

# **Any Other Day**

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One: Percy

As she sleeps the colors

blare in her head. All sharp tones and contrasts on the wheels of the driverless dream-cars. All blurred faces on the corner of Hampton and Main:

faces showing fear. She sees her hands and knows them, she sees the stains on her fingers and remembers a moment of pain. The scene shifts and someone calls out in caution

from a place above her sight. Their language is not livid but luscious

like the colors, and everywhere the words refract and alter, as they pass through windows. Then something she sees in the corner of her vision—giving off a subtle, softened prism shine—and with a

grasping stoop and crawl she rends this new thing from station. There is a scream, and the bedlam of a hundred horns, and every part seems pierced but strangely right. The clamor grows

and cracks

and crashes.

Percy wakes. The noise of her dream bleeds into the whine of her clock radio buzzer until her hand finds the snooze and strikes. Her fingers rest with the echoing impact above the cool green halogen glow of the clock, and in the shock of silence she feels the dream fade. She wipes the sleep from her eyes and reaches for the pack of Winston Full Flavor cigarettes beside the now quiet alarm, knocking an empty wine bottle from her nightstand.

"Shit."

Leaning over the bed, she silently congratulates herself for being so thorough in last night's binging as to not leave a single drop to stain the carpet. Percy leans back, drawing a single cigarette from the pack and lighting it. Percy exhales blue smoke into the dim light of her bedroom at 6:00am. Flicking ash into the overfull ashtray, she marvels at the fact that only yesterday, Tuesday, she was getting up and groggily crossing to the bathroom, turning on the shower and opening the shampoo: getting ready for work. But not today: "Today there will be no shower," she thought, trying to find confidence in the idea. For eight years, two months, and thirteen days, there have been 6:00am showers for Percy. She thinks about this, trying to figure out how many days exactly that would be, but before she can get past 365 multiplied by eight she recalls the strange feeling of her dream. Car horns, someone was screaming like crazy.. .but nothing else would come back.

"I can't believe I quit my fucking job yesterday."

She thinks back to the feeling of elation she'd had walking down the hall of cubicles and offices, past a standing crowd of fellow employees with a box of her desk contents held close in her arms. It would have seemed strange that they all stood to watch her go, but she knew that they must have heard her final exhortation to good old glad-handing plastic-faced Finner—something about a stapler and a quiet room with a webcam. She had hurled her blue metal Staplemate at his head for that extra bit of authenticity, missed just over his left shoulder. He had not screamed a little girly scream as she had hoped he would, nor had he reciprocated her anger. He had simply ducked his head and said coolly: "I guess the term 'crazy bitch' wasn't too strongly worded after all." She was proud that her eyes hadn't even widened at the comment, or when she noticed the huge crack splintering out from the stapler's point of impact with the glass partition behind Finner.

Then came the long walk to the elevator, the quiet awe of the office, and the final smile on Finner's slimy face as the elevator doors glided shut. Then came the two bottles of Pinot Noir and the first night of freedom: the exalted disregard of Madonna on the stereo at midnight and a drunken dance in the living room; the long forgotten list of numbers and the sounds of two-dozen answering machines.

Now comes the morning after.

The sting of hot ash on her stomach brings Percy back to the present. She swears dutifully and forces the Winston butt into the already over ashtray before wiping away the fallen piece of cherry, leaving a dark smudge on the little rolls of her exposed belly. She gathers the central roll in her fingers and pulls, drawing the skin about two or three

inches away from herself. With a sigh she picks up the television remote and turns on the set facing her chaotic bed. The late-night Lifetime original now replaced by paid programming—apparently before sunrise is a good time to sell juicers—and after a moment's surfing she quickly turns the set off again. To sleep her hangover off would make the most sense, but so many years of a six day work week leaves a routine to be reckoned with, and the same sleep cycle that had stolen every Sunday's chance for rest had hardly been shaken by one night's drinking. Again she thinks back:

The other two faces in Pinner's corner office look on demurely as she states her case. They will not show sympathy or understanding because they don't feel either; they will not show contempt because they have learned how to hide it. This is hopeless:

"I've worked in this office for twice as long as him, I've got a master's and he's got a bachelor's, I'm in here an hour earlier every day and an extra day every week, I've got twice the contacts and three times the client list, and you're *still* promoting him over me! What the fuck Finner?" She stares down at the diminutive man seated in front of her and adds to herself: "*You* don't even deserve to be my superior, much less Pearson."

"Now, Percy let's not fly off the handle here. Pearson has worked very hard for this company, and we feel that he has what it takes to handle this responsibility." At this she glances in Pearson's direction, just in time to catch a smug smile as it flees from his lips. "I know you asshole," she thinks, trying to say as much with a glare while Finner goes on with his standard issue brush-off.

"The emotional stress that comes with this kind of bump is no laughing matter, and right now you're not exactly showing a confident aptitude in that department."

"No kidding," said Pearson, fingering the paperclip caddy from his seat on Pinner's desk, glancing down at his watch. Pinner, seated behind his desk, apparently heard nothing.

"You little shit," she spits the words at his face.

"Percy! Let's keep the personal attacks to ourselves, shall we?" Pinner stares at her wide-eyed (he heard that one). She wonders how they learn to show genuine shock like that, these people she knows to be beyond offence.

"Okay, Pinner, we shall. But how about we also keep our hands to ourselves at the next Christmas party, what do you say Pearson?" She regrets saying this before she has even finished her sentence—not in any hurry to remind them of the drunken display she had made of herself four months earlier—but it certainly gets Pearson's attention.

"Oh, come on! You were begging for it."

"Only because I didn't know how small and unsatisfying *it* would be."

"That's *enough* you two." Pinner slams his fist down on the wood-coated carbon fiber and looks at the two of them, comfortable in his parental role. "This argument is hardly productive, and it's completely beside the point. Now unless either of you have anything constructive to add I suggest you get back to work."

"Crazy bitch."

"What did you just call me?"

"Crazy, bitch. I think you heard me."

"Oh, well you can just..."

"I said that was *enough*, Percy. Now I know Pearson's wording was too strong, but he does have a point. You are constantly at odds with the people in this office, and if

you can't play for the team then we are certainly not going to put you in charge of it."

With this Firmer crosses his hands on the desk and looks expectantly at her, Pearson assumes the same posture, and together they stare her down like two cops on a cornered crook: "go for it, we dare you."

"You want strong wording? How about this: I—fucking—quit!"

The alarm screams on its second round of rousing. This time she reaches for the off button and pushes it with a forceful desperation, as if it worked for larger alarms. Reaching for her cigarettes again she picks up the empty pack from last night, balls it in her hand, throws it at the television. Standing up and out of her bed, Percy feels suddenly stifled by the smell of smoke and sweat and wine. Crossing the room, she opens the window to the right of her TV set.

It is a chilly spring morning at sunrise, and from her eighth-story bedroom window Percy looks down between the eastern walls of her apartment building, on the streets of Midtown. The first soldiers of the city's infrastructure are about their business—here a mailman, there a garbage truck, and a spotting of early joggers. She hugs herself to guard against the cold and considers the people below, all of them with headings and deadlines, out in the brisk morning air with something to prove and the will to prove it. Where would she ever find any of that again? Uncertain, she turns from the window and back to the mess of her bedroom.

Picking up the wide-necked wine bottle she walks through the hall to her kitchen, past the bookshelves half full of business manuals and motivational texts about maximizing potential, half full of the promising books of her youth—all of them so haughtily cynical and sure of themselves in their judgments of the world. She runs the

wine bottle along their spines as she passes and taps it on the bar between the kitchen and living room before rounding left into the kitchen itself. The sink is a mess of reheated leftovers and last night's other empty bottle, with the remains of a bowl of ice cream balanced precariously on its mouth. This she removes and lays down in the sink, turning on the water to rinse it out, but she quickly turns the water off again and instead rests her hands on either side of the sink, hanging her head over the dirties and recycling with a sudden wave of nausea. "*I could puke right now,*" she thinks, "I haven't puked in four years." Although the thought has some excitement for her, she waits a moment and the nausea passes, and as she remains head down and breathing deeply she catches a waft of her own aroma: musky and stale from the night before.

"Maybe a shower would be a good idea after all."

The water is hot and soothing to her parched skin. Percy looks over the line of various cleansing products along the molded fiberglass shelves of her shower wall and wonders when she started needing so many ways of washing herself. Picking up a stylish white bottle of body wash (with soothing aloe and vitamin E) she opens it and squeezes liberally into her periwinkle loofa, drawing out lather with her hands; she begins to rub herself down. Suddenly she realizes that she is crying. Without understanding why, she sits down on the floor of the shower against the back wall and rests her head against her knees. The water falls, slightly cooled by the air, to her hair and skin and Percy sobs openly.



"Okay, Percy. You're thirty-four, and you've just quit your job, without any possibility of a reference. You have no friends; your parents are dead, and you've got three maxed-out credit cards. What the fuck are you going to do now?"

She sits a while weeping and wondering at the answers to her own questions. Finally the water turns frigid and she reaches out to turn it off. In reaching she finds her Lady Schick razor, mounted beside the faucet. She plucks the razor from its perch and examines it, running a pruned finger across the blades. She looks at the finger and lifts up the small, bloodless cut with her thumbnail. A vision of her pallid corpse found weeks later in the tub flashes before her mind's eye.

"Yeah, right. You don't even use this thing to shave anymore."

The two months of growth on her legs lay slick against her skin as testament. She carefully places the razor back into its wall-mount and rises from the shower floor, rolling the notion of suicide around in her head. Percy has always agreed with the idea that to kill yourself is the single most self-absorbed thing a person could do. But then, she also considers the majority of human acts to be self-absorbed and, viewing self-absorbedness as a central element of humanity, she has never had anything against suicide in principle. In the absence of other viable options, why not?

Before now, she has seen no reason to consider herself a candidate for self-termination, as she has termed it in the past, but in her present situation Percy finds a surprising kind of comfort in the thought of ending it all for the sake of her own inability to think of anything better to do.

As she dries herself off, Percy runs over the particulars in her head. The thing that has always bothered her about suicide is other people's tendency to make someone else's

decision into their own personal tragedy. She could not stomach the thought of people reading about her in the paper and crying to themselves: "What a shame. She was so young. There must have been something someone could have done." She would not stand for such sniveling on her behalf, but how to avoid it? People will have to know her position, on her terms, and understand that this is what she wants. There will have to be a public account, authored by her, so that the media couldn't spin her story into another great American heartbreaker. There is only one course that she can see: an open letter to the newspaper. She could write it herself and drop it in a city mailbox, just before doing the deed. But at this she stops and wonders: "How am I going to do this?"

She slips back into her pajamas and considers the possibilities. The razor idea: definitely out, Percy has never had much of a tolerance for blood and has no confidence whatsoever in herself as a surgeon. "I'd fuck that up for sure, and be bleeding for hours and probably have a change of heart and grab a Band-Aid." She also has no access to firearms, and doesn't like guns, in her mind that leaves bathtub electrocution, stepping into traffic, and jumping from a building. Of these options she likes the last: "Least painful, and least likely to fail. The mess will be quite a problem for someone, but that can't be helped. But which building?"

As she thinks over potential jump sites (ten stories at least, not a tourist spot) she hears her cell phone ringing somewhere in the apartment. Puzzling briefly over where she'd left it last night, she hears the Continental ring tone issuing from her bedroom. Running down the hallway she is struck still by the memory of last night's final drunken act. At somewhere around 2:30am, Percy had dug out her old college date book and dialed alphabetically down the list of phone numbers in the back. She must have made

over twenty calls before finally passing out; leaving messages along the way to any answering machine that would listen (miraculously no one had picked up). She creeps up to the still-ringing cell phone in terror and reads the number from the LCD on the outer face: "394-382-3849. I think that's Betha." She had not spoken to her college roommate in over six years. Awash in uncertainty, she hurriedly picks up the phone and asks nervously:

"Hello?" There is a moment of silence, as if the person on the other end is rethinking their decision to call.

"Percy?"

"Yes?" It was definitely Betha.

"It's Betha!"

"Oh, Betha! Hi, how are you?" Percy's voice is raised an octave in an instinctive return to familiarity.

"Oh I'm fine. I just got your message. It's been a while. Is everything alright?" There is a measured caution in Betha's speech, as if she is talking to a temperamental child.

"Sure. I was just enjoying my first day off."

"Yes. You mentioned quitting your job in the message, something about a stapler? What happened?"

"Oh, you know: creative differences or something like that." This is hardly the time for a full retelling. "How have you been?"

"Uh.. .good. Jake and I just took the kids to Grand Rapids to see their grandparents.. .and we bought a new car last month. A Toyota."

"A Toyota? That's great; I hear they're very dependable. It's so good to hear that you and Jake are doing well. I guess Amanda must be almost seven by now."

"Andrea, yes, she'll be seven in May. Listen, Percy, you said something in your message about getting together soon, I think that would be great. What are you doing for lunch today?" The concern is evident. Percy imagines Betha as one of those tearful former friends on the evening news, going on and on about wishing they'd have known.

"I was actually just sitting down to write a letter, and then I had plans for later on. But thanks for the offer."

"Okay, well, what about tomorrow?"

"Yeah, um.. .I'm not going to be available tomorrow either. Tell you what; I'll get back to you. Right now I've gotta go though. Thanks so much for calling."

"Percy, wait..."

"Oops, that's the other line. Talk to you soon, Betha. Bye!" She slapped the phone shut and tossed it on the bed.

"That was close."

Close to what? She should have just come right out with the whole thing, had a good laugh about it all with her old friend over a couple of cocktails at Ziggy's Bistro, maybe asked Betha about any possible openings at her firm. Percy walks over to her bed and digs the phone out of the mess of sheets, lifting it open and staring down at the little illuminated animation of a tuft of Dandelion seeds lurching away frame by frame in the wind, building up the courage to call Betha back. As her thumb moves up to the menu button the phone rings again, simultaneously vibrating and startling Percy so that she drops it at her feet and jumps back with a squeal. Somehow the speakerphone activates

and she hears the sound of her own outgoing message. Unaware of her phone having any such capability, she listens on apprehensively as her own voice chimes in, sounding robotic:

"Hello. You've reached Percy Degels. I'm away from the phone, so leave me a message with your name and number and I'll return your call at the earliest convenience, thank you." Beep.

A short silence follows, and then, barely perceptibly: a sigh, and a familiar voice.

"Percy? Hi, it's Gregor." The voice of her long-time ex-boyfriend sends Percy into a fit of sweating. Her ears burn as she recalls fractured, bleary seconds of what seems like it must have been a very long message, and she releases a painful whimper at the thought of what she does not remember having said. There is another pause on the speakerphone, and then Gregor continues slowly. "I'm sorry I missed your call last night. I really wish I could have been there for you. I'm sorry to hear about your job and all that, it sounds like a really unfortunate situation." He apparently still has a way of stating everything passively. Percy swats herself on the forehead, attempting to chide last night's drunken self, and immediately wishes she hadn't as her headache surges again. There is another pause. "To answer your question: No, I'm not seeing anyone right now, and I think it would be great to maybe get together with you sometime soon. I was thinking about coming down that way this weekend and, well, I've got your number now and you left me your address and, well.. I think it would be great to rediscover ourselves, together, like you said." Percy cringes and another wave of nausea rolls through her body.

"Oh my fucking God."

"Percy? Is that you?" She stands wide-eyed with her hand covering her mouth, staring in disbelief at her phone on the floor.

"Gregor? You can hear me?"

"Um, yeah, I suppose I can." Percy paces her bedroom floor and tries to think her way through the silence. She imagines Gregor standing somewhere west of her wearing the same timid grimace on his face that used to drive her mad, and probably some kind of earth-toned flannel. He is the first to speak.

"Wasn't I just leaving you a message?"

"I don't know. I thought so. I think my phone is broken." Silence again prevails between them, and Percy scrambles to think of some way out of this conversation in the few seconds she has before Gregor inevitably begins talking again—he was never very good with silence.

"Are you on speakerphone? It sounds like you're walking around or something." She can hear the fear and uncertainty in his voice, the attempt to sound casual.

"Yes, Gregor, I'm on speakerphone."

"Well...urn, how's it going?"

"Not well, Gregor." She still knows him this well; he has not changed. She still knows how to answer him without really saying anything, and that he will keep floundering rather than call her on it.

"Okay. Well would you like to get together this weekend?"

"I'm afraid that's not possible, I've got other plans that I forgot about. I think I have to go, right now. But I'll give you a call if something changes."

"Now hold on a god damn minute." At this she stops pacing. Gregor had never

lad much of a taste for profanity, except during sex, and this is most certainly not that.

"You call me out of the blue, after six years of nothing.. .after changing your number and six *years* of fucking nothing, and you tell me all this shit about wanting to see me.. .and now you stonewall me?" She is shaken. Gregor was never this assertive before; she wonders what else has changed.

"Gregor, I was drunk. I'm sorry, but I really think if we talked later I would be in better shape to..."

"Fuck that. You're gonna explain this to me ri-----now." Percy's phone chirps and the screen light blinks on and off, signifying an incoming call. She leans down over the screen to check the number, wondering who would be next. 394-320-4003: her office. What can they possibly want?

"Percy? God damnit, Percy?" Now he has realized how to get results.

"Okay, Gregor, I'll talk to you. But just hold on a second, okay? I've got another call coming in from work and I'm going to have to answer it."

"The hell y---- are. You're going to..."

"Gregor! Enough with the strong-arm routine, I'll fucking talk! Just give me a minute; I need to get this.. .Okay?"

"Okay." His voice has returned to its normal tone and he seems to have realized the limits of his play for domination. Intrigued all the same, Percy reaches down to her phone and presses the send button to switch lines. At first there is silence, and then she hears the line ringing as if she was calling someone.

"Oh, Christ. What is going on with this phone?"

The line rings once more before picking up, followed by the tinny voice of Pinner's secretary Shirl:

"This call is for Percy Degels, and is intended as a professional courtesy." An automated message; the bastards are actually sending her an automated message. "In light of yesterday's events and the reckless nature of your actions, this company has no choice but to file a civil suit against you, on the charge of assault with the intent to inflict bodily harm." Percy's fists and jaw clench with a sudden, involuntary rage. Her eyes fume and the phone blurs in her vision as Shirl's voice continues steadily: the bitch is enjoying this. "Such actions cannot be tolerated in a business environment and an example must be made. Our lawyers will be in contact..." The words trail off abruptly as the phone hurtles through the open bedroom window. Percy rushes to the window—half afraid, half exhilarated—just in time to see it explode on the pavement of the alleyway eight stories below, hearing the impact a split-second later. The phone virtually disappears completely as it shatters into hundreds of tiny pieces at a distance. "Sorry, Gregor."

