishing pole and a hooked pistol raised up from the dark sea. It was an antique pistol, something you see in those old photographs of the civil war. Rusted to hell and back. He poked his eye into the end of the barrel and found something of what looked like a piece of paper. He smacked the gun like it was a glass ketchup bottle at a local diner and out shot the coiled-up beige bullet.

He unsheathed it and revealed it was a map with a heading that went, “Dear sir, what you just found is a map to Captain Isobel’s treasure—the feared pirate leader that roamed the Seven Seas! It is not far, and I hope you find it.”

The map had a black streak pointing to a scribbled cave under some wobbly lines, presumably the waves of the sea. It also had little drawings of fishes with dimpled smiles floating around. Who was this Captain Isobel? How is this paper still intact? Is this a joke? My feet hurt—and other similar thoughts bounced in his head, but it all came to a halt. He decided to come back with his boat and equipment. If needed, he would also borrow a wetsuit and scuba equipment from his friend.

Might be fun, he thought. The sky had turned into a chainmail grey. The fisherman left.

Two weeks passed, taking the grey sky on the way out. A baby blue color became a replacement for the day. The fisherman jumped off his boat, wearing only the scuba gear his friend Tony offered him. The reason? His Treasure Finder 5000 was going bananas. The reason? It found treasure under the sea. The reason? They don't know.

He dived a bit deeper, a bit deeper and a bit deeper. The sea darkened, but he knew where he was going. Common sense and other related illnesses were needed to be scrubbed out of this old sea dog, if he wanted to continue the voyage. The cure was obsession and he OD'd on it.

He found a hole, tight like a virgin. *Looks like the map*, he thought. He tightened his beer gut, squeezed into the hole, and ripped the stone. The seawater did not flush him down the hole, for it was still too small for the ocean.

He dropped his scuba equipment to the cold stone floor, creating a dink sound. He was in undies and it was cool. He went on a linear path, but at the end, light bounced on the wall and flickered. He walked to the light. At the end of the path, legions of skeletons lay on the rocky floor. Each of them reflected a different era: a skeleton with a confederate kepi lay lopsided on its head; a conquistador skull looked at our plucky protagonist with a toothy grin; and a rusted knight guarded the entrance which the fisherman came from. A loud roar echoed to and fro in the cave like it was an invisible game of tennis. "What the hell was that? What the fuck was that?" the fisherman questioned calmly.

The ground was shaken and so was the fisherman. They were like maracas being played by a crackhead in downtown LA. The rocky wall burst into tiny pebbles and out came this real icky dude, a real rotten kind of guy. The fisherman realized there was no treasure, but instead a disgusting guy lives here. Ouch! The

fisherman farted his way out of the cave, suffocating the revolting man to a limp carcass. He got back to his boat and looked at the sky, which became more of a velvet color and then the color of kings!

Except that's not what happened. It's what the fisherman wanted, but instead, he was eaten whole by the really rotten dude. His skin and meat dissolved in the belly acid and his collection of bones was pooped out. His brain, however, lingered in the acid, soaking it all up. The real icky dude grasped the slimy bones and rebuilt it as a skeleton. He found the scuba gear laying around near the entrance and gave it to the skeleton for added character. A new era was etched into the cave's history. The fisherman was wrong. The bones were the treasure. The bones.

SOMEONE GOES ON A LONG WALK
AND NEVER RETURNS

Hey Bug, it's your Dad. I want to tell you the story of a big adventure I had.

It all started in a rocket with me and Abitha and your Uncle Jack. I don't think you know Abitha that well. She was our pilot. The pilots have to be smart and brave and quick-witted. If you still think you want to be one someday, you just talk to Abitha.

We three went so, so fast and so, so far inside our rocket! We did loops around the world a hundred times, and each time I saw the sun rise over a new place. Once, I think I saw it peeking through your bedroom window. I could tell from above because it looked like the line between the dark nighttime and bright daytime was drawn right over where we live.

When we were done circling the earth, we pushed away and drifted towards the moon. As we got close, the moon grew bigger and bigger, and soon it scooped us up. We were now looping it just like we did with earth. There were so many sunrises and earthrises, but no Bugs or bedroom windows to see them. Just us. We were further from home than anyone, but we weren't scared. When you get lost in a store, the scary thing isn't how big the store is: it's not knowing where you are.

Though we were very, very far away, we knew exactly where we were. I never felt lost because I could look up at earth anytime I wanted to see you. You were so bright!

After some time, Uncle Jack and I went into a special part of the ship called a lander. A lander brings us down to the moon's ground. Abitha made sure the rest of the ship was still doing loops, and she kept track of us as we went down.

We put down perfectly, just where we planned it. Me and Uncle Jack spent the next day just getting ready, but we couldn't stop grinning at each other because we were actually on the moon! We talked about what it would be like to walk outside tomorrow, and we talked about how much I missed you and your mom, and how much he missed Mason and Aunt Chloe.

The next day, we went outside. We wore these big suits that help us. People are made to be on earth. It's got air we can breathe, water we can drink, and it's just the right temperature for us. The moon has none of these things, so Uncle Jack and I need these suits to keep us comfortable—the same way you need a winter coat before you play in the snow.

Everything weighs much less on the moon, so when we jump, we go really high. It's like being in slow motion. You expect it to stop but it just keeps going. We spent most of our day just learning how to walk and move. It's very different from how we move on earth. We took pictures and collected some of the moon rocks. We have to do everything very slowly and carefully, because even little mistakes can be serious when you're so far from home.

On the third day, we decided to go explore. Jack stayed near the lander and I went for a long walk.

I felt like I was in an old photo. You know how they only had black-and-white pictures then? When I saw old pictures of people on the moon, I thought those were black-and-white photos too, but they're not! Everything really is gray here. The sky is black, not blue, even in the daytime. There is no green

grass or painted houses, and even the sunsets are just white, not yellow or red. The only thing I see with any color is you, up in the sky, shining down on me.

There are so many things about earth we don't even think about. Do you know air has a color? It's mostly clear, but if you look through enough air at something really far away, you can see all of the air in between like a blue fog. Our brains just know that something is far away if it sees that fog, and it knows something is close if there's none. The moon doesn't have any air, so it's easy to confuse faraway things from close ones.

I was walking and jumping toward a big hole I thought was far, far away, and before I knew it, the hole was right in front of me, and I fell down. Falling is very slow on the moon. I fell very far down, but I didn't get hurt at all.

I told you that little mistakes here can be serious. Well, your dad made a pretty big one. When I fell, I tore a very tiny bit of my suit. It wouldn't be a problem if I was close to home, but if I move, it will tear more and my suit won't keep me safe.

Your Uncle Jack and Abitha were able to talk to me, and they thought of many very smart ways they might get me out of the hole, but I don't think there's a way to do it. I'm okay with this. I know you will be sad that I can't come back home with them, and I'm sad that I can't see you grow up or hug you and your mom again. This is my home now. Maybe they'll name this spot for me. The moon is very big, but I want you to learn where my spot is, so when you look up at night and see the line of the crescent moon cross it, you'll know that I'm seeing the sunrise. And whenever you see the moon during the daytime, you'll know that I'm looking back at you, so blue and bright!

Goodbye June Bug

Love you always

Your Dad on the moon

THE WORLD IS ENDING BUT
EVERYONE FORGOT WHY

I

The world was ending and the Historian forgot why. Whatever the reason, the scarlet light that burned through the cracks of his window and into his home reminded him every day. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, holding a crystal small enough to fit in his hands. If it wasn't so dark, the bed would cast a dark shadow onto the wall. Only the light of the burning stars made it just bright enough to see. With each passing day, their flames burned ever higher—not just here, but all over the world.

In the old days, it used to snow here, but not anymore. He chose this home specifically for the snow. His cute, automated little home lived high up in the well-off part of the city where people weren't packed like sardines. More time alone for his work.

There had been a few intolerable neighbors, but they were gone now, fled to somewhere safe. Safe? The world was burning

—in famine, in fire, in death, in war. Where would anybody be safe?

II

The world was ending and the Historian knew why.

The answer screamed through the red crystal in front of him. It was how they stored their memories in those days. Ink, paper; text, computer; thought, crystal. This was a very special crystal. It held the origin of the burning stars—the very same burning stars whose scarlet light burned through the cracks and into his home. The higher-ups in the government knew, of course, and when they fled, they left the crystal to him. He just needed to gaze upon it with his mind's eye to learn the truth. For posterity.

So why couldn't he?

Neural degeneration, they called it. The crystal was cracked and it might crack his mind, too. He'd have just enough time to add what he learned to the Archives—then his brain would shut down like a computer.

But he had to know. Nobody knew where the burning stars came from. The priests thought that the disaster was the result of pollutants in the atmosphere, and the masses laughed at them. The scientists claimed that the disaster was the wrath of God, and the masses believed their every word. Someone had to know. Someone had to write it down.

It was his life versus the truth. So why couldn't he do the right thing?

III

The world was ending and the Historian feared why.

The decision that lay before him was like the weight of the earth on his shoulders. He needed air.

Underneath the window, there was a little shelf he placed the crystal on. The Historian opened the curtain and beheld the end. In the light of a dozen brilliant burning stars, the street before him was barren and empty. A bundle wrapped in blankets underneath a rusted truck looked something like the body of a man. Just a trick of the light, he was sure. He rubbed his eyes then looked at his vintage digital clock. Three o'clock. The air was so dry that a stray spark could light the whole place aflame. It was getting hotter.

His skin warmed as if from standing too close to an oven. It was starting again. Every so often, the burning stars flared and the night died to become something brighter than day. Do not look out. That's what they said. Do not look out.

The Historian jumped over his bed to the one part of the room that still had a shadow and yelled for the AC to run at max. The pressure of the earth was pushing harder than ever.

He heard hissing.

His heart dropped.

He forgot the crystal.

It burned in the light of the burning stars.

He ran back and shoved the curtain closed like he should have.

The crystal was damaged. It was dying. It was now or never.

But could he?

IV

The world was ending and the Historian raged why.

It was a sick joke that played over and over.

His choice: risk his life to learn why the world ended, or live—live through hell, but live. There were only a few minutes left. But why should he when it was likely that he was the last man on Earth? He hadn't seen any other person in ages, so was he acting for history or for himself? He wasn't doing it for human-

ity, because if he wanted to know they thought about it, he'd go ask that corpse on the street. Could he not be selfish just this once, just like the rest of mankind?

The world was burning—in famine, in fire, in death, in war.

He had watched his neighbors. In the dead of night, he'd seen two brothers steal food from an old woman and then burn her house to the ground, with her in it, so they could convince the rest that the burning stars did it. The next night, they hung for the crime. Nobody trusted each other after that.

In the light of the burning stars, he saw their true faces. One told another a story about how the next guy over was a monster, so they better beat him over the head and take his stuff for themselves. Every weak-minded coward and imbecile dressed up in the moral pomposity of the lies they told, so they could hate and kill with a clean conscience.

The crystal's screaming died down to a whisper. It was time.

With what little he knew of man, as the world's last man, why should he risk his life so man could know a little more?

