

HAIR & FEDORA

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Hair & Fedora

a novel by

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Hair & Fedora

author's note

The following fifteen chapters represent the bulk of the novel. Hair & Fedora is a finished work, but the revision continues.

These chapters take the protagonist, Danny Knuckles, from the revelation that his shadow personality is straying radically from the accepted standards of their life deep into the investigation he then pursues to learn why. A society is depicted that is fully and, for the most part, blindly immersed in a system that effectively halves their lives. The seeds are planted in Danny that will, by the end of the novel, turn him from a true-believer in the system, to an active, violent resister. This inner revolution is simultaneously political and emotional, with the one fanning the flames of the other. By the end of the novel, Danny Knuckles gains a freedom he'd never before known at the cost of essentially all that had comprised his life.

The novel is satirical, seeking to highlight the mindless ambition toward work and increase against introspective wisdom of real, if less tangible, worth. Furthermore, Hair & Fedora aims to illustrate the specific dangers of rampant ethnocentrism mingled with a disdain for history that I see as generally rampant and surging. It is meant to be comic fabulist pulp noir.

I dream of sneaking up to my own house and seeing myself washing dishes through the windows opposite the sink. I'm merrily whistling along to some tune I can't quite make out. I'm methodical in the little universe of soak-sink, rinse-sink, faucet and towel. A seasoned dishwasher of the old school, I know my stuff.. .even maybe allow myself a twinge of pride when I realize that what always seemed like such an efficient practice there in the kitchen turns out to be just as great-looking from the outsider's perspective. Then I'll scoot closer - quietly, like dad taught us to approach prey - get a better look at you. Unlike the dish washing you come up short of my expectations. You aren't as handsome as you think you are. You're a bit tubby and your five o'clock shadow isn't even enough to see the light of day, even after twenty-five years and change. You seem untidy, your dirty glasses and dandruffed shoulders, mustard-stained sagging shorts, unmatched socks.. .you seem misshapen to me, misplaced, as if you've just fallen down all the time, grotesque. Your fedora doesn't fit. I see things I can't see from my vantage, like your tortured fingernails and frayed shoelaces. Your hemorrhoid. Your holy boxer shorts. Your total lack of chest hair. The eerie white of your hidden skin. I walk up to the door and swiftly open it. You're ecstatic to finally meet me in per son. I raise the gun.

1.

It isn't my fault what happened.

People say that and sometimes it's true. It wasn't my fault. I'm not a bad guy. I'm unremarkable. I read and write and now, after a long struggle, I smoke. It's reversed, see: most people, they have a hard time quitting; I had a hard time starting. He pushed me into it, my nighttime personality, gone now save the crap he leaves in my pants when I wake up, the muscles I have to unkink after twelve hours of-

I still get pissed off. It was a hard fall.

You could say the line between us, the divide, attenuated, stretched taut and porous, an old rubber band splitting on the sides until *snap*; that he corrupted me, that his moon abolished my sun, that he vacated me only when it was too late and I'd adopted him totally - his tyranny and selfishness - having lost my girlfriend and my job and my peace and myself, my orderliness. You could say all of these things and be right on, but I loved him, too.

I loved him, I loved him, I loved him, too.

Things started to go wrong with my Fedora about a year ago, on a Tuesday.

The first indication was the floss. Normally, every morning, the floss was left out on the washroom basin with the toothbrush and the rest. Then one day I discovered that it was still in the medicine cabinet. This may seem like small potatoes to some, but in our house it equates to a pretty major breach of etiquette. I mulled it over in the shower, on the drive to work, at work, on the drive back home, while making some food, watching some TV and trying to write. The only explanations I could come up with were the following:

1. Fedora didn't floss
2. Fedora *did* floss but absent-mindedly returned the dispenser to the medicine cabinet

In spite of the astounding implications, co-workers at the bookstore convinced me not to sweat it.

"Once my Fedora left a whole tuna sandwich half-eaten in the fridge. Never did figure that out..." said Sonya.

"Mine put some of his shirts on my side of the closet the other day," said Fritz.

Me and my Fedora, though, had always operated maybe a bit more stringently than other peoples'. The next morning I couldn't help but go through the apartment with a fine-toothed comb. The trash, I saw, had been taken out. Fedora's copy of *A New*

History of World War II was open on the coffee table. Some dirty socks lay on the floor next to the bed. The computer was in hibernation. The windows were open. The floss was back in place. Everything was in order.

I glanced at the clock on the wall like every morning, the unspeakable fear of oversleeping (as if that was even possible) forcing me to it. Our schedule, nicely framed, hung next to the clock, which of course showed the same time it always did. I didn't need to look to know it as well as I knew my own stomach. On the left side of the page, on a cream-colored card stock, was my week: eleven hours a day with not a loose minute, the blueprint of a well-working and working-hard fellow; and on the right, across the center seam of golden thread that cut a swath through us like a split and opened tennis ball, on the blue-shaded side, Fedora's to-dos (I ignored these, of course - wasn't my business). The schedule, like a bible, mostly went unread, and like a bible, was the most important book in any home. Everything was ritual.

Things kept up this way for another week or so - long enough for me to more or less forget the incident with the floss, when one morning I awoke to a disaster. My cat Habib, as was his wont, was licking the thin crust of Fedora's hour-old butter from my face and the television was on.

The television was on.

I came out of the slumber and straight into a race of undiluted sonic shock.

There was never supposed to be any noise in the morning. Suddenly I've got a blaring TV to deal with, a salesman's outrageous voice beckoning me from the One Hour Slumber saying: "IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'RE A FEDORA *OR* A HAIR, YOU'LL GO CRAZY FOR SLEEPY PETE'S ANEXO HALL!" Dizzy with confusion, I

switched it off. There was the pronounced sense that an invisible Rubicon had been crossed; that things would never be the same. I told my friend HOWARD about it at the coffee shop.

"The TV was on?" he said, suitably freaked.

"Yeah. It was on."

"Floss?"

I waited for a fire truck to pass, sirens blaring, the terror and compassion inside me of contemplating *that* interruption in a guy's schedule. "Everything else was normal."

He studied me a while. We were seated on the patio outside the Double Decker: a retired, cherry-red two-level bus that'd been turned into an espresso bar. Some people, like HOWARD, had to duck upon entering. It was downtown and right in the thick of things, so you got a constant traffic of shoppers and the like walking around, occasionally oohing and ahing the novelty of the tourist bus cum coffee house, as if they hadn't seen it a thousand times before by the dictate of their schedules.

It was a perfect day, sunny and breezy, and all 6 foot 3 of HOWARD - confessed Civil War buff, salesman, a guy who never swore in front of strangers - was poised before me in a manner of utmost attention, like he was pitching me a mortgage and I had a sweaty palm on the pen over a contract.

"Whaddayou think?" I asked.

"Danny? I think.. .you should probably alert the authorities."

The library had never played a very significant role in my life. I knew my way around the web as well as the next guy and could with no difficulty conjure from that

sprawled and teeming ether even the randomest knowledge in less time than it took to walk, to look, to smell the dust and thumb the bindings and check something tangible out of an old quiet building with flickering lights and stale air. Maybe, though, I didn't want to find what I was looking for so quick. Maybe I wanted to sort of figuratively pace a bit before opening the door.

What I told myself was that there existed some information that demanded the heft of a spine and pages - that disdained and was frankly belittled by HTML, and fitting in this category was the peculiar book of rules that governed our lives, penned shortly after the innovation, known to one and all simply as "The Code." After my unsettling talk with HOWARD it was off to the library to heft some Code. I sought out an empty corner and - apprehension thrilling through me - dug in.

Article 3 dealt with transgressions on the part of Fedora or Hair.

Section 1

If in the course of events either Hair or Fedora begin to exhibit attitudes or patterns that stray from the Accepted & Mutually Endorsed Normative Standard (AMENS) it is the lawful obligation of the Strayer to report his or her unaccepted & unendorsed attitudes & patterns to the appointed local authorities and the strayee to report said attitudes &/or patterns. Upon being informed it is the lawful obligation of the aforementioned authorities to enlist in whatever actions are deemed necessary to correct the problem. This line of action designed to terminate in a return by all parties to the conduct of the AMENS

may include but is not limited to the exercise of surveillance research intervention rehabilitation & punitive action. Once all parties have submitted to proper conduct it is the authorities' prerogative to continue surveillance research intervention rehabilitation & punitive action until it is determined beyond a shadow of a doubt that events confined within the day/night cycle & the operation of the Hair/Fedora unit have returned to the agreed upon standard of normalcy. Determining the method of determining a successful return to normalcy is within the purview of the local authorities & it is their lawful obligation to do so.

It was an abysmal thought: a life made public to "the appointed authorities." A life pried into, researched, intervened upon by perfect strangers. I didn't want to think about it. Imagine the blinds flung open for all the world to see, the termitic bureaucrats burrowing into a life long held private, held sacred; its grooves well-greased and its delicate cams tirelessly turning until suddenly scrutinized down the long noses of soulless and impassionate operators with clipboards and the law on their side. Imagine what it would do to a person's schedule.

Just imagine it.

2.

Everything is ritual.

I drive the same routes, listen to pretty much the same four CDs, watch the same programs and take my One Hour Slumber in the same position every day. Neither my grocery list or diet vary. I buy seven granny smith apples, seven bananas, one box of cornflakes, one gallon of 2% milk, a half pound of thinly sliced beef pastrami, a single bag of potato chips, a loaf of French bread, a bottle of Pinot Noir, a head of iceberg lettuce, a small can of black olives, one twelve-pack of English ale, two Roma tomatoes and a small roasted chicken every week. Every second week I add a bag of cat food, a box of litter, a loaf of sliced honey-wheat bread and a wedge of provolone cheese. Every fourth week I get a bottle of Italian dressing, litter box liners, mustard and mayonnaise, paper towels and other cleaning supplies as the need for them arises - which happens like clockwork. Every eighth week I purchase salt, pepper, oil and seasonings. I check out

through aisle 7, where Sue is working. Sue's a devoted smiler. I put all my groceries in the left side of the refrigerator. Fedora puts his in the right.

My morning routine is ritual. I eat a bowl of cereal with banana slices while reading the newspaper, brush my teeth, floss, shit, shower and shave. My clothes are all in the left side of the closet and dresser. Fedora's are in the right. My shoes are next to the bed on the floor, to the left of Fedora's. He always leaves my keys, wallet, cell phone and loose change on the island in the kitchen. The cat's food bowl is always empty in the morning. This is how it should be. Everything is ritual.

Our Honda Accord resides in its normal spot. The driver's side window (in the absence of rain or its forecast) is cracked. The doors are locked. The parking brake is not set. The car stereo and air conditioner are turned off. The parking space on the passenger's side is vacant and an old green Cadillac occupies the one next to the driver's side. Sometimes my neighbor Clyde is walking his dog and we say hi with a smile and wave. (Clyde is desperately trying to get his dog's bowels on a regular schedule and has thus far achieved only limited success. There is some talk that the neighborhood association may come down on him, and I like Clyde, but that's what you get for owning a dog these days.)

I work at a used bookstore called Dusty Shelves to the left of a small, local coffee shop called The True Brew - where Fedora works. Each shift begins with one hour at the register, followed by one hour spent buying books from people who are regularly disenchanted with our offers, a one hour break spent at a Mexican restaurant called The Flying Tortilla (to eat: a half order of beef fajitas, chips, salsa verde and a small bowl of guacamole queso; supplying just the slightest buzz: two frozen margaritas no salt; and for

mental stimulation: a borrowed paperback from Shelves - usually a mystery), followed by two full hours of pricing and shelving books for my sections.

Each shift I work with the same crew. We all have the same schedule and have ritualized our workday into a sophisticated ballet. We close the store at 6 P.M. and are seldom there for as much as twenty minutes after. On Wednesdays we adjourn to the pub and discuss literature, cinema and politics for an hour and a half. I generally consume two 22 oz frosty mugs of English ale in this time. Some of my co-workers think I'm an alcoholic, but that isn't possible. On Fridays we go to The Back Room, where every week Tommy and the Tulips perform their fascinating funk and country fusion, ending, always, with a stirring rendition of "Georgia on my Mind."

Fedora and I have Thursdays and Sundays off and I spend those days in the following fashion: the morning ritual is all the same, but I veer off after shaving. Rather than proceeding to work I drive to The Double Decker, meet up with HOWARD (my girlfriend Sylvie Reins joins us on Sundays), order a double tall iced latte with a long shot - less milk more ice - and just kind of hang out for an unspecified amount of time not to exceed three hours. On Thursdays I go bowling from the Double Decker with some of my co-worker friends and on Sundays I attend a matinee with Sylvie. On Thursdays I go from the bowling alley to Sylvie's house, where we felicitate each other - adhering all the way - wink wink - to what the Code would describe as the Accepted & Mutually Endorsed Normative Standard. Afterward, she prepares dinner. On Sundays, after the matinee, Sylvie and I eat Greek food at her favorite restaurant on my dime, then we retire to my place and felicitate each other again, play scrabble, drink a bottle of Pinot Noir and say sweet things to each other until she has to return home.

On Mondays, Tuesdays and Saturdays I go home after work and fix a meal of roasted chicken and salad. Every meal as yet unaccounted for is a pastrami and provolone sandwich, with tomatoes and mayonnaise and mustard and lettuce and a handful of potato chips. It works for me.

Sometimes, at the end of the day, when I'm about to take the butter and lie down for my One Hour Slumber, I marvel at the perfect ritual of it all, the feat of social engineering that landed us all together, in the same boat, on the same river, cresting the same waves day after day, united and unchanging.

The worst crime that could ever be committed between a Hair and a Fedora was for one of them to refuse to take the butter. *Sleeping in* is the euphemism. If this happened enough times it would result in what was generally conceived of as murder.

There were urban myths. Old Danville Sykes (Hair), it was said, murdered Old Danville Sykes (Fedora) by not taking the butter for six consecutive days. According to legend he succeeded in living Fedora's life for eight years before being found out. The trick was in learning how to function smoothly and ritualistically on two hours of sleep without the butter. It was supposed to be impossible. Also, you had to memorize your counterpart's schedule and mannerisms, from whether or not he used his turn signal to how often and under what circumstances did he lower the toilet seat after relieving himself; from what he did on his days off and in what order, to how to do his job. It seemed an insurmountable task. Did Danville Hair sleep with Danville Fedora's wife? How did he pass himself off in his Fedora's job? How did he keep it all straight on two hour's regular sleep a day for eight years?

Nothing had happened with Fedora for a while after the terrible morning with the TV, and my plunge into the Code had left me more afraid than anything else. I gradually forced the issue from my mind. On Sunday, HOWARD put it to me pointedly, "Danny, are you fucking around on the Fedora thing?" For we were not strangers at all, and in front of me he swore freely and long in his hearty Southern elocution.

I waved it off, "Nah. Nah. He's doin' okay. It was just an aberration."

We got this little talk out of the way before Sylvie showed up, and for that I was very grateful, but HOWARD wasn't convinced by my optimism. He gave me a concerned, lingering stare before leaving me alone with Sylvie, and I knew that on Thursday next he'd be at it again.

For now, anyway, I could turn my attention to my beloved, my beautiful, my gloriously punctual woman.

3.

Sylvie Reins had fallen into my lap two years ago at Shelves, when one day I offered her \$18.00 for a grocery-cart full of mystery paperbacks. She had legs that went (as they say) all the way to the floor, a soft green summer dress and dirty blonde hair, and she was livid.

"Eighteen bucks?"

"Eighteen bucks."

"Eighteen bucks." It was a statement of utter disbelief.

"Eighteen bucks," I confirmed.

"Well screw that." She wheeled out in a huff, her grocery cart aimed like a snowplow at whatever unfortunate person got in the way.

Two weeks later I was walking to The Flying Tortilla for lunch and passed her waiting patiently for a bus. She was wearing sweatpants and one of those tight, sleeveless running shirts that may or may not be the top of a one-piece swimsuit. I walked past,

realized who she was, then went back. "You're ridiculously good looking," I said. I had and prided myself on kind of an unrefined technique with women.

There was a hint of a smile at the corners of her lips, then she placed me in her memory and scowled. "Eighteen bucks," she said. At this exact moment the bus arrived and the doors swung open, allowing Sylvie a triumphal exit.

It occurred to me I must have crossed paths with her a thousand times at that bus stop - me on the way to lunch, her returning from a run - and never noticed. That she had come in to Shelves when she did was serendipitous and I couldn't let a cartful of lousy paperbacks nip in the bud something that held such promise.

The next day I saw her again at the same bus stop. I stopped in front of her, manufactured what I considered my most winning smile, and said: "Twenty-five." She laughed.

"Do you have any idea how much all those books are worth?"

I put on the sheepish face, "For us? Eighteen dollars."

She scowled, but not without humor. "What's your name?"

"Danny. Yours?" We shook hands.

"I'm Sylvie." She squinted her eyes, pursed her lips and looked off into the distance, as if thinking hard, "I'll give 'em to you for thirty."

I was ready for this, "How about eighteen and dinner?"

Now the examination. She gave me a quick once-over, sizing up in her mind, I was sure, my prospects and abilities, potential upsides and downsides. She would see that my socks matched my outfit, that I wasn't fat, that I carried myself well. She *wouldn't* see the fact that I actually dreamed. She'd observe the nice shade of my skin, but

wouldn't know that it was a farmer's tan. She'd wonder how I was in bed, and look at my hands, and see my fingernails. She'd sum it all up with three little words that would henceforth open all kinds of doors for me: *he seems nice*.