She stands a moment longer at the window and considers the violence of the phone's impact below. She thinks about the conversations she has just had with two people who used to mean the world to her; how detached she had become from them, from everyone; how pathetic she had felt relapsing into that lost familiarity, just to avoid really talking to them. Is that how it is all the time with people? Everyone just exchanging the same pleasantries, all the time hiding from each other? A small crowd gathers below around the remains of her phone, looking inquisitively around. Percy closes the window.



She finds her office bag upside-down behind the tan leather couch in her living room—exactly where she had tossed it the previous evening—removes from it a ledger and ballpoint pen, and lights a cigarette before sitting down at her small, circular kitchen table. Taking a few quick drags from the Winston before resting it in the ashtray at the center of the table, she uncaps the pen and begins to write: *People of America, I give up. I have spent these thirty-four years of my life working and struggling among you, trying to find a way up and over all the bullshit. But the higher I climb, the deeper the pile becomes, and I just can't stand the smell of it anymore.*

Good beginning; strong, captivating, no sappy self-loathing or melodrama. They'll probably cut out the curse, but who cares?

*Some of you may call me selfish for what I have chosen to do. But I would ask you: what is there but selfishness in this world? We work our lives away, toiling endlessly, sacrificing our time, our energy, and even the love of those around us, and for what? A fat check and a chance to carve out a piece of the pie to call our own. Well, I'm here to tell you that the pie is filled with air, and the crust is made of concrete.*

Okay, not bad; solid imagery. A little vague, but vagueness never hurt anyone. Now, let's really get to the point.

*What I mean to say is that I have ceased to believe in the worthiness of your cause: that I will no longer be a part of this meaningless charade that we call a society: that I have decided to kill myself, by jumping from the height of our greatest*

*accomplishment (how sad that it should be so meager), to show you all what it looks like to fall from the top.*

*I write this open letter to you in the hope that it will be published and my voice will be heard—my true voice, not the sound of my assumed self that so many of you have heard—so that you might know me in that small way. I hereby refuse to be labeled as a misguided soul, or wayward spirit, or in any other way invalidated. To those of you who would lament my self-determined death as a loss or a tragedy for all to learn by, I say this: Do not be so quick to judge me as a failure. This is the only way I have left to triumph after all my efforts have come to nothing. In the same breath, I would say to those people that would point the blaming finger that it is not your place to do so, and that there is no point in a world without justice such as this one. I blame no one, and declare that you have no right to either.*

Careful: that's getting a bit too doleful. Someone might cry. Better finish with a kick in the pants to bring them back around.

*In conclusion I have only this to say:*

*You people make me sick. I give up.*

*Posthumously, Percy*

*Allison Degels*

Percy picks up her cigarette and flicks loose the two-inch long cherry before taking a final drag and snuffing it out. She adds a sweeping signature at the bottom and—for verification's sake—she covers her thumb in ink from the pen and impresses a firm

print beside her name. Reading quickly back over the letter, she is pleased overall. Though it is a bit high-handed at times, she feels that the letter as a whole is quite good, and will ultimately be just the thing to keep people from labeling her as just another depressed middle-aged failure at the end of her rope. Or worse yet: one of the tragically insane. On some level, she is actually quite impressed that she is still able to write so persuasively after being out of college for over a decade, and she remembers her prowess as a writer being one of the things that caught Pinner's attention as he sifted through homogenous piles of applications so many years ago. The image of his smug face recalls Percy to the task at hand, and she crosses the room to her desk by the south window of her apartment, pulling a pre-stamped envelope from the uppermost drawer and addressing it to the editor-in-chief of the Midtown Herald-Gazette. As she licks the envelope and seals it shut, Percy feels a sense of self-assured purpose that she had not known for some time. Throwing on her dark brown overcoat and sliding into the house shoes in the coat closet, she slides the letter into the right-hand pocket and grabs her purse and keys from the table beside the front door before heading out into the hallway. She stops at the door for a moment to get one last look at her apartment, blowing a kiss to the empty living room before pulling the door closed behind her.

Out on the street, the day is in full swing. As she steps onto the sidewalk, Percy hears the bell tower of the Methodist church around the corner striking eleven-o'clock. She takes in a breath of fresh air and exhales heartily before reaching into her purse and lighting up a cigarette. She looks briefly to both sides before crossing the street and

heading west towards downtown, stopping at the corner to drop the letter into the mouth of the blue metal mailbox planted in the concrete.

## Two: Rudge

The four feet fall in twos  
up the hillside and the sky is black. No horse  
but a rhythm the same and a tambourine  
to keep it. He and she make them and they are running. The sky is black but  
the hill is lit by daylight and all he can see is their white feet gaining ground  
on the green. He knows she holds his hand and needs him too, though  
neither speaks, somehow her name is leaving him. He looks back to see her  
face and she is gone. No salt pillar in sight, and everything shifts.

On stage the pedals and sticks are of his own  
body, the rhythm is all of him.

The break moves to ... undulates and the crowd calls .. *fro* and  
they breach the barrier to reach out hands to him he, must play faster  
*...harder* as they touch

the rhythm in him and his sticks are  
bleeding bones beat, all to splinters.

The rhythm is fractured as their hands  
reach in and are struck and cut. He

cannot stop playing,

not stop playing  
can not stop.

With a start Rudge rises from the couch and braces himself against the cushions and the coffee table. Wiping sweat from his forehead he shakes off the nightmare and breaths a sigh of relief to be free from it. He looks at the table in front of him and picks up a yellow legal pad covered in scrawls and a large note written in sharpie, apparently to him:

*Rudge,*

*We would have waken you up to go to Grace 'sfor breakfast, but you looked so cute kicking in your sleep that we just had to let you be. Sleep well cutie-pie. You make me sick.*

*-Paul*

*(your mother wants me)*

Another characteristically abusive note from his longest running roommate: a year and a half and you'd think you had earned a little respect. Rudge glances down at his watch: 11:15. So they are all off to Grace's Diner without him, maybe someone will bring back pancakes.

Spotting the sharpie on the table in front of him, Rudge picks it up and turns the page on the legal pad. He tries to picture the dream in his head and remember its shapes. Making quick, gestural marks he sketches out the form of a figure seated at a set of drums swinging wildly with elongated bone-like arms and hands, while a crowd of shadowy wraiths looms in on all sides. As he finishes, he briefly considers the drawing and thinks that it would be better done in charcoal and on a much larger scale. He tears the page from the pad and folds it roughly before putting in his pocket.

Rudge stands, enjoying the benefits of sleeping fully clothed; he slides across the hardwood living room floor in his tall cotton socks and out the open door to the porch, where he sits down on a metal folding chair to put on his sneakers. He looks across at Blue, returning his gaze stoically from the corner of the porch where he rests as usual, not wagging his tail.

"You are one classy mutt, you know that?"

Blue lays his head down on his front paws and exhales heavily, rousing a plume of dust from the poured cement surface of the porch.

"Yeah, I thought so."

Rudge smiles heartily at Paul's Shepherd/Sheepdog mix, thinking again that the old mutt is his friend's single-most redeeming possession. As he slides on his wear-worn sneakers, Rudge peers through the porch railing at the view of Midtown, distant and spotty through the daily-thickening foliage of the trees in front of his house.

The day is rising warm and unusually clear, and he wonders what to make of it. Looking back down to tie his laces, Rudge suddenly feels a flash of memory: a part of the dream he had not recalled at first. He now distinctly remembers running up a hillside—it seems like it must have been the hill behind his grandmother's house in Charlevoix but then again, maybe not—needing very badly to continue holding someone's hand. Was that Josephine? With the setting it would make sense. She and Rudge had spent a good deal of time there one autumn years back, but there had never been that kind of desperation with her, and there was no familiarity in the touch of his dream. As he finishes double knotting his shoelaces, Rudge thinks briefly that he should try calling Josephine today, see how she is doing. But it has been so long. A low-throated growl

from Blue brings Rudge's attention back to the present and he follows the dog's intent gaze to see the mail truck crackling into the gravel drive, stopping a few yards in front of the porch. The mail carrier nods blankly at Rudge from the left side of his cab before stepping out of the squat, angular vehicle. Rudge returns a salutatory wave to the man and remains seated as he climbs the stair, holding a medium sized package stamped first class.

"G'morning." says the postman, casting a wary eye on the still-growling Blue.

"You folks ever think about getting a post box out front?"

Rudge looks bemusedly up into the mustached face of the tallish, unnecessarily fit civil servant in front of him.

"We believe in maintaining close human relationships with the people around us."

The man seems annoyed by Rudge's smart-ass return, and even more annoyed with the continued growls of the dog in the corner. Rudge feels a twinge of remorse for his comment, and wonders if he has been living with immature people for too long. "Easy, Blue." Blue ceases his mock threat and lays his head back down on his paws. Rudge looks back up at the postman expectantly, but for a moment neither says anything.

"I'm sorry; wouldn't you have to come up here anyway to drop the package?"

"Well there aren't packages everyday, and it's sort of a hassle to have to pull in here all the time, it's a long route I've got out here." The postman makes no moves to offer Rudge the package under his arm; he has chosen his terms and is sticking steadfastly. Rudge gazes out at the visible building tops and back at the man.

"We're only four miles from town."



"Yeah, but I've gotta go another twenty before cutting back down Parched Hill Drive and.. .Look, everybody else on the route has one and it would make my life a lot easier. Would you at least consider it?" With this the postman thrusts his hands out from his sides and stands with what Rudge believes to be an imagined degree of desperation on his face: there is no way he can really be this worked up about a mailbox.

"All right, I'll see what I can do." Placated, the postman finally offers the hostage package to Rudge with a computerized logbook resting on top.

"Thank you, please sign here."

As he signs the digital screen with the attached light pen Rudge glances briefly at the return address on the package and sees the expected graceful arcs of his mother's handwriting: another care-package from Kansas City, she really ought to stop sending these. He places the plastic pen back in its slot and hands the logbook back to the itinerant postman with a broad smile, who turns without a word and marches back to his truck in the sunlight. At the last moment, the strictures of duty take control as he pauses at the truck's door to call out:

"Have a nice day." Rudge returns with another animated wave and stands with his package to go back inside, Blue rising to follow him.

As his eyes readjust to the dimness of the living room, Rudge sets the unopened package down on the piled array of the coffee table and follows Blue into the adjoining kitchen. He picks up the dog's faded metal water bowl and dumps its stagnant contents into the sink before refilling it with fresh water. Rudge places the bowl back in its usual spot, directly in front of the waiting Blue, and paces back to the couch and the parcel from his mother.

Rudge's mother Miriam, as he had taken to calling her at the age of eleven, has been sending care packages since the first week he left home for college, six years ago. There have been few lapses, the foremost of which being the seven-month period when he returned home after his third semester at Kansas State, dropping out with a 3.64 GPA.

During that heavy half-year, there had seemed no point in the packages, or the care for that matter, as Rudge had maintained a considerable barrier of languid despondency, lying about the house watching television all day and eating whatever snack food was available in the family's cupboards—rarely any full meals. This had caused a great deal of anxiety for Miriam, and she had explored many avenues in trying to recuperate her son's motivation.

First she had tried books. Rudge had been an avid reader since childhood, showing interest in all genres of literature and nearly every other manner of writing, but each inspirational text she brought home simply added to the stack of uncracked bindings and pages on the floor in Rudge's room. Tired of wasting the money her husband had left her on the unwanted books, Miriam had joined a focus group. Meeting every Wednesday at the community center. Seekers of Efficacy Learning as Friends, or SELF, was a hodge-podge of the meek and the overzealous. The group sympathized with Miriam's situation, and many of them made visits to her quaint suburban home to try and "reach out" to Rudge. Some were gentle and soft-spoken, others abrasive and militant, but no matter how they approached Rudge their efforts were all for naught. Some left the house in tears, others in fury, all of them frustrated by Rudge and his ability to dissect each of their arguments without any visible signs of interest or difficulty. It was after the second person dropped out of SELF following a meeting with Rudge that Miriam herself was

politely asked to leave the group. At a total loss, she tried one last time to talk her son out of his depression.

"I'm not depressed, Miriam. I'm perfectly content." Rudge paused his channel-surfing to look at his mother as he spoke, and granted her the courtesy of muting the TV set.

"How can you say that when all you do is sit around and watch television? Don't you have any ambition to accomplish something in life?" Her words were adamant, but worn by overuse. He saw the weariness in her eyes, and thought it unfortunate that she should worry so much about him.

"I've told you how I feel about that question. Whatever I gain I will eventually lose, and I see no point in wasting energy proving to others that I'm worthy of their praise. There is nothing I can really gain that I don't already have." Rudge noticed with regret the sarcasm of his own voice, not wanting to weaken what he truly believed with levity. He met his mother's worried eyes with as much seriousness as he could manage, but she covered them before speaking again.

"I just can't explain to you how wrong you are. I don't understand how you can be so selfish."

"I think you mean self/ess." At this, Miriam turned completely away from him and crossed the room into the kitchen.

"Oh what's the difference? You can hide behind all that philosophical nonsense all you want, I don't buy it. What would your father think of all this?"

"I don't know, Miriam. If I see him I'll ask." Rudge turned back to the television and resumed his arbitrary search for something decent to watch.

"Oh, Rudge, don't be such a jerk. It was a rhetorical question."

Rudge's father Robert had left him and his mother when Rudge was eight years old. It was not your average, irritably messy affair, with a drawn out legal process and lots of irate phone calls. Instead, Robert Perkins had simply started a bank account in his wife's name, filled it with a great deal of money, and left a note: *I'm leaving you both. I'm sorry. Don't look for me.* And they hadn't.

All things considered, Rudge's father deserting the family was no great loss: he worked long hours as the vice president of a national marketing firm in Kansas City, and Miriam was already taking full care of Rudge by the time he left. Not to mention the philandering. He had cheated, and it had hurt her dearly, but she had no way to stand alone and with time she forgot that part of herself. As they learned to live without him completely, Rudge and Miriam came to the agreement that Robert had done the right thing, which left no taboos on his occasional reference, but Rudge's last comment had clearly been designed to irritate his mother and to remind her of the pain and frustration that she once felt, and this was simply more than she could stand. As Miriam walked back into the den carrying her purse, Rudge could not help but notice the change in her expression: the worry had not so much left her as altered somehow, and as she took the remote from his hand and turned off the television, he could not help but feel a little nervous about her next words. She spoke slowly and with great determination:

"I will not watch you do this to yourself, Rudge. I know you feel very strongly about these things but you simply cannot waste your life here watching television. You are too talented and too intelligent to wither away like this. I don't know how to make you see that, so I can only hope that you will find it on your own." As Miriam spoke she

began to cry, but she managed to hold strength in her tone. "You have to move out of this house by the end of the month." Rudge could tell that she had thought a good deal about how to say this to him, and he realized that he was crying too, despite his well-honed stoicism. He watched his mother writing out a check as she spoke. "Here's five thousand dollars. It should get you started wherever you decide to go. I suggest you head west." And so he had.

As Rudge sits on his dirty green couch and peels the packaging tape from the US Postal Service box mailed from his hometown, he does not think of this last time that he saw his mother in person. He thinks instead about Blue, and how Paul should really spend more time with him, and take him out to exercise more often. It seems to Rudge that Blue was growing old too quickly for a dog of his age (although truthfully he doesn't rightly know old Blue is), and this seems like an injustice for a dog with so much character.

Opening the flaps of the package, Rudge cannot help but chuckle at the smiling faces iced on to a bag of chocolate chip cookies, jovially greeting him from their perch atop a sheet of tissue paper. "Good lord, Miriam."

Tossing the cookies aside on the sofa, he lifts the tissue paper and pulls out the customary letter from his mother. The letters varied a good deal in length, depending on Miriam's mood at the time of writing, as well as the significance of the other contents of the care-package, this week's letter was only a single page—decidedly brief by her standards. He reads it carefully:

*Rudge,*

*Nobody can resist a smiling bag of cookies! Be sure you hide them from Paul (and whomever else is living there at this point) if you want them to last. I also included a check with a little spending money in case you 're tapped out. I know, I know: I send you too much. But I can't spend it all by myself and if you manage to save any of it you might just get an inheritance after all*

*Things are good here. Terry sends his regards, along with some magazine article that he'sputting in with everything else; I'm not sure what it's about. Probably some music thing. We 're going up to lake Eerie next week to hang out in the houseboat for a few days, so I might not get a chance to write, but if I miss you I'll be sure to catch up the week after. I wish you would get a phone so I could just reach you that way. I promise I wouldn 't badger you too much ©.*

*Anyway, I hope you 're well and content. Drop us a line sometime.*

*Love,*

*Miriam.*

Rudge glances back over the letter and smiles as he bites into one of the awkwardly jubilant cookies. "Still happy with half a face, huh? You resilient little fucker you." He wonders what mildly interesting bit of rock journalism Jerry—his mother's boyfriend of a year and a half—had picked out to send him. Brushing crumbs from his stomach with the letter, Rudge notices a bit of writing on the back of the page:

*p.s. I found this in the attic when I was cleaning out some things. Thought you might want it.*

Looking closer at the contents of the package, Rudge spots a flash of yellow fabric barely visible underneath one of the corners of the tissue paper. He turns the box upside down and its insides fall into his lap with a dry rustling sound, the check and magazine article slide to the floor by his feet. There is a second of confusion before he recognizes the age-old t-shirt, given up for lost ten years ago. He picks up the nearly transparent garment and examines it in reverent awe, the faded colors of Dali's "Clock Explosion" giving way to the canary yellow tint of the shirt fabric.

Rudge thinks back to he and his mother's vacation to St. Petersburg, Florida. It was about two years after his father had left, and Miriam had been slowly taking him around the country at irregular intervals, and with no discernible pattern of reason. They had stopped one unseasonably cool October afternoon at the Salvador Dali museum in St. Petersburg and spent most of their time in the gift shop, where Rudge had picked out the then bright yellow shirt, which they only had available in a large. "You'll grow into it." Miriam had said. But Rudge had not waited to grow into it, he had worn the shirt for the rest of the trip and for another week straight after that, and could seldom go more than three days without donning the dress-like garment. Four years later, just when he had almost gotten to the point where the Dali shirt didn't look completely ridiculous on him, it had disappeared without a trace. Rudge had complained frantically to Miriam when he had searched the entire house and come up empty-handed. Miriam, who had secretly stowed the shirt away in the attic after becoming utterly disgusted with its ubiquitous

reign on her son's wardrobe, had responded lightly: "I suppose it's just as well, Rudge. The darn thing was just days away from falling apart altogether." It had taken him weeks to forgive her uncaring dismissal of his crisis, and months to give up searching. As he holds the long-lost shirt before him now, Rudge half-smiles and snickers to himself: "The attic huh? You don't say." She was quite a piece of work, his mother.