Why should he?

V

The world was ending and the Historian saw why.

He held the fading cracked crystal in his hands. His mind's eye was ready to peek. An open window stood before him. The crystal whispered. He made his choice.

In the end, could he have made any other?

A STRAY DOG WANTS TO BECOME A SAMURAI

To be a samurai and fight in those honorable combats with the warlords—that was the wish of Inumusha, a stray dog of Hakodate, and he had nothing to lose now.

Inumusha didn't think he'd survive this year. He could tell he had lost weight, and he certainly wouldn't be gaining enough to be likely not to freeze to death. His white and brown fur wouldn't be much help in the temperatures this far north.

Luckily, war was coming to Hakodate, and Inumusha knew it. The soldiers had come and taken up residence. They had scrounged up all the food supplies (hence why the dog could not get scraps) and readied palisades. He knew what he had to do. He would join in the inevitable battle and intervene against those Imperials invading Hakodate.

He had heard the new government here was called the Ezo Republic, and it sounded pretty neat, not that he knew what it was. He may have had ambition, but in the end Inumusha was just a dog. He couldn't understand the nuances of government. But nonetheless, he made his way for the harbor, where the enemy must first come.



“What is this dog doing here?” asked the captain of the Kotetsu.

“Sir, this dog is the hero of this battle,” yelled a sailor as he snapped to attention in front of his captain.

“What did he do?”

“Sir, this dog was found on the enemy flagship. According to a prisoner, he wouldn't leave them alone and got in the way of operations. Apparently, he wanted something. He disrupted the entire course of the battle for those Shogunate holdouts.”

Then Captain Nakajima said, “This dog is an imperial hero and a true samurai of the Emperor Meiji.”

“One more thing, Captain—he has Inumusha on his headband.”

PHYSICS STOPS WORKING FOR AN
ASTRONAUT

Floating free, a man inside his shell breathed air that he had breathed a thousand times. He humored thoughts that had been racing through the same worn paths of his mind for hours now—despised those thoughts and that breath. Home was shrinking closer to the scale of all the other dots now. It had been out of reach for as long as the man's thoughts had run their circuitous track, but he wished he could still see it. No one had ever died this far away from Earth.

At least there was the sun, still bright and big enough to be recognizable despite the distance. It still looked different from how it should have. The sun and the dot he thought was Earth crept to the edge of his visor, and a few seconds later the sun emerged from the other side, but no Earth. Too small to see. He wondered what the others on the EVA saw. Maybe they were all scattered to the edges of the solar system, just like him. Maybe they were all torturing themselves inside the station right now, running nonsense numbers and puzzling over nonsense results, just like him. Maybe they'd shrug and accept it. He didn't like that idea, and buried it under the numbers running their race yet again.

It had been a while, long enough for the sun to be inconspicuous among some of its distant cousins—still bright, but growing dimmer among a sea of other pinpricks seeking to confuse the man. Stunning, alluring pinpricks, each promising that they could have been his home, chastising him for having the gall to have left it in the first place. Serves him right. He sighed, then thought of his breath and of his warmth. The suit told him that it had plenty of each to spare. More nonsense numbers to run amok.

Time passed even as he doubted that it was. The numbers ran their laps as disbelief goaded them on. Nothing seemed to shrink, leaving the man with the suggestion that he was suspended motionless at the center of the universe. Of course, it was more likely that he was just very far away from everything. The suit still said that the scrubbers were working and that the battery was nearly full. Why wasn't he hungry? Why wasn't he tired? He closed his eyes to the stars in protest.

He stopped running his mental race. The same impossible results won each time, even as he bet against them and gave a head start to more sensible contestants. He thought a lot more about his colleagues on the station, but not really about any in particular, and instead wondered how long it would take for things to return to normal. Perhaps things would not return to normal and no other man would leave home again. All those smart people from all those countries seeing and saying the same thing after he'd been plucked from his secure tether had to be worth something. The race started again in the man's mind, but with no numbers on the starting line.

Each lap had a new leader jostling the previous backwards. Undiscovered natural phenomena shot past—an act of God which was tripped up behind death hallucination. Each hypothesis that came to mind had some sense to it, but never had enough to be convincing. As the ideas beat around the track, their strides became irregular, some padded to a stop, and

others collapsed now that they weren't being goaded on. He floated in nothing as nothing overtook the space in his head. He couldn't entertain those meaningless possibilities any longer. None could be supported above another. Nothing worth thinking about.

For a while, he stared and spun as the pinpricks stared steadily back, but then closed his eyes and saw nothing. He breathed the air that he had breathed a million, a billion, a trillion times. Nothing was humored, and it bloomed where thoughts had collapsed. The suit cheerfully reminded closed eyelids that he had plenty of air.

THE FIRST MEN LOOK TO THE MOON
AND WONDER WHAT IT IS

“*I*t doesn't matter. She'll focus on the fact that polar bears don't—”

“Sheher, where'd the fireball go?”

“It's over there.” Sheher signals with palm facing up.

“It can't be. It was that way an hour ago.”

“Why ask if you know?”

“I don't know. I just know it's not that.”

“You didn't have to point that time.”

“What?”

“I already pointed at that one. You didn't have to point again.”

“Sheher, I'm not trying to piss you off. I just pointed at it.”

“I know you think your pointing method is your prize if you're sterile, but it's bad.”

“Please stop obsessing over it. I already told you I don't like doing it your way. It feels pretentious.”

“Then face the palm down.”

“A strange orb is freezing us and you think this is about you.”

“What strange orb? You didn't point at anything, so I don't know what you're talking about.”

Pointing with an open palm, right foot atop a rock: “That Sisyphean spaceship ere us looking for thoust lost meteor. It'd find it too, if thoust made its own light. Wish thou a clue? It ought be at 19°22'00"N 89°12'00"W. Hurry then!”

“Fuck you.”

“Let's go hide under the trees for warmth.”



“I'm freezing, pinhead jackass.”

“This can't be good. Dying on the first day? I haven't even seen a woman.”

“Maybe if we figure out that orb's power we can counter it. Or is it a circle?”

“Let's not forget the most unexpected twist—it may be a cylinder.”

“Since it's so unexpected, I think it's that one.”

“Great, so we know it's a cylinder. But how does that freeze us? Look at the circles on it. The cold must be dropping from there.”

“Could it really be as easy as closing them?”

“We have to try, otherwise I'll never have children.”

After throwing rocks up at the moon to clog the so-called holes, they fell to the ground.



Panting, sweating, and smiling he exhales, “Nothing hard work can't fix.”

“Our first conquering. I feel done with plants. Tomorrow, I'm choking out a cow.”

"They look tough, so don't do it before I smash a hefty stone on one."

"Sheher, I think the rocks are spilling. I'm feeling cool!"

Quick to not let most of their work undo, they continued tossing. To make sure it gets real jammed, they threw till their arms gave out and they fell asleep on accident.



Mumbling, "I guess if it's for a quick travel, they can appear on open fi—"

"Sheher, get you and your sweat off me! Sheher! The fireball is back! Look, right there."

"Art thou so impressed by thoust humble offsprings thoust came to yield over two of thoust holy spears? Sheher, he's blinding me. I think he wants me to apologize for my sarcasm. I'll start pointing like you, unironically—though I'll admit it was getting to post-ironic."

"Stupid. Let's eat."

"We should check for cows over there."

"Fire is good."

"God is Fire."



"Dirtbag, I told you not to kill a cow alone! And more than one!"

"I didn't do this. Wait, look at these marks on him, and this mess of rocks. The cylinder spill must've landed on them."

"This isn't a coincidence. This is a gift." Sheher pressed his index fingers and closed palms against each other while looking up at the sun. "Ow! I was being grateful and he hurt me!"

"Ohh, that fireball over there blinded me for looking at it."

“Lively gas chamber, mayest gold and glory continue to spring eternal holy fortune and promise. We will that cylinder will never curse your land again! Sheher, kneel and look at the ground too.”

“I hope he notices your ironic devotion and burns you.”

“Until we find women, don't talk about being alone. Let's eat and start looking.”



“This chewy mess distracted me! Tell me you were looking!”

“Sheher, we lost him again. Oh no. Look who it is.”

Smacking his arm down, Sheher looked to the night sky. “It lets us look at it. It's so pretty with all the stars around it. Maybe he's the good fortune.”

“It's already chilly, so I don't think so.”

“You know, once I got off you in the morning, I stopped sweating.”

“You're suggesting we use the cow's body warmth?”

“Yes, thank you.”



Each cozily stared out of their cow and looked up at the moon.

“We should think of a way to have fire down here.”

“That sounds complex. We already have these cows.”

“You expect me to pull this thing around the world?”

“You can just stay here.”

“What's here?”

“Us.”

“And?”

“I'm thinking everything might not be about women?”

“What's it about?”

“Going to the cylinder.”

“That doesn't sound complex?”

"It's just rock piling."

"You might die of old age doing this. You might regret not having a kid halfway."

"I might regret never going to the cylinder."

"I promise you, we'll talk about your success or brave attempt forever."

"I'm wondering if forever matters."

"This cylinder must be negative fortune. Beautiful and negative. Pulling us in and making us think like this."

"..."

"It could be the cow smell."

"..."

"Maybe it's us. No good blaming an outside source."

"..."

"But an outer source can be so strong we have no choice."

"..."

"How would we differentiate from a strong outer force and a weak self? I can blame this cylinder and no one can judge. But what if the well-hidden truth is that I am stronger than this cylinder?"

"..."

"zzz"

"zzzz"

"zzzzz"

"z.zzzzzzzzz"

"zi"

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION
BECOMES A LEADING CAUSE OF
DEATH

*I*t starts, paradoxically, with marrow-deep chills. The sensation of frigid ice water wracking your form, seeping beneath the flesh, settling in your very core. Tingling in the extremities, the heart rate slows, the entire human machine stuttering to a crawl.

You read the stories. Baffled detectives sifting through ash, news anchors with stern eyebrows rattling off the most recent death rate from the CRT screen. It's not that you thought yourself invincible, it's just that death seemed so intangible; like any other experience, you don't really know what to expect until you're in the bowels of the thing, your senses finally proving what you've been told all along. *Memento mori*, and all that.

When you wake just after midnight in a fit of violent tremors, you know it's happening. There's no where to go, no contingency plan; the emergency rooms have begun shutting out the desperate folks who exhibit these symptoms, for the collateral damage is too great. Entire hospitals have gone up in black plumes of flame, always originating from one fading body. The science doesn't follow. There are no explanations for this new, infernal epidemic. Your father said it was because Hell was

already too full, so the devil resorted to burning the sinners up here to save time and space.

Resignation floods your veins because it's inevitable; there's no fighting back. You pluck up the pamphlet on your nightstand, an unsettling bright brochure with big, block letters and simple instructions: 'What to do when exhibiting symptoms of SHC'.

The flimsy paper rattles along with your trembling frame. As expected, the first few suggestions are deceptively hopeful, urging you to call your doctor to confirm the condition, to check your temperature, your pupils, your pulse. You skip ahead to the end.