"Twenty-five and dinner," she said.

"Done." I was about to say *Let's talk schedules* when the bus pulled to a halt right next to us. We gave each other a knowing look.

"Tomorrow," she said, "Try to be here earlier.. .if you can."

I said I would, we smiled awkwardly, and she was gone. In our society it can be very difficult to hook up with someone. Article 1, Section 2 of the Code puts it best:

Both halves of the Hair/Fedora unit will find that any & all extra-curricular activities including intellectual distractions romantic interludes & any other conduct not strictly accounted for by the AMENS are irrelevant next to the necessity of engaging whatever action is next on the schedule.

In my house, and indeed my life, the only things free to roam and indulge themselves without the intrusion of the schedule are the cats. Sometimes, in the downtime slots, I'll while away an hour just watching them. Their independence is a source of deep, conflicting feelings for me.

On the one hand, their lives are sybaritic paradises. Greta, a little black and white mustached cat, and Habib, a Russian blue hair with a tubby, disproportionate belly, do nothing all day but sleep and eat and shit, clean themselves, chase bugs, play with each other, fight with each other, cuddle with each other, clean each other, stare at bugs

together and compete for my attention. They will doze perfectly still for twenty minutes before rising, stretching and moving to another location to begin the nap anew. What, I wonder, is the point of this life? They have no purpose, no guiding doctrine other than pleasure. I had stolen from them, quite some time ago, their capacity to fulfill any kind of procreative biological mandate. They were wholly an obligation taken on by me for my entertainment. Yet at night, just before slipping off into the One Hour Slumber, I will - having spent the previous twenty minutes neatening up the apartment - listen as they paw around, knocking things onto the floor, a trail of toppled and overturned items in their wake. If they did have some secretive feline understanding, it might've been to sabotage my orderly universe. Were I the type to indulge in soul-searching analysis of my own concealed motivations, I would at this point directly ask myself: *Why did you get these damn cats in the first place? Why really?* But I'm not. Instead I turn to the other hand, which is wrinkled not with anxiety or curiosity, but envy. I envy their undiluted attention to sheer pleasure; I envy that they are unleashed, unrestrained by any but the most fundamental schedule. What would happen if cats got jobs? They'd cease to be cats.

Anyway, having cats in the house directly requested a more complicated life. Their idleness - say, when I'm in the tiny transitory phase between one engagement and the next - threatens to undermine my confidence in the whole system.

At moments like these, when uncertainty elbows its way into my thoughts, the point of our system bears repeating: it is economic, I tell myself. We have fashioned through the innovations (the Fedora and Butter technology) the greatest workers in the world, which led to the greatest economy in the world, which led to a higher standard of living than any other people have ever known. The 22-hour worker/consumer, the 50

hour work-week, the increased household income, the multiplied bank accounts, credit cards, stock portfolios, all the utility charges from a single domicile nearly doubling, the cost of groceries... all of it, robust, thriving, surging and brilliant. My cats may not know the pressure of the schedule, may contentedly waste two thirds of the (full) day asleep, but last week I purchased five more shares in the government of Tahiti. So what've they got, really, that I want?

"The difference between America," HOWARD said once, "and the rest of the world, is that we're the nation that never sleeps. That's what it all comes back to."

"Can you even imagine? these other countries? what that life must be like?" I said.

He laughed, "No way, man."

Sylvie gave me a sharp, thoughtful look, "What gets me is the idea of having such a long day. And then sleeping forever! Think about what's happening to your body while you're just lying there..."

I smile, "You mean, like, bugs crawling into your nose and ears?"

"No, I mean your muscles rotting and your pores and your teeth," she shivered.

"Have you ever heard of 'morning wood'?" HOWARD asked.

He was something of a student of other cultures. He would regale us for hours at a time with what he'd just read in a book published somewhere overseas. Morning wood sounded weird. As did morning breath. And alarm clocks. And something called *insomnia*. Usually I'd sit there awestruck by whatever he was telling us, but I'd become uncomfortable when he started talking about dreams.

4.

It's a secret, but I've always had what are called *dreams*, ever since I can remember.

Earliest memories involve me waking from the Slumber screaming and crying. I can only imagine how frightening this was for my parents. At the end of my eleven hours I'd take the butter and emerge in fine fiddle as Fedora, who'd go about his happy business all day. Then he'd take the butter and one hour later I'd be screaming incoherently about what is called a *nightmare*. It meant that there would've been a single compartment in our brain that'd teemed, all through Fedora's day, with my fear. I don't think my folks ever did anything about it except the time my dad issued his terrifying decree: "Danny, for your own sake, don't tell anyone about whatever it is that happens to you during the Slumber, okay? It isn't normal. But your mother and I think that in time it'll go away."

As far as I knew Fedora never suffered from dreams; they are exceptionally

uncommon, but ailments afflicting one half and not the other aren't. It has to do (everything does) with your schedule, and how well you maintain it. Someone who is frequently late will suffer bouts of anxiety and depression, while their other half glides easily through the day. Maybe one has a better job than the other. Maybe one has a better routine or love life or something. I've looked long and hard for reasons I'd have dreams and Fedora wouldn't, but none are forthcoming.

So here's what it's like: the entire hour of pause is filled with images. It's a story written by the subconscious and unspooling behind closed eyes. They generally don't make any sense. You'll see a man, for instance, and know that it's your boss or your dad or Jesus Christ even though he's not vaguely similar in appearance. You'll do crazy things like nearly have sex with girls, or fly. Once I was shot through the head by a burglar with a shotgun and felt the weightlessness of death.

Most times they follow no logical progression. You'll jump from scene to scene, seldom discomfited by the transport, as if you always belong wherever you find yourself. You feel no disjointedness or confusion. No matter how crazy and unscheduled things seem they make perfect sense to you.

Occasionally I'll have recurring dreams. As a young boy I dreamt for three slumbers in a row that I was on board a great cruise ship filled to the brim with toys of every conceivable variety. Another time, for almost a week, I had nightmares about a gray-haired, red-eyed, becloaked man who followed me through a house, never in a hurry but always *right there* no matter how fast I moved. You might meet a girl - as happened when I started to get to know Sylvie - and dream of her obsessively. Sometimes when you wake up there's a certain fog - nothing at all like the clarity everyone else

experiences. Instead of beginning with the readiness and mental acuity, you sort of ascend gradually into it, occasionally having to reassure yourself that the dream is over. At times a nightmare will haunt you throughout the day. But they're not all bad. In fact, honestly, I've kind of gotten used to it.

Not long ago I started having pretty funny ones. I even woke up laughing once or twice. Over time they've become more sophisticated. I can remember having detailed, sensible conversations in some of my more recent dreams. As an example, I was walking around an airport, looking for a will-call office, and a good-humored female clerk informed me that there wasn't really a will-call office, as it were, but that *will-call* was really just about *everywhere*. I smiled wolfishly, "Do you mean to say that it has *transcended the office-state!*" We laughed. I awoke and had present in my thoughts for the rest of the day the concept of a strictly localized service that evolves into a ubiquitous reality.

Dreams can inform you. They also have a knack for drawing something mundane from your daily life and filling it out. A highly memorable dream I had once involved a friend driving us around a parking lot and going on and on about how much he hated the bank. Later in the dream I contemplated the hermetically sealed state we leave our cars in every day. Here is one tiny zone in our impossibly large world in which we exercise absolute control. Upon parking you will roll up the windows, turn off the air conditioner, turn down the radio so as not to be rudely met the next day, perhaps apply the parking brake, maybe adjust a mirror or two - and the point is: it will remain in precisely this state until you again open the door and key the ignition.

I mentioned that it was highly memorable because most aren't. You'll begin

losing a dream the moment your eyes open. It's like batting at cobwebs, something you can only barely make out. You touch it and it hardly registers, and then it's gone; but its ghostly memory (or, the memory *of having remembered*, for just one moment, what it was about) will accompany you throughout the day.

There used to be people who would record their dreams in a special diary. There were whole schools of psychology built around dream interpretation. You've heard of Freud? Of Jung? That's what they did. Generally speaking, I don't think they mean much of anything. What can it possibly say if you dream you encounter a mechanical dog? Or that the world is invaded by aliens who use weapons that sound like something from the earliest, laughable videogames? Or that your penis is actually the size of a small torpedo? The thought of making inferences from such insanities seems silly at best.

No. They just exist in their own way, alongside me and simultaneously within me. They're like an expansive river that, for one hour a day, I swim in. If it weren't such a stigma to dream I'd tell people all about them. I'd sit Sylvie down and explain to her how once I dreamt we were both in separate cupboards and therefore couldn't relate to one another, couldn't understand one another - nothing! - and that this simple image served as a piercing metaphor for our relationship.. .or any relationship anywhere: the one I have now with Fedora, for instance, or with my cats, or my co-workers who glance at each other warily when I order another drink.. .we're all just in separate cupboards, get it?

5.

Except of course that Fedora and I share a cupboard, and of late he'd been polluting it.

I arose from the Slumber and felt distinctly off. There was a bizarre flavor in my mouth and rawness in my throat. The idea I was clinging to - that I was getting sick -was dispelled upon opening the closet to get dressed. It reeked of smoke. Of course the smell must have been emanating from the right side - where Fedora hung his clothes -but it was impossible to tell.

There was an ashtray outside on our porch with three or four cigarette butts. The ashtray still had a price tag on it.

Clearly, it was time for some serious action.

On our scratch pad next to the phone I hastily stepped into a new world - that of first contact - (thus explicitly violating Code directive) by writing:

Vou/ started/ Awofcmgp

That day at work I was highly self-conscious. What happens when a person starts smoking? Can everyone tell? How long before I start hacking? Everyone had had the experience of sitting at a restaurant and trying to concentrate on the newspaper as some woman - it was usually a woman - in her forties or fifties but tobacco-aged a decade more sat solitary and volcanic, breath audibly wheezy between paroxysms of ragged, phlegmy cougher. Then the metallic click of a Zippo would come to you from her direction followed shortly by a satisfied exhale, clouds of roiling smoke, etc. Fedora had really crossed the line.

At the bar after work I was detached. Between soulful examinations of the frothy head of my beer and big gulps I glanced around at my co-workers' faces, coveting their stability. Seamless duality wasn't supposed to be a thing you aimed for. It was just supposed to happen. Born from the butter: various sundry neurotransmitters rerouted and lobes reprinted.. .intrinsicly two.. .so on and so forth; worldviews, beliefs, tastes, capabilities and desires on one side, experience and memory the other, etcetera etcetera etcetera.

So did the fact that Danny Fedora had started smoking imply that soon / would want to start, as well? Would / begin to disregard the subroutines and mechanisms of our AMENS, as he had? Was I destined, in other words, to suddenly come apart, here? Now? So far into my life? Or was he ill?

In the morning I went straight to the scratch pad.

*Ye**

It shouldn't have surprised me to see my own handwriting so perfectly rendered in the single word, but there I was, momentarily out of breath, my heart pounding: surprised. First contact had been made just like that: an observation and a confirmation; no apology, no explanation, no nothing. Did he consider me and my concerns insignificant? Undeserving of justification for his acts?

Of course I hadn't protested. I'd just called him out.

Underneath his "Yes" I wrote:

The period, I thought, added some finality. Here I am, Fedora, it said, resolute and in the right. Just try and fuck with me.

It was bowling day, but first I had to go through HOWARD. The reason I didn't want him to know was that I was embarrassed. The whole thing was really very

embarrassing.

But HOWARD was wise, "He did something, didn't he?"

"No. What gives you that idea?"

"Shit. C'mon Knuckles." He only used my last name in extreme circumstances.

"Seriously, HOWARD. Everything's fine." My words were spoken around iced latte, my eyes darting away from his from either side of the cup. I was and had always been a terrible liar. "Oh you know what? You wouldn't believe the Civil War collection that came in yesterday..."

HOWARD and I had met at the Double Decker three years ago. The barista at the time, a lithe, attractive young shoe-addict named Svetlana had introduced us. It was sort of uncomfortable because evidently she had made a type of us: older guys, literary, drank a lot of coffee and leered at her when she wasn't looking.. .not quite brave enough - or decadent enough - to ask her out. HOWARD and I shook hands as if our foreheads were branded with the same capital "L." We saw in each other the identical struggle and, in a mutual ice-breaking gambit, made conversation of it as soon as we were out of earshot of the underage Svetlana.

"That one tests my inner strength," said HOWARD.

I laughed, "No kidding. What is she: 16? 17?"

"We're going to hell."

We ended up sitting together at the table in the corner of the little brick-floored courtyard outside the bus - where we sit today - and talked for the next three hours. We exchanged stories about our youth: fumbling first attempts at love, comical sexual injuries (one time HOWARD got a charley horse while having rear-entry sex with a girl

and had to run around the room for five minutes and one time a girl broke my dick and there was a very secret Band-Aid for three of the worst months of my life). Nothing too serious. We compared notes on scheduling, how much time was required every month for deep cleaning and car maintenance, how to deal with unexpected intrusions on your schedule (lovelorn and crazy friends, deaths in family, suddenly fired - you know). We eventually turned to books and music.

HOWARD, a native of some Southern state (I forget which one, he doesn't talk about it much), identified with Robert E. Lee more than Abraham Lincoln and spoke in a beautiful drawl. He told me funny anecdotes about the Civil War and I told him stories about the American transcendentalists (this was in the middle of my transcendentalist phase), a group - I assured him - that contributed mightily to the War Between the States by chiseling from the mighty granite of their beliefs what would become the common refrains of the abolitionist movement.

Talking about these things served the dual purpose of enlightening us both to each other's knowledge and raising a divider, of sorts, between us and Svetlana, who - whenever she wandered too close to our table - would make showily that what we were saying was way over her head. It reinforced our maturity, thus seeming to place our lust for her into the realm of the purely carnal - which was eminently forgivable. We were partners in crime - accessories, anyway, facilitating each other's denial of the fact that we were both infatuated with her.

Eventually Svetlana moved on to greener pastures, but HOWARD and I remained, beholden to the schedule and genuinely fond of each other besides. By this time I had taken my first tentative steps into the world of creative writing and, as a way to

test the waters, had begun the Boris and Doris story - a very old idea of mine. It goes like this: what if a man, a lonely man named "Protagonist," possibly with marital problems, received a letter in the mail addressed to someone named Boris. It would have no return address. "Protagonist" reads the letter, it's by someone named Doris and is beautifully written, intelligent and witty - a sophisticated and worldly love letter.

(You will allow me to indulge for a moment: "...we have been refined through the generations of roving poetics that preceded us; perfecting craft and genome as a vintage wine perfects itself in the cellars of time: with age. Left alone and for long enough we'd become idiots-in-love, incapable of speech.. .and yet I feel that with the charged current of us spread so thin yet indestructible across the land, we are so smart and good that we could presently cede ourselves a new nation.. .that we in fact demand nothing less. I am Unconstitutionally Yours, Doris." See? I can write.)

He puts it into a kitchen drawer and forgets about the whole thing until a week later, when another letter from Doris to Boris (no last names) arrives. This would really intrigue "Protagonist." Why did Doris think that Boris lived in his house? This one, too, he would read and put in the same kitchen drawer. Finally a week later a third letter arrives, this one addressed to Doris, from Boris, responding.

Boris and Doris would continue their brilliant correspondence with "Protagonist's" house as the vertex of the unlikely triangle. I thought the correspondence would somehow change "Protagonist's" life, and that's all I had.

I'd written four pages before becoming profoundly stumped. HOWARD helped me through it. Turns out a crazy neighbor was engineering the whole thing. Her Hair wrote as Doris and her Fedora as Boris. Her Hair was hetero and nutty and her Fedora

was butch dyke and nutty. Both Hair and Fedora had traveled the world and read loads of books, struggled with their sexuality and even written two or three published works in England before coming back home to the states and losing their collective mind.

My story, "Unseasonably Yours: The Correspondence of Boris and Doris" was published in the local literary magazine *Mohawk Review* - which turned out to be way too much success way too fast. Not since have I been able to attract the interest of a magazine, an editor, an agent, a publishing house or anything beyond the all-accepting audience of a spoken word night at a local coffee house. Forget *Hair Style*, *Hair Color*.. .even *Bangs* and *Chaste Rabbits* gave me enough stock rejections to spill out the mailbox.

But HOWARD doesn't let me stop. HOWARD is like my personal trainer. It is my role in our relationship to seek help, comfort, and reassurance. Whenever I ask him if he's got any problems or things he'd like to talk about he shrugs me off. HOWARD gives the impression of being fully in control of his life - a big part of which is hassling other people to take the reins of their own.

"Danny."

"You should come in and see this Civil War collection, man. Seriously." This was desperation - we both knew it. We had never seen each other outside the Double Decker.

He threw his hands up in reluctant retreat, "Alright. You don't want to talk about it - fine," he extended a long finger at me, "But just be careful man. Okay?"

HOWARD knew just what to say. I caved. I couldn't let him think that I was being lazy about something so critical. "I'm gonna apply for a vacation," I said. His eyes widened.

"Really?"

"Yeah," I stirred my drink, pretended to watch a group of kids walking past - anything to avoid meeting his stare, "He started smoking."

"Wo." HOWARD knew. Nobody smoked, anymore. If you smoked you were a first class weirdo, the guy in class everyone regretted, whose parentage everyone wondered about. Besides, they were impossible to get. Hell and high water both provided in the modern economy against the availability of cigarettes. America had fled like from an evangelical's voice-emblazoned brand of hell the vice of smoking. A pack, they said, was liable to cost you a week's share of rent.