Rudge lays the Dali down just long enough to peel off the green John Spencer Blues Explosion t-shirt he had been wearing for the last week, catching a generous waft of his own body odor before putting on the newly reacquired garment. Blue looks up from his place on the floor by the television.

"What do you think, Blueboy?" Blue responds enthusiastically with a single wag of his tale—more of a repositioning really. "Yeah, I like it too." Rudge rewards the dog's interest with a cookie, and stands to a soundtrack of grunts and crunching.

He stretches his arms up to the ceiling and marvels at the six-inch rift that opens between the bottom of the shirt and his jeans: it has been a while. Looking down, Rudge remembers the check and article and stoops to retrieve them from the floor. He scans the check first (\$650), and the article second (Moog Factory in Asheville, North Carolina Retools to Promote Manufacture of the New Voyager Synthesizer), and then retrieves a small shoebox from underneath the couch for the storage of both, briefly glimpsing a stack of similar checks and articles before re-closing the box. Rudge's living expenses are very little in comparison to the sums his mother sent him, and he only cashes one check at a time. If he ever cared to guess, he would estimate he has somewhere around \$7,000 in that shoebox. But this is far from his thoughts as he walks back outside with Blue at his heels and examines the developing day.



A succession of paired beeps issues from Rudge's watch as noon rolls around and he picks up a stick in the yard, tossing it in a random direction. Blue scatters from behind him with impressive speed for a dog his age (six, or seven maybe), and in a matter of seconds the stick is retrieved and thrown again. It occurs to Rudge that today would make a good day for people-watching downtown. Without the need for a job, he had by necessity come up with several eccentric hobbies, and people-watching has of late become by far the most interesting, primarily because of the seemingly endless amount of variation in observable activities and mannerisms. Something about the way people go about their lives when they think no one is paying attention to them holds a great deal of intrigue and excitement for Rudge, and he ponders the walk into town.

"Whadya say there, Blue?" he pauses with the stick in mid-swing and Blue looking on in tense anticipation. "Feel like going for a walk?" Rudge tosses the stick towards the gravel road and Blue rushes after it in a fury of barking, his excitement fully peaked at the mention of a walk. Just then Rudge hears the prickled whir of tires on gravel and looks in a panic to see Blue closing on the hurled stick almost as fast as the mail truck on its return journey. There is a scratching slide and a rising pall of dust and then for a moment, complete silence. Rudge rushes forward to grab Blue by the collar where he has stopped a few feet short of the stick, which is now wedged underneath the dusty tires of the mail truck. Regaining his senses, Blue begins barking madly at the mail carrier, who leans out of his truck and into the clearing dirt cloud to return the favor.

"God Damn it! What the hell are you thinking? You know that if I wreck this thing it comes out of my paycheck to fix it?" Blue continues to bark angrily under Rudge's

hold, and the postman wipes his mustache before speaking again. "I don't know what it is with you, fellah, but I sure wish you'd ease off of me. At least for today."

"I'm sorry. It was a total accident. I really didn't hear you coming until you were right on top of us." There is genuine alarm and an apparent regret in Rudge's voice and the postman's features soften ever so little as he removes his sunglasses to wipe off the collected film of dust on them.

"Well, just be careful for christ sakes. I mean I coulda killed your dog there." "Oh, he's not mine really. And to be fair, you were going too fast." "Oh really?" Promptly putting his glasses back on, the postman flashes a sly, desperate grin. "Well maybe I won't be so quick on the breaks next time." He revs up the trucks engine and cranks it into gear with an inadvertent grinding, turning his eyes coldly to the road ahead.

"Hey, wait. Do you think you could give me a ride into town?"

"What? You must be outta your gourd, kid."

"Well, it's just that I need to meet my roommate there and help him pick out a mailbox. He's not so good with colors." Rudge offers a challenging smirk to the postman. "Yeah, I'll bet. Get in before I change my mind. Nice shirt." "Thanks." Letting go of a quieted Blue, Rudge jaunts around the front side of the truck to enter on the left of the modified vehicle. Blue begins to follow warily, still hoping for the prospect of a journey away from home. "Watch the house, Blue." With an audible sigh, Blue turns back to the house and walks slowly up the drive, turning to watch the truck pull away in a loose cloud.

There is a pleasant breeze winding through the city streets as Rudge checks for traffic before stepping out of the mail truck's left side.

"Thanks again, Pete. I'll be sure to look for that book—what was it again?"

"Masters of Deception. Al Seckel. Sterling Publishers."

"Right." Rudge leans smiling on the window of the truck, feeling the awkwardness of the moment set in. Pete the mail carrier looks back at him from behind his sunglasses and considers his passenger, fighting the urge to say something encouraging.

"Take it easy, kid, and get a mailbox." Without waiting for Rudge to back away from the truck he pulls out into the street and speeds east, towards the city's postal hub.

Rudge crosses through the drifting exhaust to the sidewalk and sighs; putting his hands in his pockets and watching his feet alternate forward on the concrete. The vague image of blurred, scurrying feet flashes in his mind and for a moment he tries to see more. Reaching in his memory, he rounds the corner with a left turn onto Parson Street and looks up suddenly at the glowing stretch of city blocks before him. A winding breeze strikes his front and Rudge marvels at the day. Looking eagerly upwards in a squint at the glinting windows and reflections on the tops of the buildings on Parson Street, he begins to feel the familiar anticipatory flutters reaching up from his stomach into his throat. There is always this nervous energy before a good round of people-watching, and as he guesses again at the origin of the feeling—his thoughts passing on the nature of voyeurism and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle—Rudge levels his eyes with the oncoming crowd and begins scanning over the people of Midtown.

There is a man in a well-pressed grey suit striding blankly up the street, his eyes glazed and distant as he speaks emphatically into an ear piece, his black leather brief case held tightly and swinging in opposition to the nearest leg as he passes on the left. "Sheas should have those figures by 3:00, that gives us two hours to run them back through marketing projections and process the correlates." There is a woman on a bench in a complicated green blouse, gathering her lunch around her in an archipelago of Tupperware containers, now nibbling blithely on a baby carrot. There is a dark, squat man shaded by the awning of his hot-dog stand, serving a kraut-laden frank to an overweight youth in a green jersey and baggy white denim shorts. There is a crowd of six waiting at the bus stop on the corner of Parson and Braden, wherein two men in bright jackets are speaking energetically to one another, forcing a silence on the other four. There are two young girls in the cross-walk, walking briskly in short skirts and sandals, the taller one on the left looking down at her cell phone and nimbly keying in abbreviations, looking up with her companion as they are addressed sarcastically by the brightly-jacketed men. "Hey, ladies, lemme give you my number. When you turnin' eighteen?" As the awaited bus approaches and slows with whining brakes, there is a woman in her pajamas and an overcoat crossing diagonally from the opposite side of the street, stopping momentarily between lanes to let the bus pass her by.

Rudge pauses at the crosswalk of Braden Avenue and watches the woman in navy blue pajamas, as she stands unconcerned in the middle of the street. He watches the bus driver, an elderly woman with a great bloom of white hair, as she gasps in silent alarm to see the reckless pedestrian standing no more than a foot from her path and the bus groans as the breaks are slammed on. He watches as the passengers on the bus lurch forward and

crash against the backs of seats, looking up in anger a moment later as they right themselves, to see the woman cross in front of the bus without emotion and step onto the curb, not once showing any sign of awareness towards the huge municipal vehicle beyond her initial pause in the street. "Damn, that bitch is crazy." The jacket men speak once more and Rudge begins crossing Braden Ave in a sudden rush of movement, his heart rolling in his chest. While he agrees with their appraisal, as he starts to follow the pajama woman he cannot help but wonder what else is in motion before him. She can't have been crazy for very long, Rudge thinks, as her overcoat is clearly in good condition, as are her purse and pajamas. She walks at a determined pace in front of him, Rudge watches her heels rise and fall alternately and tries to see her shoes.

The first step in properly watching a person is learning as much as possible from their attire. Not just the clothes they are wearing and the various other adornments on their person—purses, watches, hats, jewelry, etc.—but what condition all of these items are in and to what degree they dictate the functions of the watched. By taking great care in observing these characteristics, it becomes much easier to understand the movements of a person and to know how to follow them. For a man in polished loafers and an Armani suit, the ideal tactic is the most direct one: blatantly follow the man, at a distance often to fifteen paces. He will inevitably notice you, but his business-centered, stratagem-weary mind will convince him that he is being paranoid, and his pride will keep him from ever confronting you or in any way altering his movements. For an old woman in cracked leather flats and a flower print dress, it is best to move in short bursts and then to remain casually stationary as she slowly moves along. If she looks back she will either not notice you, or she will wonder momentarily at her failing memory,

swearing you had been on the other side of that phone booth just moments ago. With the pajama woman and her rubber-heeled bedroom slippers, none of this is necessary.

Her pace is nearing frantic and her head moves about without focus, mostly tilted upwards at the sky. This seems to Rudge somewhat contradictory to the troubling calm she had displayed moments ago in the street, and his interest increases as he bounds along behind her, amazed that she moves so quickly being at least a foot shorter than him. Trying to gather more from her outward appearance, Rudge notices the pattern on her pajamas: white outlines of long-petaled flowers against the blue fabric, either falling or drifting in an implied wind. He is unable to make any conclusions from this other than that they are very clean pajamas, considering, and that they can't have been worn outside very often before today.

As he looks on she continues staring up at the sky (he tries to follow her gaze: Or is it rather the tops of the buildings?), moving through the other people on the street without regard. Suddenly her eyes lock on the upper floors of the Chandler building, well known for the expensive Italian restaurant at its apex. As she stares up at the great, shining structure she does not stop walking, and so her body turns but keeps its general heading and she is slowly coming around to face Rudge while walking backwards. For a moment they lock eyes. He has no time to dash off to the side or stop and look away without making himself obvious, so he simply returns her second-long stare. Her features are soft, to the point of looking slightly swollen, but she is attractive to him. Her hair is shoulder length and straight, and very light brown, and her eyes are almost black from this distance. He is fairly certain that she takes nearly no notice of him, as she continues to turn and faces forward just in time to collide with a motivated-but-sweaty looking

young man in tweed, who had been watching his own reflection in the street-side windows and in doing so had failed to notice the pajama woman. The collision is minor, though it causes him to spill a dark beverage on himself, and she makes no effort to stop her forward momentum, only clutching her purse, which leaves the tweed man all the more perplexed and upset as he stares at her back with his hands raised. "Oh, just keep walking, huh? Not even a word!" Rudge looks back to his subject in time to see her raise a middle finger in response; the first actual recognition of another person she has shown. As he passes the exasperated young tweed man, he cannot help but smile, noticing the growing smell of coffee. "Oh yeah? Fuck you too, lady!" he tries to wipe his suit clean, splashing more coffee out onto his hand in the process. "Jesus Christ, what is it with this city?"

So, she's not completely spaced. Rudge wonders if she had noticed him after all—he had to have made at least some small impression—but there seems to be no reason to alter his technique or become more covert, as she has resumed her previous manner and pace after a few minutes time, searching the building tops once more for what he knows not to guess.

As she comes to the corner of Parson and Central, the pajama woman stops and looks up and down the busier avenue as the traffic whirrs by in front of her. Rudge slows up behind her and moves closer to the buildings on his left, stopping beside a trash-filled alleyway between a barbershop and a fabric store, just as a precaution. Looking briefly down the alley and noting the shadowed forms of graffiti grouped at the far end, Rudge returns his gaze to his subject and notices her turning back toward him. As a reflex he

tries to duck quickly into the alley but trips over his own feet and falls hands first with a grunting "Shit!" into the heaped mass of garbage.

Lying splayed for a moment over a mound of great black refuse bags; Rudge waits to feel the oozing wetness of garbage juices seeping onto his clothing, but is surprised to find himself remaining dry. He lifts his head to find that the acrid trash smell generally wafting about the alleyway is pleasantly absent from the bags beneath him and, glancing up at the open top of one of the bags, he sees a goodly sized clump of hair pushing its way out. Counting his luck on having landed on what looks like one of the few areas of trash from the barbershop, Rudge begins pushing himself up from the ground but stops abruptly when he feels something cold, squared, and metal beneath his left hand. He closes his hand around the object and pulls it from underneath the garbage bags, momentarily unconvinced by what his eyes present to him: the slender shape of a loaded gun clip sits unassumingly in his palm. Rising fully from the ground, Rudge's mind reels as a vault of questions and possibilities is thrown open by the found item, and the simple implication it leaves him. Not forgetting his interest in the pajama woman, he stoops amongst the trash mound and begins scraping along the ground and pushing through the garbage with a growing urgency. Thinking twice, he slides the clip into his pocket and continues his search, stopping cold five feet into the alley and rising slowly, with a gun in his hand for the first time in his life. At first he holds it at arm's length, like a dirty diaper or a wet sock, then he brings the weapon closer to his face and examines it. It is smaller than he expected—no more than six inches in length—but this in no way lessens his trepidation at having an instrument of death between his fingers. His pulse quickens and he is nearly panting as his eyes bore into the hard surface of the gun, seeing



nothing else. It is of a dark, shiny metal and as he wraps his grip properly around the handle he feels suddenly embarrassed to know that he has an erection. Someone passes the alley in a rush and Rudge remembers where he is, turning his back to the street and trying to think about his next action. Bewildered, he bends down, feeling himself harden further as a result, and pulls up his right pant leg, tucking the gun fully into the fabric of his sock. "What the fuck am I doing? What the fuck do people do when they find a fucking gun?" He continues to mumble obscenities to himself as he sidles out of the alley and heads towards Central Avenue, trying to will his erection away.

When Rudge steps around the corner of Central Ave and Parson he is met by a great wake of humanity. The sounds and smells of Midtown's main business drag strike a stifling blow to his heightened senses and he feels heavily nauseous. Scanning the sidewalks for his pajama woman, he is distressed and confused; she is nowhere to be seen. Rudge begins to walk west down Central; he feels an overwhelming sense of oppression from the people all around him. He tucks his hands deep into his pockets, feeling the bulk of the little gun's clip in his left hand, lowering his head between his shoulders and trying to feel invisible. This is a difficult task in a bright yellow shirt. Becoming increasingly convinced that he is about to be sick, and giving less hope to tracking down the pajama woman in the depths of this urban sprawl, he ducks left into the first doorway and enters Trollinger's Bookshop and Coffeehouse to the light jingling sound of the bells hung from the inside of the door.

The settled quiet of the bookstore does less to calm Rudge's nerves than he would have hoped had he planned his entrance. He glances back out the door behind him and

wonders if he has been followed by anyone for any reason. Seeing the unconcerned mass of citizenry crossing between him and the visible ground floor of the towering Bryson building across the street, his unwarranted fear is slightly abated. Rudge turns, somewhat startled by the inquisitive greeting of a tallish, pear-shaped woman behind the counter.

"Hello. Can I help you find anything?" Her searching blue eyes make him painfully aware of the bulge in his right leg, and he swallows the air in his throat before answering hoarsely.

"Do you have a restroom I could use?"

"I'm sorry; it's not open to the public. Customers only." She pointed to a sign in the front window of the store, the curt motion of her hand trumping the facsimiled smile on her face.

"I'll buy something."

"Back of the store, to the right."

His mind in a torrent on his way back through the rows of books, Rudge feels to make sure of his wallet's placement in his back pocket, momentarily concerned that he may have to run out of the store from the bathroom. Finding its leather bulk secure, he reaches the door marked unisex and knocks to no response before entering. Once inside the bathroom he feels for the light switch and with a flick the small room is flooded with light and the buzz of florescent bulbs. Rudge considers his reflection in the plain-wooden-frame mirror for a second before lifting his leg up onto the open toilet and carefully removing the gun from his sock. Its weight has shifted in his walking and red spots of irritation are forming at certain points of his leg; some harsh corner of the shaft catches an elastic thread as he lifts out the weapon and the thin white band tightens and

snaps back against his skin. Largely unaware of all this, Rudge raises the gun to his face once again; this time looking straight down the barrel. Forcing the shouts of warning from his mind with assurances that the clip is safely inside his pocket (putting his hand there as proof) Rudge looks down with one eye closed into the small black bore of the barrel, noticing the curving lines of striation descending into the pitch-hued depths. There is the sudden sight of an unexpected flash in his mind and the vision of his head expanded in parts to a plaster on the yellow walls of the bathroom. Shuddering from the accidental thought, Rudge points the barrel at the floor and looks at himself in the mirror again, his auburn eyes wide open.

The nausea has faded and in this small space he manages to feel in control once more. Looking down at his reflected hand, he wonders how much of that control is derived from the shining weapon gripped there. Sure of his whimsy, he raises the gun slowly to a level even with his chest and stares coldly at himself. "Yeah, suckah." That second there is a knock on the door and he turns to see the handle rotating and a crack of the outside light beginning to show before he manages to shout, too loudly:

"There's someone in here! Just a minute!" The light behind the door quickly retreats and the handle is static once more with a loud click, but the person on the other side says nothing. In a panic Rudge turns and flushes the toilet before again lifting his leg onto the seat and replacing the gun in his sock. He loudly washes his hands and stares, frightened at himself, taking several deep breaths before turning to open the door.

The brightness of the bookstore's windows channels back through the parallel shelves to Rudge and washes out the color of the room. He looks about the space outside the bathroom and finds no one. Confused, but much more in control of himself, he turns

off the bathroom light hastily departs into the shelves, noticing something very different about himself: a kind of abstract power and a sharper awareness of his surroundings permeating his mind and limbs. A part of him scoffs at the feeling and considers it a pathetic, false bravado, but the greater portion revels in this new sensation. Scanning over the store through the unevenly crenulated empty spaces above the books, he glances from customer to customer, from the coffee counter to the small music section on the opposite side of the room and there he stops and stands still in the aisle with his gaze fixed on the pajama woman. She stands in the music section and fingers through CDs listlessly, periodically glancing at a clock on the wall behind her. Rudge looks at the clock himself: 10 minutes to 1:00. He looks back to her and begins moving slowly through the aisle towards the front of the store, touching on random bindings as he goes.