'Once you have contacted your closest loved ones, notify the local authorities, and, if applicable, your landlord, then sit in a tub of cool water.'

It doesn't say what to do after that, because there will be no 'after that.'

You fumble out of bed and into the little galley kitchen. There's a week's worth of mail, bills, and cheerful cards, stacked in front of the Keurig. In the cupboard below is an unopened fifth of Grey Goose. You were saving it for the birthday party, but always hated to see good liquor go to waste. Fist curled about the cool neck of the bottle, you make your way into the bathroom and turn the tap.

The water is clammy and uncomfortable as you sink in. You didn't even bother to strip off your pajamas, so the heavy cotton sticks and rasps against your skin. Slick fingertips struggle for purchase around the vodka's cap, but through stubborn sheer will you force the bottle open and immediately upend the bitter, searing liquid to your mouth. The liquor burns down the trachea, churning in the stomach, and then the rest of your body erupts into incomparable pain.

You assumed the transition from frigid cold to searing heat would be a gradual affair, but the switch is instantaneous. It feels like your gut is boiling, your blood turning to mist, your

tongue dry as your mouth gapes open in a silent wail. The bath-water bubbles and steams as your skin shrinks and draws in close to the bone, then the folding of the envelope, one madcap of teeth-gnashing agony before the blaze and simmer of flame, and then—oblivion.

UNPROMPTED II

“*I* just fell, Dave.”

“You didn’t,” Dave grinds out between his clenched teeth. Ricky’s a fucking liar and always has been. The look Ricky is giving him isn’t pity, really. It’s something else. Something softer.

“I tripped over my own stupid feet like an idiot and broke my neck,” he says.

“Nobody did anything to me,” he says.

“It was an accident and I died for no reason at all,” he says.

“No reason at all! No reason at all!” Dave shrieks, leaping to his feet, throwing his arms out, spinning to glare at the ghost sitting on his bed. Crosslegged, terrible posture, as if they’d just been playing Xbox. “I’m just supposed to accept that? That you died and it doesn’t even matter and nobody cares, and I’ll just move on with my life, and you’ll be nothing but dirt in this shit-hole town forever?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess? Then why are you haunting me? If it doesn’t matter, then why are you here? If I’m not supposed to do anything, then why are you here?”

"I don't know."

Dave drops back down on his bed heavily, like his legs have given out, and he buries his face in his hands.

For a long time, neither of them say anything. Then, silently, Ricky stands. Dave, heavy-eyed, lifts his head but stays slumped where he is. Ricky doesn't do anything or say anything. He just stands next to his desk and squints down at all the shit there. *People don't just die*, Dave thought. *Ricky wouldn't have just died*.

It was called an accident, but it couldn't have been. Dave was so sure that it had been murder—that there was someone to blame, and everyone who said it was an accident just didn't care enough. Not like Dave. Dave would find the murderer, or some conspiracy or aliens, or just anything. He really, really believed that there was something more. But in the end, Ricky's death was just an accident. There's no one to blame, and it was just something stupid and tragic that happened for no reason at all. A hiccup in the universe.

Dave drops his face back into his hands.

"I don't want you to be dead," he whispers. His throat hurts.

"I know," Ricky assures him gently. After a beat, he asks, "Hey, what do you call a guy who can't keep his head on straight?" And then, before Dave can say anything, Ricky laughs. "Dead!"

Dave whips his head up. "You fucking ass—" but Ricky isn't there. The room is empty, as if he was never there at all. Dave's jaw works, but nothing comes out. Ricky always does shit like this. Making jokes when he shouldn't, just so he doesn't have to think about uncomfortable things. Like that this is goodbye for real.

Asshole. He probably thought he was being real cool, too.

Dave groans, lets himself collapse backwards across his bed. Theatrically acting out some kind of catharsis. Pretending at closure. That's how it's supposed to go, right? The ghost is gone,

and suddenly it's better. He's supposed to feel better now, but his heart still hurts and it feels like it won't ever stop. It sits in his chest like a clump of mud.

He doesn't realize he's crying until the tears start pooling in the shells of his ears.

A MOVIE ACTRESS KILLS HER
UNFAITHFUL HUSBAND AND MUST
HIDE THE BODY

“*J*ust... please... please come back home, Jack. I miss you, baby.”

These were the final words of the famed actress' press conference. Her tear-filled eyes had sought out one of the many cameras lined up in front of her, and she had looked straight into its lens while uttering her emotional plea. The dramatic images headlined news broadcasts across the globe and made an impression on anyone who had tuned in to watch.

A week later, her husband was still missing. The star of last year's highest grossing blockbuster seemed to have vanished into thin air. The disappearance caused Hollywood's rumour mill to go into overdrive, churning out wild theories ranging from a hostage situation to an alleged drug overdose at a controversial spiritual retreat in the Himalayas. Others hypothesised that the actor had run off with one of his many flings.

Another week passed with no sign of the actor. Meanwhile, a frenzy had erupted on Twitter after a man posted a picture of himself standing next to the actor's statue at Madame Tussauds London, capturing the post with the hashtag #FoundHim! An offended fan of the missing celebrity saw the post and

responded to it with a scathing reply and a hashtag of their own, #BurnTussaudsToTheGround. Both hashtags went viral and, as a result, spawned a flood of photographs of tourists mimicking the picture which had caused the fuss.

At the same time, Madame Tussaud's social media accounts were bombarded by irate admirers of the actor who accused the museum of placing profits over feelings. The actor's statue was, indeed, one of their most popular attractions. Notable for being the museum's most kissed statue, hundreds of visitors posed for pictures with it every day. Even after his disappearance, droves of women still queued up to wrap their arms around the actor's chiselled physique and plant a kiss on his waxy cheeks.

The museum's board of directors convened and issued a press statement. It claimed that their initial decision to keep the statue on display was done as a gesture of hope and gratitude. However, following the social media storm, they had decided on temporarily removing the statue and placing it in their storage facilities. A sizeable donation by the museum to a charity championed by the missing actor was also made.

Not long after this statement was released, the outrage subsided. The chairman of the museum congratulated his staff on their handling of the situation, adding in a subdued yet satisfactory tone that the museum's ticket sales had gone through the roof. Little did he know that his decision to place the statue in storage would, ultimately, prove to be the first step in uncovering what is now regarded as the single most sensational story to have ever come out of Hollywood.

It was a female member of the storage facility's maintenance crew who inadvertently set the ball rolling. The lawyer of the woman, who would like to remain anonymous, claims her client spotted a bug crawling up the statue's pant leg, and that this was her motive behind pulling down the statue's trousers and underwear. Security camera footage of the incident, which

leaked from the museum's security team, cast serious doubts over her statement.

The rather grainy footage shows the cleaning lady taking her time to unbutton the statue's jeans. Then, again in unhurried fashion, she is seen pulling down the silk boxer shorts. Up until that point in the video, her assertion could, in theory, be considered truthful. However, the last minute of the clip, that has now gone viral and shows the cleaning lady snapping several pictures of the statue's genitals, shatters her credibility entirely.

Astonished by the statue's detailed work, the cleaning lady sent the pictures to a handful of friends. Equally perplexed, they replied that they had no idea the museum went to such lengths when creating statues. The photographs then, somehow, ended up on an obscure forum dedicated to male celebrity nudity. The thread containing the images initially gained little attention, with forum members casting doubts over the authenticity of the pictures. The creator of the thread posted a final message admitting they weren't genuine, adding that, "still... M.T. really care about the detail lollllll."

The freelance journalist who broke the story refused to reveal how he found the pictures. He also has yet to divulge how he could tell that the genitalia in the pictures did indeed belong to the missing actor and not his wax statue.

A day after the story broke, a Major Investigation Team belonging to London's Metropolitan Police raided Madame Tussauds and made the grim discovery. In a joint statement the following week, both the MET and the FBI admitted they were stunned by the complexity of the murder.

From the evidence and information they had managed to gather, they suspected the famous actress had paid for her husband to be killed. They presumed the body was then embalmed and mounted, likely by a mortician or a highly skilled taxidermist, and transported to London where it was swapped for the wax statue on display at Madame Tussauds. Exactly how

and when they had managed to succeed in carrying out their elaborate ruse remained a mystery.

In the months following the investigation, several of the museum's staff were arrested. All but one, an acclaimed marketing strategist, were eventually released. Also apprehended were a taxidermist renowned for his extensive work with celebrity pets and the pilot of a private cargo plane specialised in refrigerated transport. No less than 37 warrants were issued for individuals suspected to have been involved in the crime, ranging from truck drivers to alleged hitmen with links to Russian crime syndicates in the LA area.

As for a motive, the FBI has yet to make an official statement. However, speculation that a romantic motive was behind the murder appeared to be confirmed during the apprehension of the deceased actor's wife. A veritable swarm of journalists, camera crews and photographers had congregated outside her Hollywood mansion on the day of her arrest. As she was huddled into the unmarked police SUV, the dozens of microphones aimed at her recorded the handcuffed actress' chilling words that would go down in Hollywood infamy.

"Well, he liked being touched and kissed by other women. So, I gave him what he wanted."

A SMALL TOWN GETS A MUCH
COLDER WINTER THAN THEY
EXPECTED

*I*t was Martin's move-in day when the weather turned. Both the weatherman and his parents kept using the line "lethal temperature drop" and warned him against going out. Even Squid, his pet rabbit, shivered in discomfort when Martin put him in his carrier. But there was no choice in the matter. The moving date had been scheduled months in advance and, given the market, simply could not be changed. At twenty-seven, he had decided he would rather die than live with his parents one day longer. Twenty-seven was when rockstars died. While Martin didn't have their talent, he did share their habitual drug use and love of music.

Moving his bags and drum kit into the box truck was the hardest thing he had ever done. He was frostbitten and wind-scraped by the end of it and just as cold as when he'd started. The truck provided little relief. The leather driver's seat was covered in frost that stuck to Martin's jeans and chilled his legs worse than the wind.

He grimaced and turned the key. Nothing happened. He furrowed his brow and turned the key a second time. All was silent. The engine didn't even try. Outside, a pair of homeless

men ran silently down the sidewalk. There was an unusual lack of ambient noise. He yanked off the thick blanket covering Squid's cage and found his rabbit shivering in a ball. He tucked Squid under his sweater and gave a long sigh. The rabbit fur was comforting against his chest, but he still cried. Salty drops rolled down his chin and trickled onto his neck, where Squid took notice and poked his head out the neck of Martin's sweater to lick them up.

The sky was gray and darkening. They needed to move and find shelter. But when Martin exited the truck, the ungodly wind cut to his heart and seized it. Squid shivered violently against his chest. Each heartbeat came fainter than the last. He grit his teeth and ignored his dad waving at him to come back inside.

The back of the truck opened with a clang and Martin waded into his luggage, throwing boxes and bags aside until he retrieved a leather purse. He collapsed on the spot and tugged on the metal zipper, but it was stuck or frozen and wouldn't come undone.