"I made first contact."

"Jesus. What'd you say?"

"What'd I say? I said 'You started smoking,' and he said, 'Yes.'"

"Yes...? That's it?"

"Uh-huh. I said, 'You can't do that,' and we'll see what he says tomorrow. But I came to it this morning.. .I can't wait anymore."

"Do *you* wanna start smoking?"

I felt a nervous smile on my face, "Not yet..."

"I mean, maybe that's what's supposed to happen, Danny."

"How will I know? Whether I start on my own accord - and I really don't want to - or he gets me addicted, how will I know? I have to do something."

"What's your plan?"

I told him. HOWARD had always been a great listener. He offered some advice, and by then it was time to go bowling. As we shook hands I said I might not see him for a

while. "Don't expect me on Sunday," I said. He gave me a hug.

Smoke I was suddenly aware of curled from the little bar-side corner smoking section of the bowling alley, beers slugged back as strike after strike was dealt by the people on either side of us, like always. They were good: these big dudes with untucked tee shirts and curly hair, their motorcycles all outside. We of the Dusty Shelves weren't so great. There was a who-cares attitude permeating our lane. At some point, every Thursday, Fritz would trip while releasing the ball and end up spread-eagled and sliding on the conditioned lane. Everyone in the alley - less the biker dudes - would applaud, Fritz would blush, and we'd all make the same jokes. This never got old. But today I was a little distant. The smoke, though tiny and distant, was bothering me. Sonya, who ran the Kids section, was elected to talk to me. She followed me to the bar and gave me an inquisitive look.

"What's going on, Danny?"

The guy who always got me my second beer got me my second beer and I breathed through my nose, looking at it. "Nothing. Nothing too serious."

"You sure? Seem all.. .different." Sonya had those big Kid's Section eyes.

I took a long drink and thought about maybe I'd have a third, just this once. "It's personal."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"No," I tried a laugh. "That's why I said it was *personal*, Sonya."

"Sorry," she started walking away. What a rebuke I'd dealt her!

"No, I'm sorry. Listen," we headed back to the lane together, the bowling alley

stifling me in all its thoughtless joy, like they should've all had or at least known everything about my problems, "Things have just been a little rough for me. I'm actually thinking about taking a.. .a vacation."

"Holy cow."

"I know."

She gave me the big Kid's Section eyes again, this time almost leaking with compassion, "We're all here for you, Danny."

The final roadblock was Sylvie, which I anticipated to be the roughest.

HOWARD I could handle, but I couldn't bring myself to tell my Sylvie everything that was going on. There was love here, after all; not simplistic sexual schedule-happy love, but the kind where we'd look at each from time to time and contemplate reevaluating our lives, contemplate turning everything upside-down in a quick instant just to cement now what would commence golden and content into a forever of us.

Sitting her down and saying "My Fedora's blown a fuse so I'm taking off work" was not a thing to say. It wasn't even an option.

We sat on her couch and I told her I needed some time to myself and would be taking a vacation. She held my hand and nodded gently the whole time I talked. She was very soft, said "You can come and see me at work, if you want."

"I'll try," I said, not meaning it but trying heroically to sound like I did. She worked at a wealth management firm and my image of Sylvie didn't allow for that environment. Love is love but it's also everything else.

"Danny, I don't want to rush you, but whenever you're ready to talk to me.. .I'll be here."

"I know. I know. And I will."

She smiled oddly, "I think I have a clue, though."

"Oh really?" This was unexpected.

"Yes. But I want you to come to it, on your own."

I thought *Oh shit* and clammed up and she tactfully changed the subject. We played some games, drank a bottle of wine and retired to the bedroom, where the standard exercises were unusually passionate. I couldn't shake the cloying feeling that she was trying to convince me of something; as if a lifetime's of days pivoted on a night's exertions, and a man's liberty got vouchsafed into a certain box through a certain rhythm of hot breaths.

Clearly, I was going to have more to deal with than my wandering Fedora.

6.

I C040/ do- whatever I \ocwt.

Apparently, my resolve was infectious. That was his reply. That was the best he could do. I thought for a second, then wrote my equally profound retort.

re/ not wppoted/ta- do-THAT!

The exclamation point, I believed, added a great deal of urgency to the situation.

The Vacationing Bureau was kept in the basement level of an unspectacular downtown brownstone. The floor assignments had no doubt been made in order of utility,

thus: those departments that got a lot of traffic (new worker permits, foreign worker reprogramming and visas, career reallocation) got the choice offices with the big windows and the happy employees while the Vacationing Bureau gathered cobwebs in the unwindowed dark underground. Nobody takes the elevator down without receiving a few probing glances from fellow travelers. The whole idea of downward motion is loathsome. As it is with life, so it is with elevators. Airless and dry and with something mummified about it, the interior of the Bureau had a whiff of decay about it.

Used to be whenever you wanted to take a vacation you'd tell your boss a couple weeks in advance, and he or she would pencil it into the schedule somewhere. And that was it. I speak the truth. Now, of course, you have to wait in about ten thousand lines, fill out a different form at each one asking for all the same information, and finally get interviewed. It's tricky - you practically have to apply for a vacation just to apply for a vacation. I think they do it this way on purpose.

It goes like this, the first clerk says, "Good morning my name is Cheerful what is the reason for your visit to the Vacationing Bureau today?"

And you say: "I need to apply for a vacation."

And she says: "Here's a form to fill out. Once you've filled it out please go to Section A-12 and see Mr. Fatigued at the front desk."

The form asks some pointed questions. Why do you wish to take a vacation? What is the desired duration of the vacation? What do you wish to accomplish? Are you applying singly or with another person or with a group? When was the last time you applied for and/or took a vacation? Then all the usual stuff of name, social security number, hours worked per week, average household income, etc.

Mr. Fatigued takes the form and feeds them into a machine you can't see. It takes about twenty seconds for him to grunt, eyeing the results, eventually giving you a second form in addition to a wax paper copy of the first, and telling you to turn both in to Mr. Jovial at A-14. Mr. Jovial's form gets a little more personal. Weight, size, hair color, do you own pets, do you own a car. where do you intend to go for your vacation, are you happy with the service thus far provided.

Mr. Jovial is personable and eager to serve, processes both forms and then tediously asks you all the same questions you've spent the last half hour answering. He directs you to Ms. Pusillanimous at A-16.

Everyone in the corridors of the Vacationing Bureau - anyone applying, anyway - has an increasingly haunted look about them. One's quotient of mental calm has an inverse relationship with the amount of time one spends in the Bureau. The bureaucracy is astounding.

I was able to get it all done, however, in a three-hour span scheduled for writing and downtime on Friday morning, before going to work. My interview was with an old woman named Sally. She had permed, immobile blue hair. She gave the impression of being one of those sweet, kindly grandmotherly types, but her title (and her rather incongruous last name) betrayed that image: Sally was *Mrs. Bullhorn*, Deputy Director of Vacationing Authorization. This was heavy stuff. The director probably only showed for boardroom meetings, policy briefings of superiors and ceremonial functions, otherwise leading a life of behind-the-scenes luxury. Sally was in the trenches, dealing every day with people like me who - more often than not, I guessed - had something to hide, had just spent hours standing in line and being scrutinized by myriad clerks and anonymous

government officials, and were at the very end of their rope. It was a clever system, I thought, designed to make you want to spill your guts to Grandma Sally here at the last stop. In my case I would say: "The truth is, Mrs. Bullhorn, I'm going on vacation to investigate my Fedora, who is straying.. .no I didn't report it and yes I know that's against the law.. .I guess maybe you're right and you all should begin the process of intervention.. .yes that *would* be better than being incarcerated for withholding necessary information from the authorities!"

But I was strong.

In a singsong, warbling voice, Sally hit the highlights of my application: "So, what have we here? Mr. Danny Knuckles, is it?"

"That's me!" I say, putting on the cheery face.

"Danny Knuckles, what an interesting name..."

"Thank you. I've had it all my life."

She paused, taken aback, and laughed, "Of course, yes! You've had it all your life. Isn't that right. Let's see here, Mr. Knuckles. You wish to take a week of vacation, is that correct? You just feel you need some time. Well of course that's very understandable. You say you'll stay in the area? Wonderful."

Sally stopped here and stared at me expectantly. I didn't know what to do so I didn't do anything.

It stretched on ten seconds.

She mercifully continued, "Now, Mr. Knuckles, as you may or may not be aware, the amount of time allotted to any person for vacation is dependent upon how much money that person makes in the average week. Does that make sense? Good. For people

in your income bracket the subscribed duration is three days every year, and of course you're aware that there is no rollover. Looking at these numbers it seems you are indeed due your three days..."

We did the stopping and looking at each other thing again.

Ten seconds.

"However, because you have never applied for a vacation before in - what, 16 eligible years? -lam allowed to extend it."

I knew about this - had done my homework. "That's great," I said. She looked up with some surprise, as if she'd forgotten I could talk. As if she was speaking, literally, to a sheaf of wax-paper forms, tattooed with all the specs of a man, but not to a man, himself- and forget the looking-at. I was a thing dead, still, forever-lifeless beyond the vision of her bureaucrat's eyes.

"Isn't it." Something changed in her. It was the eyes. They went all hard. "How are your relations with your Fedora, Mr. Knuckles?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your Fedora-"

"We don't have any relations. Who has relations with their Fedora?" There was this huge foot in my mouth and I was having a hard time talking around it. You don't ask that question. You aren't even facetious about it.

"In a civilized society, no, relations are not had."

"Right."

"I was just checking."

She looked at me for a long time, maybe listening to the sweat break out on my

forehead and plummet down my back.

"Mr. Knuckles-

"Yes ma'am."

"Mr. Knuckles, as you may or may not be aware, we will be notifying your Fedora through the proper channels of your decision to take a vacation."

"Certainly."

"There is never any cause for contact between units, as the Code explicitly directs."

"I'm well aware of that, Sally."

"Mrs. Bullhorn, please, is the name *I've* had all my life."

And I could see it, too. I bet she dominated the sandbox. "Pardon me," I said.

"We will naturally be putting the same questions to him."

"The same questions?"

"Yes."

"I mean, what questions? He doesn't have to do all this, does he?"

She laughed, "Oh no, Mr. Knuckles. We just have to be sure that everything is what we call *optimal* for the vacation to commence. You're familiar with the Seizure Unit?"

I gulped. Where the hell had *that* come from? "Yes."

"They're the ones who will bring you in if anything goes wrong - if anything, you know, isn't cricket."

"Huh." I had no idea what crickets had to do with anything.

"Do you request the one-time extension of your vacation, Mr. Knuckles?"

"Yes ma'am. I do."

The silence here contorted itself into a pair of pliers working on my nose until at last Mrs. Bullhorn made a noise and looked back at her computer screen. "I'm going to go ahead and draw you up a weeklong vacation, seven full days to begin at once. Does that sound alright?"

"Yes ma'am. It does."

"Please sign here.. .and here.. .and initial here..." This goes on for a couple minutes. Then, just as I'm about to stand and take my leave of Mrs. Bullhorn, she pushes a panel on her computer screen, clears her throat and says: "Mr. Danny Knuckles (Hair), I Sally Bullhorn (Hair), Deputy Director of Vacationing Authorization, hereby grant you a fiill seven day vacation by exercising my right to do so under Article 18, Section 7 of the Code, which states that

anyone having not applied for a vacation for ten consecutive years and never having applied prior to the ten year period is permitted a one-time extension on the standard allotted vacation duration with the understanding that in situations of dire need left to the judgment of the authorities &/or the employer the vacation will be terminated after the standard allotted duration of the vacation elapses.

Is there anything you'd like to add, Mr. Knuckles?"

"Uh, no. Thank you."

"Very well. Mr. Knuckles thank you for spending your time with us, I trust

everything has gone smoothly and do enjoy your well-deserved time off."

I walked down the hall like a death row inmate: every step nearer the lip, the precipice of unscheduled chaos. And then, like they were giving me one last probe, the orange shirts came running past. Twelve or thirty of them - who could tell with muscles that big and so few teeth? *Seizure Unit*, she'd called them, hustling off to requisition some poor sap came unhinged during his liberty. They even smelled like bad motherfuckers. I stuck to the wall and watched them go, shook my head clear and was free, like my cats.

I got out of the Bureau as fast as I could, terrified and thrilled and a little guilty, but totally free for the next seven days. It was.. .strange.

7.

Just to be polite, I decided to go to Shelves to inform the manager personally of my decision to take a vacation. It wasn't necessary - the Bureau handled everything - but I was headed in that direction anyway. My first move, phase one, was to The True Brew, which was right next to Shelves. What I didn't count on was the shock of walking in and out of work on a day that I was regularly scheduled. Opening the door to leave took a couple deep breaths and an exhausting exercise of will power. I'm pretty sure people noticed. I wondered if it got easier.

The True Brew was one of these dimly lit places that stink marvelously of coffee beans. All the employees have tattoos and haircuts and sullen attitudes. Fedora, I thought, really didn't fit in. The guy at the counter was rail thin and had far-out eyes. He communicated with me exclusively in body language. When I said, "Can I please have Danny's schedule?" he sort of raised his chin a bit in dim acknowledgement and slow-walked away. I scoped the covers of some local zines and observed that the shop did

quite a trade in dust. There was a community message board with lots of "Roommate Wanted" ads.

SWM Seeks Open-Minded M/F Roommate For Wild Sex, Rock & Roll Parties and Neighborhood Poetry Slams. \$775 a mo. BDSM Essential. (No pets or smokers.)

Another:

Sick of the Code? Fuck it! (FTC Meetings @ 6:15 AM Wednesdays, True Brew)

The guy with the eyes tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a piece of paper with Fedora's hours. I thanked him and he nodded and walked away. This was the only way to do it: a favor asked and granted by an anonymous third (well, second) party. I couldn't have looked at his schedule in our home. I'm trained not to. It's like the eyes just slide right off. This paper, though, they stuck to.

It was a revelation: five days a week my body came in here, threw on an apron and went to work. But standing there as Danny Knuckles (Hair) I just couldn't imagine it. Checking out the schedule, I saw that Fedora worked on Wednesdays at six. He would serve the Fuck the Code group every week. Maybe he even listened in. Maybe he sat down with them. Maybe he was one of them.

The city seemed different as I emerged from True Brew. Crisper. A bit foreign. Everyone had somewhere to quickly get to. They bustled along the sidewalks, heads lowered, tilting forward into the next thing. All except me. I had no place to go. Shining

glass buildings of commerce loomed over me, an endless stream of traffic choked through city center and I stood there, thumb up ass, doing absolutely nothing to engage or motor the economy. My heart palpitated.

Walking past Dusty Shelves to get to my car, I was drawn to the door again. It was like when you have to pee and your need increases with proximity to the toilet. The further away I got the easier it was to keep going. Then - serendipitously I guess - I saw that I was parked under a billboard for Sleepy Pete's Anexohall - the very same product I'd heard advertised when Fedora left the TV on. It was sold at every local pharmacy, so turns out I had a place to go and some money to put into something, after all.

Made me feel just a little better, anyhow.

Anexohall claimed to smooth out the whole vacationing process by stifling the urge to stay in schedule. Side effects included increased frontal lobe activity leading to bouts of excessive contemplation (almost never happens, said the lady) nausea (very rare) and sleepiness (very common), but the sleepiness wasn't supposed to come on until after a few days of taking the medication.

"Like, how sleepy?"

"Oh it's not too bad. 'Least that's what I've heard. Just sort of tired every so often. Like you been doing heavy lifting."

"So, physically tired? In the arms and such?"

"That's what I heard."

I bought a bottle and read the instructions. One dose just before taking the butter was supposed to last a whole day. I'd have to wait.

It's difficult to overstate how peculiar I felt just kind of walking around. I'd sketched for myself a sort of game plan to get me through the week.. .the things I had to do, people I had to talk to and all that, but it was an impromptu, thrown-together schedule; nothing at all like the recipe I'd been cooking with for the past so many years.

Some people went totally crazy on vacation and never returned, which is one of the reasons they made the application process so excruciating. The paperwork served the dual purpose of forming a psychological profile of the applicant while gathering information about his case. The government had spent a lot of money on Fedora and me and wasn't about ready to cut the leash unless they knew we'd come back.

You'll remember the story of the Slocums, Russell and Sherry and their two kids, who took a couple weeks in one of those cities built all around theme parks. Russell lost it first. He'd worked twenty straight years, uninterrupted, as an accountant. All the free time got to him fast and on just the third day Sherry finds him duded-up in his nicest workday thread, lying in a bathtub filled with cold water, crunching numbers from a hotel room service menu.

So then they went home, right?

Wrong. The wife flips, locks the kids up in the master bedroom and hangs herself from a ceiling fan. Dad puts the do-not-disturb sign on the doorknob and sets about writing tax law into the wallpaper with a knife. A few days later someone reports the smell. They find the kids starving but alive, the dad gets fired and committed, and the mom buried. The most remarkable thing about it was they all kept taking the butter, only their other halves lost it too. Who wouldn't?

You heard the story. You had to. It was well-publicized.

HOWARD told me once that Southern plantation owners would occasionally give their slaves a week or so of "liberty." What they'd do was essentially make sure the whole break was spent in an alcoholic stupor, and they'd poison their food and keep them from all aid and comfort, so when the slaves returned to bondage it was with a profound fear of freedom and gratitude to their taskmasters.