As he reaches the end of the Historical Non-Fiction aisle he notices the store clerk watching him and recalls his obligation to buy something. Keeping the pajama woman in the periphery of his vision, he looks around at the headings of each aisle until he finds one marked "Art/Art History/Art Theory." Striding loosely over to this section, Rudge begins looking over the titles of the various books, noting that they are grouped alphabetically by author, and arranged in larger groups of general subject heading. Observing this, he moves back to the left and scans down the shelf to a row of books resting over the title: "Surrealism". Bending down to examine the individual titles, he shoots a glance back over his shoulder to see the pajama woman scrutinizing the cover of a particular CD, and then moving towards the checkout counter. He hurriedly resumes his own search and after a moments time draws the book he had been looking for, a very tall and somewhat weighty volume, from the shelf, pretending to inspect the cover art, which

he actually becomes somewhat taken by: A row of large, triple-masted schooners rising from the left corner of the picture into a same-shade sea and sky. As the line of ships proceeds towards the right, it morphs subtly, each ship becoming more and more the negative space of a bridge. Rudge looks up again to see his subject heading away from the checkout counter and towards the door, and he quickly rises with the book in hand to barely beat a goateed thirty-something with a latte and the latest Dan Brown novel to the register. He lays his purchase before the boisterous, beaming clerk and ignores the smug murmurings of the man behind him as she rings in the book, casting his eyes furtively out the door to see the brown overcoat and bedroom slippers lighting a cigarette just outside. Slightly relieved, he turns his attention back to the clerk and reaches for his wallet.

"Masters of Deception? I guess this goes pretty well with your shirt, aye?"

"Yeah, I'm a big fan." In truth, he knows next to nothing about Dali, or Escher, or Gonsalves for that matter, but this hardly matters now, as the pajama woman crosses the street outside.

"Okay, that'll be \$37.44." Rudge thrusts two twenty-dollar bills into the woman's hand and grabs the book from the counter, moving towards the door.

"Hey! What about your change?"

"Give it to the Wanna-beatnik."

Rushing out the door, Rudge barely bothers to check for cars before stepping into the street. Across the four-lane road he sees the slippered foot of the pajama woman disappearing into the Bryson building and, judging his way clear enough, he dashes out across Central Avenue with his book in tow. Weaving through the passing cars, he is halted momentarily by an oncoming fire engine with its sirens luckily activated en route

to some crisis. Bolting through the draft and Dopplered wail of the massive red rig, Rudge slows at the door and tries to ease into a calmer state before pulling on the sanded metal handle and entering the Bryson building.

Inside, the lobby is crowded. People are treading to and fro across the grey marble and red carpet covering the floor at intervals, with variously muffled and percussive footsteps echoing through the high-ceilinged room just above a cloud of moderate-volume speech. Rudge spots his subject at the far end of the lobby near the elevators, and observes her removing some small, indiscernible items from her shoulder bag and placing them into the pockets of her overcoat. Rudge picks a spot half way between her and the far-left corner of the building and begins walking slowly towards it, watching as she rifles one final time through her bag and then, walking five feet to his right, throws her purse into a square, black trashcan. Continuing on his trajectory and placing his free hand in its pocket, he watches as the pajama woman enters an elevator alone, now stopping in his path to watch the doors close slowly, and the dial above the doors turns all the way from left to right without stopping: she is on the top floor, alone.

Panting, completely out of breath, Rudge pushes the door at the top of the stairwell open to a crack and peeks through to spot the pajama woman thirty feet away, standing at the ledge of the building and looking down. No other building tops are visible, as the Bryson building stands a full three stories above all others in a six-block radius. The woman's form is striking against the white stone and black rubber of the roof and the bright, bathing blue of the sky. She can't possibly be serious, but she appears to be.

As he watches she stands back from the ledge and begins removing various items from her overcoat and placing them in her shopping bag. With her wallet, keys, and what looks like a can of mace placed in the bag, she folds the rustling plastic over itself and sets it at the foot of the ledge. As she bends down, Rudge widens the door and slips through to crouch behind a utility box five feet closer to her. After a moment he eases his gaze around the corner of the box to see the pajama woman climbing apprehensively (but steadily) up onto the ledge of the Bryson building. This is insane, there is no way that woman is about to jump off of this perfectly good building.

After ascending to the fifteenth floor on the stairs in the western corner of the Bryson building, Rudge had unburdened himself of his book and risen, somewhat lightened, five floors further to find the door marked "Executive Offices" securely locked. Turning to lean against the door, he had cursed in exhaustion before looking up to see the door to the roof slightly ajar, little lights on the keypad situated to the right of the handle blinking red. With a sudden understanding he had crept up this final flight of stairs and, after a moments pause, had pushed the door open.

Now, as he sits crouched behind the utility box, his head is swimming in the past hour of his day. Rudge feels the gun against his leg and the sweat dripping from the skin and soaking his sock, thinking that he could pull the gun on her; force her off of the ledge. Considering this terrifying possibility, he hears the pajama woman speak for the first (and, from the looks of things, possibly the last) time.

"Okay, Percy. It's time to do this thing. No turning back. The letter's in the mail."

With his ears burning and his chest turning over itself, Rudge steps quietly out from hiding and walks towards the woman. Feeling a sick dizziness boiling through his

head and stomach, he speaks:

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Jesus Christ!" The woman spins around shouting and stumbles sideways on the ledge. Rudge rushes forward to grasp for her, quickly closing the ten feet between them.

"Stop!" she screams at him. Unsure, reeling, he stops within arms reach.

"Back up." He backs up, faltering. The woman's features leech into the lightening sky around her. Rudge feels his throat tighten and he begins to salivate, swallowing, he closes his eyes and bends over forwards trying to catch his breath. The woman says nothing, he feels himself breaking out in a fresh sweat. Falling to his hands, he vomits, the meager contents of his stomach spouting violently onto the hot black rubber surface of the roof. When he is finished, she finally speaks again:

"Gross."

Rudge spits the bile from his mouth, coughing, and rubbing his lips over the back of his wrist. Opening his eyes again, he sees the colors around him start to fill back in. His mind cooling further with each passing second, he rises to his haunches and looks up at the pajama woman, feeling the shame climb in his face. Her forehead is somewhat contorted and she looks at him in concern from her place on the ledge.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so." Rudge brushes himself off and looks at her in the eyes, seeing them from this closer point a rich and textured brown. "How about you, Percy, right?" His voice is nasal and he tries to ignore the smell of his own sickness. At the sound of her name she stiffens and raises her chin at him to further elevate herself. She speaks as though she has not heard his question:



"What are you doing up here? Did you follow me?" There is anger in her voice, and much less fear than he would have expected. The wind blows hard across the rooftop and she squats down suddenly and clutches the ledge. Again he moves toward her and again she halts him, shouting:

"Stay the fuck back!" Rudge complies, once more retreating to a distance of five feet. For a moment there is silence. She stands again and repeats her questions. Rudge responds, reflecting her harsh tone.

"I asked you first." At this, she narrows her eyes, unwilling to yield.

"Oh, right. No, I didn't follow you up here. Now go away. I'm busy."

"What're you going to do?" Knowing his question is foolish; he returns her quick stare and tries to drain all emotion from his expression.

"What do you mean 'what am I going to do'? I'm going to jump off of this building! Now go away or they'll think that you pushed me."

"No, you're not."

"What?" She sounds genuinely puzzled. He restates:

"You're not going to jump."

"Fuck you I'm not. You gonna stop me?" He can; he can reach down and pull out the gun and she will do whatever he tells her to.

"I don't have to: you have no intention of jumping." She steps closer to him and brings up her hand to point at him, pausing, rethinking her next words.

"Who the...? You don't even know me, kid. I remember you. I saw you right before I ran into that prick in the tweed suit.. .and you were in the bookstore, you little

pervert. Just because you followed me around doesn't mean you know my life." He waits to make sure she is finished.

"I don't have to know your life to know you are never going to jump off of that ledge, or any other ledge. You have no intention whatsoever of killing yourself."

She pauses, looking away from him and out over the city. He follows her gaze and together they stare out at the patchwork of iron, stone, and glass, seeing only the assembled whole. At first the silence is uncomfortable to him; he feels that he should be speaking, trying to convince her of what he has seen in his watching; that she doesn't know how to die like this, but as he looks at the city he thinks that he feels an understanding falling between them, or at least that this moment is properly without speech. He looks back to her and still she watches the city, looking out not down; he knows she has admitted it to herself, but the anger in her stance suggests that she is not yet willing to back down. The wind picks up again and blows across her body, lifting her hair and clothing, and he suddenly yearns for her.

A grouping of pigeons stirs on the somewhat shorter building directly across from them, and as the wind settles a single bird lets itself fall from the ledge and drifts left before turning back in their direction. Climbing the air, it alights beside her. She looks down suddenly at the bird, standing still after its flight for a brief moment to regard them blankly before it begins pecking along the ledge, moving towards her. Rudge smiles at the scene and feels a warm humor rising in his chest. She stands motionless as the bird continues to ease closer to her, apparently unconcerned with their presence. Then, bracing herself briefly and almost imperceptibly, she swings her right foot violently at the

pidgin and narrowly misses as it gives out a distressed, chortling-coo and lifts off from the ledge in a flurry, flying away east.

"God Damned Pidgins!" she screams after the bird, her hair falling in her face.

"Why are you doing this?" Rudge is now free of the warmth he had felt, shaken from his euphoria by her aggression towards the bird, her ignorance of the moment; he feels like pushing. She looks at him angrily, her fists still clenched, her teeth still gritted in defiance.

"*Why* are you doing this?"

"Because none of it fucking matters!" Her face is reddened but draining fast, she slackens her limbs and, sighing, quiets.

"Because none of it matters."

"None of what matters?" Rudge adopts her tone and volume, speaking slowly and feeling another burn in his ears, another tightness in his throat. She looks out at the city again and her arms rise from her sides to move with her words.

"This! This whole fucking thing. We do it all and live it all and it's wrong: there's no point." She looks back at him hard, stabbing at the last word, and he feels the desperation in her.

"How does that make it wrong?" He has had this conversation before, with friends and roommates, late night by the shade of alcohol. He is used to playing the Devil's Advocate, but now he feels a firm belief building behind his words. She is stifled but still searching.

"Because we all *act* like there's a point."

He sees her liven at this statement, finding the words with more ease as she goes, and he can only let her go.

"We act like there's a reason for all this shit we go through, like there is a point somewhere that we *will find* at the end of it all. But it's all bull *shit* and I can't stand it anymore! And I can't stand to have to turn on the news and find all these people giving me reasons like they fucking *know*, when they *don't* Y, but I just keep on eating it up and telling myself that I'm not and working my ass off and thinking that I'm going to get there and I—get—nowhere!" She has paced along the ledge before him while she speaks, looking at nothing in particular, and now she stops. She turns her eyes to Rudge and he sees the tears running from them, down her face. Her crying, which has made no audible difference in her speech, gives him a final sense of relief. As he looks back at her, unsure how to hold her gaze, his heart jumps and freezes to see her moving rather hastily on the ledge, but only to sit, facing him, and put her face in her hands."

"I just don't know what I'm here for anymore, and I feel like I never really did."  
Rudge smiles.

"I do." She looks up at him wearily, raising the hair from her face with one hand so that it stands in a roll above her forehead.

"Stop smiling. You do what?"

"I know why you're here." She sighs and lets her hair fall, looking away to the right; not wanting to ask.

"Why?" Rudge waits, wanting to know the proper dramatic timing, perhaps waiting too long.

"To buy me lunch."

She looks back at him now, sourly bending her mouth and eyebrows, giving off a forced kind of half-laughter.

"Give me a break."

"No. I'm serious: I haven't eaten anything today and I'm pretty hungry from running up all those stairs and following you around for two hours. I think you owe me lunch." She narrows her eyes at his chiding tone but he does not falter or break his stare. Still, he feels that she sees through him.

"For what? Saving my life?" Her sarcasm is heavy but she asks all the same.

"I didn't save your life. I only saved you some time. Now grab your shit and let's go before somebody calls the cops."

Looking around her for a moment, she sighs once more and glances back over her shoulder at the far below street before turning back to Rudge and slowly, pridelessly, lowering her feet to the rooftop.

As they exit the stairwell into the lobby, Rudge stops by the entrance to the men's room and turns to speak:

"I've got to go in here for a minute and clean myself up. Will you hold my book for me?" He stands with the book extended to her and waits, not smiling. Reluctantly, she takes the book.

"First I have to buy you lunch, and now I'm holding your book while you wash the puke off of yourself?"

"I'll just be a second. Don't go anywhere."

Rudge enters the empty bathroom and goes quickly into the nearest stall, closing and locking the door. He places his foot on the closed seat-lid and hurriedly rolls up his pant leg. The gun clatters out onto the bathroom floor and he scrambles after it, reaching from under the stall to retrieve his renegade firearm. The gun had nearly loosed itself from his sock numerous times on their descent from the rooftop, and Rudge had to fake a limp to keep it secure, saying that he must have strained it on the way up or something, wondering why the damn thing hadn't fallen out when he was bounding up three stairs at a time.

Now, as he straightens himself up in the bathroom stall, he questions whether or not he should leave the gun here—in the toilet tank maybe—and come back for it later, or just leave it for good. He looks down at the shining metal object, so simple looking and light in his hands: no, he will not leave it here, with his fingerprints all over it, not knowing where it has been or what it has done. Removing the clip from his pocket, he slowly slides it into place in the bottom of the handle and hears the metallic 'click' echo through the bathroom. Rudge realizes he is holding his breath and exhales, his pulse quick. He squints down at the right side of the weapon and eases his hand along its cool surface, finding and activating what he is sure is the safety before lifting his shirt and tucking the gun snugly into his waistline. Lifting his arms, he groans and wishes that he had worn a larger shirt.

"Don't lift your arms, don't shoot your dick off."

The door to the bathroom creaks open and Rudge reaches down to flush the toilet before loudly fumbling the lock open and stepping out of the stall. A short and portly man in black appraises him oddly and slows his stride far too much for comfort, his

watchful eyes disappearing behind the far stall door as Rudge hurries at the soap dispenser, trying not to sweat.

Bursting out of the bathroom door, he takes back his book with a quick "thank you" and leads the way lithely to the exit, calming himself only enough to turn back and ask nervously:

"So, where should we eat?"

"I don't know.. .I need cigarettes."

"Here you are, folks."

The waiter sets a tray full of drinks down on the grated green metal table and reaches quickly for wine glass in the center.

"Here's your Merlot, miss; and the draft for you, sir. I'll be back to take your order in just a minute." Rudge catches him eyeing Percy with a sideways glance; having made no mention of her attire.

"Thanks, Kenny." Rudge raises his beer at the waiter and smiles before taking a sip. Kenny smiles back thinly and in a flash he is off with his tray, out from under the patio umbrella's shade and across to another table.

Setting his beer down on the table, Rudge looks across at Percy, who is staring at him blankly over the top of a menu, yet to touch her wine. He thinks to give her some gesture of recognition—a tip of the head, a smile, a raising of the eyebrows—but stops himself from doing so and simply stares back. Apparently not intending a contest, she speaks:

"Do you always do that?"

"What?"

"Call the server by their first name."

This is not what he expected her to say. Slightly off-put, he takes a moment to think, without really needing to.

"Yeah, I guess so. Why?" She looks away to the right, following laughter from a nearby table.

"It's rude." Setting down her menu, Percy reaches to her feet and draws the pack of Winstons from her shopping bag, unfolding the cardboard flap and extending the pack towards Rudge in offering.

"I told you: I don't smoke. How is it rude?" She pulls out a cigarette and places it in her mouth, reaches back in the bag for a lighter and lights the cigarette. Rudge slides the black plastic ashtray closer to her and she exhales a large cloud of smoke upwards and into the space of the umbrella, where it flowers and rolls about.

"It's just an asshole thing to do." She takes another drag and squints her eyes against the smoke rising from the cherry. "Kind of like telling someone on the ledge of a building that they're not going to jump." Again she exhales. He looks across at her and then away, out over the railing to the street. A couple in spandex jogs by and he watches the woman's thighs undulate as she moves down the sidewalk, tugging at the bottom of his shirt for the third time since they sat down, resolving to ignore the gun in his waistline as best he can. He looks back at Percy, who has noticed his gaze and followed it to the jogging woman.

"You weren't."



"And just how do you know that, Rudge?" Percy says his name with a marked sarcasm, having demanded to see his ID during their walk to the nearest corner store, fifteen minutes ago; still giving him a look of disbelief as she handed his wallet back to him on the sidewalk. She wears a similar look now, as her wrought-iron chair eases back to cradle her weight.

"Because I was watching you."

"Okay, folks, have you decided what you'd like to have?" Kenny stands with his hands clasped at his chest and the same thin smile on his lips, looking back and forth between the two of them, rubbing his hands together, just below a tiny crucifix, hanging from a thin gold chain around his neck.

"I'll have the Bistro Burger with bacon and cheddar. No mayo. No onion. And I think I've changed my mind on this glass of wine; could you bring me a water instead?" She offers him the wine glass without expression.

"Certainly." Kenny the waiter leans in for the glass, drawing it away from Percy's hand with an over-animated bend. "And for you sir?"

"I'll have the chicken-Caesar salad, please, with the dressing on the side."

"Alrighty. I'll get those orders in right away." Picking the menus up from the table, he makes an odd sucking noise with his lips and teeth before turning to weave briskly across the patio and back into the double-doors of Ziggy's Bistro. Rudge turns back to Percy and picks up his beer to take another sip. She watches him coolly through a newly-blown plume.

"Since when?"

"I'm sorry?" He licks his lips and sets his beer back down on its napkin, waving his hand through an approaching puff of smoke.

"When did you start watching me?" She flicks the ash from cherry into the ashtray.

"After you almost got hit by that bus."

Rudge flashes a smile at Percy which she unexpectedly returns, pulling on her Winston, speaking through the smoke.

"It wasn't going to hit me. That driver completely overreacted; she could have just kept on going and everything would have been fine."

"Well, yeah. If by fine you mean that you would've been squashed by a bus, and therefore never had to worry about jumping from a building then, sure, I suppose that qualifies."

Percy scoffs, reaching across the table and grabbing Rudge's beer to take a long swallow and set it down in front of herself.

"I mean, I've seen some close calls before, but you definitely get the blue ribbon." Rudge retrieves his beverage and raises it to Percy, nodding. "Hands down."

"How much time do you spend just following people around?" He shrugs and takes a sip.

"I dunno. It varies: eight, twelve hours a week?" Percy tilts her head back and laughs, exhaling smoke. Kenny approaches with a glass of ice-water, arriving just in time to hear her at full volume:

"Jesus! You're a God Damned pervert!"

"Um.. .here's your water, miss." He sets the glass down in front of her and clears his throat, visibly distraught. "Your food should be out in a few minutes." With this, he turns and walks away, mumbling unintelligibly to his necklace and leaving the two of them exchanging perplexed, guilty glances. Percy stifles a giggle and, turning to make sure that Kenny is safely back inside, the two of them burst out laughing.

"I think you should check your burger for Divine Judgment before you eat it."