Squid sniffed the cold air with his frost-nipped nose and wriggled out of Martin's sweater. A few nibbles and the corner of the purse came apart. It was enough for Martin to slip two fingers inside and close them around a pill decorated with a smiley face. He crunched it in his mouth as Squid wriggled back to safety. A minute passed and synthetic strength surged in his bloodstream. He laughed and shot up from his slump, startling a vagrant who was peering into the back of the truck. The man had a rough face turned rosy red from the extreme cold.

Martin ran over and shoved a pill against the man's lips. The vagrant chomped it down and closed his eyes, prepared to spend his last moments in bliss. Martin slapped him out of it. "Come on, man! Give me a hand."

"What the hell did you give me?" the vagrant asked. His eyes went wide. "What the hell's wrong with your stomach?"

"That's Squid. I gave you an upper. Use it all the time when

I'm playing. You play music?" Martin's words came out so fast that they piled into each other, but the vagrant understood him perfectly.

"Me and the boys play on garbage cans," he said.

"That's excellent. Is it nearby? Hey, why aren't you in a shelter? Right here—careful with the kick drum."

Together they carried the drum kit through the bitter cold and into an alley. Tarps and blankets had been strung up in the shape of a long hall. A long-bearded man who looked like he was made of newspaper sat out front. He didn't move a muscle as Martin and his new friend carried the drum kit inside.

"We bring drugs and music!" Martin roared. The healthier vagrants rushed him with open hands, the wearier ones shuffled, and one by one they all got a smiley face from Martin's purse.

The energy in the tent was electric. Martin grooved on his drums while the others banged on upturned garbage cans and the sides of dumpsters. Squid hopped out of Martin's sweater and found a morsel to nibble on. The heat from twenty-odd bodies bashing up a storm quickly accumulated. Jackets came off; sleeves were rolled. They jammed and raged through the night and into the morning. The sun came up and the cold went away, and every one of them stayed alive.

Martin's story was aired across the country. He became a folk hero overnight and named his new band Never Dead. The only time he returned to his parents' house was for Christmas dinner.

A SOLDIER RETURNS HOME FROM
THE FRONT LINES AND DISCOVERS
THAT NO ONE KNEW THERE WAS A
WAR GOING ON

Ullr remembered a softer time. Boastful fools proclaimed the Gods were no more. The faithful prayed to Them for a good harvest, and cursed Them if their plow rusted. How he wished to return to that age of innocence. Ullr knew Gods existed. And They were terrible.

The Golden Mother birthed twins: The Grey (God of Decay) and The Green (Goddess of New Beginnings). Equal in power, opposite in all else. Their eternal battle so regular it blessed the world with seasons.

This time, though, spring refused to come. The cold cut to the bone. Smoke blackened the sky as entire forests were burned for warmth. Shepherds butchered their flocks, milkless mothers suffocated wailing babes. The world was dying.

Ullr's wife, Sigyn, had just delivered a son. It was not yet time for naming, but he was already showing the man he would be. Square and serious like Ullr, with his mother's clever eyes. He cried as Ullr spoke: rarely, and always to a purpose.

Long autumn days left them well-provisioned. They could keep cold and hunger at bay, but not the desperate men begging them for food or wood. Ullr was shamed to turned them away,

but dividing his stores with all would ultimately save none. He didn't understand, though, the hearts of these men. If they could not take what was Ullr's, they would settle to destroy it.

Returning from a long day of wood cutting, Ullr noticed great clouds of smoke rising from the direction of his home. His house had been burned, Sigyn and his boy locked inside. The mob remained, neither pleased nor horrified by their crime. They put up little fight as Ullr and his axe cut each one of them down.

He grieved in his own way, leaving with his home still aflame, carrying nothing but his axe and his sorrow. Not trusting himself to walk back through town, Ullr took the northern road toward Bryll, home of the King and center of the world.

From his distant village, Ullr hadn't heard the King's call for men, but any who saw his broad form on the road to Bryll knew such would be his ultimate purpose. Ten thousand were fitted with golden armor, hooked spears, and axes sharpened to kill a God. Each were given a gold flask filled with thick syrup that would keep them warm, fed, and battle-ready. The flasks slowly replenished, provided one never drank the last drop.

Ullr and his band left Bryll feeling invincible, but their confidence faltered as they encountered starving beggars waving golden helmets or empty flasks as they passed. Three of his band tried to desert. The first succeeded; the next two were killed by Ullr himself. There was no fourth attempt.

They marched north to the Blood Oak, The Grey's conduit to earth. As they neared, they found their minds under siege. Violent thoughts and waves of despair crashed over them. The syrup kept such whispers at bay, but desperate men don't ration. The hollow rattle of an empty flask marked those soon lost to madness.

They joined with the main body of the army, two thousand weary men. Every day they pushed farther north. Every night

they withstood The Grey's children: formless, shifting beasts with jagged claws and endless jaws. With spear and axe they kept the hordes at bay. The syrup wore off quickly now, making them vulnerable from without and from within. Fallen men rose as shades each night; eyes black, they hacked through camps and comrades. As the red sun rose, they disappeared with the other beasts of night.

With no moon visible, Ullr could not number the months they fought. Many more died, few came to replace them. The violent slaughter of both monsters and his former comrades again became like chopping wood. This Ullr could do. It was practice. The Blood Oak was near.

Fewer than one hundred remained, all men like Ullr. No gold peeked through the thick layer of dried gore. Bands were sent back to pick through fallen corpses for fresh weapons and undrained flasks. They began saving these treasures for their final push.

With the massive red tree in sight, each remaining soldier devoured flask after flask of the golden syrup. Their eyes burned white with the power of the Gods. Minds finally clear and bright with purpose, muscles exploding with new strength, axes raised, they charged. The oak bled as they hacked away. Its roots ensnared and consumed any who fell.

There was a great crack, and an eruption of blood as the tree split. It fell impossibly slow, exploding apart as it smashed on the red-stained frozen ground. Within the ragged stump, Ullr saw a color he forgot existed in this world. A deep-green hand, delicate and feminine, rose from the carnage.

You have done it, Ullr, a voice called from within his mind. *Winter is ended and I may now bring spring.*

It is too late, he thought. *The world is dead. My family is lost. The cycle of seasons has been broken.*

He heard The Green's light laughter in his mind. *Nothing is ever broken. Am I not the God of new beginnings? What you see here is*

just the annual dance. Each year my brother believes he has conquered the world, and each year I am freed to restore it.

And then, with a bright flash, he saw The Green clear away the blood and splinters of the broken oak and plant a crimson acorn where it once stood. She lifted the dead men and beasts and restored their golden armor and white fangs. She pulled the smoke from the air and reformed the trees in the forest. Then Ullr's world collapsed in on itself...

Ullr returned home after chopping wood. Tiny buds peeked from the trees, birds trilled, and a thin tail of smoke came from his chimney in the distance. He thanked the Gods; it seemed that winter would be brief this year.

A TOWN SHUTS ITSELF OFF FROM THE WORLD

All around me there is cobblestone. It stretches for a few miles in either direction down Downing Street. It is noon, I reckon, as the sun is directly overhead. A breeze shakes my jacket, and then subsides. Dirt rises, swirls into small vortexes, and then rests again upon the ground.

My hands are warm. The mate I brewed from my thermos is ready. I scoop the leaves to the side of the gourd. I sip, I swallow. Some people prefer to spit out the first few sips, as they can be overwhelming. I drink.

I am the only man for miles, I reckon. No traces of animals, either. All along the cobbled road, there are houses, but nobody comes to the windows, or out of the doors. Curtains are often drawn; when they aren't, it is rare. No window is ever opened. I have been walking for an indefinite amount of time. I count the seconds to remind myself of the feeling of passing time.

Houses on Downing follow a loose pattern: red roof, blue roof, green roof and nauseam. Numbers go up from 0001 to 9999. 9999 is next door to 0001. Right now I am looking at 8392. It is the same home as 0002 and many others. Red roof.

I finish my mate, I continue walking. I do not sleep, as it is

always noon, I reckon. It comes to pass that I am back at 0001. I have walked forever and never. I have never walked forever. That sounds esoteric, but it isn't. I mean to say that nothing ever changes, no matter how much I walk. I cannot tell you how long I have been here, pacing the row of Downing Street, or if I have ever really walked it at all. Do I dare try to remember the times? No. It does not matter. Not now.

I still do not know every intricate detail of Downing. Each house has a quirk of its own. 3042 has a flower pot on the front porch. 4567 has circular windows instead of square ones. My favorite is 0707, because it has one great window in the shape of a heart. I can see inside of it; everything is satin and red. In the space between the houses, I like to imagine that there is an infinity. Between 0707 and 0708 there are many trillions of atoms, yet I can see where one begins and the other ends. Every step, I remember that this is uncomfortable.

Only one house is unnerving to me. That is 1003. It does not have any stairs leading to its door. Instead, there is a gray statue in the shape of an Egyptian sphinx. Legend says that the sphinx will ask travelers like myself a riddle. Every time I have passed it, the statue has been silent. I would like for it to ask me something, anything. Does this statue think I am rude? I reckon it does. I have not once tried to make conversation with it. The next time I pass the sphinx, I ask it a question.

"What comes once in the morning, twice in the afternoon, and never in the evening?" I ask the statue...

There is no response. It is a piece of marble, of course there is no response.

Something grips me now. A feeling unknown to me before. On my next round, I make my way to the door of 0001 and I knock. Hard. I knock for a long time, until the door creaks open. Behind the door, there is nobody. I do not enter 0001, because nobody invites me in.

I knock on 0002. The door opens, and I am greeted by the

Mona Lisa. She does not invite me inside. She softens the blow with a smile.

At 0003, I knock, and am greeted by a naked man. He is tall, and his bones poke from his ribcage. His heartbeat is visible, although faint. "Father," I plead. He does not invite me inside, and I leave.

At 0004, I am greeted again by nothing. At 0005, I am greeted by The Old Guitarist. At 0006, my mother answers the door, nude.

At this point, I recognize the pattern. I go to 0007, and there is nothing. I reckoned as much. I go to 0008 and am greeted by Washington Crossing the Delaware. I go to 0009 and am greeted by the corpse of my father. Holes have formed on his skin, revealing traces of black organs and bugs. This time he speaks, "do not look away," and I do not. I see the skin of his body decay, atom by atom. I stare forever. The sun goes down, and I assume it is midnight. There is nothing left to stare at. I look behind me, and then back again fast. Dad is not there, and will never be there again. I continue on into the night.

SOMEONE PLANS A PERFECT CRIME

The best tool in any thief's arsenal is thus: exploitation. Exploitation of weaknesses, be them human or institutional, proves to be, to this day, the most versatile stratagem.

Of all weaknesses, the easiest to abuse remains desire. Like a clipboard and yellow vest that grants access anywhere, desire is the worst lock.

My desire is hidden within another's: a simple box of contents without meaning to the layman, tucked away in a locked bedroom. A bedroom next to mine. Yet, the unrelenting watch of the owner keeps me from getting to it.

My brother is always dwelling in his room, and I can't get to his box of sneed.