Sometimes it's hard not to think about those things.

Now, peering into store windows, doing some people-watching, cruising sides of the street I'd never been on before, I understood the folks who couldn't take it. There were, what, seven hours left in my day? Seven hours to fill before going home and taking the butter as the Code and my own physiological makeup required? Seven hours of *not working*?

It dawned on me with the speed of heartburn that I'd have to keep myself very busy over the next week. This vacation business was hard work.

8.

Once I got home I made a very methodical list of Fedora's stuff and where exactly it all was. I even took pictures of everything before beginning the search. Pulling out the drawers of the right side of the cabinet, I tossed his clothes over my shoulders until the room was blanketed in his socks and underwear, tee shirts and shorts. I found some porn - positioned symmetrically with my own porn in the same drawer on the left side. He was me, I kept telling myself, but he wasn't. I tore through the closet. I opened up all his documents on the computer. I leafed through his books and notebooks. Fedora was just as committed a writer as I was. Dozens of loose pages covered the floor, scrawled over with his (my) handwriting. The same kind of things I did, a line occurs to him and he writes it down:

ro^n/, only
v\&i^ \vl\jew c&mMTty

I was impressed with his words - they seemed very *right* to me, as if I'd written them myself. Which of course I had, sort of.

Not knowing what I was looking for, I tediously examined the groceries in his side of the fridge (all the same as mine - no surprise there). I overturned the pantry, peeked into his bags of discarded newspapers waiting to be recycled, scanned over his music. Putting an unmarked, antique album in the stereo I listened as our mom prompted young Fedora.

"Do you know what this is, Danny?"

"No."

"Are you sure you don't know what it is? I think you do."

"It's a... picture."

"Yes but what is it a picture of, Danny? Is it a kind of house?"

"Barn!"

"That's right! That's exactly what it is. It's a barn. Good for you. Do you know who lives in barns?"

"Cows in barns!"

My mom sounded young. So did I. I didn't recognize my voice. Disturbed, I turned the stereo off and commenced my search. Eventually I found the fedora. It was on

top of the water-heater. Dark blue and nice. Perched there, innocuous, it seemed silly. The whole thing was silly, I thought. How can this hat - this simple old-fashioned hat - contribute to transforming me so greatly? How does it divide me?

I didn't touch it.

I shut the door.

For reasons that seemed too complicated to ponder, the steam rushed out of me after happening onto that goddamned hat. What began as a fervent search fizzled and died. I sat on the floor in a little space I'd cleared and combed through the fruits of my labor.

There wasn't much: a dark poem, a list of phone numbers, a bottle of expensive-looking brandy I'd found buried under some riff-raff in the corner of the closet - possibly misplaced in a drunken stupor and forgotten. It wasn't until I stopped looking that I hit the jackpot.

I went to the scratch pad next to the phone to look again at our first contact. It struck me as a concise, snippy exchange. Unbecoming, I thought, of a first contact. We should've written *beautifully* to each other. Really put our heart into it. Tried to leave an impression. Absent-mindedly, I flipped through the pages of the pad and saw the words:

fTC meet-Wed/6:15

with a phone number next to it.

FTC. Fuck the Code. So he *was* involved. Trepidation making my fingers dance over the keypad, I dialed the number and got a message. "You've reached the FTC East nightline. Try this number..." shaking, I wrote out the new number. Of *course* they wouldn't answer - they were on Fedora-time. I put the phone back on the handset and walked outside, deep breaths all the way. I found that I craved something and didn't know what it was. I hadn't known that was possible. If you can't name a thing, how can you crave it? How do you know? If you were hungry and didn't know what food was or how to eat, what would happen? Seeing again Fedora's ashtray, I called it nicotine - because my body chemistry knew whether I did or not - walked back inside and picked up the phone.

"FTC."

"Hi." I said. I hadn't planned ahead.

"Hello. What can I do for you?"

"I guess I'm calling for information."

The voice on the other end was quiet, almost whispering, "We don't have.. .I mean we don't have any *pamphlets*, or anything."

"How's it work? Whado'I do?"

"We have a meeting in one hour. You can come."

"Where is it?" He gave me directions that I copied, my hands still feeling light and jumpy. The meeting was in a windshield wiper factory, of all places, on the other side of town. There wasn't enough time to clean up my place and get out there so I left it in disrepair. My cats pawed through the scene, excited by the new decor.

9.

In my apartment, consumed with what I was doing, the need to conform to the old schedule had been minimized, but driving across town it came back in full force. I kept on activating the turn signal as if to exit the highway when I didn't want to. Must have looked crazy: my speed alternately slow like I was getting off and then, having remembered myself, accelerating rapidly. There was an antenna inside me, bending and hurting for the ritual I'd left behind. Tomorrow would be better, I told myself, Sleepy Pete would see to it.

The windshield wiper factory was a large, low, blue-roofed building in the hills east of town, surrounded by a sparsely populated parking lot and a rusty fence. The words NATIONAL WIPER ALLIANCE in massive red lettering springing from the roof announced the building's identity in what I thought was a cryptic way. If you didn't know they made windshield wipers, what would you think they did? Was there a FEDERAL WIPER COALITION somewhere? The rival factory? Did they *spy* on each other?

There wasn't any sign of human life except for the parked cars, which were more or less congregated around the entrance. I parked and went in and was immediately met by a fat man, a skinny man and a black woman, staring at me. The room was small and rectangular and I could just barely stand up straight. The blue walls were hung with pictures of factory managers and employees of the month. There was a hall leading off to the left and a large fake plant in the corner.

"I'm here for FTC," I said, feebly.

"We're all early," said the fat man, shoving his hand into mine. "Name's Vernon." He was a bit sweaty in the face, had crystal clear blue eyes and a bald spot the size of a silver dollar encroaching on a depleted store of thinning yellow hair. He smelled a little.

"Danny."

"Pleased to meet you Danny. This here's Jake and Stella. Y'all say hi to Danny."

We all shook hands.

"Is this your first meeting?" Asked Jake, a pensive little man with a sharp nose and slightly crooked, deep set gray eyes.

"Yes."

He made an approving noise through his pointy nose, then spoke with strained articulation, "I remember that during my first meeting I was very nervous."

I had the impression Jake hadn't *not* been nervous for some time. Probably long before his first meeting. "I'm just wondering, why here?" I was thinking, why would one group meet in a coffee shop in the center of town and another in a desolate windshield wiper factory on the outskirts?

Vernon slapped his belly in a proprietary way, "I work here. Yep, I'm a wiper-man. It was convenient. Free coffee and donuts and such."

I was aware of Stella's presence, but she wasn't exactly diving into the conversation. Her eyes, angry black, seemed in my peripheral vision to be glued to the side of my head. I turned and smiled at her and not one muscle on her face moved. She had short, kinky hair and was strikingly attractive. This just made it all the more weird. Pretty women don't stare.

"Yep," Vernon continued, "Meredith asked me to arrange for a new meeting space after our last one got torn down."

"Tom...w/ia/?"

He laughed, "Oh it's nothing. Just that we used to meet in an office park that got sold part and parcel to some biotech firm. They renovated it. Tore down our old stompin' grounds."

"I see."

Jake raised a finger, "I think they were actually in pharmaceuticals, Vernon."

"Well whatever. Robots the lot of 'em, right Stella?"

"Hmm." She said, still scrutinizing me.

"Don't mind Stella," said Vernon, comfortably, "She's just kinda paranoid."

"Paranoid about what?" I asked her.

"New people," she said in words as cold and final as knives.

An awkward silence was here mercifully interrupted by the arrival of two more people: a teenaged boy with a lot of juice and a colossal black man with opaque eyes and a face so perfectly expressionless it was possible he hadn't so much as blinked in years.

The kid stopped in his tracks as soon as he saw me and for a moment I thought I had a cover that had somehow been blown. Then he stuck his hand out, "Meredith Dees, who are you?"

We convened to a conference room on the second floor of the factory. One wall was entirely window overlooking the floor and its labyrinthine assemblage of machinery. The table was nicely polished maple but over it the membership of the Wiper Alliance chapter of FTC liberally spread their watery coffee and lamentable, unfresh donuts. When the meeting began there were nine people. I feigned at mingling with a cluster of college-aged kids until Meredith called us to our seats.

He couldn't have been older than 17. Perfect, unlined skin and lots of energy. His blonde hair fell winningly into his face and he casually brushed it aside. He had deep green eyes, wore baggy jeans and a circa-1970s Houston Astros jersey top - the one with the big gaudy rainbow across the middle. He was athletic, but not muscle-bound.

"Okay, I see we've got some visitors today. That's Danny Knuckles over there in the corner, looking funny," everyone chuckled and I felt my face flush, "And that's Sophie Stall." he glanced at a girl sitting across from me. She was in her mid-twenties and had unruly eggplant hair, alabaster skin and, at the moment, a gracious smile. A picture sprang to mind of a girl who had always sought new things and new adventures and had come gracefully through each one. I envied her.

"It's nice to have you guys," said Meredith, "And for your benefit I guess I'll just go ahead and, uh, go into the intro. So if you regulars want to split for a sec, have a smoke or somethin', feel free," a small group shuffled outside, but not Stella. She hadn't

stopped glaring at me once. Why didn't she glare at Sophie? "So here's what we're all about, people," and Meredith went into his practiced monologue.

Fuck the Code had been conceived seven years prior in the basement of a woman named Stephanie. She was having disassociative problems with her other - my ears perked up - and believed the Code was to blame. She started going to the library and learning all she could about what life was like before the innovations. Her theory was that so-called "seamless duality" was actually very harmful, resulting directly in a multitude of neuroses that people were daily coming down with in droves and also the chief contributing factor to the gradual decrease in the average human's life span.

"Huh?" said Sophie, stealing the word from my mouth.

Meredith smiled knowingly, as did almost everyone else sitting around the table. Even Stella stopped drilling a hole into the side of my face for just long enough to give Sophie a significant look. "That's right," said the leader from the head of the table, "Twenty years ago the average white man lived to be 74, the average white woman 77."

"And today..." my voice trailed off. I didn't want to explicitly admit my ignorance.

"Today it's down four years for both. To say nothing of black people," he said, extremely uninhibited, "A black woman in great shape is lucky to see 72."

Sophie wasn't satisfied, "But that doesn't make sense, wouldn't they want us to live as long as possible? To work and consume as much as we can?"

All heads turned to the teenager as if they hadn't heard it a thousand times before. I pondered for a moment the possibility that in opening the doors to the National Wiper Alliance I had actually stumbled into Meredith's dream: a room full of adults hanging on

every word from the kid in the baggy pants.

Not that I supposed he had dreams. That anybody did but me.

"The retirement age is 68, Sophie. So long as average white folk are living that long they don't give a shit."

"But - *consuming*."

"Yer 69 years old - all you want are drugs and diapers," everybody, even Sophie, laughed. I joined in late. "Yer takin' up space! Seriously, you own whatever property you live on so you ain't payin' any rent, you don't drive far enough to buy any gas for the car you own. You stop buying shit for your place. You get old and your whole life shrinks down - it becomes inexpensive and *unprofitable*." I liked the way he said "unprofitable." It wasn't a word you heard used sarcastically.

"I mean for fuck's sake with social security and Medicare all yer doin' is leachin' off the government!" he shook his head passionately, his hair breezy and charismatic, "No, so long as you've lived until you can't work anymore.. .that's all they care about. Just ask the King, here," he said, nodding toward the hulking, quiet black man sitting next to him. "His folks are retired and they get no respect from the government."

For the first time "the King" was motile. He nodded in stony confirmation. He was suddenly, vaguely familiar to me, but I couldn't place it. With the overall weirdness of the room he fit right in: a mute dark presence observing.

Sophie's thirst for explanation sated, he moved on. Stephanie believed that the butter and fedora innovations were going to wither our lives down until they ceased to be lucrative. But by then the authorities would have so much control over the people vis a vis the Code and the AMENS that they could do whatever they wanted with us. Though

Stephanie was historically untainted by paranoia and was said not to possess a political bone in her body, she couldn't fathom a scenario in which everything turned out okay for the greatest percentage of people. She formed the first Fuck the Code group with some like-minded friends and they set out to create a kind of counter-schedule. The way Meredith described it, it was like the old initiation processes you read about in histories of Masonic orders: a sort of theatre is enacted around you with people you've never met taking part. A traumatic event is visited upon you. How do you respond? These scenes orchestrated to brand the initiate...to permanently affect his outlook by altering his inner landscape.

The antischedule was meant to be adopted gradually; implemented step by step until, at the end, you had a person freed from any kinds of scheduling restriction whatsoever. Except for one.

"You still take the butter," I said, speaking for the first time.

Six or seven faces turned to me as a pall settled over the table. Meredith's eyebrows scrunched up. He said, "Well, sure. We're not mwrderers, Danny."

"But what I mean is - if Stephanie was sure, if you're all sure that it's killing us before we should die..." I was scrambling. A deep breath was called for. "What I'm saying is, what's the point?"

"The point?" Meredith looked on the verge of getting his dander up when Jake raised a finger.

"Meredith, if I may?"

"Sure."

The pointy-nosed man fixed me with a patient gaze, "Danny - may I call you

Danny?" I nodded. "Danny, Stephanie's belief is that before anything can be done about the butter, before anything can be done about seamless duality, the people - *we* - must break the chains of the schedule. We must be free to pursue exactly the kinds of distractions and idleness the Code forbids. Do you see?"

"So what's the end run?" I asked. Even Sophie, I noticed, seemed to be embarrassed to have ever been associated with me. "When do you know what to do next?"

Meredith looked at me incredulously and said "We *don't* know, Danny. We're still waiting."

The perception of FTC on the outside was that it was peopled by dysfunctional kooks and I was beginning to agree. This only became more pronounced as everybody filed back in and the regular meeting took place. One by one they stood to give their testimonials, recount their progress along Stephanie's antischedule and delve into arduous detail about their setbacks. Says Jake, "Try as I might, want as I do, I am unable to get through the 4th step. My inventory.. .inevitably displays the design of a small and impotent man, incapable of honesty and.. .thrust irretrievably into the very belly of the Code by his own indelible fear." Meredith got up from his chair at this point and walked up next to Jake and put his arms around him. I glanced across the table after a moment and saw that a single tear was streaming down Sophie's cheek. Meredith hugged Jake until Jake responded and hugged him back. They stood like that through the smattering of heartfelt applause that followed, and when Meredith finally let go he looked intensely into Jake's eyes and said, "You're not alone."

I had to get out of there.

"Hey, Danny! Wait up!"

Meredith caught up with me in the parking lot. I had about a foot on him, probably thirty pounds too, but after witnessing his smooth management of the table and the scene with Jake I couldn't help but feel like he was just a little bit bigger than me.

"What'd you think?"

I had split the moment everyone stood and undertook the usual requisite mingling these kinds of things always demanded. They had all forced a cavalier disregard while eyeing me out the door. Now I stood on the pavement and saw the King come through the doors, slowly making his way to where Meredith and I stood. "I don't know, man. I'm reserving judgment."

"Cool. Cool. Well listen, do you have a phone number or something? So I can get in touch with you?"

"I don't understand."

He waved his right hand in the no-big-deal gesture. "It's just how we do it, man. Me or somebody else'll call you before the next meeting."

"That's cool," I said, instantly ashamed to be mimicking his speech, "I've got the number. I'll call." The King was very close now, his enormous hands at his side, his body seeming hardly to move at all, only to approach like the black outline of a man on a target at a gun range.

"Shit man, that number changes every week. It's easier this way. Trust me." He held out a pen and piece of paper.

My mind froze. Something about the present reality had got stuck in my throat. The King stopped just behind and to the right of the kid. In a wordless way our square of the parking lot had transformed from benign, indifferent turf to a zone of imminent hostility. I realized I hadn't said anything for probably about thirty seconds. I planted a couple sweaty palm prints on my pants and thought about just walking away.

"Look, don't make a *thing* out of it, man," Meredith chuckled, "Just give us the fucking number."

"I didn't see Sophie give anybody-" two big black hands grabbed me by the lapels of my shirt and physically raised me off the ground. The King got me to about eye level before the collar started ripping.

"Wo wo wo King! Set him down, dude. *Damn*. Chill out!" As the King backed away and I fell against my car, trembling all over, Jake's words, "indelible fear" came spontaneously to mind and Meredith lost his cool. "Everybody just *calm the fuck down*. Jesus! Danny - here." He threw the pen and paper at my chest. I collected them from the ground and thoughtlessly scribbled down my number. Jake may have been incapable of honesty but at that moment I was incapable of anything but. I handed it back over and was almost to my door when Meredith said, "Get him." The hands fell onto my shoulders with the force of tumbling boulders and wheeled me around. The kid was punching my number into the phone. He held it to his ear and smiled at me, "Just checkin', man. It's no thing." A minute later, satisfied, he switched off the phone and it disappeared into the spacious confines of his pocket. "King, let the dude go. Danny, sorry for the scene, man. You should really just relax, you know?"

"Right."

"Okay man, be seein' you."

"Okay."

10.

If applying for a vacation was like voluntarily wading into purgatory, trying to get a phone number changed was like locking yourself in hell, skipping up to the devil himself and spitting in his face. But it didn't seem like I had much choice. Psychosis emanated from Meredith and his clan. The play between he and the King unnerved me -a 17-year old kid with a predator like that for a toy. The space between them was infused with domination and subservience.