"Yeah, I hear they stick it right under the cheese."

The laughter fades and a silence falls between them. Percy snuffs her cigarette in the ashtray after a final drag and immediately reaches for another.

"Would you mind not doing that?" She pauses with the lighter raised and looks across at Rudge, her eyes sharp.

"Sorry, pal; I'm afraid I only allow one concession per customer." She sparks the lighter and sucks the flame onto the end of the cigarette with a few quick starter-puffs. "And you've already had yours."

Rudge fixes a momentary glare on his companion and looks away broodingly, having seen not the slightest hint of remorse on her face. A slew of derisive remarks roll through his mind, and he settles on the one most likely to garner a response:

"Maybe I should've just let you jump (not that you would have). With the way you suck <sup>6</sup>em down it won't be long anyhow." She considers this briefly without any outward reaction, taking a heavy drag and blowing it his way.

"Well why did you fucking bother anyway? I mean, shouldn't you have a job to go to? Or do Mommy and Daddy just send checks to fund your voyeurism?"

"Mommy sends the checks; Daddy left, when I was eight. I haven't had a job in seven years."

Percy's hand halts briefly on its way to her mouth. She flicks without direction and a quarter-inch of ash falls onto the sleeve of her overcoat. She quickly brushes it away and takes an unsteady drag, leaning back to exhale upwards.

"Yeah, well, sloth seems to suit you well enough."

As Rudge watches the smoke coil in a transparent bloom above her exposed throat, Kenny arrives with their food and places it cheerlessly before them.

They eat in silence, looking everywhere but at each other. Rudge finishes his meal first and refuses another beer, opting instead to look through the book he had bought. Turning through its slick pages, he glosses over the many images of willful misrepresentation, and thinks unenthusiastically about what he considers to be the natural human tendency towards deception: the need to lie and be lied to.

Percy finishes her burger and fries with a quiet belch, and the two of them shake off desert and coffee. Kenny presents the check, placing it unassumingly between them, and Percy promptly picks it up; examining the total and pulling two crisp bills from her wallet, placing them into the fold of the black server book. Together they stand and exit through the patio gate, Rudge holding onto his pants through the fabric of his t-shirt.

Out on the street:

The bustle of lunch hour winds slowly to a close. People wander back to their lofts and offices in taxis and on foot and in buses; some smoking, some drinking coffee, some eating as they go, some just walking without distinction or even purpose. On

Sanction Avenue, Rudge and Percy walk west, retracing the steps of their earlier journey through a long stretch of business-oriented, efficiency-based restaurants with similar names — like Mauricio's Deli and Takeout, and the Carlsbad Cafe. Leaving Ziggy's Bistro, Rudge had not stopped to wonder why they were coming back this way, preferring to dwell in silence a little longer and simply follow; treading closely behind Percy and half-consciously watching her walk.

As he stands beside her now at the intersection of Sanction and Parson, she is emptying the contents of her shopping bag back into the pockets of her overcoat before tossing the bag into a trashcan on the corner. Rudge holds his book under his left arm, and as he looks up the Bryson building is visible at the top of the skyline several blocks away. Rudge stands; waiting to cross the street and without wondering why, he looks over at Percy and feels the urge to speak.

"Can I ask you something?" She glimpses back at him in the periphery of her vision, keeping her arms crossed and watching traffic.

"Sure." Her voice is unmarked by any sure feeling, and the monosyllabic reply escapes with a sighing breath, as if she has been labored in thought as they walk. He pauses and considers asking an easier question than the one he has formed, or perhaps not speaking at all.

"You used to work at that building, right? Because you knew the key-code to the roof."

"Yes." She looks down at her feet as they cross the street in front of a waiting line of cars. He glances to his right and sees a heavy-set, balding man with a cigar in the driver's seat of a small white hatchback, watching Percy walk through a cloud of blue

smoke. Rudge ponders the contempt he feels for the fat smoking man, quickening his pace ever so slightly to block Percy from his leer.

"And you just got fired recently."

"I quit. Yesterday."

"Okay; so?" He puts his arms out inquisitively and turns to her, walking, expecting something. "People quit their jobs all the time, or get fired.. .what the hell made you decide to kill yourself?"

She does not slow her pace or look at him and at first he believes she intends to ignore him. Blowing a sputtering breath through loosened lips, Percy finally meets his eyes; inhaling plain air, stopping short her words; rethinking.

"Well, you'll probably read all about it in tomorrow's paper, but..." There is a scratching clatter as the gun falls from Rudge's pants and skitters two feet before he snatches it up again, dropping the book, and shoves it in his right hand pocket. He waits to hear a scream or a siren but nothing comes. Percy quickens and turns left to cross the street, pushing in front of a young boy wearing navy and a look of frightened excitement.

"Percy, wait! It's not mine, I swear! I found it!" She quickens more still and does not look back to shout:

"Whatever, psycho!" She is not scared so much as angry as she flees from him. He gives chase with his hand still clutching the gun in his pocket, stopping short as she suddenly turns on him, fists clenched and feet wide.

"Look, motherfucker: you follow me five more feet and I swear to God I'll scream for the cops!"

"Just hold on a minute. I can explain this." Removing his right hand from his pants and bringing it up level with his left in a halting gesture, Rudge scrambles for a logical statement; something, anything to turn this around. Two seconds and she shouts once more, her eyes wild:

"Fuck explaining! You find someone else to rape and murder 'cause it ain't gonna be me!" She turns again and bolts around the corner, yelling as she goes and he trails:

"Not today God Damn it!"

Rudge curses to himself and comes around the corner at full speed, seeing Percy's back too late to stop. He collides against her with a flash of white and the two of them crumble to the ground. There is a blank moment in his mind, and he feels himself being lifted briskly to his feet, opening his eyes to see the gruff and rigid features of two uniformed police officers; one on him, the other brushing off Percy's overcoat shoulder as she rubs her forehead.

"Alright, you two. What's all this noise about?"

Shit. Rudge stands without a thought beyond this and stares dimly at the officer holding his arm, who squints back at him disapprovingly and trades a quick glance with his partner. Percy seems to come back to herself, only to adopt a similar expression of dumbfounded fear.

"Well? Somebody speak up here. You sure had plenty to yell about a second ago." This from the officer standing over Percy, looking back and forth between the two of them. "That was you shouting just now, wasn't it ma'am?"

"Yes, officer." She looks at Rudge, unsure, and he sees the consideration of options in her eyes—certainly one of which being to turn him in right here and now. He tries to communicate his plea with a split-second's gesture; flashing her a pained glare.

"Pretty sharp stuff, seems to me: rape and murder?" There is an edge of humor in the policeman's tone. Rudge thinks for a moment that he may get out of this yet. After all: the beer on his breath; Percy's pajamas, which are starting to look a little rough around the edges—they could very well appear to be crazy, but the officers are serious enough in their demeanor, and his head still aches and throbs as they stare him down.

"Is this man bothering you?"

"Yes. No. I don't know." She covers her face again.

"He's starting to bother me, Fred. I'll tell you that much." The cop behind Rudge elbows him in the back with medium force, and he staggers forward slightly and grunts from the nudge. "You drunk or somethin', fella? Speak up!"

"Uh-huh." It is all he can utter; his right thigh burning and beginning to tremble as he stares at Percy, who has raised her head so that her eyes are visible and they turn to him now, showing sadness and uncertainty.

"Say, John, didn't we hear that call about a possible jumper on top of the Bryson building a couple hours back: something about a woman in an overcoat and a black suit?" Rudge continues to stare at Percy and wills his eyes from widening. She stays equally petrified for a moment, now only lowering her hands to her sides and straightening herself somewhat; this still seems like too much to him and he waits for the cops to strike.

"Yeah. A false alarm as I recall, Fred. But still.. .maybe we oughta take these two in—just to be sure—since they seem so hell-bent on secrecy."



"He's my boyfriend. We got in a fight, okay? I was just tryin' to fuck with him a little. You don't have to take us in. He's just a drunk bastard and I get tired of his shit, alright?" The words spill from Percy in a torrent and leave a dry silence on the group. Rudge, moving only his eyes, looks over her shoulder at a small group of people gathering on the next corner; watching the scene and pointing.

"Well, it would appear that we're getting somewhere. Wouldn't you say, John?"

"Yes indeed, Fred. A bit saucy on the language, though. I'm not sure that I'm convinced yet." Fred raises an eyebrow at his partner. Rudge's head begins to cool, but he is uncomfortable with the officers' silent communication to each other.

"Yeah, me neither, Fred: not quite yet. Hows about a make-up kiss, just so we know all's well." John and Fred both stifle a chuckle somewhat unsuccessfully, and Rudge finally allows his face to show the shock he feels. Percy rolls her eyes at the three of them and begins to ease towards Rudge. He waits; his heart beating rapidly—but at a different rate altogether from that produced by the promise of jail—she puts her hands on his face (presumably for show) and pulls his lips to hers. Rudge feels the particles in his lips, tongue, and teeth; each and every one of them, spiraling faster and broiling out to brush against the shapes of her wet mouth. His chest flushes with breath and he wraps his arms around her, feeling her gasp, and kisses her more deeply. One of the forgotten cops lets out a long, low whistle and Rudge lets her fall back to stand away from him again, only now tasting cigarettes.

The two stand smiling at each other and their hands meet—and hold—briefly as they resume a fair distance. The crowd across the street is clapping sarcastically and someone shouts, laughing.

"I think our job here is done, Fred."

"By the bulge in that guy's pants, I'd say you're right John." John guffaws and slaps his partner on the shoulder, and the pair of policemen turn to walk around the corner; Fred turning back to say between bellows:

"You kids try to keep it down now."

Rudge and Percy walk west with hands clasped together. On Grifton Place, the late-afternoon sun sets high shadows on the homogenous buildings across the street, and softer conversation settles about them as they go on aimlessly forward.

"You really just *found* it, right there in the alleyway?" The sarcasm in Percy's voice has taken on a playful character, and she looks up at Rudge and squeezes his hand before letting go of it to reach for a cigarette.

"I swear it." He puts his freed hand over his heart, returning her tone. "Seriously though, it was the weirdest thing: one minute I'm following you and trying to duck into this alley, and the next thing you know I bust my ass and land right on top of a gun." She laughs; putting her lighter back in the overcoat pocket and jump-starting her cigarette.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know." Rudge looks over to meet the mischief in her eyes and lets forth a nervous smile, finding himself suddenly excited. Forcing down the feeling, he moves his gaze to the ground and retraces his thoughts to speak: "I was thinking about taking it to the police, but our friends Fred and John ruled that one out for sure."

Percy; giggling: "No shit! Those guys were unbelievable." Rudge joins her laughter, feeling the onset of an urge to say something sappy.

"Yeah, but I'm really glad we ran into them, or else we might not've..."

"Easy there, Kissanova." He blushes at her rebuttal and chides himself silently for giving in to his instincts, but smiles as she takes back his hand and flicks her still-long cigarette onto the sidewalk.

"You know, if you still wanted to turn it in...you could always call and leave an anonymous tip telling them where it is; after washing it, of course."

He hadn't thought of this, and he turns, smiling at her devious notion before stating its flaws.

"Yeah, but I don't actually have a phone. And I wouldn't want to involve any of my roommates; they'd probably want to keep the damn thing." Watching his feet again, Rudge thinks out loud: "Though, I suppose I could use a payphone."

"True. Or you could use the phone at my place." She grins coyly, turning her head down. "Besides, there's a mailbox I might need to use it on right out front."

Rudge pauses at this with a quizzical look; demanding more with his silence. Percy stops and turns in front of him.

"Nevermind.. .come here." She pulls him down to her for the second time and they kiss lingeringly on the sidewalk. They spin around a half-turn. Rudge feels his blood thicken and as they part, he asks:

"How do we get there?" Percy looks past him up the street in the direction they have been walking and then meets his eager eyes again with a smile, pointing behind him.

"We'll take the bus."

She turns him around to see a city bus cruising towards them, the driver watching as she waves and slowing to the curb. Feeling his nerves tingling and sending sudden warmth over his body, Rudge thinks as he enters the bus of the weapon he is still carrying; checking that it is secure in its new place in the back of his pants and keeping his front towards the weary-looking bus driver as Percy counts out change from her wallet and drops it into the moneybox with a series of clangs. The driver nods and pushes a button that drops the change from the clear box to a lower compartment, and the two of them move to the rear of the empty bus. Taking a seat beside Percy, Rudge looks back to the front of the bus to see the driver watching them in the long, horizontal mirror mounted above the windshield; almost staring as the bus accelerates with a steadily rising rumble.

*Three: Ethan*

The lines are all well formed  
Before him. One by one they wait and (climbing) step in turn.  
He sits above and smiles to see them come.  
Tokens trickle to their trap, riders find seats  
and all is calm with the engine's climb,  
just before it fades.

to Red, streaks across the mortar gaps, hides better  
in the bricks between.

This is long before (he knows) as the trains sleep solid on the tracks.  
Pallid light from station lamps, shaping places not to be.

Bearings rattle through the liquid pressure, striking lightly either side.  
Flashlights, fishing: found him out. (Fuck!)

Sudden sight of all and ease to run,  
over gravel with the backpack's faster clatter, here they come  
shouting from behind. Stop!

Along the sidewalk.

Two exit, one enters, all in order

but not this one:

something flares about her edges and reaches for him from behind

her raiding eyes, gnashing eyes,

tear him down but still she stands

so calm.

Ethan's eyes open to see the depot's break room table and chairs standing sideways before him. Shifting himself upright on the crash cot in the corner, he glances at the clock above the door: 2:45. With an arbitrary brushing off he rises and wonders how it is that he feels so awake, why he should have such an unnatural awareness after three hours of sleep, and this the third double of the week. Sometimes with a big push like this there is a point where it doesn't matter anymore; where you just keep going until it's done, thriving on the absurd desperation of it all—but this is different.

He feels like something is watching him. Not someone...something: a presence to cold and abstract to be human: alien eyes from a million miles away, still so affecting although removed in observation. For a moment, Ethan stands looking about the break room, scrutinizing the table and chairs, the coffee-stained counter tops littered with soda cans and cellophane wrappers, the old yellow refrigerator: the seeming normality of it all only heightening his paranoia. With a shudder, he wonders whether he could have dreamed something about alien-abduction, or being naked in school. It has been so long since he had any memory of dreaming—probably over a year—and he questions what, if anything, his mind had been occupying itself with as he slept.

Continuing their survey of the room, his eyes fall again on the clock above the door: 2:47—only thirteen minutes before his next shift: the paranoia will have to wait. Ethan once again brushes off his uniform and straightens his jacket before turning the door handle before him and stepping out into the main bay of the Midtown central bus depot.

For a moment there is only the brightness of the afternoon sun flooding through the front bay doors. Then comes the smell of oil and exhaust, the low rumble of large

engines idling, and the echoing exchanges of the other drivers at shift change. Ethan turns left and walks to the steps leading down to the dock floor, running his hand over the grey railing there, striking the metal at intervals and feeling the vibration fade in his hand as a low tin hum resonates dimly from the impact. Rounding the bottom stair, he prepares himself for the oncoming fray of formalities.

"Hey, Ethan! You look like a zombie, man, you pullin' that die hard shit again?" So Whitmore, one of the dock mechanics, is the first to draw him in, with his careful hair and youthful affectation—always so abrasive to Ethan: why couldn't he just act like a thirty-eight-year-old?

"Someone's got to do the work around here." At least he could pass off his contempt as a joke. Next along the walk to the time clock comes Angie, always a smile to compliment her aged waddle.

"Good afternoon, Ethan." He smiles in return and mock-bows to his senior co-worker before responding.

"Good afternoon, Angie. And how was the 7 today?"

"Don't get cute with me, young man. You know perfectly well it was a damn nightmare. I damn near ran down some batty young gal in her peejays and half my passengers are probably gonna sue me for reckless endangerment." Ethan chuckles at this, always pleased to succeed in getting Angie to swear at him.

Arriving at the time clock, he pulls the magnetic card from his jacket pocket and swipes it through the slot at the base of the machine. His name flashes up on the screen in little blue digits alongside the time: Ethan Halifax, in: 2:50. At this, he punches in a three digit code and waits for the screen to light up again: Assigned route: #9. Damn it.



The afternoon 9 is a murder-haul through the throat of Midtown's business district and back out to the eastern depot, which Ethan likes to refer to as the Inferno, finding in it a striking resemblance to Dante's vision of hell. With a deep sigh he turns from the time clock and heads to the far end of the main bay, shoving his hands into his pants pockets and keeping a brisk pace to avoid any further interactions, which of course guarantees nothing but attention.

"Hey, E! Why so glum, man? You're lady finally tell you about her and me?"

Whitmore calls out from a cadre of mechanics taking a smoke break out front, sparking a roar of laughter with his sexually charged remark.

Fuck you! Grease monkeys! He should say it, so what if they drain his transmission fluid next shift?

"I don't have a lady, Whitmore." He cringes at the gaping window he just opened, and braces for the consequences.

"Oh that's right, you like dudes!" another explosion of labored guffaws and hacking coughs. Don't worry: they'll all be dead in ten years; twenty tops.

Reaching his assigned gate, Ethan leans back on the nearest I-beam extending down from the thirty foot ceiling and waits as the lunch 9 driver pulls into the bay, the shadow of the depot door closing steadily over the tired diesel sound of the city bus: It is going to be a long evening.

There is a hinging hiss as the hydraulic brakes depressurize and the door of the bus opens. The engine remains idling, and Marvin Hale steps down from the rig and approaches Ethan with a familiar smile.

"She's all yours, old man." Marvin salutes and extends his hand to Ethan; the two of them shake lightly and hold the contact for a moment longer before releasing.

"Much obliged, Marv."

There is an uproar to their left, and they hear Whitmore's boisterous voice over a raucous choral cackling, watching him gyrate pronouncedly as he vividly describes the lower features of some unknown and most likely fictitious woman.

"Christ," says Marvin, "hasn't he fallen into one of the dock pits yet?"

"Sadly, no; but there's always hope." Ethan meets his friend's eyes but does not return his laughter, looking past him at the rig instead and giving out an elaborate sigh.

"Aww shucks, pal," Marvin obliges playfully, "all work and no sleep makes E a dull driver, huh?"

"Something to that effect."

Marvin grabs Ethan by the shoulder and shakes him heartily, a habit which Ethan today finds more annoying than usual, backing away from the grasp, grimacing. Marvin becomes immediately serious at this recoiling, and Ethan regrets making his emotions so clear; not wishing to appear weak in his colleague's eyes.

"Jesus, E, you look down right pissed. You want me to take this one?" The offer is genuine, but still unacceptable.