However, being his brother, I possess the key to this 18-year-old virgin's heart. Not a woman's touch. Her attention will suffice. Which woman? I'm glad that you asked: the local wolf girl that, in a stroke of fate, enjoys the same mindless activities as my brother. The nature of these activities and my knowledge about them is of no concern for others. Of course, she does not exist outside of the Discord profile I have created for her; but

her phantasm is alive and thriving inside the mind of my brother. In fact, she has been invited to the house today, and should be on her way right as we speak. The only cost of this whole operation: five dollars. The price for the neighbors' mentally challenged son, Andy, to ring the doorbell at 1445 sharp. When the doorbell rings, my brother will rush out his bedroom door, most likely leaving it unlocked and unattended. I have calculated at least ten seconds until the opening of the door, and another fifteen until he deduces, from retard Andy's presence, that this is all a scheme. I have forty-five seconds to run into his bedroom and steal the box of sneed.

The last message sent to him at 1404: "I'll be there at 3 o'clock :3"

The time on my watch: 1444. I'm sending him this message: "Sorry I'm a bit early ;p"

1445, the doorbell rings. Game on. I hear his chair falling on the floor through the wall. He stumbles to the door (two seconds later than anticipated) and runs down the stairs. I make my move, open my half-opened door, walk silently to his room, and rush towards his closet. Opening the sliding doors, I see on the floor the sneed box, formerly Chuck's, my brother's friend. I take it, leaving a decoy in its place, bring it back to my room and close the door, maybe a bit too hard. It's been thirty-five seconds since the ring. I purge the account of the wolf girl and leave through my window, sneed box in hand.

No witness, since no one will ever believe retard Andy, a box of sneed all to myself, and another virgin catfished. What a beautiful day.

AN EXPLORER FROM MEDIEVAL
EUROPE TRAVELS TO CHINA

To my dearest Avaril,

I am writing this to inform you that I will not be returning. I have found peace in Xanadu. Sadly, I cannot disclose my location any further, as I fear the nearby Christian missionaries might find out about our tranquil hideaway and present it to the mercy of the Mongolian rule, with whom they have become partners in imperial expansion.

Thankfully, their chances of ever discovering this tropical haven are considerably low, since the pathways leading to it are obscured by dense rainforests and the monsoon climate. We too might very likely have remained in the dark as to its presence, if it wasn't for a group of thieving grey gibbons that stole our maps and disappeared into the depths of the jungle. Pursuit led us to where we are now.

I will refrain from going into too much detail, but as you might have guessed, what we saw was instantly preferable to ever returning back the way we came. To put it briefly, it is a land of complete seclusion, peace, ponds, gardens and saunas. It is paradise. We were invited to stay indefinitely, on the condition that we would never see the outside world again, and so we

all accepted, with the exception of Milano, who declined for reasons as of yet unknown. It is through him that I expect this letter will reach you.

Dear sister, though I hope you will succeed in keeping all of this to yourself, I took the caution of factoring in your natural inability to keep secrets, which is why I've been as reserved as I've been here. However, you can tell mother and everyone else that I am not dead. You can also tell Ryia that I am fully aware of her affairs with Hue. I knew she was a whore from the first night we spent together. There are many girls here, far younger than her, and I haven't kept myself from being unfaithful.

Yes, I won't be coming back. But, frankly, the only thing I will miss is you, which is why I felt the obligation to write at all. There was a marketplace in Khanbaliq where a young girl was playing a strange instrument. I asked what it was and bought one for you. It is called a Sheng. Think of it as a very complicated flute. I imagine it might be difficult to figure out at first, but I trust that your musical inclinations will prevail. Milano has promised me that it finds its way to your footstep. I hope it arrives in one piece. Don't practise at night.

UNPROMPTED III

“Catch me if you can!” five-year-old Knife says with cushions of air pushing him higher and higher.

A hundred feet above their house, Knife and his siblings, five-year-old Kite and eight-year-old Korn, play amongst the Mesopotamian spring clouds, light and fluffy in appearance and warm in texture.

“No fair!” Kite shouts. “You had a head start!”

Knife laughs gaily. “Come on, slow poke!”

Korn makes a dash for him, her long brown hair flowing behind her as she does so. One step, two, three, four, she reaches Knife and shouts, “Tag!”

Panting, Knife turns around to go after Kite.

One hundred feet below this game of aerial tag, Mama is preparing to go to the market in the city, while Papa is cutting wood for the hearth and oven. Mama carries a linen bag across her shoulders and a leather purse around her waist, and looks around the small clay dwelling for anything else she might need before leaving.

The sun reaches its apex in the sky when she reaches the outer walls of the city: high and thick clay blocks in uniform

rectangles and squares. She walks to the market where there is a monumental amount of produce to be bought and sold: pigs, chickens, goats and cows to milk, cheese and yoghurt; vases and bottles of wine and honey; woollen garments, tops and bottoms; barley, oats, maize, cocoa; dogs, cats and horses; even the latest bronze tools and weapons are available for barter.

Mama walks past the weapons and tools, the horses and cats and dogs, the cocoa, maize, oats and barley, the woollen garments and picks up a bottle of honey, another one of which appears in her other hand. She puts it in the bag and then repeats the process with a bottle of wine. Satisfied, she continues past the yoghurt, cheese, picks up a bottle of milk and takes that, and then arrives at the cows.

“How much for this one?” she asks the vendor.

“What have you got?” the vendor says.

Mama pauses to look in her bag. “Well, I’ve got a bottle of wine, a bottle of milk and some honey. Or some coins, if you’d prefer.”

“No, no,” the vendor says. “I’ll take the wine and honey, please.”

“How about just the wine?” Mama counters. “It’s of the highest quality, I can assure you.”

“Nope, no can do.”

“Okay, if you insist.” Mama hands over the wine and honey and the vendor unties the rope around the stake in the ground and hands it to her.

When Mama is home again, she places a hand on her cow and concentrates. There’s a five-second wait before a second, duplicate cow appears next to the original. It sniffs the air and flicks its tail with elegance, as if it had been alive for seven years already, rather than having just been materialised into existence.

“Papa, can you call the kids down? I need them to milk the cows,” Mama says.

“Knife! Kite! Korn! Get down here, now!” Papa shouts.

Already he can hear moans of complaint floating down from the clouds. "How was the market, honey? Busy?"

"A bit," Mama says. "Have we got enough wood for tonight?"

The children appear just when Papa is about to say yes, they do.

"What, Mama?" Korn says.

Mama turns to her. "I need you and your brothers' help milking the cows here, sweetie."

Korn sighs heavily. "Ugh, fine."

"You too, boys," Mama says to Kite and Knife hiding by the doorway. They visibly deflate at being called upon.

Mama duplicates a couple of empty bottles and the kids get to work on the cows, the milk coming out in warm thin spurts at a time. When they finish, Papa puts fish and lamb chops in the oven for dinner, and they eat as the darkness closes in, their small room lit by two fat candles and the embers of the oven.

Night falls and the family sleeps. They wake in the deepest, bluest part of the night, not by the sudden flash of red light that cracks the horizon, but by the succeeding tremors that shake the dirt beneath their feet. The tremors start off as a light wobble and grow stronger and stronger, until Mama evacuates the family for fear of the house collapsing, which happens shortly after. Rain falls, and the children manage to create a sort of tent from the rubble, as they breathe life into the wind and lift up the walls and roof. There they sleep until morning comes.

Mama walks into town that morning, but there is no town left to speak of. The river had burst its banks and the combined collapse and flood had swept the town away completely.

A MAN CROSSES AN OCEAN BY
HIMSELF I

Very carefully, the man, stripped to the waist, wearing only a pair of tattered shorts, pushed a sharp stick down the length of the fish and placed it at the front of the raft, next to the other two. Provided he rationed them, this should be enough to last him six more days.

The sun sent down its rays in a swathing blanket of heat, burning the skin on the man's back and cooking his food.

Some weeks ago the man had left his home, the frozen wasteland known as Greenland, and departed in search of a better life, a life devoid of the endless winter and miserable townsfolk.

He had sailed south, spending the first few days with nothing to see but endless sea, then docked at the port of Liverpool and picked up supplies of tea and rum along with a few deckhands to assist him.

Then they had proceeded farther south until they reached the Horn of Africa, where they had encountered a vicious storm. The sky blackened and thunder crashed; lightning flickered across the sky and licked the mast, which promptly splintered and set ablaze. Fifty-foot waves battered the hull and leapt up,

until one gigantic monster rose up and split the ship clean in half.

The man, the captain, leapt overboard and clung to a piece of driftwood while the ship collapsed, until he was knocked unconscious by the falling mast. When he came to, his ship, crew and cargo were all gone, and he was adrift north of what he didn't know to be Madagascar.

Now he ate a sun-roasted, skewered fish at the front of his raft. It was chewy, and a bit smoky, but otherwise all right. The sun carved through the sky and eventually set, and the stars came out to play. The man lay back on his make-shift raft and gazed at the stars, feeling a wave of bliss wash over him. After all he had been through, it was worth it just for this moment.

A MYSTERIOUS BUTTON IS FOUND
WITH NO KNOWN FUNCTION

“*B*utton,” said Jim.

“Brrraaaaautton,” said the parrot.

Jim could not see out of his left eye. An eyepatch lay where there was once dignity. His corset was tight, and a bright crimson red. Pants? No. He wore pantaloons. Pants were for men with jobs with dignity. He was something lesser. Something inhuman.

“Keep your hands inside of the ride at all times,” said Jim without any passion. Once the passengers settled in, he turned the key of the console and pressed a green button. This happened every day of the summer. He was twenty-three.

“This is the last summer,” he told himself. After this year, he'd have his Bachelors of History from a middling college in the middle of a city nobody cared about. Children screamed far away, and then ceased, and then screamed again. Today there was no line. A few teenage boys had ridden the ride five or six times in a row now. Every time the boys disembarked, they made a show of running to the back of the barricades. After weaving through the iron maze, they would smile at Jim, as if they had never seen him before. They were obnoxious.

It was a simple ride. A trolley disguised as a pirate ship ran along a track submerged in water. It went up, and up, and up, and then down and around. The whole ordeal took two minutes and forty-five seconds on the dot. Pirate Quest Adventure was a miracle of modern engineering. It was also far away from every other ride in the park, right between the bathrooms and an ice-cream stand.

The parrot was Jim's only company. Sometimes, Anna-Maria from the ice-cream stand would come over to offer Jim leftovers. Anna-Maria did not work today, a fact which Jim knew, as he always checked the schedules for her name. On the days their schedules did not intersect, there was an added dread to clocking in. Days where Anna did work were bearable. Even on days where they both worked parallel hours, seeing Anna-Maria was not guaranteed. The hope of leftovers kept Jim sane.

Part of Jim's training included parrot maintenance. It was alive, unfortunately. Jim's white pantaloons had crackers stuffed into them. His phone, as well as his wallet and keys, were in a locker somewhere. Should Mr. Mendelzberg come by and find him in possession of anything other than crackers, he would be in trouble. The parrot shat non-stop. A plastic cover over his arm helped to lessen the number of times a week Jim had to wash his uniform.