Fortunately for me the government never closes. The department of information was housed alongside those of protocol and justice in the Cleaver Building: a monumental affair with Corinthian columns, a billion steps and a towering, gushing fountain in the foyer. Almost made you want to come back, I thought, but not quite. The disparity between the architecture and the content was unbridgeable. I found my way to the department's front desk and almost an hour later was face to face with Mr. Nathan Detroit, the deputy director. In spite of the fact that it wasn't fitting to exercise any

variety of humor in the halls of bureaucracy, I couldn't help but laugh upon hearing his name.

"That's great," I said. "Your parents big musical fans?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your name, Nathan Detroit. It's from 'Guys and Dolls'." He stared back at me with a blank expression. Old school arts and entertainment was not big fare these days.

"The musical," I added, lamely.

"I don't get the reference."

"Never mind."

Nathan Detroit, face inches away from his computer, the same colorless visage digesting all my information, got down to brass tacks. "Mr. Knuckles, we have a problem."

"What's that."

"It has just come to my attention that you've recently applied for a vacation."

"Yes. I did that today."

He spoke without looking at me, his voice maintaining the pitch and persistence of a metronome: "Do you have any idea how unusual it is to apply for a vacation and an altered phone number in the same month much less the same day?"

"I wasn't exactly planning on it."

"Well this won't work it simply will not do." Now he faced me, his left eyebrow cocked, his lips pursed: the precise portrait of bureaucratic displeasure. "Someone will be by to see you in the morning. Good day."

"Huh?"

"Thank you, Mr. Knuckles, please go now. It's nearly butter time." He took me by the arm in a grasp that wasn't intended to be friendly and guided me out of the office.

"Who's gonna come see me?" He closed the door.

But the man was right, butter time approached.

I returned home and was momentarily put out by the state of my apartment. (In the fraction of a second it took me to remember my earlier rampage I thought: *they broke in* - not sure which "they" I meant.) Then I spent a good long time staring at the clock, trying to figure out if I had enough time. It just kept ticking, and I couldn't take my eyes off it. I heard a voice - my own - saying that this probably had something to do with being unscheduled all day, then, more audibly, the word *butter*. There was a tugging, internally, in my bones. The antenna was directing me to the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom.. .the routine. Frantically, I kicked into gear and set about the task of returning things to normalcy.

A few minutes later the place still looked like a pigsty, but I couldn't put it off anymore.

The tug in my bones had become prohibitive.

I went to the kitchen, opened the freezer and got the tube of butter. You get so close.. .you can't think clearly. I'd spent all day turning my apartment upside down, surrendering myself to government buildings, standing in line, being molested in the parking lot of an obscure windshield wiper factory, belittled by a kid half my age and in the company of neurotic weirdoes who left with my number.

The forgetfulness comes on. I am dimly aware, now, squeezing the butter into the palm of my hand and applying it (being sure, as momma always said, to get it behind my ears), that someone is going to come and see me in the morning.. .but I can't remember why or who or anything. It doesn't seem right that my place is in such disarray, and I sincerely hope that Fedora won't mind. I wince. The butter is always too cold.

The tug in my bones is tremendous. "How do people?" I think aloud, my voice a puny thing maybe doomed to die before even reaching the walls, so that if you stood feet away and I screamed with everything in me you'd only wonder at that buzzing. "How do people *endure this!*" It had occurred to me that some people don't take the butter. They don't take it and then they sleep in. They don't take it and then they sleep in and then they aren't smokers anymore.

A bottle of some sort fell from the pocket of my pants as I stumbled out of them and the word *anexohall* rose to me from the clatter. I decided to take some. "Sleepy Pete," I say, inexplicably. "Sleeeeeeeepy," the tiniest words winnowing away into untraceable rivulets of

The tug is impossible. The bed waits.

The bed.

The

in a blue room without walls and surrounded by machinery. Great, long assembly lines cover twisted parsecs down on the floor where the workers all move like automatons - like Tin Man whose dumb-dumb language fills the room.. .brief, coughing words unintelligible from up where me and the baby live unassumingly among cows. The assembly line produces robots named Pete Pete Pete Pete Pete. Strikes

a fella as masturbatory, dontcha think? a bovine named Vernon asks, says robots using robotics to build robots named all them same names over. Baby segues easily from crying jags to laughing ones and she's a boy with yellow hair who at one point inside a long brutal wail I reach down to pick him up and it says You should really just relax, yeah? These words nearly plummeted out by the din of the petes.. .white noise blocking not informing, not unlike where-did-the-cows-go, whose function was first a grayscale, second a mustache, third a

keeping me from hearing what baby is saying. I, Danny, a chicken, can't even tell if he's laughing or shitting or crying or walking now. Then it is all naked Sylvie naked on that syrupy lustrous conference table. (Stella? No. Sylvie. Unthink this.) The baby's gone, so it's just me and Stella and them mossy robots and one of them saying something but I can't hear her for all the racket and I say What? And she says Huh? and it's one of those funny communication breakdowns like in the old song by

I can't hear you for all the racket I say like I'm talking to someone who doesn't speak much English, say a food processor or a bear or a nicer crystal dishware set, though it's been said that bears - like in the old song by - that bears yes they see things pretty much the way they are

I can't hear me either Stellvie say so it's me who must mount her and while she glares at me fuck her brains all the way out her ears and yes right then I'm in control of an out-of-control situation.

11.

I'd just eaten breakfast when the cop arrived.

He was rangy and friendly looking, tanned skin and trusting, dark eyes. He was in plain-clothes: blue jeans, a green shirt and a brown leather jacket - all of it with the comfortable wear of familiarity. I liked him at once and was unafraid. He said, "You Danny Knuckles?"

"I am."

His handshake was rock-firm and he initiated unwavering eye contact that would last throughout our meeting. "Drew Holliman, Danny. Good to meetcha. Let's sit down."

We took seats around the dining room table. He pulled out a miniature recording device and set it between us. "Everything we're about to say is being recorded. If you wish you may call for an attorney or public defender right now."

"Am I being charged with something?"

He smiled warmly, "No. It's just what we have to say."

'Is this the kind of thing where, um, where anything I say can be used against me?'

He sat back in his chair and seemed to become very large, "It's not like that, no. This meeting is for purely biographical reasons. You haven't done anything wrong. It's just protocol. Whenever someone applies for a vacation the same time they apply for an information change - be it phone number, or a move, or whatever - we have to have some questions answered." Then he said the magic words, "Totally routine."

"Okay then, I, uh, waive my right to an attorney."

He nodded, this was all perfunctory. I was made to feel like everything between us was in harmony. "I got some questions for you," he dug into his briefcase and came out with a sheaf of papers. "Let's see here, you have recently applied for and been granted a vacation for.. *personal* reasons not involving any kind of crisis. Correct?"

"Correct."

"A couple hours later you went to the Cleaver Building and applied for a change in phone number. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Can I ask you why?"

I had thought this over, "It's my girlfriend."

Drew understood. His eyes lit up, "Ahh." Our harmony deepened. We were two like guys in a like world filled with like dames always trying to make coin purses of our scrotums. I leaned back.

"She's starting to get a little too serious, you know? Wants me to change my schedule a bit for her here and there and.. I'm not ready for that."

He lifted his hand, "Say no more. Say no more. Is this also the reason you took the vacation?"

"It is."

He sat poised with a pen over his sheaf of papers, "What is your girlfriend's name."

An unwelcome chord had intruded on the harmony.

"Does that matter?"

"Well it's like this, Danny. Assuming you're about to visit an emotional trauma on the lady, we'd like to have her name so as to put her on the watch list."

"Watch list?"

"Yeah. Just in case *she* up and decides to apply for a vacation her name'll be on a list of candidates to be careful with."

"What does that mean, *be careful with*T

Drew was frank: "Means she won't *get one*, Danny. We can't exactly give three, five days freedom to someone who's just been dumped."

His eyes said *What kind of idiot are you, anyway?* and mine said / *thought -- were brothers* and his went empty, waiting.

"But..."

He was abrupt: "But what, Danny? It's for her own good. She's liable to do something crazy, right?" He became more animated, "Here she is, lookin' through magazines for wedding dresses and here you are schemin' a break-up! It ain't pretty, man. Shit happens in these situations and we in the government have to do our best to protect our people - from themselves, when necessary." Drew Holliman had a fraternity

to him that engendered my trust. It let him use swear words and probe into my personal affairs without making me feel soiled. But I was definitely getting the sense that he wasn't what he seemed, and that the interview was going poorly.

"Look, Danny, it's really no big deal," he said, me just staring blankly at him, "If you care about her so much you can tell her not to try and apply for a vacation or an information change for a little while."

"How long?" I asked.

"A year."

My jaw dropped open, my eyes got bigger. "*Ayear!*" It was unthinkable.

He sighed. I was now wasting his time. The harmony was a bittersweet memory. "Here's how this works, if you don't give me everything I need today you can kiss your chances of a new phone number goodbye. I understand the DV gave you an extension on your vacation and believe-you-me friend they can revoke it just as fast. In fact they can revoke the whole damn thing and put you on-"

"Sophie Stall." I said, surprising myself.

Angry Drew slowly reverted to Friendly Drew, the muscles in his arms and shoulders relaxed, "Whew. I thought for a second you were gonna be a hardass."

"Sorry. It's just a little strange. I'm kinda out of it."

He cocked an eyebrow, "You been takin' that anexohall?"

"As a matter of fact I have. Is that bad?"

"Doesn't matter. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No," I said, disturbed.

"Any living relatives?"

"An uncle. In Florida." I didn't want to tell him about my folks.

"What's his name?"

His name. Why did Drew want my uncle's name and what did Drew know about anexohall and did I just get Sophie Stall in trouble? "Urn, Jack. Jack Kingsley."

"Uh-huh. And why, again, do you want to get your phone number changed?" I stared at him, baffled, until he smiled and laughed. "Just pullin' your chain man, relax."

Why did people keep telling me to relax?

Then the phone rang and, still sitting, I reached up and behind me to get it. In the process I knocked the scratch pad onto the floor. I said hello and the voice on the other end said, "We're watching. Tell him anything and you're dead." Then it was gone, and Drew had picked up the scratch pad and was reading it.

"Great!" I said into the phone. "Okay. Fine. Yes. I'll see you then."

"What's this?" asked Drew, tossing the pad across the table so it stopped at my hand, my talk with Fedora staring back at me.

Vow started/ bmjokvnty

*Ye**

Yaw coWtr do- tHof

do- whatever I

THAT!

Yeah,

my stuff, yaw shut.

"It's, uh...it's-"

"It's a first contact, isn't it, Danny?"

I tried to put on a *Preposterous!* face, "No! Of course not. It's a.. *poem* I was writing. Not very good, admittedly, but-"

"Go ahead and call that attorney, knucklehead. Tell him to meet you downtown."

Walsh 73

"Get in!" I yelled. "Now!"

Meredith pulled up just short of the cop, who ignored me. The kid bent over, grabbing his knees, panting. From my vantage I could see him take something from his pocket - a can of something - but his baggy tee shirt hid it from Drew.

"He's got a-"

Meredith stood up straight and blasted Drew in the face with some kind of spray. The lanky man yelped, put his hands to his eyes and started spinning around the parking lot. Meredith looked past me over the car as I scrambled to get into the driver's seat. My door swung open and a pair of hands grabbed me by the love handles and pulled me out.

The King lifted me up and tossed me on the ground next to Meredith. I landed hard.

Drew was still yelping in what had become to me a very distant background. With my life endangered he had diminished rapidly in importance.

"Take care of him," I heard Meredith say, petrified.

The King stalked off in the direction of blind Drew and Meredith managed to get me standing, pointing the spray can at my face. "We're gonna go get in that van now," he said. I nodded, obedient, then turned just in time to see the King land a hard right hook on Drew's nose. I could hear his face crack even from distance and with blood roaring in my ears. My interrogator dropped like a bag of bricks and Meredith gave me a shove.

A moment later we were all cozy in the van, the King at the wheel. Meredith was by my side, the spray can still aimed at my eyes. "Thought you were smart, didntcha?" the kid said. "Thought you'd infiltrate our little group, huh?"

"What are you talking about?" I managed.

"Shut up!" He slapped me across the cheek, like a woman. "I'm not that dense,

Danny. We followed you last night, moron. Saw you go straight to the D of J."

Department of Justice. The Cleaver Building. "Then this morning your boy comes to hear what you have to say. Who's he?" I gathered that he was referring to Drew. "Your frickin' narc master?"

"You knew his name," I remembered, "You know he's not a narc."

"Shut up!" He slapped me again. "We know him 'cause we know his brother. Stop tryin' to talk yourself out of something." Then, for no readily available reason, he started laughing. "Shit, King, we're doin' this guy a favor, ain't we? He doesn't even know. He's scared as shit and he doesn't even know." Mental clarity burst into me. King was King Kelly, the old boxer who'd had to surrender the belt amid a hail of corruption charges. The crushing right jab he'd dealt the cop had jarred my memory. Meredith thought I'd been contracted by the Department of Justice (Drew Holliman, point man) to spy on the FTC. But that didn't make any sense.

"Meredith," I said, waiting a few seconds for him to tell me shut up and slap me, "the authorities wouldn't *have* to spy on you. FTC is legal! They could just audit-

He was jubilant in interrupting me, "Dude doesn't even know, King! Dude has no fuckin' clue!" We came to a red light and Meredith, still laughing, said, "King, can you knock out knucklehead here? Don't break anything though, if you can help it."

"Wait," I said.

A black fist introduced itself to my face, then expanded to fill my universe.

Being knocked unconscious isn't fair. It's someone killing you for a little while. We miss out completely on a little stretch of life. People in comas have it rough. So do all

of you who've never dreamt, but spend a Slumber every day divorced utterly from all perception. At least, when you dream, you're entertained. Being knocked unconscious is a sample of death.

There was the sound of driving, of tires and RPM, and I'd been blindfolded. Meredith and the King were silent so all I had for a few minutes was the sound and feel of the engine, the sweaty smell of the van's interior and a persistent thrill of dread. My face hurt all over.

"Meredith," I said, "If you'll just listen for a minute I'm sure we can work this out."

Nothing. He wasn't next to me, anymore. I prayed that he was in the passenger's seat and that the King wasn't taking me for a ride, as it were.

"I'm not a.. *narc*, or whatever you called it. I'm just a guy that was interested in your group. Honestly. I went to the Department of *Information* - not Justice - to change my phone number, see. They're in the same building."

We had taken a right, gone off road and were coming to a stop. I could hear gravel, leaves - something beneath us that wasn't asphalt. *Take him to the woods*, I could imagine Meredith saying, *and leave him there*.

"That guy, Holliman, he was only at my place this morning because-"

"This is fine," said Meredith. We parked. Doors opened and slammed shut, then the sliding one next to me was opened and I was hauled outside.

Dying, being shot or having any kind of mortal wound inflicted upon me was just too unordinary to ponder. Of course I wasn't going to be killed. It just didn't bear thinking about. But I *had* been stolen, knocked out, blindfolded, and taken to some rural

setting. The evidence was mounting. "You guys aren't gonna like, kill me or something, are you?" Meredith laughed. They were on either side of me holding my arms as we walked. Birds were singing. I couldn't be killed to birdsong, could I? It was cold. There welled up inside me a compelling need to fill the air with words, "This is all my Fedora's fault, you know."

Meredith chuckled, "Yeah."

"If it weren't for his messing around... He leaves the floss out, he starts smoking, he leaves the TV on. What's next? Danny Knuckles *Fedora*, *that's* the guy really screwing me here. You and King Kelly got nothin' on him."

"I like Danny," said Meredith. "You could learn a thing or two from him."

Something in my mind went *click*. "What did you say?"

"I said I like Danny. That dude knows how to relax. You're the one sneakin' through his shit and talkin' to him and stuff. He just wants to be left alone to live his life, man."

"What are you talking about? How do you know Danny?"

How *could* he know Danny? I was stymied. Meredith was a Hair, just like me, and King Kelly and Drew Holliman and HOWARD and Sally Bullhorn and everyone else I ever saw. How could he have ever met my Fedora?

The kid laughed, "I know him, man. I get around."

In the darkness, tripping occasionally over a stone, branches swiping my face, being led perhaps to my death, I figured it out. Meredith could only know my Fedora if he lived a whole day, unbuttered.

Meredith had axed his other.

"You're a murderer," I said. "You're murderers. You're 24-hour people."

"Ding ding! You finally got it, man! Congrats. Except," he slung his arm around my shoulder and cozied up, "I have a bone to pick, it's not really *murder*. We prefer to think of it-" I was blinded by light and searing pain as he ripped the tape from my eyes, "as *reunion*."

We had entered what looked like the center of a small village. Huts and tents and shacks dotted the horizon. Kiosks and trade counters dominated the immediate vicinity without a soul to be seen. "Where are we?"

"Welcome to Haven, Danny Knuckles. A community of gen-you-wine 24-hour people."

I looked at it for a second, "Where are all the persons?"

Meredith frowned; he must not have counted on the town's abandonment when planning his big impression, "Underground, I guess. Another false alarm. King, go see what's happening." The King strode off. For a big man he was an oddly quiet walker, making no noise and seeming to displace no air as he passed by. I watched him walk up to an old phone booth about twenty yards away, push it aside, bend down and open some kind of hatch through which he descended into the earth.

"Why did you bring me here?"