"No, I've got it Marv. I just need to get on the road and I'll settle in fine."

Marvin stands back in assessment a moment longer, searching Ethan's face, holding his gaze.

"Alright, man. Don't say I didn't offer though."

The two friends part ways and Ethan climbs the steps to the cockpit and takes a quick stock before sitting down in the weathered leather seat. The city had appropriated \$5.3 million for new buses just eight months ago—replete with all manners of digital readouts and scrolling displays—but the seats are already cracking: typical. Again he draws out his magnetic ID card and swipes it through the slot on the dashboard. The lights on the screen above him change: Your Driver Today Is: Ethan Hallifax. They still hadn't fixed the misspelling.

Looking down from the erroneous sign, Ethan watches as Whitmore drags a fueling hose around the front of the rumbling rig and looks up, pursing his lips in a kiss, with a barely audible smooching noise. Ethan looks away without reaction and picks up the metal-encased logbook from underneath the seat, flipping it open and marking his time underneath Marvin's last entry: Driver In: 2:57. There is a series of thuds on the side of the bus and Whitmore walks back around the front, just below the windshield. Ethan revs the engine and presses down on the horn, giving a deep, sustained blast. The startled mechanic jumps back a full six feet and shields himself with the fueling hose, now looking up wide-eyed and soon fuming to be the newfound object of lackey-laughter. Ethan shrugs—the bewildered look on his face adding just the right insult to injury—and Whitmore suddenly throws down the hose and begins walking towards the door with a determined look on his waxy face. Ethan kicks the engine into reverse, roaring out of the bay door without checking for clearance from the shift-captain (who rages at him, his voice crackling over the bus' radio); assuring himself a write-up for improper procedure, and laughing his ass off.

nature of a scavenger; to move haphazardly from one action to another, always looking for a good direction to head in.

The man smiles squeamishly at Ethan as he climbs the final step and pulls a handful of change from his maroon sweatpants, dropping several coins on the floor and stooping for the ones landing nearest his worn white sneakers. A beleaguered groan issues from his throat as he rights himself, leaving his face disastrously close to Ethan's.

"I'll just leave the rest of 'em down 'er fer you. Heah, heahgh." These last sounds from his mouth having a resemblance to some kind of signature, stock laughter, altered nearly beyond recognition from isolated over-use.

"Thanks." Ethan responds blithely, but says nothing more; not wanting to provide any encouragement or what might appear to be a lead. With outgoing scavengers such as this one, any communication beyond the minimum can easily spiral out of control, possibly leading to a dangerous attachment.

Ethan looks up, and watches the little man move down the aisle in the observation mirror, smiling to himself as the passenger stops five rows back and sits; directly in the center of the scavenger range. He wonders how many of his colleagues have noticed how important where exactly a person sits on the bus is, as an indicator of their type. Ethan has only mentioned his discoveries to a few other drivers—and even then he presented them as a sort of joke—but while he is on his routes he constantly makes observations such as the seating range.

Rows one through five are subject to many variables (such as bus capacity, time of day, and which groups have dominant numbers within them) and as a result must be watched more closely, but they are, on average, largely occupied by scavengers and the

more motivated, socially viable drones. If Ethan were to have talked more to his first and currently only passenger, he would have certainly sat in the first row; searching out Ethan's prospects for the duration of his ride. As it is, the man ventured farther back and into prime scavenger territory.

If ten more scavengers were to get on the bus, they would all sit in the same area as this first one; generally not varying from between rows five to ten, which makes this the default scavenger area. Again: it is because of their nature; they gravitate to crowds, and away from extremes, and from their place in the middle-most rows they can easily branch out to other sections of the bus if necessary. Ethan imagines this theoretical overabundance of scavengers as he looks at the lone little man, always making sure to look away before making eye contact. Looking back to the road, he sees a person at the stop ahead and slows the bus, halting it dutifully at the curb.

A woman of about thirty-seven enters quietly up the steps and deposits a pre-sorted handful of change into the transparent repository to his right. Ethan checks the amount and nods to the woman before pushing the release button and sending the change down to the safebox below with a clatter. She nods in return, and turns to walk to the second-to-last row and seat herself against the window without so much as a glance at the other man: casebook midlevel drone.

The back of the bus—rows eleven through fifteen—is almost exclusively reserved for people just like this woman: relatively low in energy and rarely inclined to conversation, sensibly although not flashily dressed: going through the motions. Ethan often imagines them at the jobs they undoubtedly travel to and from under his guidance; sitting slouched at unadorned desks and typing endlessly into their computers, sometimes

stealing a glance at any near window (with the same unremarkable look on their faces that this woman now bears) and arbitrarily watching the time pass. They take no joy in their work, yet they do it for decades. They travel to and from their modest homes and eat their modest meals and live their modest lives, modestly, just like her. But where would we be without them?

One of the reasons Ethan has never fully revealed his findings to his coworkers is that they would surely think him arrogant and hateful. Not true: in fact he places no greater value on any of his passengers over another. Each one is every bit as vital to the continuing operation of the grand city before him: his city.

The stop request bell rings above him and he begins to slow the rig; the brakes whining. Stopping smoothly three feet shy of the sign-marker on the sidewalk, Ethan levers open the bus doors and the squat scavenger exits, with a wave and a chuckle as he bounces past and down the steps. Glancing back up at the observation mirror, he sees the drone-woman watching the little man walk away with a slight disgust on her face. Seeing that he watches her, she looks quickly out the window and up, appearing upset. Ethan pulls the doors to and brings the bus out into traffic once more, peering out his window in time to see two boys deep in an alleyway: one making hurried movements with his arm against the wall, leaving behind graceful white spray-painted lines, while the other keeps watch. He locks eyes with the lookout a second before both boys disappear behind the rolling by brick of the next building over, and immediately thinks of Chase.

Being raised in the pseudo-slum suburbs just south of Midtown, known regionally as Jippsville, Ethan had been hard up for alliances. His was one of six white families in

the neighborhood, and though he had two older brothers growing up—the closest one to him being a full seven years his senior—they were actually *too* old to be of any help to him. So he had stayed close to home; not even daring to wander as far as the playground three blocks down from his split-level, split-siding house for fear of falling into the hands of one of the local gangs: roving bands of too-tough boys with lit cigarettes and a single switchblade knife floating between them.

One day he sat at seven-and-a-half, out in front of his house with a piece of chalk slipped away from school, writing his name on the sidewalk in block letters. Suddenly a shadow had cast itself over his work, and he had rolled around on his heels, bracing, to see the face of a much older boy—probably at least ten-and-two-thirds—looking down at him coolly and appraising what he had just done. The boy's features were all in darkness as he stood directly in front of the sun, looking back and forth between Ethan and his name.

"Hey, that ain't bad, man."

Ethan had stood up nervously and backed closer to his house, regarding the strange boy's features—still dark though he was now fully lit—and fingering the chalk in his hand.

"Can I see that?"

Ethan handed the chalk over somewhat morosely to the older boy, having learned by then to simply give up anything demanded: the sooner the better. As he watched from his own lawn, the black boy bent down to the sidewalk beside Ethan's work and wrote right next to it: C-H-A-S-E-I. Finishing with an underline, he stood back up and pointed down.

"That's me." With that, he gave the chalk back to silent little Ethan and walked away. After he was well down the street, Ethan walked back to where he had drawn his name and looked at the new addition beside it, admiring its greater size and precision.

Once this initial meeting had passed, Ethan had seen Chase One (thinking this was his actual name) at various intervals in the neighborhood, and the two would leave new works in chalk for each other to find at that same spot on the sidewalk. Eventually coming to speaking terms about eighteen months later, when Ethan had learned of his nominal mistake:

"Naw, man, its part of my tag not my name. My real name is Cheysan. You know: like Chey-s^m; Chase-Ow." He had gone on to enlighten Ethan about the burgeoning art of graffiti; telling him of his older cousin in New York; of racking cans and gettin' upon trains and walls and billboards; on everything. He had told him of end-to-end burners and fat-caps; of Zephyr, Caine, and Mad 103; shown him the smooth lines and sprawled shapes of bright color on concrete and metal in the crisp stack of newspaper clippings underneath his bed: It was love at first sight.

Over the next decade, the two of them grew up together in the shadows of Midtown, imprinting a legacy on the city's surface in ink and aerosol. They formed the IBS Crew in 1985. Within a year, every writer in the Midwest knew the names of Chase One and E-thos, and the Jippsville Bomb Squad, and their tags could be seen on every block of Midtown, always accompanied by a six-letter acronym: NSWNSR—Never Stop Writing Never Stop Running.

By the time he was twenty-two, Ethan had an arrest record several pages long. He and Chase had been busted over thirty times, always together, and every cop in the



county knew them on sight. Even with all this, they refused to stop writing—having by then changed tags a dozen times over—choosing instead to make their ventures into the dark far less frequent, and a great deal more dangerous.

In the early morning hours of April 18, 1992, Ethan found himself hanging by a hardware store rope from the tallest bridge in Midtown, with Chase swinging ten feet to his right. The two of them had walked to the center of the bridge at half-past three, dressed head to toe in black, the cans rattling softly in their backpacks making the only perceptible noise. Reaching the crest of the bridge, they'd stopped, and removed their backpacks without a word; pulling from one of them a twenty-five foot length of heavy-gauge rope. They wrapped the rope three times around the nearest lamp-post in silence, adrenaline surging, and then fed the equal ends through two of the oval-shaped spaces in the bridge's concrete railing, and back around the top of the railing to tie around themselves in well practiced trucker-hitches.

Then, crisis: Ethan had miscalculated and the rope was too short to reach wrapped so many times around the light-post. Unwilling to call off their mission after so much planning and anticipation, they agreed to go ahead with the rope wound only once around the post's four-foot circumference. Readjusted, they each picked up their respective backpacks and put them on backwards—so that the paint-filled pockets rested against their stomachs—and lowered themselves in tandem over the edge of the bridge.

They set to work on the huge metal support beam that traced the entire span of the bridge, swinging back and forth on the rope to rest at intervals along the beam; working together to spell out a massive IBS: their final and indelible mark on the city. Ethan had hardly finished the outline of the T when he was suddenly jerked upwards, letting out a

startled shout and looking down to see his can fall to the railway far below. Blinded by the beam of a policeman's flashlight as he was tugged steadily upwards, Ethan did not see Chase untie his own knot and rest his weight fully on the foot-wide base of the support beam, and did not know his friend had fallen until he heard the fast-trailing sound of his scream.

As he opens the bus doors to the waiting line of people at the Central Ave/Market St stop, Ethan thinks back on the end of his previous life. He watches the passengers file one by one onto the bus (drone, drone, drone, scavenger, scavenger, drone) and drop their coins and swipe their passes; thinking back to what the young and unattractive parole officer said to him fourteen years ago:

"Mr. Halifax, you have an opportunity here. An opportunity that your rather unfortunate friend will never get: an opportunity to become a productive part of society; to give something back." Sitting across from her then as she browsed over his case file, he had picked up a pen on her desk and began tracing out a large and ornate 'C' on the arm of his chair. Looking up at him, she had reached across and snatched the pen, and told him of his other opportunity with a far less heart-felt tone: "Or you can go to prison." And so Ethan had opted for the former; beginning his thousand-hour community service term at the Midtown Municipal Garage, washing graffiti from the sides of buses; spending many ironic days with a chemical-soaked rag, pressing hard, back and forth across a fading acronym.

Sitting at a red light, Ethan looks up at the passengers in his mirror, and begins to observe the mannerisms of a child sitting beside his mother and tugging temperamentally

at her blouse. The woman pauses her phone conversation long enough to swat the young boy's hand away; plugging her exposed ear to shut out his injured cries. Others nearby sigh or look annoyed, or simply raise the volume of their own conversations. With a growing disinterest, Ethan reaches underneath his seat and pulls out a tiny FM radio receiver, slipping the left earbud into place before accelerating forward towards the now green light. Thankful to have ended up tailing Marv on the Inferno, he flips the contraband radio on and feels for the station dial, rolling it right, now left; honing in on the nondescript accent of an NPR announcer as she carefully measures her inflection while addressing a British-sounding man on the subject of dreaming.

*" (shhhtgszst)The question of whether (rrshshckansshhhhshrrm)maintain a consistent self during our dreams notwithstanding, where do you stand, Dr. Bishopson, on the issue of(fffsshowshhhsh) effects our waking lives? "*

*" Well that's an interesting question, Diana, and I think you've touched on one of the biggest questions in the field today. Which is: how is it that we can be certain—and I am speaking empirically here—that our experiences during dreaming are not taking place in a very real, constantly present kind of alternate plane of existence? Real as in having clearly apparent effects on our physical beings (such as raising stress levels and mid-slumber motor functions), and constantly present as in being in a way accessible to us at all times.*

*"It is true that the traditional interpretations of data gathered on the activity and stimulation of the visual cortex during the dream-stages of sleep suggest that we are in fact creating the images we perceive while dreaming based on preexisting constructs, but I would point out that those same areas of the brain are similarly active during our*

waking lives and are in fact employed in helping us to more quickly identify what we see by constantly performing a comparative analysis using that same memory-base of internal constructs. "

"Hmmm...I see. What do you mean by your use of the phrase 'in a way accessibl(shrlgzszshrrrrrthe only way III love youshzzzshshhh) " Ethan turns the dial towards the higher frequencies in search of the local talk radio channel, having acquired over the years an extreme distaste for the sound of foreign scientists discussing abstractly built fringe-theories. As he scrolls the stop-request bell rings out over the noise of the bus and an upper-drone thirty-something in a shiny yellow tie approaches Ethan in the mirror, ignoring the signs suggesting that he remain seated until the bus comes to a full stop.

Ethan removes the earbud and waits for the rogue passenger to speak:

"I'm sorry, pal, but could you stop me at the next corner, just past the sign there?" Ethan eases the rig twelve yards past the designated stop and depresses the hissing brakes before opening the door.

"Thanks...Ethan, I appreciate it." The man slides a single dollar bill into the jacket pocket of his uniform before scuttling down the steps and into the already-opened door of his apartment building, and Ethan's eyes meet those of the preening doorman before pulling his lever once more and driving away; neither showing much emotion.

Replacing the single earbud and resuming his frequency search, he turns up Lintier Street and begins the long loop that makes the evening 9 such an arduous route to run.

"(shhhhhkchhckcvvvjust one look annshhhpchkcan earlier story hkchkh)bizarre development, police officials are now saying that the man found murdered last night in

*the northern vicinity of Parson Avenue was in fact a nurse's assistant at the Brightvale Wellness Center, where a widespread security breach is rumored to have taken place just hours ago. There are confirmed reports that a fire alarm was triggered and an emergency response team was dispatched to the facility, but no other word has come in as to the nature of the alarm being authentic or not. A spokesperson for Brightvale has recently released a statement to the press, assuring the public that everything at their facility is secure, and that all patients have been accounted for. The Midtown Police have, as of yet, made no arrests in the shooting death and have asked that anyone with information relevant to the case please call the Informant Hotline at 394-332-TELL, that's 394-322-8355.*

*"Wow: sounds like some pretty freaky stuff going on out there near the county line, wouldn't you say Britney? "*

*"You said it, Bill...Sheesh: I sure would hate to run into one of those folks from Brightvale in a dark alley. "*

*"Oh, gosh no; I think I'd rather run into my mother in-law... "* The choppy laughter of the deejays rolls through Ethan's left ear as he pulls in to another stop; thinking about the old resort turned mental institution situated only nine miles east of the city limits—the post-WWII expansion of the city having been both the reason for its uneasy proximity and the source of its comfortable security budget—and as a pair of middle-drones climbs the bus stairs to slide their passes through the card slot, he wonders briefly how its inhabitants would figure into his classification system; or for that matter how Chase would have figured into it.

One hour and twelve minutes later:

Ethan drives rig 9 down the sparsely-peopled stretch of warehouses and thrift stores that is Grifton Place, happy to have the bus to himself again. The radio console on his dash crackles to life and his happiness fades as he hears the station manager at central speak his name:

*"Halifax: What's your ETA back here? Over. "* The voice coming over the speaker is thin and mechanical. With a sigh Ethan reaches over to retrieve the microphone from its dash-caddy—easing the spiraled chord around the steering wheel—and clears his throat before pressing in the little red button on top with his thumb and speaking his reply:

"I'm heading east on Grifton, just past Wiley; I should be there in another forty-five minutes or so. Over." He holds the mic back away from his mouth and waits; a moment passing between transmissions.

*"You're behind schedule, GodDamnit. Over. "*

"What can I say, sir? The 9 is a murder-haul, and today was especially..."

*"Don Y give me that shit, Halifax! Just get your ass back here ASAP: we 've got a few things to talk about. Over and out. "*

"Copy."

Placing the microphone back on the dash with a 'click', Ethan swears under his breath; noticing a person ahead, standing alone at the next stop. As the bus draws nearer he observes the passenger to be a tall man in an expensive-looking grey suit—now showing itself to have a spotty texture as he slows, nearer still—talking on his cell-phone

and holding a shiny black briefcase. Ethan stops at the curb and opens the doors to the man, hearing the present half of his conversation float into the bus:

"Yes, the bus is here. I'm just about to get on, so I'll.. .what? ... What do you mean?" The man ceases his forward motion and stands blankly as he listens, growing gradually more upset. "Well that's ridiculous: he should be able to take care of it himself. Look: I'm just about to get on the bus. Can't we just deal with this later?" Ethan waits, trying not to show his impatience, though the man would not notice if he did. With a grand gesture of exasperation the man tilts his body back and turns his face skyward; calling down God to answer for whatever has developed on the other end of the phone.

"Okay, fine! I'll be there in a minute." Casting his eyes to Ethan for only a second, the man in the expensively textured grey suit waves the bus away and turns to walk himself around the corner, still speaking into his phone as Ethan closes the doors and pulls off, somewhat pissed: "No, I said I'll be there in a minute..."

No sooner than he regains good speed, shifting into third gear, Ethan notices a couple kissing just a few yards to his side of the plastic-sheltered stop at the intersection of Grifton and Martin Luther King. The two stop kissing, twirling as he approaches and what he takes to be the woman—who appears to be wearing pajamas underneath her cheap overcoat—points right at him over the other one's shoulder.

"Oh, don't even do it" he says to her through the windshield, still some thirty yards away. Sure enough she edges out to the end of the sidewalk and begins waving her arm. "Fucking scavengers." Worse: scavengers in heat.