"I smell like parrot shit," he thought to himself out loud. It was a moment of fierce introspection. "I smell like parrot shit, and Anna-Maria knows it."

"SKrAAAAARRRR," said the bird, its beak inches from Jim's ear. The bird shit again.

Jim stared into the running water. His expression was empty. He looked at the submerged track. Two minutes and thirty seconds had passed since he pressed the green button on the console. The sound of machinery and puberty echoed down the track.

Fifteen seconds remained when Anna-Maria tapped Jim on his good shoulder.

“Hey!” she said. “How's it going today, bud?” Her voice was special. It occurred to Jim that he was older than her.

“Oh, hey. I thought you were off today.” What a fuck-up. He gave himself away.

“Oh, I took Courtney's shift. We had some extra ice cream today. Did you want some?” Anna-Maria did not deduce his autistic schedule checking habit from his knowledge of her shift.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Anna-Maria left. All that remained were the boys, still writhing in the ship. “Time to disembark, mateys.” Jim knew that he smelled like shit. The boys ran the maze again, and boarded again. Jim breathed heavier. He thought about how he smelled.

“BRaaaaaaaaAAAAaaaaaaaarRRRR,” said the parrot. Jim could feel blood shoot into his eyes.

“Brrrrraarrrr. Die! Die! Die!” said the bird. Jim looked at the console with the key and the big green button. He closed his eyes and pressed the button. This would be the boys' sixth expedition into the known. Anna-Maria was bringing him ice cream. She would smile when she gave it to him. It meant something. It meant...

When Jim opened his eyes, the console had only one button. It was black with a skull and crossbones in the middle. Jim breathed in deep through his nose and out of his mouth. As Anna-Maria turned the corner, she saw him punch the console with all his might.

WEEKEND BBQ AT THE MILLER'S
HOUSE

Whenever Tommy chose to attend Bev and Reed's weekend barbecue, something incredibly bad would happen. The first time, it was an accident in a nuclear power plant in Japan. The second time was an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The third was a fire in a nearby mental hospital. Each time, the incredibly bad thing got closer and closer. Now it was knocking on his door. They had sent Noel to invite him.

"Mom and Dad are asking if you're coming to the barbecue."

"I can't. You see, whenever I come to the barbecue, something incredibly bad happens. First it was the Japanese nuclear—"

"Aunt June is coming too."

"It was at four, was it?"

It had almost been a year since Tommy last saw June. She was rarely ever in town. Upon reflection, maybe June was all the more reason why he shouldn't go. Maybe this time June was the bad thing itself. But then, also, what else was he going to do all day? So he wore his plainest aloha shirt and went over to the supermarket to buy some beer. When he arrived at their backyard, June was nowhere to be seen.

“Hi, Tommy. Thanks for the beer. Though we do have punch already.”

“Hello, Bev. Uh, do you know if...”

“June? She said she might be late. Just sit over there. The ribs are almost done.”

The kids were playing Jenga over at the kids table. He said hi to Reed and complimented the ribs, then sat at the end of the adults table next to Harry, who was an old ex-navy pilot.

“When I looked over, the wing was completely gone. So now I was losing altitude with the landing gear failing to open, and the engine was probably on fire, and I couldn’t see the carrier from all the smoke. Then the AHI started to spin, and I could feel myself starting to faint, but then at the very last second I...”

Hours passed and everyone got drunk. Tommy stopped ruminating on whatever might happen and ended up drinking all the beers he bought. The Jenga tower collapsed and was rebuilt many times over. The sun had started to set and people were leaving. Just as he was about to call it a day, June showed up.

“Oh, Tommy, I haven’t seen you in a year almost! Do you know if there are any sausages left?”

“June, you... sausages... I have to go pee. Wait here.”

So he went inside. Noel and his sisters were watching TV on the couch. He passed behind them to get to the toilet. It took him a long while to finish, then he flushed, but the water rose instead of flushing down and the toilet flooded. At first he panicked, then he felt relieved. This was it. This was the extent to which the bad thing would be bad. He drunkenly got out to tell Reed about the toilet but realized Noel and his sisters were now watching an emergency broadcast. It was happening. When he managed to break out of shock, he ran outside and interrupted June and Bev’s conversation.

“June, quick! Come with me to the front yard!”

Together they went out front and watched it happen while eating sausages.

A BOY DISCOVERS THEY CAN TALK TO BEARS

Sunday morning and the kid slips out of bed, into linen breeches and top, ties their long black hair back with a strip of leather, reaches under their bed to grab the longbow and arrows, then runs out the door and into the cool summer morning. The kid is going deer hunting.

It had rained the night before and the kid feels the damp grass beneath their feet, a feeling that never failed to comfort them. They walk the dirt path that takes them from their house through the village, past the church and into the forest. Bird-song is all around them, light and angelic trills, deep and arborous echoes both near and distant. The sun falls through the gaps in the canopy, sending down great beams lighting up the flora and fauna.

The kid goes down to the river and follows it to the lake, hoping some deer or rabbits will be grazing nearby. Much to their disappointment, there's no sign of life here, not even the birds. So the kid resorts to fishing. They go to the edge of the lake, roll up their trousers and wade in. The cool water provides a much-appreciated relief from the encroaching summer heat. They load an arrow in their bow and stand perfectly still for a

minute. Waiting. Waiting. The kid sees a fish flit by and fires—a hit right through the eye! The kid collects his arrow, wades back to the edge of the lake and puts the fish down on the bank, then goes to resume their position again. Another five minutes pass; another fish is collected, this time pierced through the side. The kid stays out there for a good hour before leaving with three more, skewered neatly along one of his arrows.

As they head back upstream, going back to the village, they hear an unusually sonorous voice coming from behind a thicket of bushes.

“Yeth! I’ve goht wohn!” the voice says, followed by the sound of crunching bone and noisy swallowing.

The kid crouches low, leaves their arrow at a nearby tree and slowly advances. They reach the bush just when they see the river beyond, in the middle of which is a huge brown animal, swallowing the remains of the fish they had just caught.

Jesus Christ! the kid thinks and scrambles back behind the bush.

As the kid watches, they think the creature resembles a dog, in the way that it moves and its small ears.

“Mmm, that wath a nithe wohn,” the voice says.

The kid rapidly looks around until they realise it came from right in front of them.

“What the hell is happening,” the kid whispers under their breath.

This animal ponders the water briefly before diving in face first, returning with another spasming fish clenched between its jaws.

The kid slowly rises and creeps back to the tree where they left the skewered fish, then returns to the bush. They go beyond, tentatively holding the arrow in front of them. At the scent of more fish, the brown animal turns its bulk toward the kid. It rises up, standing on its hind legs, and towers in the air.

The kid quickly takes a fish off the arrow and extends it in

front of them. "H-Here. This is for y-you." They toss it up to the animal, who catches it before dropping down to all fours.

"Mmm, I haven't had wohn of thethe before," it says.

The kid titters. "Good, right?"

The animal emits a low rumble, which seems to be an agreement, before it drops the fish, slack-jawed.

"Wait... you can underthand me?" they both say at the same time.

The kid promptly passes out.



When the kid comes to, the sun is spreading the colour of blood across the sky. The huge brown animal lies next to them, keeping them warm with one eye open.

The kid jumps, before remembering what had happened. The animal raises its head, snorts, settles back down.

"H-H-Hello," the kid says.

"Tho," the animal says, "you're finally awake." Its deep, resonant voice seems to rattle the kid's bones. "I wath wondering how long you would be out for. Thankth for the food, by the way."

"Hey!" the kid says indignantly. "You weren't supposed to eat all of it. That was going to be my dinner."

"Oh, don't worry," the animal says, "I can get you plenty more."

"You can?"

"Come on." The animal gets up. "I'll thow you."

THERE'S A PRAIRIE DOG PROBLEM
IN THE BIG CITY

“Get on the fucking ground!” cried the masked prairie dog in the gas station. He held his rifle steady, eyes burning with hate. “You, get up. I want everything in the registers and one of those five-day-old hot dogs,” he growled at the clerk.

William picked himself off the bright linoleum floor and carefully started to put the cash in a plastic bag. Blood dripped from his nose onto the cash. Wiping it away, he dumped the change into the bag, ran to the hot dog rollers, and quickly prepared a meal for his guest.

“Quickly, quickly, you cocksucker. Give me the bag!” the prairie dog commanded as he kept the rifle squarely pointed at William. The clerk slid the bag and the meal to the rifleman, who knelt and took a few bites of the hot dog. He nibbled it with the efficiency of a beaver chewing wood, then spat out the last bit and looked into the bag.

“Blood? The fuck is this shit?” the prairie dog screamed as he shot William in the head. He looked to his left and his right, checked the cash again, and quickly exited the gas station. A

smile crept over his face. Years of problems were over. Now he could buy a ticket back to Washington to see his family.

When the customers finally lifted their heads, they saw that the prairie dog had vanished with paper money strewn onto the ground. It was discovered after viewing the CCTV footage that the rodent had neglected checking overhead when he came out—four frames of the footage showed a hawk carrying him away.

A CHEF COOKS A MEAL FOR A VERY
UNPLEASANT GUEST

A full-course meal,” said the man on death row.
“Don’t fuck with me, Chef,” said the warden on the other side of the bars. Next to him, a skinny boy in an apron held a notepad and a pen.

“I can assure you I am not.”

The warden clicked his tongue.

Chef turned to the skinny boy. “Why don’t you surprise me?”

The skinny boy didn’t know what to say. He had never seen this kind of attitude from the other inmates here.

The warden sighed. “You got that, Cookie?”

“I, uh,” the cook startled.

“Go on, then!”

The cook looked at the warden, then at Chef, then closed his notebook and left.

“So, how long do we have left?”

“You,” said the warden, “have got till evening. Personally, I can’t wait.”

“Perfect,” said Chef, smiling.

“What are you so happy about?”

Chef didn't answer.

The cook returned with a tray when he was in the middle of a confession.

"Sorry, Father. One second." Chef stepped to the bars. "Ah, how exciting—wait a minute."

The cook stopped with his hand halfway to the tray.

"Son," Chef said, taking off his glasses, "what are you doing?"

"Your last meal? Sir?" The confusion was palpable in his voice.

"I ordered a full-course meal."

"Yes... and here it is."

"A full-course meal consists of an appetizer, a main course, and a dessert. Which culinary school did you go to?"

"I went to high school."

"What's the problem here?" the warden asked, stepping in.

"I regret to say that this is not what I ordered," Chef said.

"Well, I regret to say I don't give a shit."

"Sir, I have a right to enjoy the last meal of my choosing. That, the state must provide. Now I have already specified what it is that I—"

"All right, all right!" the warden shouted. He glared at the cook. "Take that shit back and give this asshole what he asked. And get it right this time," he said, pointing at his face.

Chef returned to his bunk. "As I was saying, Father... If God leaving his Son to die on the cross isn't filicide, then what is?"



An hour later, the cook returned with a cart. Chef left the priest's side, who was nodding off, and came to meet him. The tray was opened. Chef adjusted his glasses.