"A lot of reasons," said Meredith, lighting a cigarette and offering me one. I declined. "First, we're gonna do a favor for your fedora. Second, we're gonna do a favor for you. Third, we're doin' a favor for ourselves because we can't afford to have no snitches in our group."

"I'm not a snitch."

"Whatever. It doesn't matter. You *are*, you *aren't* — I don't care. When it's all said and done you *won't be*, know what I'm sayin'?"

I shook my head and it made my jaw and brain hurt. "No, I don't."

"Let me put it this way, my man," he put his arm around my shoulder and began guiding me to a khaki tent with a generator chugging outside it, "Once a person becomes unified and lives the whole day and sleeps six, seven hours, they sort of lose the will to act the snitch. 'Least on us they do. Which is all I care about."

I had to ask a stupid question, "What if I don't want to be unified?"

He gave me a *poor-baby* look, "I'm sorry Danny, you just don't have any choice."

A quick rage came over me, "Stupid kid," I said.

He grinned, "You know what would make you feel better?"

"No. I don't."

He kned me in the groin. Real hard. It was like blue lightning in my throat and I couldn't feel my legs. For the second time in an hour I hit the ground hard, doing that thing men do when their balls get crushed. You know the thing, with your knees pulled up and your hands down there and you kind of rock back and forth?

"Oh, I guess that wasn't it," he said, standing over me like a deranged child god of yore.

The hatch swung back open and the King alit from the earth. About thirty or forty very normal looking people followed. I watched them from my prone position, a random ant or worm obstructing my line of sight. The King eventually hoisted me off the ground and took me into the tent. Outside I could hear life resuming in Haven in the form of hushed voices and whispered observations. I was news. I waddled to the nearest chair and

collapsed into it. The tent was empty except for the chair where I sat and an unremarkable full-length mirror three feet in front of it.

Meredith grabbed me by my swollen jaw and made my mouth open, then, before I knew what was happening, he'd tossed a soft rectangular pill in. "Swallow," he said. I glared at him defiantly but my Adam's apple told the story: defeated man, ready to swallow.

"In a couple minutes here you're gonna have an experience that'll change your life, okay knucklehead? Just sit down and look into the mirror. The King and I'll be outside."

They left.

It was time to take stock of my situation. The second day of my vacation had thus far not gone according to plan. My whole body throbbed with pain. I'd been drugged and could easily envision, outside the tent, Meredith plotting my demise.

My demise. Not like physical death - which I suppose would've been worse - but the obliteration of the *me* I'd always known. Danny (Hair). I thought of the fedora sitting back at the apartment on top of the water heater and realized that all they'd have to do was keep me here. There wouldn't be any butter in Haven. Tie me to a bed and watch as day by day I edged out - killed? - Danny (Fedora). Watch as pieces of Fedora dwindled away, getting brittle and small, easy for me to turn to powder between just a couple fingers. Watch me sleep for those fatal, consecutive hours, dreaming a little man inside me pounding tiny ineffective make-believe fists against my eyelids, begging me *Rise, rise*.

Yes, *killed* was the right word. But they'd let him kill me. They *liked* him. I'd get absorbed into his consciousness and dissolved there. I'd smoke and every day watch the sun rise and set and the moon ascend glorious, luminous into *the dark*.

Or was that too simplistic? Was it not more reasonable that with each successive day I'd grow more and more connected with Fedora? Throw myself into an unhealthy cigarette smoking habit.. .feel friendly with these 24-hour people.. .be born anew into the body of someone who considered Meredith Dees a bosom buddy...?

Would I be able to distinguish between Hair and Fedora? Would I even remember? I wanted to ask someone. I had a lot of questions and no one to ask. I stared hopelessly into the mirror.

Abject. Disconsolate. Ruined. This is what I saw. The King had ripped another collar. My whole face was swollen and tinted vaguely blue. Tomorrow, I thought, I'll have a shiner to show off. I was dirty and scratched up from all the time spent on the ground. It certainly wasn't a happy situation, and I *didn't feel* like I was smiling, but for a flash I could've sworn...

It was imperative that I give Haven the slip. Maybe the King had left the keys in the van. If I could somehow get the drop on them, maybe crash this mirror on their heads... Of course I had no idea what drug I'd just taken. Could be I'd wake up in three days and be "unified."

"Not likely," I said.

Sort of.

I *saw* my mouth move in the mirror but didn't feel it, and I *heard* the words but they didn't sound from my lips. Of that I was sure.

"What?" I asked, in the regular way, looking around and seeing no one before my eyes settled back nervously on the mirror, where again my face started moving on its own volition.

"It's not likely, Danny, that you'll get the drop on the King. That guy's got some serious reflexes. Used to box, you know."

I was talking to myself, I realized. I was talking to *him*. "Fedora?"

My reflection smiled at me, "In the flesh. They call *this*" and without trying to or feeling it I waved my arms around, signifying the mirror, "the two-way mirror. . . That's a play on words."

"Yeah, I get it," I said. "You've done this before?"

"Oh yes. You and I've had quite the conversation. Don't worry, you're not supposed to remember."

My mind was a perfect blank, shot from bafflement and shock. "What did we talk about?"

Fedora grinned, "All kinds of stuff, man. You told me about HOWARD and Sylvie and the bookstore. . . I think once you mentioned something about floss. I told you about my job and my girlfriend the doctor. Normal stuff."

A quick sadness pierced me. HOWARD and Sylvie and the bookstore - my whole reality was summed up in so many words, light years away. "What's going to happen to me, Fedora?"

/, Hair -us!"

We're going to be reunited, aren't we."

That's right. It begins now."

"I don't want to."

"*Of course* you do! You just don't realize it yet. If/want to, *you* want to. That's how it works."

"Then there's something wrong. We're malfunctioning. / don't even wanna be a smoker!"

Fedora grew tired of the subject, "I enjoyed your dream last night, Hair. Meredith as a screaming baby? Nice."

"You have my dreams?"

"Every Slumber, man."

"How do you know they're mine and not yours?"

"Well, first off, you've really got to get over this whole *mine & yours* thing, but the reason I know is because they come from your life. For instance, I've never met Stella, I've only heard about her. Here you're already felicitating her on a conference table."

"That was Sylvie," I said, thinking: *oops*.

"Whatever."

There slipped into me a sudden urge for peace. I wanted to bring quiet into my life. "I'm sorry I went through all your stuff."

"Don't worry about it, man. Hell, I'd been lookin' for that brandy for ages."

"Do people think you're an alcoholic?" I asked. "And are you still smoking, or what?" There was something else, "Oh, I should go ahead and tell you I think we're getting a hemorrhoid."

He laughed, "Whoa man, slow down. There's plenty of time. When we're

reunited we won't even have to go through all this shit." He made me tap the side of my forehead like I was thinking, "We'll just

The need for peace suffered a major setback. I sat forward, bringing Fedora's reflection doubly close, "I really don't want to, and you should just know right now that I'm gonna try and get out of here."

Change came over us, "Why do you wanna live like a robot, man? Why should I be a slave to your.. .fucked up idea of things?"

"Why should I be a slave to yours?" I asked.

He looked thoughtful, "We have here a perfect dilemma, Mr. Hair."

"Indeed we do, Mr. Fedora." I leaned back in the chair and took a deep breath, "How does this place get along, anyway?"

"You mean, why don't the authorities come and shut it down?"

I nodded, so Fedora did too. "Yeah."

"They take kind of a hands-off attitude about the whole thing..." The way it was explained, because the 24-hour people in Haven were beyond repair, the government allowed them to more or less peacefully exist in a far away place. They just weren't allowed to live, work or advertise in any way in town. Pretending to be abiding by a schedule, Haven inhabitants would go to grocery stores in town at the same time of the same day every week. The FTC wasn't really a front organization, either, which was why the government didn't come down on them, but lots of Haven people started in FTC and were recruited by Meredith or someone like him. Locally, 24-hour people did believe that every so often a D of J officer working undercover would tip off whatever group he was attempting to compromise about the existence of Haven, to curry favor, or show off, or

just have some fun. About once a year (because even some crimes would be held under the sway of some schedule), Fedora said, some biker gang or lower tier mafia thugs would come out and harass the 24-hour people, set fire to things and steal produce and money. It was like something from an old Western movie, I thought, but it jibed with the "false alarm" Meredith mentioned and the ramshackleness of the whole place. Fedora said that every few years Haven relocated to a different bomb shelter.

"Bomb shelter?" I asked.

"Yeah. Somebody - I think Holliman - has an old map of Cold War bomb shelters they dug in remote areas. Whenever a place gets too hairy - no offense -" he smiled ruefully, "they just pick up and move. That's why it's all tents and kiosks."

"Did you say *Holliman*?"

"Yeah. He's the chief. Blue Holliman."

We know him 'cause we know his brother, Meredith had said. "*Drew* Holliman's brother?"

"Just a second." My eyes started scanning left and right, like I was reading something, then stopped and settled on my reflection's face, "Right, you met *Drew* today. Oh man, that's cool."

"Why is that cool? What makes that remotely cool?"

It took a while for me to understand, but Fedora stuck with it like a patient older brother. *Drew* and *Blue Holliman* were identical twins and had, for many years, enjoyed the kind of relationship that siblings born under the same starscape were so favored with. They worked together, played together, dined together and learned together. Both sets (twins, *Hairs*, *Fedoras*) remained inseparable, seemingly inextricable from the magic of

duplicated genomes, raising families and moving up the ranks in law enforcement. "They were *neighbors*, for crying out loud," Fedora said.

And then the bough broke. Blue Holliman split, abandoning his family, carving Haven from the ejected lumber of a motorized society, gathering about him a second, engineered progeny of followers, disciples, and leaving his best friend and brother Drew behind. No one save the brothers knew any details. All that could be gleaned about the pivotal moment was gleaned from the disposition of their forces in the present day: Blue Holliman lorded over a troupe of the willfully exiled, his middle finger permanently extended to American society, and Drew Holliman smoldered with a ceaselessly burning desire for revenge. Drew, Fedora said, had dedicated his remaining days to capturing (at least) his twin brother, with whom he'd once spent a life in accord and profit and peace.

I asked why, if it was so regular that Haven got busted-up through the machinations of Justice officials, wasn't it just as easy for Inspector Holliman to escort one of these raids, pop his twin and be done with it.

"It's not his beat," Fedora said, "It never was. Soon as Blue hightailed out of Justice they put the Inspector on some watch list and information shit. They wouldn't trust him with anything important, and they keep their eyes on him." Which made sense, I thought. One twin dropping out of society was the equivalent of one half of the Hair/Fedora unit doing the same. Fedora, I thought, was the Blue to my Drew. Once one strayed, the other, no matter how devoted he was to the ritual and the schedule and the Code, was permanently tainted.

I felt the logic of it corralling in my brain. Drew Holliman festers in some deadend bureaucratic Justice job until one day, boom, Danny Knuckles - through no fault of

his own - lands him cracked-face-first into the hunt for his venomously hated twin brother.

It occurred to me in a searing-hot moment that he'd never let me go, now; now that I was a bridge for him to that lusted-for and mysterious beach yawning aloof and elusive across the wide river of whatever broke him, whatever broke *them*, to begin with.

I had to catch my breath. "Wait a minute wait a minute wait a minute," I said. "You're tellin' me that there's a... a peripatetic cabal of 24-hour people, annually assaulted by bikers and mafia thugs, led by a man named *Blue* whose own twin brother works for the D of J and dreams of taking him down?"

Fedora smiled, "Crazy idn'tit? Good word, by the way, 'peripatetic.' Vagrant. Dispossessed."

"There's a kid named Meredith who plays around with a notorious criminal boxer," (I had to say all this out loud to believe it) "a two-way mirror that changes the whole concept of talking to yourself, and the entire thing somehow revolves around 100-year old subterranean bomb shelters."

"Weirder than anything you could ever think to write, right Hair?"

"Oh I'll write it," I said.

"FFewill."

I looked at him, "I'm the one with the body."

Nervousness came over my reflection; I was amazed by how thinly I veiled my emotions. "What are you sayin'?" Fedora asked.

I set my face firm and replied, "If I escape and I don't take the butter, what happens to you?"

"Well if you do it *that* way I'll die. You'll be a common murderer. And that you're not."

"There's some other trick they have, then, to unify people.. .some way they construe as *not murder*..."

"Yeah."

"How do they do it?" I asked, standing up and beginning to pace. When Fedora didn't answer I realized I'd wandered away from the mirror. I jumped back and he gave me the same look I give myself when I do something stupid alone in the apartment.

"This only works if you stay in front of the mirror."

"I see that, yeah."

"I don't really know what they do, Hair," he said. "You go into a hospital room-"

"A hospital room?" That didn't seem right. How could a strictly forbidden operation be performed in a city hospital? I said as much to Fedora but he didn't respond.

"Danny?"

He was gone. I was in complete control of all my limbs and facial expressions again and every time I spoke I knew what I was going to say.

I was just another asshole talking to himself in the mirror.

##

I sat and contemplated my girlfriend Sylvie Reins.

There were numerous things I liked about my girlfriend Sylvie Reins. I liked her slender and graceful arms. I liked that she had an inner glow and seldom wore makeup. I liked that she read great literature and talked to me about it. I liked that she would even read whatever I'd written and unfailingly offer encouragement - regardless of whether or

not it was deserved. Sitting there in front of the two-way mirror, I even liked that she always beat me when we played Scrabble. Even that.

She was an explorer - only a more outgoing one than me. Where I limned a plot in a story, curious about what lingered across the iron wall of the One Hour Slumber and insatiably intrigued by the tether that was love binding people in hard and perplexing times, she actually got out. Even made me go to a *church* once - one of the few remaining artifacts of faith persisting in a culture given part and parcel to the demands of now and economy and production.

We'd penciled in a couple hours on a Sunday a few weeks in advance, to give us time to prepare for the shock of schedule change. In the car, while driving, I made fun: "So the way I understand it is there's this hybrid man/God baby, and the hybrid man/God baby grew up and then bathed all of our sins in his blood, thus washing us."

"Shut up, Danny."

"If you do good, you spend eternity in the perfect market of the clouds, every need met, every desire anticipated, and if you do evil it's licked by flames and locusts in the belly of the planet until Kingdom Come."

"Shut up, Danny. It'll be fun."

And it was, too. There were these things called *hymnals* with archaic but beautiful poems in them. There were all these people enthusiastic with *the spirit*, clapping in eruptions of spontaneity and effusion. There was this man in robes, with a voice like thunderclaps, eyes that shone the sparkle and effervescence of a guy taken whole by an idea. He spoke on redemption, forgiveness, eternal life. It was awesome, but we didn't go

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I liked the way she kissed me. She'd kiss my neck, sometimes, and sometimes she wrote me real letters with pen and ink. These would invariably be an accounting of a series of days, what she did, what she thought about, how she was getting on, etc.

My girlfriend Sylvie Reins and I were in love.

Sometimes I'd write *her* letters and have flowers sent to her. If there's one thing a woman loves it's receiving unscheduled flowers. Spontaneity, in our society, is not completely dead. (As witnessed by the people at the church, or by the time Sylvie and I felicitated each other in an elevator, or the time we up and decided, only an hour before butter time, to fashion the world's fastest picnic from her pantry and eat it on the roof.)

After that first dinner we were instant schedule buddies. I found her absurdly easy to hang out with. She listened to public radio, did crossword puzzles and could drink her weight in cheap beer. Sylvie was just as content with the wine and cheese crowd as the bear and peanuts crowd. There was never any call for pretending on my part. She liked that I worked in a used bookstore, was obsessive about my schedule and valued punctuality above all else. I liked how engaged she was in each conversation we had and how quickly she forgot them later.

Sylvie and I were in love, and all of the sudden I missed her profoundly - like I had already failed her, or she was already dead.

I zipped open the tent and, seeing an opportunity, started walking - as casually as possible - back to the van. Meredith and the King had their backs to me and were involved in a conversation with a bunch of people on the other side of the village center. I was assertive, taking the initiative, being a man - but it couldn't work. Someone would

raise an alarm and I'd run and then the King's enormous hands would reach out and steal me back. Kidnapped people don't just walk away.

I wondered if maybe the drug had worn off before it should've, or if this was some kind of trap. I'd get this close to a car only to find the *real* Meredith and *real* King sitting in it. The kid would be laughing, oh what a funny prank! Then they'd hustle me away to a Haven torture chamber, kick me in the nuts and spray stuff in my eyes and punch my face. They'd do whatever they did to merge a guy's halves and I'd break through the haze singular, maybe in moonlight, maybe without a single memory of anything that'd ever happened to me, Sylvie shattered from me.

Except that I was getting away with it.

*O Fortune**. I thought. I was getting away with it! There was maybe thirty feet to go until I reached a tree line - a football field or so beyond that I saw the black van and a whole slew of other cars. Surely one of them would be keyed up and ready to drive. Tightly wound, heart pounding, people passing me and smiling, I made it to the trees and ducked in. The sound of crushing leaves exploded in my ears. Every movement was awkward. I was a monster stalking through the woods in deafening strides...

.. I was getting away with it.

Giddy, I picked up the pace, started to jog a little and even dared a look over my shoulder. Meredith and the King were still talking, but the cluster of people was beginning to separate and soon they'd wander back over to the tent. "Fuck it," I said aloud (used to it) and started to run as fast as I could.

Time and distance were canceling each other out, so it was like I was running in place. Idiotically, I thought of those word problems they dole out in school. "If Danny

Knuckles is 70 yards from freedom and traveling at a rate of 12 miles per hour, how long will it take him to get there? If Danny's evil pursuers must travel 100 yards at 15 miles per hour, will they catch up to him? If so, how close to freedom was Danny before being so tragically snagged? If not, how much of a head start does Danny have if he gets into a car that travels..." and so on.