The woman in her pajamas enters first and pulls a wallet from the right-hand pocket of her coat, unsnapping the change compartment to fish out the requisite amount

and drop it, coin by coin, into the repository: these people are trying to make him later, and succeeding admirably. Ethan hits the release button for the safe and considers the much younger man who walks second up the stairs, keeping his body turned awkwardly towards Ethan as he passes by and follows the woman to the back of the bus—guaranteed destination for anyone seen kissing, hugging, or even leaning lightly on their lover at a bus stop. Reaching the back, the young man turns and looks directly into Ethan's eyes in the mirror: Is this kid trying to fuck with me? He holds the gaze a moment longer as he moves back out into the right lane, coming up on the city-center, and accelerating at a quicker, less comfort-conducive pace than he usually would. He checks back to the scavenger couple and sees them whispering to each other, causing his dislike to instantly solidify.

Looking back to the road ahead of him with his bottom lip lifted in a frown, Ethan's mouth drops completely to see yet another passenger at the very next stop. Three in a row at this hour: unbelievable; and from the looks of them, this one's a scavenger too.

The bus jerks violently, squealing in pain as it is brought to a standstill before the indeterminable figure on the sidewalk; facing away from the doors and staring up at the building above, now turning slowly as the lever slides out and the doors open. Ethan can just hear the muffled protests of the couple in the rear—bemoaning his unkindly, curt maneuver to the curb—but he is transfixed instead by the woman below him, looking to be in her later forties (and not carrying the age very well). She wears white clothes like hospital scrubs with little brown slippers. Her left hand is bandaged and red spots of blood can be seen through the gauze. There is the head of a crushed violet with its petals



drooping from her breast pocket. Her hair is ash-grey and stands out in a mangled frizz from her tilted head, and as Ethan sees the sharpened shards of her eyes he thinks momentarily about simply pulling away without even closing the door first. Then he hears the tender vacancy in her voice as she speaks a lost "Hello"—almost to the entire vehicle—and begins mounting the stairs.

"Hello, there" he returns, watching as she pauses at the top of the stairs before heading down the aisle, seeming at once more aware and determined.

"Hey! It's eighty-five cents to ride." She turns to face him and puts forth her words with care:

"I have no money."

"Well, then I'm afraid you'll have to get off the bus." He stands up to say this, and takes a step towards the older woman, his left hand suggesting the door.

Ethan is unsurprised to hear the woman in the rear speak up, having spied the couple observing his manner in dealing with the newcomer.

"Hey, c'mon: just let her ride the bus, for Pete's sake. I'll even pay the fee if I have to."

You would. "No. She has to get off—that's the rule—now please stay out of it." He turns back to the sharp-eyed, slow-witted woman to see her holding out a dearly wrinkled dollar to him. He stares at it, blankly; only able to say "It's exact change only." She smiles back at him saying this:

"Oh, that's perfectly alright; you can keep it."

"Alright, fine then. Have a seat and we'll be off."

Completely fed up with this day and its people, Ethan seats himself roughly and puts the bus back into gear, slamming shut the doors and pushing down the accelerator with an unconcerned amount of force. He holds the dollar up to the mirror before shoving it into the coin slot (having suspected cameras and two-way glass for some months now). Behind him he hears pieces of the conversation that develops between the newly acquainted:

"You.. .sit next to us.. .like."

-Mumbles-

".. .Percy, and this.. .Rudge..."

-Pause-

-Mumbled Question-

"...well, just now."

-Laughter-

-Mumbles-

"...in so long."

-Pause-

"Oh."

"No! Wait! Don't!"

He cannot turn or look up in time to see the scream but he does see the flash in the mirror just before he feels his left shoulder separate from the rest of his body; all rendered numb by a force of heat and great sound. As he passes from consciousness, Ethan knows somewhere inside his mind that the bus is drifting to the right towards the row of parked cars ahead.

*Four:  
Asher*

White

Red

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Red

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Whit

e Red

the lights flash

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bright into the dark ahead and

e Red

mingle with the steady-cast Yellow.

Whit

She drives.

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Here and her again she knows

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the things that sit outstretched just

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and wait with Ruin's blood on their

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teeth.

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She sees the others

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floating at her speed,

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there and them again they reach

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to stop  
never was  
a way to stop  
the screaming  
Now.

the Earth stands still and  
everything else spins for  
once, this thousandth time  
glass becomes blood in a  
flurry of grace and pain this  
furious dance is getting old

fast it

finally slows  
on the roadside.

Red

Red

Red

Red

she

hangs upside

down and looks out

into the black to see it



rushing towards her again

that face

those eyes

those teeth and claws

Red Red Red

White.

She soars in a fury of colors and fire and thrashes out against the emptiness above her; screaming death on anything she might grasp; killing nothing. She rises in the bed and feels the burning white fade. She falls back against the mattress, her eyelids easing but still closed.

Asher opens her eyes to the room. The color is gone. She rolls to the right and looks to the white wall over the folds of sheets. The window sits high in the room and the light floods in at midday, she thinks, it must be past morning. There is blue in the window, not the same blue. She remembers the ache from behind her eyes and wonders when the meds will come. Maybe today, she thinks. She thinks this everyday—maybe today—nothing more at first, no wonder of what she waits for. We all just wait, wanting, she thinks. She realizes she is awake. This is waking: thinking the same things; starting the same way with the same thoughts. What holds me here? It must be these thoughts I keep thinking, maybe today.

The tension and fear of her only dream coarse through her and she is vaguely aware of the pain she is in. She lifts her head to look at her hands. They are sick again; the wrinkled skin so wrong to her eyes. She is still sick. Sick again. Again through her mind go the visions of the road and the wagon; so fast through the dark with Richard and Joel and the sick man... the other one that is always there, at the end. She closes her eyes and throws her head back against the bed in panic and begins to moan. There is the light sound of speaking through the door and also a moderate buzz as the handle turns and swings open. The three enter.

This time there are just two. Where is the other man? Where is he hiding? She writhes under their grasp; not quite so strong this time with only two. The larger one leans completely over her and she feels the sting in her right arm and smells his stink. Her arm is cool and little tingles spread into her chest and legs and she slackens in the bed; hearing the only two speaking as they exit: "Man, this is fucking ridiculous."

"You're telling me? I don't know why they don't just lock the place down."

"Does she always shout like that?"

"Every time."

The door is closed again, and Asher lies in her bed and breaths as her thoughts come clearer. She opens her eyes to see the high ceiling above and tries to think about how long she has been here: just this morning; then the others; ten years? No: she is wrong again. She scratches her arm, and looks, and sees the spot of blood, and knows where she is; here in the white room.

Asher sits up in her small bed against the corner to the left of the door, with its small wire window. She looks up at the wall in front of her and sees the high window, bright blue on the other side; the only other color here. Listening, she hears the familiar noise outside: another woman wailing; sharp voices and quick commands from the men; the echoing sound of another door closing; all dim through the door to her room.

Sliding herself over towards the edge of the bed and the floor, she looks down at the spotted, light grey tiles—just a duller kind of white—and eases her feet down to the cold floor; standing uneasily and sliding on her soft brown slippers. She wonders if the doctor will come today, come more days like she used to. It has been so long since she visited. Not as long as being here, but still so long. She thinks back to the last time:

"You're still having the dream?"

"Yes." Asher sits on her bed with her back in the corner. The sun comes down through her window and falls warmly on her face. She sits with her face up to the sun and



her eyes closed; watching the colors move around behind her eyelids. She hears the doctor's pen against her paper.

"Do you know my name today, Asher?" She opens her eyes and looks over to the doctor, whose body is washed out and aglow in the brightness of the sun; the lovely hair and glasses coming slowly into focus above the pretty green blouse and the white coat that covers it.

"Of course I do, Dr. Winters." The doctor smiles and her eyes sparkle a bit through her glasses.

"Good." She writes some more; her pen dashing down diagonal letters. Asher feels that she has not seen her in a long while and remembers that this is true.

"Why don't you come see me any more?" The doctor stops writing and looks up at her; surprised, she pauses ever so briefly before speaking:

"I do come to see you, Asher. Just not as often as I used to—we've got a lot of new patients and I just can't make it by so often." She looks on at Asher and holds her eyes with a genuine tenderness. Asher feels very close to her again and smiles as she looks down at her paper and lowers her pen to underline something.

"Do you remember Miss Mayweather today?" She does not know the name but it frightens her and the feeling of closeness is gone. She hugs her knees to her body and puts her head down.

"No." She is mad at the doctor and scared that she will leave soon. "Why do you do this to me? Why can't we just talk about nice things?" She begins to rock back and forth against the corner and hit her head against her knees.



"I'm sorry, Asher. I'm trying to help you: I can't help you if you don't remember things." The doctor's voice is irritated and far away. Asher grows more angry and scared and feels herself breathing hard. She begins to whine and rock back against the corner with more force; banging her head against her knees to find the only solid feeling.

"What have you done to my family? Why do you keep them away from me?"

"I haven't done anything to your family, Asher."

She hears the doctor stand and pick up her chair as she scurries towards the door and gives it three hard pounds; the notebook softening the impact of her fist and adding a dry, tapping sound. The door opens with a buzz and the three men enter with the doctor giving orders.

She feels their hands pulling her down and holding her. She feels the sting in her arm; and slowly everything goes white again.

Sitting against the door in her room now, there is quiet out in the hallway. Asher looks up at the blue in the window and wonders at the tears on her face. She looks at her hands again and then tucks them under her knees so the wrinkles won't show. Outside the door, she hears heavy footsteps, and she rises to her feet quickly and quietly to peek through the wire window at the two men who had entered her room before, walking and talking and stopping outside her room to lean against the hallway walls. The larger one is younger and dressed in aqua, clothes like her own but not white. The older is much more wiry, and wears a badge and a club. She listens as they speak:

"I don't understand. If the cops don't think somebody here did it, then why do they keep calling people in for questioning and taking all our staff?" The

younger man



sounds frustrated and tired as he asks this. The older one's answer is more entertained, almost amused.

"It's cause they wanna know who else is involved. They say they found over twenty-thousand milligrams of Thorazine in Gary's apartment and *that's* why somebody shot him: for the drugs! He's been skimming off the top for as long as he's been here, and they figure somebody's been helping him out; maybe one of the doctors."

Asher leans with her head on the door and wonders why the littler man smiles so much. The bigger one in blue moves his body over her wire window and she feels his weight push the door in against its lock.

"Yeah, well, be that as it may I'm getting pretty sick of having to run all over this God Damn place and hold people down while you stick them with needles. I mean: I'm just an intern. I'm not even supposed to do anything around here but change bedpans and look at charts and shit." She looks at the hairs on the back of his head as he talks and thinks of his smell: it was not so bad after all. "Do you even know which one of those drugs is which? Or are you just giving them whichever one you put your hand to first?" She hears the man with the badge respond seriously to this, but still for some reason she does not take him seriously.

"Of course I do, kid. I've been at this place for going on seventeen years now, and that's longer than damn-near anyone else. Except Dr. Winters of course—I can't believe they drug *her* downtown—and a few choice, veteran whackos, like our friend Ms. Grove, in the room behind you."



Asher moves down below the window as the man's head turns and peeks in her room, and she feels the door give back the other way. There is a short silence, and she listens to her own breath.

"What's her story anyway?"

"I'm not even sure, kid." Words from the radio at his side speak out in static, and he moves his hand over to silence it; pausing at the knob to listen: *"Patient transfer from County Medical is arriving at the East Wing. All available..."* "click. "All I know is she has these nightmares about ambulances and wakes up dead. She's supposed to have killed some nurse, thirty years ago or something: strangled the gal to death with her bare hands."

"Jesus Christ."

"You're telling me. And she isn't even the worst of them; the guy down the hall in room 118? Now there's a tough customer..."

She lowers herself to the floor and holds her head against their lies. Strange and angry memories wheel about in her mind: a man's smiling face; her mother's hands on her shoulders; a woman dead in her arms. Suddenly a noise in the hallway breaks her away and she opens her eyes on the floor and looks up to the door's wire window. She hears footfalls loudly fading and the older man's voice spitting swears as it goes. There is another hollow scream and a series of shouts, and by the time she gets to the window she sees more men like the others rushing past her doorway in the direction of the yelling. She tries to make out words from the chaos but hears only this:

"Get him away from the door!"

".. .No! Go get the other one,  
kid!" "Shit!"

"You've got to hit the lock down switch..."

"...third from the left on the second row! Go! Go! Go!"

A moment later she sees the young man in blue running full speed by her door and their eyes meet for an instant as he passes. He looks frightened and very concentrated. She waits and listens to the shouting and leans against the door. The very next thing is a great crashing sound and then an alarm roars out above her head and she covers her ears against it as water drops from the ceiling and onto her. Asher leans in against the door and it opens under her weight, spilling her out into the hallway. She remains in a clump on the floor as the blue man jumps over her head, heading back towards the noise, which has become everywhere. Everyone is shouting over the alarm and the water has her soaked as she stands and stumbles down the hallway, turning left and then right and then left again to see another door and the blue of outside. People rush past her and bump her and she hears the laughs of a crazy person in her ears with the sounds of the other men. Whining again, holding her head, she staggers towards the door before her and pushes outside and away from the burning alarm and the water.

The light of the sun nearly knocks Asher down as she careens out the exit and into its brightness. The door swings shut behind her and the wailing quiets, leaving her to stand in the sunlight. She looks about herself, blinking, and sees the spread out, rolling greens of the hilly field behind the building, stretching down to a tall metal fence far and



away; the rising strength of brown on an oak tree above her and the rich red stones of the walls behind; all the colors deepening as her eyes adjust.

Asher stands with a feeling of great giddiness, dripping water from her clothing and warmth on her skin. The clamor behind her rises again and she moves right against the side of the building past the large tree trunk. Feeling the changing ground on her feet through the thin fabric of her slippers, she stops underneath an open window and hears the frantic tones of a woman on the telephone, trying to make herself heard over the alarm:

"No, there is no fire! We think one of the patients tripped the alarm! They're all over the place! Just send the police: we don't need a God Damn fire engine!"

Asher moves on around the corner of the building, hearing the rough idle of an engine, and sees the shining white of a large, square vehicle parked underneath a red brick enclosure extending out from the stone. She recognizes the ambulance and feels drawn to it, staying crouched at the corner as a man in a black uniform and cap comes quickly from the door of the building and runs to the rear hatch of the ambulance, throwing it open and retrieving a bright box—a field kit—from inside. Without closing the hatch he dashes back to the heavy metal door of the building and disappears. Asher waits a few seconds after he is gone before moving, walking quickly across the open space and remembering:

The bright white paint on the hood of the Cadillac wagon catches the lights of the city as she drives forward through the night. Richard sits to her right and chews loudly on an apple. Joel rides in the back reading a magazine by the dimness of the rear interior



lamp on the roof. She looks into the glowing insides of a passing gas station and sees a man at the counter handing money across to the teller; a girl with blonde hair in a bright orange vest. Lite rock music eases quietly from the speakers as the three of them cruise through the outskirts of Midtown.

Asher feels the strength of the engine resting underneath her foot as she accelerates through a yellow light, looking over at Richard to see him raise his eyebrows mid-chew and turn to her with a sarcastic scorn.

"Careful now, young miss. Just because it's a slow night, doesn't mean you need to cause any accidents."

She smiles; looking into the rearview mirror to see Joel turn the page loudly on his magazine and speak without looking up: "Keep it on the road, girlie."

The night is clear and cool, and the streets are empty. She feels a great sense of pride to be behind the wheel with her team; to have gotten here at all. The months have passed so quickly and everything has seemed to her like a dream that she is sure to wake up from soon, but as she turns the wide body of the car onto the main stretch back to town, she feels just how real the steering wheel is in her grip; the lights of the city are in her eyes; the crackle of the dispatch radio is in her ears:

*"Control to Unit Twenty-Six: come in, Twenty-Six. "* Richard leans over and picks up the microphone; swallowing his mouthful of apple before he speaks:

"This is Twenty-Six. Come back, Control."

*"We've got a call about a coronary out on Rampart Road, in the Merlin Hills District what's your location? "*





"Finally" Joel calls from the back; putting down his magazine with a dry paper plop and leaning forward to listen.

"We are currently heading east on Oxford Avenue, approximately...sixteen miles from Rampart Road. Over."

*"Roger that Twenty-Six... The boards show you as the closest unit to the area. Can you take the call? Over. "*

Richard holds the microphone and glances up at her with the question in his face. She leans down to the dash and flips the switch to the lights and siren in response, making a hard left with the wheel and letting out the engine. There is a rubber squeal in the turn, and the night around them fills with intermittent flashes of white and red. Joel braces himself with his hands between the front seats as Richard waits for them to straighten out before responding into the microphone:

"That's an affirmative. Central: Unit Twenty-Six responding. Over and out."

Asher closes the door to the ambulance and adjusts herself in the driver's seat, gripping the wheel tightly with her hands and lulling with the rumble of the engine. She sees the jacket resting on the seat beside her, with a large and silver EMT printed on its back, and slides it over her damp shirt and arms. The radio on the dash sputters and she reaches out and shuts it off with a touch. Leaning out the window, she moves the large vertical rectangle of the driver-side mirror and watches the world rush by in its reflection; its trick of dual vision something she can hardly remember. Stopping the mirror now to



face her, she sees for herself just how long she has been at this place. Her hair is large and loose and no longer the deep black that it was, but a dead-dog grey instead. Her eyes are sunk deep into her withered face, and their charged chartreuse gleam is all that she recognizes of herself. She sees a tear begin to roll down her face and wipes it roughly away; turning the mirror to show the far fence and placing her hands firmly back on the wheel. Feeling the movements and force of the ambulance reaching up through her own flesh, she drives forward, out from under the brick shelter.

She is frightened at first by the fast response of the wheel and pedals, but as she yields to the rumbling will of the engine, Asher proceeds, more slowly and softly forward, over the smooth black drive and around the front of the building, the siren still screaming inside.

The large red stones stand formed around the wide open features of the building's front face; with a gaping mouth and so many eyes made smaller by visible concrete fill-ins around tiny square windows like the one in her white room. She passes the large sign rising from the ground and reads the words there in wide, plain letters: Brightvale Wellness Center. So that is the name of this place.

Asher turns away from Brightvale and towards the long stretch of driveway running down past a parking lot and leading to a small, square brick building standing before the selfsame metal fence; showing itself on approach to be chain-linked and topped with coils of glinting barbed-wire. Slowing the ambulance as she moves down the hill towards the gatehouse, Asher sees a line of police cars heading towards her from the other side of the gate, still some distance off on the straight-shot road extending beyond to the forest. Seeing their flashing lights she looks down at her dashboard, and activates



the switch to her own siren system, afterward reaching up to her seatbelt and drawing it down into place with a 'click' on her right side. The sound pierces through the cab and rises to join the wailing chorus, and she presses down hard on the gas pedal. Looking towards the quickly-nearing exit she sees a man lean from the window of the gatehouse and disappear quickly back inside. Seconds later the gate begins to slide smoothly to the right, and it is fully opened by the time she flies through.