"Much, much better, son. Bold choice of apéritif, I must say."

"You gave this bastard wine?" the warden roared, rising from his stool.

The cook slinked back from the warden's looming figure.

"Now, now," Chef said, "he did serve what I asked."

The warden grumbled.

"Is that *velouté de champignons* I see?"

"What?" the cook asked back, wiping on his apron.

"Cream soup."

"Yeah."

Chef nodded approvingly as the cook lifted the trays one by one, until they reached the main course.

"Son," he said, "what colour is that wine?"

"White."

"And what did you do a very good job in preparing as the main course?"

"A burger."

"Made with what meat?"

"Beef."

Chef looked at the cook and smiled weakly.

"We don't pair white wine with beef, son."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" the warden cut in.

"This is a basic culinary principle. It's regrettable, but I cannot be served something—"

The warden's nostrils flared with rage as he kicked the cart, sending plates crashing down death row. The cook jumped back. The priest jolted awake.

"I swear to God, I will choke you myself, you..." the warden said, baton unsheathed.

"I wouldn't suggest you use His name in vain in front of the padre."

"One last chance!" the warden roared, then grabbed the cook by the collar and said, "If you fuck this one up, I swear to —just go!"

The cook fixed his apron and ran back to the kitchen.

When he came in with a new cart, deep orange was shining from outside.

“...and what about Abraham? He was more than ready to sacrifice his own child. Eager, even.”

The priest was about to reply when the cart arrived. They all came standing around it: Chef, the cook, the warden, and the priest.

“Go ahead, son,” Chef said softly. “Serve it.”

With hands almost trembling and neck burning from the warden’s gaze, he unveiled the main course.

“Voilà!” Chef exclaimed. “A beautifully crafted sole meunière! This shall go along perfectly with your white wine, my boy.”

The cook just stared at the fish and chips on the plate.

“Well, let’s bring it in!”

The warden unlocked the door and the cook wheeled the cart into the cell, bringing it before Chef, sitting on his bunk.

Chef smiled at his last meal and looked up at the skinny boy in an apron.

“Be proud of your work, son,” he said to the cook. “This is almost too good for a man to eat.”

The cook looked away and smiled meekly. The warden rolled his eyes.

“Father, would you lead us in thanksgiving?”

The priest nodded. All four closed their eyes and hung their heads in solemn prayer.

Then Chef opened his eyes, grabbed the bowl of cream soup, and slammed it straight into the warden’s face. He was laughing as the warden beat him with the baton, laughing through bloody lips and cut teeth, and laughing still as they dragged him to the gravel range where the firing squad waited.

“Mea culpa...”

Later, the cook walked to the other end of the corridor, towards the kitchen, with newfound faith in his title.

A WISE OLD MAN DEFEATS A TIME- DRAGON

The old man produced a pot, some water, and an open flame to the time-dragon.

“If your powers over time are absolute, then watch this pot of water boil,” the old man said as he poured the name-brand water into the pan and started the flame.

“Foolish mortal, any task you present, I can accomplish. And when I accomplish this, your daughter will be mine...” chuckled the dragon, staring into the pot.

“Now remember, if you stop looking at the water for any reason, I win.” The old man started to walk out of the cave. “And as a dragon of your stature, you can never break your word, lest you lose your powers.”

“Yeah, yeah...” the dragon muttered as he focused on the pot of water

Three hours passed. Nothing happened.

The dragon grunted and used his powers to fast-forward time.

Hours passed. Nothing happened. Exhaling, he moved faster in time.

Days passed; still the water would not boil. Focusing harder, he made time move faster.

Still nothing.



10^{100} years later...

The dragon cried, “what manner of foolishness is this?” as he lifted his head to reveal... nothing. An endless void stretched before him. Screeching like a incel deprived of his tendies, the time-dragon produced a warp to send him into the past. Back in time he went, past the Reckoning of the Greenlanders, past the North Korean global empire, past the building of the Utah border walls. Back and back he went, until he found himself outside the cave, where the old man was exiting.

“You tricked me!” he cried out, pointing at the cheeky old man.

“And you took your eyes off the pot of water. I win.”

AN ARTIST FINDS THE ULTIMATE
INSPIRATION BUT DOESN'T HAVE A
BRUSH OR PEN

Gerald ran into the gift shop, shoving old and young alike. He had wandered into the art museum looking for inspiration, but only in jest. So inspiration had given him a spark, but only in jest.

Gerald eyed the Mona Lisa pens next to the register and grabbed one, only for the security guard to tap him on the side of the shoulder with a baton.

"Sir... can I assume you paid for that?" hissed the officer as he tapped the shoulder not once, not twice, but thrice.

"Look, I know what I want to create. I can feel it, so please just give me some space!" the artist answered with a sniff as he clicked the pen and popped out the receipt tape from the depressingly white dispenser.

"Sir, drop the pen and please leave," the guard politely commanded—but was still ignored, as the artist was searching for the right spot to start. The pen was about to touch paper when the guard sighed and grabbed Gerald's hand. The artist cried in pain and dropped the pen. It hit the ground not once, not twice, but thrice.

"Come on. Let's get you out of the gift shop an—" the guard

stopped as Gerald slammed the man's arm again and again, trying to free himself from the iron grip.

"If you... don't let me... go now... the greatest work... in the 20th century... will go... uncreated you... cretin!" the artist exhaled with each strike.

Unfortunately, what Gerald could not know was how when the guard was a baby, his father would call him cretin—and how when he was 15, his father called him cretin, and the boy repaid his father with a black eye. And when in the boxing ring, the only truly beautiful match he ever had the privilege of fighting was the one where his opponent called him cretin.

And so the guard slammed Gerald against the white wall of the museum and began his work. Each strike of the baton was met with a cry of pain and a streak of blood. Over and over again—not once, not twice, not even thrice did the guard stop. But, eventually, his muscles grew weary, and the real cops finally showed up. And in the end there was a red angel placing her hands atop a beaten and dazed Gerald's shoulders.

AN ALIEN FINDS SOMETHING
SURPRISING AT THE CRASH SITE OF
ITS SPACESHIP

*B*arox excreted parsox from his maxmox glands when he saw the two legs sticking from the front of the spacecraft. Again, Barox glanced, and again, more parsox.

“Clorx! They’re bipedal!” Barox transmitted to his third-rank spounx and conveyed the disgusting scene to them.

“No, stop showing that oh Yinx, my maxmox,” Clorx shot back. “Now I have to clean up the Xotorium! Thanks, Vixnix!”

“It’s not my fault that you decided to chug a flask of dihydrogen monoxide, you Vixnix!” Barox returned. “I wanted to go to the local gas giant and mingle with the iceoforms, but nooo, we had to give the local infestation a quick buzz to show them who’s 4arx!”

“Fine, whatever. Will it make you feel better if we deposit our excess isotopes in their atmosphere before we go?” Clorx countered.

“Fine, but only over one of their great bodies of fluid. Help spread it quicker across their ecosystem.”

A WOMAN REALIZES THAT SPIDERS
ARE BASICALLY CATS

On waking one morning, Susan suddenly came to the realization that spiders are, in fact, just small cats. It made perfect sense, really. Both hide a mischievous bite beneath a fuzzy exterior; both run for cover when you stomp through their territory; both love climbing her walls and hiding in her closets. Only a moment's thought was needed to complete the discovery, linking the two fond household companions. Susan was ecstatic.

As she sat, pondering the significance of her revelation, she spotted one of these small cats scurrying across the ceiling. She decided to name it Clover. It wouldn't do to have unnamed cats just hanging around her room. Shortly after naming her newfound companion, now skittering down her wall, she caught a glimpse of another amongst her window curtains. "So like a cat," she chuckled. "I'll call you Leopold." She scratched behind what she supposed were Leopold's tiny ears. Naming all of them would be fun!

As silly as it sounds, she was once afraid of tiny cats! She would shriek and leap into a flutter every time one would creep

from the corner of her room and skitter across the floor. She would call to her boyfriend to—

Oh no!

How many cats had she killed, and how many of these felicides had she been an accessory to? Her stomach crept into her throat. The joy of this morning's discovery was instantly erased from her mind.

As she was dwelling on the dozens of tiny cats and kittens she had executed—their tiny bodies still twitching, shrouded in toilet paper, unceremoniously flushed away—Susan realized she had to atone. A small winding sensation tickled her ankle. She checked to see Clover crawling toward her.

"Oh, Clover," she wept, "can you possibly forgive me?"

Clover crawled up her leg and onto her lap. He walked up her arm and rested in her hands. She knew he understood, and he forgave her. She would never hurt another cat again. She had to tell the world to stop their brutal campaign to rid human dwellings of these tiny cats.

She would need some signs, posters, advertising of some sort. Susan picked up the phone and requested the supplies she would need. As she waited, she imagined the viral ad blitz she could launch... With only some poster board and sharpies, she could even surpass E. B. White, in raising the status of tiny cats in the public's consciousness. In future years, arachnophobic would be an accusation leveled at those still backward enough to use the term spider.



"It sounded like she's in a much better mood than yesterday."

"Yeah, what the hell happened? Everyone seems on edge."

Frank, one of the hospital's orderlies, had taken the weekend off. While he enjoyed having the same weekend schedule as the

rest of his family, it seemed like every Monday, he'd hear about all the crazy shit that happened while he was out.

“Susan attacked the woman who brings the therapy cats! She wouldn't stop screaming. I think she convinced herself the cats were giant spiders or something.”

Paper, markers, and glitter glue in hand, they opened the door to Susan's room.

A MAN CROSSES AN OCEAN BY
HIMSELF II

The ocean stretched on before them, seemingly forever. The horizon over the ocean was not that of a curve below sight, but the point at which detail became too great for human comprehension. He could see many islands of myriad colours across the distance, some sweeping in archipelagic curves, others clustered together haphazardly, some alone. He was dressed just as he had been in the ambulance. He turned to look at the dark figure next to him, the voice of which seemed to speak into his mind rather than his ears.

YOU HAVE TO CROSS IT ALONE.

“Where’s everybody else?”

THEY ARE FARTHER ALONG THE SHORE. THE DISTANCE IS SO GREAT THAT YOU CANNOT SEE THEM.

“Does everyone have to cross it by themselves?”

NOT EVERYONE. ONLY THOSE WHO LIVED WITHOUT FINDING THEIR TRUTH. MOST PEOPLE DO NOT. BUT FROM YOUR TIME, IT IS NEARLY EVERYONE.

“What about those who don’t cross alone? How do they cross together in these little boats?”

THEY CROSS IN GREAT SHIPS, SWIFT AND LARGE, OF MANY SHAPES.

“What truth do you mean, anyway? I was a successful person. I was generous enough and—”

IT DOES NOT MATTER HOW MORALLY YOU LIVED. THERE ARE MANY ALONE IN THE OCEAN THAT WERE SAINTS AND HEROES TO THOSE AROUND THEM. THERE ARE THOSE ON THE SHIPS THAT YOU WOULD CONSIDER MONSTROUS, BUT THEY FOUND THE TRUTH THAT PASSED YOU BY.