The math was in my favor - and, for once, everything else was too. I found a yellow Camaro with the keys in the ignition. O! Fortune!

I would like to say that at this point commotion broke out around Meredith and the King, that I peeled out of the parking area and sprayed them with a healthy backwash of rocks and leaves, that the kid was all red in the face and mutely screaming, his voice tiny and irrelevant against the roar of the Camaro's engine, that here commenced an extraordinary chase resulting in overturned cars crashing into shopping malls and blooming explosions, frenzied pedestrians running in circles with arms upraised, that I escaped, in the end, by the hairs on my chinny-chin-chin.

But the truth is that I calmly pulled away from the rest of the cars, found the highway, and took a left.

When I realized I wasn't being followed, a long series of hearty, euphoric laughs ensued. I had walked away, stolen a car, and - at least temporarily - eluded reunification.. .albeit in a way no one would ever believe.

Except Sylvie, whom I now called. For the first time in our relationship I was making an unscheduled visit. She sounded a little taken aback, but willing. The tone of my voice - a fluctuating mixture of shock, urgency and elation - no doubt tipped her off that I wasn't calling for amorous reasons. I asked her to let me use her garage and said I'd explain everything.

And maybe she was looking at it as a kind of practice. If we ever did get married, the scheduling complications would, for a time, be nearly insurmountable - to say nothing of the strain put on the AMENS. This was just one of the reasons very few people jumped the broom anymore. You watch old movies and syndicated shows in black and white - the Cleavers and what not - and it's all men walking in with a briefcase and

his suit still immaculate at the end of a long day at work, the wife hands him a fresh steaming blueberry pie and his children jump on his lap while he stands, telling him they love him. Something tells me it was never that easy, but forget about it in our day and age.

Anyway, I got a sample of that halcyon honeymooning era when, with two hours to spare before butter time, I walked in. Instantly her hands were on my bruised and scratched face, she observed that I was limping (a remnant of Meredith's unsuccessful attempt to make me feel better) and ordered me onto the couch. Soon there was a cup of herbal tea in my hand, a pillow under my neck, two aspirin down the gullet and a loving woman swabbing my wounds, here with dressing, here with soft dry kisses.

"What happened to you?"

Things were generally awhirl in exhaustion and happiness and spent adrenaline.

"I have to confide in you now, Sylvie."

"Confide," she said, taking my hand and fixing me with a stare of heart-melting concern.

She listened for the next twenty minutes without saying a word. When I was finished a body-long wave of exhaustion buffeted me. The day had been basically one uninterrupted rush, book-ended by a relatively tranquil bowl of cereal and submergence in a couch, my lover's hands and soothing eyes. The anexohall was probably also partly to blame. My upper arms were becoming sorer by the second. Sylvie said, "You'll have to stay here, tonight."

"I can't. I can't bring you into it. If Fedora wakes up here tomorrow he'll know where you live, he'll.. .mess stuff up. I can't do that." Besides, I thought, I'd have to go

home and pick up the fedora, and there'd be a stakeout of my place. Truthfully, I had no idea what I was going to do, so of course she asked me exactly that.

"What are you going to do?"

"Find a motel. Whatever." I yawned. "Things are really screwed up."

She turned away for a moment, squinting with thought, "He'll be able to use that mirror, won't he? He'll talk to you in the night and you won't remember."

My blood seemed to chill, "God. I hadn't thought about that." *But what can he find out?*

"What if you tell him something...?"

The images flashed through me in montage sequence: ripped from my comatose reverie, made to appear in a mirror, an amnesiac discussion, negotiations undertaken in a sieve of memory. I shivered. "Whatever I do, I'll have *decided* to do it, you know? They can't twist my arm when I'm just a reflection."

"Didn't you say you sort of threatened him, Danny? Didn't you say that?"

I sighed, "Yes."

"So he does the same thing to you!" She spoke with a quick-decided urgency, "Danny you *can't go slumber*. If you do he'll just run off to those people and they'll do the operation. You can't do it!"

"I can't sleep in, Sylvie," I whispered, the thought a terrible one.

"Then you go to - what's-his-name - Holliman. You go to Holliman."

"I'm on Holliman's shit-list."

"No way, honey. You're his new best friend. You probably just learned more about Haven than he has in who-knows-how-many-years of trying. You can identify the

people that attacked him. You can tell about the hospital."

"If I do that-"

"You'll survive. Turn yourself in and they'll monitor your Fedora every step of the way. They won't let anything-" she suddenly stopped and her eyes welled up with tears and her voice tiptoed over a wire, "anything - bad - happen - to - you."

I took her in my arms and knew: she's right. It's the only way.

In the Camaro, with the high of escape still coursing through my veins, I had conjured up a scenario in which I'd convince Fedora not to do anything rash. I'd write him a long letter. In the final analysis there was no way he'd unify against my will. He was I and I was he and there was no chance I'd kill him, so how could he kill me? Maybe he really did believe there was a difference between unification and murder, but he'd have to respect my beliefs, because...

.. .but this is where I hit the snag in my logic. I *didn't* respect his beliefs, so it was folly to assume he'd respect mine. We held in precarious balance our identities and beliefs and somewhere along the line we'd diverged (as he would say, rueful smile and all) a hair too much. Fedora would end me. Sylvie's warm tears, now pooling in my clavicle, comprised the liquid and irrefutable testimony of her heart. If this were a zero-sum game, if it was, finally, him or me, failing would mean failing her.

An irrational blur of what-ifs jammed in my chest: what if Fedora hadn't left the TV on - hadn't left the floss out - hadn't started smoking? What if he'd just gone through with it, leaving me totally in the dark until it was too late? What if I'd attended a different FTC meeting? What if I hadn't escaped.. .would Sylvie be crying? What if I hadn't been scared off by the frigging Code in the first place and allowed the authorities

to do their job? The ceiling offered no answers, the room no solace, and the woman no reprieve.

"You're right." I said. "I'll do it."

She trembled and held me tighter.

This time around, the Cleaver Building held no aesthetic allure whatsoever. It was an abominable place overflowing with bureaucrats, spies, inspectors, weasely-eyed men and cyclones of paperwork. It was a place where a man was reverse-engineered from data; where every aspect of his life could be rendered in binary code. Entering, I was a swimming, static wash of ones and zeros. Sylvie, who'd insisted on coming along, didn't seem so disturbed. She had drawn upon a powerful resolve to break her schedule and usher me into my new life.

I wrote a story once about a couple who, though wildly in love, never managed to work out their schedules with each other on account of they were both so fanatical and unbending when it came to their seven set days. The crux was her afternoon spent gardening and his afternoon working for the volunteer fire department. In the end the guy goes off the deep end, destroyed by his subjectless love, and sets fire to himself on her lawn. She puts him out, surveys the damage done her hydrangeas, and kicks him on his ass out into the street. Later, her Hair (for these were Fedoras - most of my stories center on Fedoras as there is something so enchanting about darkness), while cooking a borscht, accidentally lets the kitchen go up in flames. The VFD come out and the dude feels this overwhelming and irrepressible but inarticulate desire to watch it burn. So he does, not raising a finger while the other volunteers busted tail. The point is: schedule compromises

are hard. My heart throbbed and swelled for Sylvie as she wrapped her hand around my arm and took a deep breath and forced herself to walk by my side.

The front office of the Department of Justice revealed itself behind a pair of superlative mahogany doors with words in Latin impressively etched into them. *Fiat Lux, FiatNihil*. In my state of mind they represented some devious spell gargled by evil people in dank climes that I was now forced to do business with; selling my little soul for a dash of comfort.. .bargaining in the desire that maybe, just maybe I could squeak through this terrible situation unscathed, seamless duality restored, ritual intact and inviolable.

The lady said, "Inspector Holliman is in the hospital." "We really need to see him," said Sylvie, who'd appointed herself my spokeswoman.

"You can visit him, but they say he's in and out of consciousness." Sylvie and I looked at each other, both at a loss for what to do. "Well," she said, her eyes still on me, her hand still clasped onto my arm as if I was likely to vanish in the absence of her contact, slip soundlessly into some loophole of justice, "we really need to speak with someone."

"Lieutenant Roth is in. He's the Inspector's assistant." We went to Lieutenant Roth's office, a hole-in-the-wall bursting with file cabinets, stinking of stale food and stale men and presently occupied by a short guy in street clothes, bloodshot eyes, a phone stuck to his face, thick, unregulated black hair and a nose that maybe once had seen unbroken days or maybe was just born that way. His jaw dropped when he saw me, the cigarette dangling from his lower lip. He said, "Call you

back," hung-up the phone, said, "You're under arrest."

"I'm turning myself in."

He retrieved a pair of handcuffs from the desk and started toward me. "Doesn't matter. You're still under arrest. It's not like one of those Fm-gonna-quit-so-you-can't-fire-me kinda things. Are we gonna need these?" The cuffs didn't possess a jingle so much as a menacing clack.

"No."

"What is he under arrest for?" asked Sylvie.

"Is this the unlucky lady, Knuckles?" Roth winked at me maliciously. "*Miss Sophie Stall?*"

Sylvie's brow creased in confusion, "What?"

"Ah fuck it," said Roth, taking me by my other arm, "Guy's got enough problems, I guess."

There was a new force in Sylvie's voice as he rushed us out of his office, "What is he being arrested for?"

"All kinds of shit. What's it to you? He hasn't broken the bad news yet? Or was that just another lie, knucklehead?"

He was dragging me through the corridors. I was on display for everyone in the halls of justice. "Where are we going?" I asked Roth.

"What's he talking about, Danny?" asked Sylvie.

"The Inspector wants to see you, knucklehead. We're goin' to the hospital where you can eyeball your friend's handiwork. And I say handiwork in jest. You're lucky I don't shoot you where you stand you miserable sack of shit after what your friend did to

the Inspector." He took a deep breath as if stifling (or postponing) some large, uncontrollable tantrum. "And you, young lady," said Roth, not facing her, "are gonna have to leave and go home or go cry at your momma's or something. I really don't fuckin' care."

"Don't call him knucklehead."

I squeezed her hand, "It's okay."

We stormed through a back exit into the employee parking lot. "Get lost, Sophie."

"Danny, who's Sophie?"

"I'll explain later."

"Get lost, *now*?" said Roth.

"Danny?"

"Go," I said.

Bewildered and disappointed, Sylvie turned and went haltingly back into the building. Roth now turned to me with renewed ferocity. "You miserable sack of shit." He threw me against the body of a black and white and wrenched my arms behind my back.

"Thought you said we wouldn't need those," I said, the cold metal of the cuffs stinging my wrists.

"Yeah. But then you started giving me all this trouble. Heartbroken I guess about seeing your sweetheart leave." He tightened the cuffs until the blood circulation was cut off, then pushed me into the back seat. The tires screamed as he revved out of the parking lot with the studied recklessness of an expert driver. He made a last-second, high-speed turn onto the street so that I smashed up against the left side of the car. My elbows were killing me.

Roth chuckled and winked into the rear-view mirror, "Second thoughts, knucklehead?"

And so began my cooperation with the Department of Justice.

Drew Holliman's face was a memory. I could reconstruct it, as you fill in a paint-by-numbers coloring book, I knew where it all belonged - what pieces where - but could only pretend the whole. His entire head was wrapped in gauze except for two tiny holes where his eyes were and a little one to breathe through. The doctor explained that when the medics got to him spinal fluid was oozing from his mouth, that he'd require total reconstructive surgery, and that he'd come very close to full-body paralysis. That was a few hours ago. Already they had him sitting upright and able to carry on a conversation - though we were told he'd phase in and out with no warning.

I sat rubbing my wrists (Roth had uncuffed me before taking me out of the car, not wanting anyone to see how he'd tormented my arms), boggling over the fact that the same fist had interacted with my face a little after destroying Holliman's, and that I had only a bruise to show for it.

"Hiya, Knuckles," said Holliman, curiously upbeat - drugged, no doubt.

"Hi," I said. Roth stood, fidgeting, in the corner.

"What are you doing here?"

"My Fedora is going to Haven as soon as he wakes up to unify us."

"Your Fedora, ey?"

"That's right."

He was quiet for a while, looking up at the lights on the ceiling. "Whaddaya think,

Roth?"

"Fuck him."

A muffled something that may have been a laugh erupted through the gauze, and Holliman's eyes twinkled, "Ah, don't mind Roth. He's a little putout by my condition. Who was that hit me, anyway? I couldn't see for that shit they sprayed in my eyes."

"King Kelly," I said. They both went nuts. At first I thought they didn't believe me, then I realized having one's face immolated by King Kelly was a major honor. Roth actually came over and shook Holliman's hand.

"Unbelievable, boss." He shook his head, envious, "Only you."

"And that kid? Who was he?" asked Holliman.

"Somebody named Meredith Dees. He's the leader of the FTC group that meets in the windshield wiper factory."

Roth was skeptical, "And you're sayin' that both these guys are 24-hour people? They live in Haven?"

"I don't know if they *live* there," I said, "But that's where they took me."

The Inspector thought for a moment, "Okay, knucklehead, what, again, does all this have to do with you?"

I explained about my Fedora: his straying, his fondness for FTC and knowledge of Haven, his quest for unification. Roth and Holliman were perfectly quiet as I told the story. At the end I thought I'd done a good job of tying it all together and summing it all up.

"I guess you think you're offering us some kind of opportunity. Is that right, knucklehead?" asked the Inspector.

I rubbed my wrists some more, "I thought, maybe."

"Whaddaya think, Roth?"

This time the lieutenant took a plaintive tone, "*Fuckhim*, boss!"

Holliman quaked with laughter, "Guy says it wasn't his fault, Roth, take it easy!"

The Lieutenant's silence was a heavy scowl, a frustrated intolerant discontent on the back of my neck. "Well, Danny," Holliman continued, "I'll tell you what, we'll arrange some sleeping quarters for you tonight..." His voice slipped away and didn't come back. He'd passed out.

Roth glowered in the corner, lurking like a toothache and straining at the leash. He said, "Hey Knuckles, you know if this shit doesn't work out for you, I'm gonna kill you, right? You know that, right?" I didn't say anything.

A moment later, Holliman came to, "...and we'll have somebody keep tabs on your Fedora. That way... hey, did I just pass out?"

"Yeah."

"Man, that is strange. Anyway, we'll put someone on the knucklehead Fedora and check out what you're saying. You got one day, all right?"

"All right."

"If your story checks out - well, we'll take it from there. But if it doesn't you're gonna wake up to the Code being thrown in your face for obstruction of justice and escaping arrest and conspiracy to commit manslaughter and whatever else we can pin on you. I'm not so keen on this whole 'you walked right out of the tent, stole a Camaro and got away unchased' thing, but we'll check it out. Now get out of here, both of you.

Lieutenant, make the arrangements."

"Yes sir."

"Oh, and knucklehead? The cuffs don't get any more comfortable."

Blood rushed to Roth's face, and when the door was closed he pushed me with vigor down the hall - mad, I guess, that I existed for him to unlawfully abuse and that his boss could bust him for it.

The lieutenant was exacting in carrying out Holliman's orders. He set me up in a motel equipped with a one-size-fits-all fedora in each room, arranged for all-day surveillance of my other, and even let me buy some moreanaxhall. After this was done he sneered at me and left. I then tried to call Sylvie, but the motel operator said I wasn't allowed to make any calls (although Fedora would be able to make as many as he wanted). My cell phone had been similarly restricted.

Famished, I found my way to the motel bar where a solitary, over-dressed woman with curly hair sat at one end, framed in softly glowing smoke and nursing a cocktail. I sat at the other end, ordered a pastrami on wheat and a beer. The lady looked at me, "You look as if you have had a rough day." She had an accent I couldn't place - middle-European, maybe, but who could say. The globe was peopled by dialects and languages unknown to us, anymore. Wading into it was pointless due to the discombobulating barriers, alien mores, bizarrely long days, and when they came here they came singly and stayed quiet, for the most part.

There was America and then the rest of the world, and once the twain had met, but never again. Not until they got on our schedule. We had distanced ourselves too far from the rest of the pack.

"That I have," I said.

"Perhaps I can help you wind down." She moved a little drunkenly to the stool next to mine and I saw the crow's feet around her lusterless hazel eyes, her makeup overdone. "I am Famke," she said, extending a hand. I told her my name and wondered idly if I was being watched. She said, "Tell me about yourself, Danny, why such a handsome man should look so roughed up."

"Oh, just a few run-ins, you know."

"You are a Hair, yes? Isn't that how it works? The Hair in the days and Fedoras at night?"

"That's right. You can tell 'cause I'm not wearing a hat."

"I am not from around here," she took a deep drag from her cigarette and exhaled it in neat funnels from her nose. "I am what you would call a 24-hour person. It fascinates me that you will never live to see the moon."

"I've seen it," a little defensive, "In movies, on TV."

"You don't know night, Mr. Danny. And your Fedora, he does not know the sun... Together you live in twilight."

I was restless, the smoke upsetting me. I wondered how a cigarette would feel between my lips: if it would feel like death, or cool, or both; if it tasted illicit. "Where are you from?"

"Where I come from children rejoice at dawn and men's voices raise in song at dusk." She was sauced and romanticizing, this much was clear. "Sunsets bleed warm and long on the hills and in deepest night starlight washes the curious, the adventurers and sinners... You poor people, you don't understand."