The police caravan comes up full in her horizon and she flies on still faster; passing them in a blur of sound and color with her eyes rigidly forward to the road. In moments she is safe under the arms of the forest and slowing down, turning off her siren. As she watches the shadows dance across the street surface with patches of sun streaking through the trees, Asher feels excitement writhing all about her, and her mind is clear as fresh air breezes through the cab of the ambulance through its open windows.

She follows the curves of the road at some speed and keeps her thoughts trained on the process of driving: gas, brake, turn, gas, brake. Thinking there might be other cars on the road soon, she reaches back to turn the siren on, and its rising return makes her push the vehicle forward, faster. She watches the lines on the road carefully as they dim and a cloud stops the sun spots, and as the sky goes suddenly to total black she looks down for the lights.

The trees around her are strobing white and red in the night. Their branches appear like bi-tonal lightning bolts rooted at the edges of the road as she barrels ahead. Sporadic mailboxes whir by on the road and the siren fills the air around them. Richard



and Joel hold the man firmly in place behind her and venture brief movements over his unconscious body at any straight section of the roads through Merlin Hills.

Her eyes fume, consuming everything before her in the short seconds that any given space lingers in her sight, and she tears through the black; turning time forward with the force of her wheels. Joel holds the map and shouts directions from behind her as Richard vocally assesses the patient's condition, and their words coalesce and braid through the siren. The lines on the road below her weave back and forth as she drifts from one side to the other, and now as she watches them they veer out of her vision completely and in an instant everything before her is rolling and bucking violently and there is wet warmth and the splintering sound of glass with the siren still howling above the screams of her teammates; only falling silent at the very end of it all, when there is nothing but the sound of her own voice left to scream.

Asher's hand hurts a great deal. As she opens her eyes she sees that the sun has returned again, and the sight of blood on her left hand brings her senses back to her with it. Looking forward, she sees the windshield still in place, but cracked where it rests with the base of a tree extending downwards from its top right corner. She feels the blood throbbing in her head and reaches for the seatbelt release; pressing it up to fall down to the ceiling of the ambulance. Rolling herself upright, she roots through the mess of medical supplies all around her with her right hand and comes up with a roll of gauze. She wraps the roll several times around her injured hand and then, tearing the roll free





with her teeth and sticking it the right pocket of the EMT jacket, she begins to climb up and out of the ambulance.

Throwing open the rear hatch, Asher finds the ground, and looks about her to see the forest rising up the hillside and a rough path dug through the dirt where the ambulance came down. The road looks to be at least sixty feet up from where she stands, though it cannot clearly be seen through the brush. Turning in the other direction, through the trees she sees the tops of many buildings standing brightly in the sun, and recognizes the skyline as that of Midtown. She looks down at the sloping mountainside and through the ferns and other bushes, and then back up towards the road and then back out to the city not so far away. She steps once, letting her foot fall on the ground towards the valley below, and then stops to remove the jacket, and hang it on the broken left-side mirror-arm of the ambulance before turning again and setting off down the hill.

The people on the street do not look at her as she walks among them, and her eyes pass over each one as well without notice, but their sounds and smells loom large in her mind. Her mind has been blank to this point on the walk—down through the forest and in through the stretches of large, windowless steel buildings to the edge of the city—but now, as she moves down the sidewalks growing busier with each passing block, her senses widen in recollection. Her brain traces backwards through decades and tells her what she is surrounded by—a man wearing cologne; a hot dog stand; a dog; a motorcycle; a baby carriage; a donut shop—and as the recognition amounts to



consciousness her emotions flood in, fighting one another for dominance; casting thoughts about like stones as she comes to a stop at a flowers stand.

Asher finally sees again as the fragrances of a thousand different flowers both past and present hit her full-on in the face. She stoops and smells hard at a bright violet— with its hay-stained sweetness and swarthy hues—and sees a patch of the same flowers outside a window years ago and she cannot quite place herself. The man behind the flower stand is old and weather-beaten, dressed in a dark green plaid, and as he picks the violet out from before her and hands it across to her, she thinks that he must not always have been so. She smiles and thanks him as she spins the flower under her nose, thinking that she knows him as she walks away down the street.

She continues to smile at those she sees and some of them smile back, and some of them look like faces she would have known, and some of them look all brand-new to her as she spins her flower. She turns and walks backwards to look at the backs of a young couple in young clothing and her giddiness returns as joy seems the victor in her head until someone grabs her arm and pulls her back and her flower falls, still spinning to bounce from the windshield of a car flying by and land in the street under the traffic. The person holds her arm and keeps to keeping her from getting it back and tries to talk to her until she turns and bares her eyes at him and he lets go. The traffic stops and people walk and someone steps on the violet before she can reach it and pick it back up sadly as she stoops between all those legs. She sees that was the right thing to do as she picks up the crumpled and smudged piece of paper she knows is money, and she stands, tucking both things from the ground into her shirt pocket. Hearing a horn honk she turns her head right to see that the cars are coming again and she stands alone in the street. She moves quickly



to the other side with her hand pressed against her drooping flower and stops to look back at the traffic as it speeds up in the street and look at all the people passing by in their cars. Asher turns and moves and almost bumps into someone, a man, coming up behind her to wait and cross the other way, and the two of them side-step each other as she quickens her pace down the street and looks around. She now takes in all she can and revels in remembering the ways of things to herself: This is a restaurant and that is how people sit there and they all have to wait and pay for the food in a line; that is a man talking on the phone but phones have wires and he is just pretending; this is a fountain and the people sit here to wait together for something and make the waiting better somehow; that is a little boy and he will grow up and get older and stronger and kiss girls or even other boys and still be weak in some ways. She does not think of these things as a child learning them with excitement but as the adult who tells them to the child in a somber and knowing way. She smiles to think of kissing again as she walks through the people, and thinks that she has not seen a kiss or been kissed in far too long. She looks about her and tries to find someone kissing but does not see it, and she is scared and thinks that she is sure people still kiss each other. She walks further along the street and looks up at the buildings above her reaching up into the blue and clear sky. As she walks she checks back to her violet and makes sure that it is still there with its sad head hanging from her pocket

Asher looks up again at the building in front of her as she stands five feet from its huge glass surface and sees the other buildings lying in reflection at the base of her sight. She has walked through the city and seen all the people and now the streets around her



are empty as she stands with the building and stares up its side, thinking how very tall it must be. As she watches the empty windows of the other buildings in the windows of this one, she feels lonely again and sighs, and hears the building give off a great sigh that sounds like wind through a giant bottle, and she sees something move in to stop at the base of her mirror-vision, and turns around to realize that the sigh of the building was really the brakes of the city bus now sitting before her.

The door to the bus opens and she stands and waits and says "Hello" looking up at the metal frame of the bus. The bus returns her greeting with a "Hello, there" and she looks up into the door to see that it was really the tired-looking man with the very short and dark hair who said that—buses and buildings don't talk or sigh. She remembers to walk up the steps to the bus and sit down but not to pay, until the man makes her turn with an abrupt "Hey!"

"It's eighty-five cents to ride."

Asher looks down at the clear little box and thinks of the coins she would need to drop inside. "I have no money" she says to the tired man now standing and he looks somewhat agitated by this but at least he continues to try and smile at her; his eyes are blue.

"Well, then I'm afraid you'll have to get off the bus." He moves his hand out to his side and towards the door she just came through and she thinks that she would rather stay on and listen to the engine's roiling grumble as she hears the woman she had seen in the back of the bus speaking plaintively to the driver. She hears the phrase "for Pete's sake" and likes hearing it again and wonders who Pete must be as she looks back down at her flower and sees the rumpled corner of her dollar slid down in her pocket. She pulls





out the dollar and holds it up to the man and sees the bandage on her hand is still there, and she feels embarrassed not to have used her other hand.

"Its exact change only" the man says, and she realizes how she can make up her mistake to him and tries to sound her most polite:

"Oh, that's perfectly alright; you can keep it."

The man looks briefly from her to the dollar and she thinks that she likes him and the dark circles around his eyes remind her of her own, as he takes the dollar from her and turns back to his seat, saying "Alright, fine then. Have a seat and we'll be off."

She turns herself to the back of the bus and is pulled forward on her feet as the bus begins to move again, taking rough steps to find herself in front of the two lovely people in the farthest seats. The woman who cares for Pete and his sake looks up at her kindly and says "Hello." She says nothing back but looks at the young man close on her left examines him. His hair is slightly longer and lighter than the tired driver, and his eyes are brown like the woman's but darker, and they look at her a little uneasily. There is a second's silence between them before the woman speaks to her again, with an awkward feeling in her voice, but still kindly:

"You are welcome to sit next to us if you like, but I think you'd better make it fast, because this guy is driving like a maniac." Asher sits down to the left of the young man and continues to look at the two of them, smiling, and suddenly realizing by the looks on their faces that she is being rude and not speaking.

"I'm sorry: Hello. My name is Asher."

"Hi, Asher. I'm Percy, and this is my friend Rudge."



She looks at the man and sees him looking not at her but at his friend with the same uncomfortable eyes. His friend, Percy, looks back at him and lays a hand on his knee. Asher likes the way that they sit close to and lean on each other and thinks that she must try not to be so rude, but can't remember what she should say.

"When did you two become close like this?" Her words feel awkward and the look that passes between the two of them makes her feel this more so, but the man turns to answer all the same:

"Well, just now really." They laugh together nervously at this, and she wants badly to join them and does, though she does not know what is funny and her laughter comes out strange; she feels strange. The buildings and cars and trees pass vaguely by out the windows and she watches for a moment and wants to feel normal. She knows she should keep talking to them about nice things but does not know what to say as she looks down at their hands clasped together. Then suddenly she thinks of something and looks up brightly to ask:

"Do you kiss each other? I mean.. .would you mind giving each other a kiss. I haven't seen anyone kiss in so long." The words sound off to her somehow and there is another nervous look, but then a smile and a shrug, and the man saying "Sure."

They lean in towards each other and he lifts his hand to her cheek softly and holds it there as lips connect for an instant and part with a small, sweet sound; connecting again and remaining. She feels stupidly overwhelmed a tear in her eye and wipes it away briskly, seeing something shiny below the man's shirt as he leans into the woman. She knows the thing she sees and feels a great danger from it and thinks that she must take it



from the bright moment before her. She reaches her hand down and quickly slides the gun from his pants and holds it before herself, saying softly:

"Oh."

That second the man turns on her and grabs her hands and arms and tries to wrestle it away from her and they struggle and she will not let go because she doesn't want to. She wants to take the dangerous gun and throw it out the window so that it will be gone and the moment can be bright again. She wants to throw it away with the nervous urge and hurt and just sit and watch them kiss; but it is too late and the moment has changed to fear and the woman screaming "No! Wait! Don't!" as the gun flashes a bright flare and she is deafened and her hand suddenly burns; feeling the gun fall. She feels her weight veering left inside the bus and hears its horn dimly over the agonizing ringing in her ears a split second before everything is brought to a jolting painful halt.

Asher's eyes vault open to the sound of sirens and see the man and woman through the bars below the seats, crumpled together on the floor and the blood coming down from the bruise on the woman's head. The world is tilted and she looks out the windows on the left side of the bus to see only the sky and building tops above. She reaches out and puts her hand in the woman's long, light hair and watches for breath. Their two bodies rise and fall slowly but steadily together and she turns her head towards the front of the bus, getting to her knees to see the driver leaning slumped over the wheel and hanging from his seatbelt, and the spray of blood on the broken windshield. She stands painfully and limps to him without a thought; making her way from one row of seats to the next with her feet against the bars and watching his body. She sees the hole in



the back of his seat and the one in his jacket where his left shoulder sags and the blood spreads dark and red through the fabric. She looks down at the door and sees the crumpled metal frame of a car crushed into the side of a building. She hears the sirens louder now and smells the oil and hears the people outside yelling in frightened voices at one another, and sees the blood on his shoulder. Pulling him back in his chair she sees the hole and the blood on the front side of his shoulder; sliding his jacket sleeve down and tearing away his shirt from the edge of the hole to see the open wound bleeding she checks his pulse and finds it weak against her fingers on his neck. He is going to die. She needs heat; she needs heat to burn the wound closed and stop the blood. She looks all around herself and down at the mangled door and hears the shouting and casts her eyes back at the two fallen in the rear (beginning to move on the floor) and down at the gun. Remembering the feeling in her hand as the gun fell and looking down at the red welts raising to its form she dashes to the gun and picks it up.

Standing back at the bleeding man's side she thinks for a second about the noise and fear of the gun and then looks down at the bleeding, dying man and turns her head away slightly as she points the gun out the window and up and covers her ear and cringes and pulls the trigger.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

She presses the barrel down and into the man's shoulder and slides her finger away from the trigger as she uncovers her ear and listens to hear the sizzling flesh and the





sudden moans of the man. There is shouting and screaming outside and many footsteps scattering but she cannot see the noises as she pulls the man closer to her and raises her hand to the window once more.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Again she presses the barrel into the man's arm and hears the sound of skin searing and melting together, and he moans and wakes up screaming as she watches and the noise outside becomes more frantic: more sirens, more footsteps, more shouting, more screaming—some from the back of the bus. Asher weeps with the man in her arms still screaming as he falls limp and fades back into unconsciousness. She looks away and to the back of the bus and sees the man and woman crouched together and staring at her with so much fear in their eyes. She drops the gun and unwinds the bloody gauze from her hand and wraps it around his shoulder and ties it as best she can before letting go and slinking down and sliding down to the corner and the door and lying in a ball and weeping still.

There is a moment of anxious calm as she holds herself and sobs, feeling the glass of the door cut into her back and blood seeping out to soak her shirt. No more blood. No more blood. No more blood. She hears whispers and movement inside the bus but sees nothing; keeping her eyes shut tight against the hell around her. No more blood. No more blood. Shattering glass and a loud clatter and thump break the silence and leave a swift hissing sound behind. She opens her eyes in terror to see the bus filling with thick white



smoke; the cloud closing itself around her as she hears them coughing heavily. She looks down at her sick hands covered in red and sees the violet still tucked in her pocket. She draws it out and closes her hands tightly around its petals as the smoke fills her lungs and she feels her self drifting away; knowing the world has ended.

*Five*

119

Nothing at first in the  
smoke but color and  
hatred.

1  
2  
0

Red

White

Red

White

Purple

White

she feels them all around  
her burning in death  
and herself.

Sleeping in  
flames.

Waiting

for

the

Eyes

and

Teeth

to

Come

Red

But something else rushes out of  
the dark and she is  
afraid but not alone as  
four  
rise and climb the cloud away above  
and see each other only.

All as one they watch the dawn  
die and break to breath again  
All awash inside the sun  
a penumbra of colors blend and she  
can feel her life her skin and mind together with  
the touch of several hands along her softly where  
she aches and has for years beyond her  
counting coming down to just one moment in the  
measuring of millions leaving everything behind  
her as she drifts off into the distance.



Knowing only color and  
quiet.

## Epilogue

Rudge awakens to the sound of his telephone chirping beside the bed. He reaches out and groggily silences the ringer and peers down at the brightly flashing screen in the early morning bedroom light. There is a groaning rustle beside him in the sheets, and Percy turns away, pulling the covers from his legs and asking in a grumpy tone:

"Who the fuck is it?" Rudge lets out a single throaty chuckle and tugs some of the sheets back from her shoulder.

"It's Ethan."

"Well what the fuck does he want?" Her eyes are still closed tightly as Rudge looks over at her in bed, smelling the gathered must of a night's sleep around them and rising from the mattress.

"I don't know yet, babe. But at this hour it can't be good." He paces across the room and pushes open the door to the living room as the phone vibrates gently in his hand; now lifting it up to his ear and pressing the send key.

"Hello?"

"If sail gone to shit."

"What the hell do you mean?" Rudge walks into the kitchen and flicks on the coffeemaker, the little switch at its base illuminating orange, and listens to Ethan complain:

"My show; it's gone completely to shit and I'm canceling it." His voice is calm and resolute on the other end of the phone, and as Rudge sits down at the kitchen table in his boxers he lets out a long and ragged yawn.

"Didn't you hear me? I'm canceling the show; the whole thing's off. Hey! Put that down you bastard!" Ethan's voice becomes far away as Rudge pictures him lowering the phone to shout at the gallery worker undoubtedly standing frozen in shock with a canvas in his hands. Rudge picks up the postcard-flyer from the table in front of him and examines it as he listens amusedly to the ensuing tirade on the other end of the line.

## *The Archer Gallery*

*Presents the opening of*

## *"The Chase and The Scavenger"*

*A One-Man/ One-Armed Exhibition of*

*Works by Ethan Halifax*

*on Saturday, February*

*22nd*

*@6:00p.m.*

*\*with a musical performance by Rudge Perkins\**

*1344 Parson St.*

*394-342-7756*

Rudge turns the flyer over to see the familiar shapes of Ethan's title piece: An angular city bus boldly rendered in blues and greens giving way to the sharp contrast of large, twisting letters interweaving below in a maze of black and white. The letters have a trail of dripping white lines issuing from their base, and there is a thin haze of grey smoke wafting throughout the image and providing a common ground. He remembers watching Ethan at work in his studio and marveling at the grace and precision with which he wielded the different-colored cans of spray-paint, and the length of time and patient explanation it took for him to see the words CHASE ONE in the complicated mass of lines and shadows on the huge canvas.

"I will bludgeon you to death with this God Damn phone!" There is finally silence on the other end of the phone, and Rudge hears Ethan clearing his throat before speaking again: "Will you get down here already and help me?"

"Alright, E. I've just got to stop by and see Asher first."

"Okay, well, tell her I said 'Hello.' And hurry up for Christ's sake." There is another series of removed shouts and swearing on the phone and then silence as Ethan hangs up, and the coffeemaker bubbles in the dim light of the kitchen.

Rudge pushes open the door to the hospital room and is met by the quiet beeping and hissing of several medical instruments. He sets down the vase of violets on the bedside table beside several others, and walks over to the window. Opening the blinds to let in the sunlight, he then turns and checks the readouts on the myriad machines briefly before taking an empty seat by the bed. He looks down at Asher's sleeping body and places his hand on her forehead. Her chest moves lightly up and down and she does not



stir beyond this simple repetitive motion. There is a light condensation in the clear tubing leading into her nostrils, and he reaches behind her to adjust her pillows.

"Hello, Asher."

Her eyelids remain closed, as they have for the past ten months, and he watches as the little mounds of her irises move back and forth at intervals just below the skin. She gives off a gentle sigh and smiles; dreaming peacefully.