“That doesn’t seem very fair.”

YOU WOULD UNDERSTAND IF YOU FELT THAT TRUTH. PERHAPS YOU WILL FIND IT OUT THERE.

The figure disappeared; the man stayed watching the ocean for what seemed to him hours, before he boarded the small boat. As he found his balance, he realised that he knew how to work the rigging. The knowledge had been given to him. A wind blew from the shore into the ocean, and he set off.



The weather was varied, the winds inconstant. He journeyed from island to island for rest and shelter. A haphazard mix of places, they seemed—many, nothing as one might expect from such overall balmy climates. There were the landscapes he expected: palmed sandy islands and jungled volcanoes rising from the deep, but some surprised him. He found islands of shady temperate forests, and patches of marsh and swamp within the ocean. He even swam below, briefly, to see how soft soil could be supported. *There must have been land everywhere*, he thought. The wet soil floated inexplicably above a dark abyss, which shot terror into his heart. He made immediately for a jungled pinnacle far off and remained on the island, surviving off breadfruit and plantains for some time.

WHY DO YOU REMAIN HERE?

“It’s the deep. I cannot bear to put myself above it.”

YOU WILL BE LOST HERE IN A HELL OF YOUR OWN CREATION. YOU WILL BE ALONE FOREVER.

The figure vanished and left the man alone. He stayed there for what felt like years. At first, his solitude was peaceful among the trees and animals that lived there with him. He wondered if this was their afterlife as well as his. He was comforted from his fear; but as time wore on, he felt a weight of loneliness that he had not felt in his sailing alone, and the safety of the island became monotony. The fear had been dulled, and the knowledge of loneliness drove him to conquer it. He did not know it yet, but the first flicker of truth formed in him.

He returned to the shore he had shunned since his landing, to the boat he had abandoned. It was untouched by the time apart. He pushed the boat out and set sail once again. Now he travelled without fear, passing islands of appearance he had little familiarity with: primeval visages of huge conifers and cycads; mossy islands of low and weak vegetation dotted with tall fungal growths. He passed stranger sights still—weird lands familiar but changed; younger visages than he had ever seen, from a world older than his time.

He landed on an island to explore it, his fear of the unknown gone, in a grove of blue fractal blossoms above white blooming glass. He closed his eyes and in contemplation found his truth. The dark figure stood beside him. He spoke to it without opening his eyes. “What’s at the end of the ocean?”

THERE ARE OTHER SHORES NOT FAR FROM HERE AND A PLACE YOU MIGHT CONSIDER PARADISE. YOU WILL SEE IT AS YOU LEAVE THIS ISLAND, BUT THE OCEAN GOES AROUND AND BEYOND. THERE IS NO TRUE END TO THE OCEAN.

The man left the grove and set sail again. He now passed in sight of other ships—thousands of small sailboats all travelling

towards the shining towers he saw in the distance. As they approached Paradise, a large ship passed them, raucous with singing, which the small boats began to pick up in a wave, all singing together.

Paradise was an endless chain of islands running perpendicular to their travel—lands and cities of myriad appearance, connected by bridges high above the many straits to the ocean beyond. The man stayed in Paradise for much time, revelling with many people he had known in life, and with far more who he had not. He was happy, but grew restive. He stood on a rope bridge between islands and gazed into the new ocean.

“I think I want to leave.”

THERE ARE ALWAYS SHIPS READY TO LEAVE. THOSE WHO HAVE FOUND TRUTH SELDOM STAY IN PARADISE. THEY TRAVEL BEYOND, EVENTUALLY.

“Where to?”

A NEW LIFE, NEW DISTANCES, SIGHTS MOST SWEET AND STRANGE. I CANNOT TRULY KNOW WHAT LIES BEYOND. IT IS NOT FOR ME. IT IS FOR YOU.

The man stayed a while longer in Paradise, saying goodbye to those who he knew would stay. He boarded a great swift ship with the others and sailed into the new distance.

A GIRL FINDS A KEY THAT UNLOCKS
A VERY SPECIAL DOOR

*K*nock, knock, knock. A faint scuffle the only response. The young girl tried the handle again, but she knew from previous experience that the effort would be a failure. She strained the handle in both directions until her wrist ached, and then screamed in frustration until her throat ached, too. She threw her hopelessly insufficient weight against the door, but this rattled her more than the wood. The door remained closed, unshaken, and, she imagined, amused.

A key, then, or an adult. These were the only two options available to her, if she hoped to open the door. They both would take time that she didn't have. The key was closer, and her previous explorations of the house allowed her to narrow her search to suspected locations, whereas an adult could be anywhere or nowhere.

She scrambled through the house in a desperate search that cost her painstaking minutes, but none of her suspicions gave up the key. She considered an adult again, but wasn't the time for finding an adult past? The best time to have found an adult was when the thought had first come to her. But now minutes had past, and she didn't have enough of them left to change her

mind. This thought returned to her twice more as she continued her search. Each time, she pushed it away with the knowledge that she had even less time now than the last time she had the thought. She started crying when she found the key. She wasn't sure if they were tears of exultation or devastation. It was in the first place she should have looked: the key drawer.

The door that would define the rest of her life opened to the key without complaint, all its amusement gone. Anxiety bubbled up inside her, as she braved a look beyond the door.

The body hung limp a foot above the ground, with a pale gold liquid running down one leg and dripping from between toes to form a puddle on the ground. The eyes stared at her wide and bloodshot, but the person behind them had gone. The girl realised immediately that even if she had opened the door in time, she would not have been strong enough to save her mother. She should have gone for an adult after all.

AN ISOLATED TOWN HEARS ABOUT
THE COLLAPSE OF SOCIETY FOR THE
FIRST TIME

“*W*hat? No way,” the bartender said as the man in the duster explained.

“I’m serious. Denver has fallen, along with Portland, Austin—hell, even Detroit,” the man in the duster responded, slamming his fist atop the bar and shaking his whiskey.

“You might say that ‘civilization has fallen,’ but it hasn’t. We still have a police force, a mayor. Hell, we even have one of those metubers from the metubes,” the bartender said as he gestured at the air. “Civilization is just fine.”

The man in the duster blinked, just staring as the bartender continued to clean his pristine glasses with a cloth.

“Tender, when was the last time you got on the internet?” he asked.

“Me, personally? About two months ago, when I got the Congo to send me one of ‘em scantily novels about a man who fucks inanimate or conceptual objects. I’d prefer not to go further in polite company, but it’s the only use for the e-reader I got for my birthday, and I—”

“Wait, you’re telling me the last time you tried to use the

internet was months ago to get porn?" asked the man in the duster, with a look of amazed concern on his face.

"Why, yes. And it's not porn, sir. It's erotica."

The man in the duster blinked for a few moments and took a shot. "Look, just try getting on the internet now. Go ahead, I'll wait."

"Why would I want to do that?" the bartender asked. "I'm quite happy with the erotic novel I'm still working through."

"Stop!" screeched the man. "Stop conflating using the internet with porn. Just go to some site—any site!"

The bartender huffed and pulled his Kindle from behind the counter. He tapped on it a few times, and his face contorted with astonishment.

"Wait... why can't I reach the e-reader store?"

"Because there is no e-reader store anymore. There is no civilization to maintain the servers that feed your degenerate behavior. That's what I've been trying to tell you!" cried the man in the duster.

"Look, I've been patient with you thus far, but while civilization may have collapsed, there is no need to call me a degenerate. I'm going to have to ask you to leave," the bartender stated, putting his e-reader down atop the ashen counter.

"Fuck it." The man in the duster laid paper on the counter and walked out.

AN ICE-CREAM TRUCK DRIVER
ENCOUNTERS THE LOCAL CANNIBAL

So way back when, I use to drive this ice-cream truck... real beater. Probably spent more time cooling the engine than the merchandise. Only had one speed: dead stop. Anyhow, rust bucket that it was, the kids would still come running when I rounded the bend blarin' La Cucaracha, or some other such nonsense to let the kiddies know I was comin'.

I had worked out a pretty good routine that summer. I'd go over to the lake around noon and kinda do these slow loops around the edge for a few hours. Come 3:00, I'd zip over to City Park. There was some summer camp thing that let out then, and all these guilty parents would pay me to cheer their kid up. See, these children just spent all day in that hot classroom, knowing damn well that most of their friends were at the lake, screamin' and swimmin' and havin' themselves a real summer. So when mom comes, she tries to bring a bit of the beach to them.

To be fair, by the time they were halfway through their pop, they looked just like the beach kids: a mess of color all over their face and hands. All the blue-faced ones just ate the Sonic pop. The yellow-faced ones had the Tweety Bird (yeah, this was years before SpongeBob). But most of the kids looked like they

came right out of some horror movie—just a mess of red all over themselves. That was the Cherry Bomb, and it was the hot shit that summer. I was always running out.

Anyhow, this one day I'd been circling the lake, spreading disappointment with my "Cherry Bomb Sold Out" sign. I was just as put-out, 'cause these kid took forever coming up with their second pick. I'd be sitting there for a good ten minutes, waiting for 'em to either give up and go back to playin', or settle with some other flavor. It was already, like, 3:15 and I needed to get out, if I wanted to catch the rich brats at the park.

I gave little Tommy a Tweety Bird or some shit, switched the chime off and high-tailed it out of there. My rust bucket groaned as we snaked through one of those rural back roads. As I was making the final turn, this deer was just standing there in the road. It finally came to its senses and started to jump away. I had the brake pressed all the way to the floor, but that damn ice-cream truck was whipped with a lot of miles on it. Old bastard just didn't have much grip in those dusty back roads.

Three of the deer's legs and part of its torso, 'bout a foot or so in width, got through clear to the back of the truck. A hoof clipped my arm, and it felt like someone had hit it with a hammer.

I don't even know how I kept on the road. It was all just adrenaline and muscle memory, I guess. I hopped out of the cab, brushed the glass and deer hair off me and assessed the situation. The truck was done. My shoulder was sore as hell, and I had a pretty good gash on my arm... but I was damn lucky just to be alive after all that.

I was probably standing there like an idiot for five minutes, tryin' to figure out what to do. (Remember, if this was before SpongeBob, it was also before cell phones.) After a while, this truck came up from the opposite direction. I can only imagine what was going through his mind, seeing an ice-cream truck covered in gore. But he pulled over and I gave him the full story.

He had a couple wide-eyed kiddos in the back seat. I was thinkin' this would give them nightmares for days.

He offered me a ride to the hospital and hooked me up with a buddy of his who had a tow truck. I guess as a way of thanking him, I told him he was free to grab whatever he wanted from the truck. With the engine off, the inventory was only going to keep for a few hours anyway. At this point, his kids were running around, and we were trying to keep them from seeing the crime scene on the hood of the truck. I opened the door to the back, so they could take their pick of the ice cream.

The drive to the hospital was surreal. We drove in silence for 15 minutes, dad in front with his Sonic pop, me with Tweety, and those two faces in the rear-view mirror covered in that familiar cherry red...