"It works for us." I said, biting back the sentence: *Yes but we have the highest*

standard of living in the fucking world, lady.

"Mmm. ' *Work.* ' Yes. This you understand. Mr. Danny, you live in daylight yet sell away your life." She shifted gears, "Do you have a woman?"

I looked at my beer, "Yes."

She smiled nostalgically, "At least you have that. You can share your misfortune. Even if-" Famke cut off abruptly.

"Even if what?"

She shook her head, "Never mind."

"No, say it." She had an attitude and I wanted to hear all of it, wanted to sit here and be indicted by the old washout.

"I was going to say: Even if you don't know where she sleeps at night."

So that was it. I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. "I thought you were going to help me wind down. Instead you're making me want to shoot myself."

She laughed, "I am at fault, of course. I am sorry. It is just so curious - your system." She leaned in closer to me and lowered her voice, "Yesterday I went on separate dates with the same man. In the day we had lunch, he was very courteous, asked me about my life - a perfect gentleman. Then at night, just to see, I approached him and we went to dinner. He was again very courteous and again asked me about my life. In a matter of hours I had disappeared in him and become something unknown. Absorbed, somehow, into the butter."

I was, for some reason, determined to make her feel better, "Sounds like you've got an opportunity there."

"Yes. I *can pretend* with him," she beamed with mischief, "In the day I can be

nice woman, and at night *sinister dominatrix*"

"You'll be two, then," I pointed out.

She looked at me sharply, her features tight. "Perhaps you are right, Mr. Danny. Perhaps your system simply.. .puts into writing - the schedule, yes? - what is already so."

My sandwich arrived and I ate it quickly (though it proved a task to lift with my heavy arms), wanting to be alone. Famke got the vibe and stared into her drink and chain-smoked her foreign cigarettes. I said good-bye and she said something in a different language, "Maybe I see you in a couple hours, yes? Maybe we meet again and for the first time."

I took a walk around the motel, a selection of her words looping through me. I remembered a similar experience, as a younger man, when I'd eaten a cheeseburger outside a local barbeque joint with a faux-Mexican beer and lime in a frosty mug, trying to ignore the flies and reading a very old book. I'd memorized the passage: "...she was sorry for all who had lived, were living, or would live, fanning with their prayers the useless altar flames, suppliant with their hopes to an unwitting spirit, casting the tiny rockets of their belief against remote eternity, and hoping for grace, guidance, and delivery upon the spinning and forgotten cinder of this earth. O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again." Something in the words had imparted inscrutable meaning to me, a wave of indecipherable import, and I walked around the neighborhood thinking: "O lost." Now I did the same around the motel, thinking of twilight, and unity, and the partition between my two selves. I pretended that there were stars in the sky that I could see - a canopy of distant pinpricks shrouded impenetrably in night - that I could marvel at and get lost in. Remote eternity, indeed.

No new thoughts came to me, no new plans. It was just that I was on the cusp of something - an unstoppable change of some sort. Things shortly would never be the same, and the motel and Famke and Roth, Holliman's crushed face, the Cleaver Building - all this entangled intrigue was just a brief jaunt from one life to the next. There was an otherworldly thrust in my bones and muscles.. .a growing struggle pitting intimacy between him and me against out and out insurrection.. .a double-helix strand of DNA writhing in fleeting civil war and fickle-minded truce. Where and who would I be at the end?

I thought of Sylvie, and wondered if when next I saw her it would be through an altered pair of eyes - or filtered, as a projector filters film, through a new set of ideas. I lamented that she left me wondering about the perfectly irrelevant Sophie Stall, of all things.

Back in my room I sat and composed a note to Fedora, one slightly different from what I'd fantasized about writing in the stolen Camaro. It said:

Vo-it.

14.

My dream ends with a gunshot and it's disturbing but, with eyes opening, easy to pretend that nothing has changed; everything is routine, the schedule trucking along. Then so much for that. It's a motel room and another day on the high wire.

The bathroom was well stocked (except for a lack of dandruff shampoo) and I left it in shape for the day, buffed-clean and detailed. All across the country Hairs were repeating this process, the nation and its business on hold as the workforce gathered momentum and accelerated into the day.

Just as I was about to leave my phone rang. A woman said, "I saw what they did to you after the meeting."

"Huh?"

"In the parking lot."

"Who is this?"

"Sophie Stall."

"Oh."

"But that's not my real name."

"No?"

"No. I can't tell you my real name."

"O.K."

"I'm an investigative memoirist."

"What?" I needed some coffee.

"I'd like to meet with you. Are you available?"

And for the first time in who knew how long I could say yes, and did, and we agreed to meet at a park. I was thinking: why not go ahead and complicate everything just that much more? I was thinking: she is beautiful and can corroborate my story that I was never on the side of King Kelly and Meredith Dees. I was thinking: I should really tell her about how I accidentally got her on the watch list. I was thinking about the alertness in her eyes. And then I was wondering about how I'd just thought to myself she was beautiful, and why it mattered, and Sylvie, and so on and so forth.

I half expected to find someone outside my room, keeping watch for me, but didn't. There'd be some subtler technique for that, I reasoned. Some invisible eyes on me.

A Continental breakfast was served, bowls of fruit and bite-size boxes of cereal, the milk at room temperature and the coffee identifiable as such only by its color and heat. There were a few of us there sitting island-like in the small room, reading newspapers. Most of them would be visitors, many of them - like Famke - 24-hour people, but non-threatening.. .not like the citizens of Haven. *They* had dropped out of society in revolt, while these people had dropped in to listen and learn; to get the flavor of

America. I wanted to tell them to reserve judgment - that it wasn't all flimsy cantaloupe and dry pineapple.

Waiting at a bus stop I felt visible and conspicuous. My hemorrhoid made sitting an exercise in aggravation so I stood and was too tall. I missed my cats and wondered how they were getting along. Home - the whole concept of Home - beckoned to me, attached as if by tether to that center of my little, increasingly untidy world. I found, staring out the windows of the bus at all the folks surrendering their houses to the forces of entropy and neglect, charging into another day at work, or a day-off widdled away in idle pursuits, that my fondness for the cats grew as I got nearer my place. I was becoming more like them - in chaos, moment-to-moment, ungoverned - but just like them having become domesticated, unable to fend for myself, surrendered to more powerful agents to secure my needs.

It was a cloudless day and brilliantly sunny. Everyone squinting, the bus roaring along, all of us held in transit in that universal bus-smell: rubbery and air-conditioned, a protean bouquet of perfumes and spilled beer, a dash of smoke, a hint of vomit, farts and leather. To the west the skyline was staggering, each building seeming to chase after the next in defiance of its architecture and inanimacy. A strip made of vast sums of money, invested each day by thousands of people feverishly looking for more. My thoughts meandered again to the dream of a couple nights prior, the robot-building robots. What deity, I wondered, had we tapped into? This fount of never-ending economy, around which all things, living and lifeless, orbit.

And to the east it's decrepitude and industrial sprawl: immense, low factories belching black smoke from ageless, stained stacks, electric fences and crumbling projects

wherein the quotidian poverty loomed fatal and foreboding over a man's schedule.

Bowling alleys and liquor stores, fast-food restaurants and barbershops, no-trespassing signs, a church or two, gun-shops and bars that stuck to the soles of your shoes. Eyesores and spirit-depressors, but employers, all, and doing their job. What nobility in it?

We were headed north, where the neighborhoods got a little nicer, the people more friendly and the houses spaced farther apart for illusions of sovereignty - as if the acreage was sentient and had waited five billion years to at last be owned by John Q. Public, Account Manager and Lawn Tyrant. The apartments all constructed for the same illusions: housing hundreds who every day only had to see two or three other doors. The grassy, communal courtyards with barbeque pits a big joke to everyone but Clyde's dog, who would spend rowdy hours there depositing turds without another care in the world. And also, when they were in a certain mood, Habib and Greta, who would sit and stare into the green between naps, fantasizing, perhaps, of adventure, or a feast of insects, a buffet of flowers.. .as if - according to some feline birthright - the whole world was theirs to consume.

With a start, it occurred to me that I was excessively contemplative. That seldom seen side effect of Sleepy Pete's anexohall had taken hold.

Ten minutes early to meet Sophie, I sat on a bench and admired the birds, the trees, the spill of leaves and the cool air for awhile. The bench was right next to a trail so these runners and bicyclists kept huffing past - people for whom every Sunday morning was exhausted in exercise, in that old struggle against flab and decay. I sat and thought about what they thought about while I thought about them: if they thought about me and

my sitting, my being there, my sudden weird presence poking into their day, a distended thumb asking for a ride, when always before the bench had been vacant.

These birds. Always either hopping or flying. Unfair. Really puts walking into perspective. Those trees. Just look at them. They must get so tired of talking to each other all the time. They must get so lousy without jobs. And what would a deciduous *person* be like?

A guy walked by with his bright helmet, walking his bike, and I wondered: *Does he think it's funny that I'm laughing? That guy with all the bicyclist gear? You can never mistake a bicyclist. They walk funny in all that spandex. Not bird-funny, but pretty funny all the same. Cleats in the gravel.*

I had been told my eyes change color sometimes, like in autumn, like in spring, like when I wear green shirts. But what if each new season our hair turned something new? What if in the winter we lost it all and tread the earth hairless wraiths, pale and quiet?

Sophie walked up while I was in the midst of freaking out. I saw again, right away, that perplexing noise in her eyes. She was now infinitely deeper and more complex than she'd been as the subject of my envy sitting around the table at the National Wiper Alliance. She was enigmatic. She brushed her hair out of her face enigmatically and fixed me with her loud and searching and enigmatic eyes.

"What the hell does an investigated memoirist do?" I asked.

"Investigate."

"Right."

"She investigates. You've no doubt noticed how there isn't much in the way of

news in our society."

"Is that a problem?"

"Don't you think it is?"

I thought it over - which I couldn't help, my thoughts were racecars now, zooming indefatigably and unignorably through my synapses, "Thoreau said once you've read one newspaper you've read them all. How many times do you need to read about people hitting other people on the head with rocks?"

"Who's Thoreau?"

I sighed. "A dead writer."

She paused. "An investigative memoirist makes of her life a living adventure and investigation and then publishes a best-selling memoir that knocks people's socks off. Don't you work in a bookstore?"

"How'd you know that?"

"I'm just saying, you should know about these things. About books."

"I've got the mystery section."

She looked vaguely at an elderly couple walking past us in sweats. "An investigative memoirist is a friend of the truth. She uncovers it."

"What's covering it?"

"No one's covering it. That's the problem."

"I don't understand."

The eyes came on me like brain-scrambling hyperlights. "You write mysteries too, don't you?"

"Sometimes."

"So figure it out."

I wasn't sure about this one. "How do you know so much about me?"

"She does her research. She has her ways."

My palms were sweaty. I rubbed them on my knees. "I'm not sure I like this."

She arched an eyebrow, "What's not to like?"

"I was interrogated yesterday. It gets old."

"I'm not interrogating. No one's interrogating. I just want you to talk. Say whatever you like. Who was interrogating you?" There was something of the calculator in her cadence - something of the dry, remote staccato of inorganic processes. Her sentences only frothed into existence to serve direct purposes.

"Guy named Drew Holliman."

"The Inspector?"

"Yes."

"Hmm."

"What's that mean?"

"He must be doubling his efforts."

"To do what?"

She waited, said, "Go ahead."

"Huh?"

"Go ahead and talk. Say whatever you like."

And here I thought I'd asked her a question. "I don't know what's going on right now.

"Why did Dees and Kelly beat you up in the parking lot?"

"They didn't beat me up." She didn't need to know about the fist or the knee, I thought.

"You ended up on the ground."

"Well, that King Kelly is a real big dude."

She was unabashedly curious, asking questions that deflected off my unwillingness, recognized themselves as unanswered, got up, brushed themselves off and tried again. "I don't get why you were singled-out."

"I'm not a pretty brunette, maybe." Wow. I'd said it aloud. My thoughts were inexhaustible horses galloping reckless unstoppable and brazen from my mouth.

"Please."

"Sorry."

"And that woman, Stella, hardly ever took her eyes off you."

"Maybe I'm attractive in my own right."

She may have raised an eyebrow. Maybe not. Probably I just wanted her to. Anyway, a moment elapsed in silence. "I think they suspect you of something," she said.

"Yes. They're suspicious of you."

"Look-"

"I think the FTC is a sham, a front for something elaborate and diabolical."

"Any ideas what, exactly?"

"Something elaborate and diabolical."

I couldn't help it. There was a charming lack of pretense about her, "You talk funny. I like it."

"My father studied rhetoric and my mother was a poet."

"And you don't know Thoreau?" The tragedy was that I believed it.

"You've been mistreated since the parking lot, I can tell."

"Well, there was a little scrape."

"How deep do you go in all this, Daniel?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're on vacation, aren't you."

"What gave it away?"

"I can smell anexohall."

"That's really something."

"You're on vacation because of something related to FTC. They're suspicious of you and molest you after the meeting. Inspector Holliman interrogates you. You get in a scrape." She made clawmarks around the words and I saw her tiny hand tendons flexing under the smoothest skin, her well-kept nails painted peach, thought about how soft they looked, those hands, and where all they could -

"Please don't call me Daniel," I said.

She hiked one of those eyebrows up, again. It had the effect of emboldening the brilliant eye. I wilted under its glare. "You're pretty good at this - at not telling. But I'll get it eventually. The investigative memoirist perseveres." She got up to leave.

I recovered. "Before you go, there's something I have to tell you."

She sat down. There were no hesitant moves with this one, every flex imparted the fullest commitment. "All right then."

I took a deep breath, "I told the Inspector you wanted to get married to me."

She looked at me quizzically, "But Daniel, I'm already married."

She left.

When deer season was made a year-round thing my father used to take me hunting. There are those of you, I know, who detest the practice, but in our neighborhood it wasn't uncommon to drive past a starved animal silently elapsing on the sidewalk. Having rid the world of their natural predators, deer proliferation became a big problem. They ate and ate and ate until there was virtually nothing left for them to eat. A single iron shot was a merciful exit compared to the alternative. So we'd hunt and I'd thrill at the kickback of the rifle, its percussive, and the preternatural connection between hunter and hunted, killer and killed. Then we'd camp out and he'd tell me ghost stories.

There once was a hair named Lothario, and Lothario went hunting one night with his son and awoke as the fedora Lothario to find that in the passing of the One Hour Slumber he and his son had suffered complete amnesia (attributed to the bad butter they used to put out). Having forgotten everything of their previous lives, they remained in the woods the rest of the night, scavenging and building fires and shooting at rodents. The following day the hair Lothario and his son - spared the neurological disaster through some never-explained synaptical trick - awoke and found that they had traveled deeper into the woods. They set out to return home but couldn't complete the journey before butter time. So, retiring, they again became their amnesiac selves, and, drawn by the darkness of the wilderness and the inspiring moon, went deeper. This continued - Hairs trying to escape and Fedoras gleefully voyaging into the woods - until the supply of butter ran out. Eventually the amnesiac Fedoras killed the desperate Hairs, *and it is said that Lothario and his son still inhabit these parts and can be detected — if downwind of*

their position - by their foul and barbaric odor.

Because I was sort of unwittingly at odds with my Fedora the story came back to me as I reacquainted myself with the cats, feeding them and petting them and letting them walk over me as I lay down on the floor to achieve eye-level. As a metaphor, getting lost in the wilderness had the ring of truth about it.. Fedora and I constantly undoing each other's actions. I imagined a perfect nemesis: for every hour I worked he would be slothful, for every meal I took or abstained from he would do the opposite, for every place I ventured he would remain anchored at home - this taken to unfathomable extremes until at last he and I would functionally cease to exist, one having negated the other. Would I then wander the streets unseen?

My phone rang and it was Roth. He got straight to the point, "What are you doing?"

"Petting my cats. The Code about to be thrown at me?"

"F'l had it my way." I deduced from this cryptic response that my story had checked out.

"What'd my Fedora do last night?"

"You shouldn't be at home. Go do something in public. I'll meet you."

"How will you know where I am?"

He laughed and hung up the phone.

It was Sunday, I realized happily. HOWARD and the Double Decker awaited me. Looking at my watch, my soul broke into song:

On schedule! On schedule!

I took my car to the coffee shop - its interior having been sealed in the proper, satisfying stasis since the end of Fedora's night on Friday. The barista, a buoyant young man named Alex, looked at me strangely. "Christ, Danny, what did you run into?"

The soreness in my face had become part of my vacation routine. "Somebody's fist," I said. "It's okay."

"Wow. Well, what can I get for you?"

"Ah you know what it is," I said.

His brow furrowed in concern. This wasn't part of the ritual. "Yeah, but..."

"Sorry," what was I thinking? "Double tall iced latte, more ice less milk. Have you seen HOWARD?"

He looked at me strangely, "Not yet. Hey, what's goin' on with you, man? You're actin' funny."

"Vacation," I said. Understanding dawned on him and he made my drink with his usual whistling exuberance. Handing it to me he said, "Good luck," and I went outside to the usual table. HOWARD showed up right on time a couple minutes later.

"You made it!"

"I don't know how long I can stay. Someone's meeting me." I said it with significance and he understood.

"How's it goin' so far?"

A desire for secrecy that wasn't my own, but transmitted from the Cleaver Building, kept me from bringing him entirely up to date. I told him things had been rough but were looking better, that I was cooperating with the authorities. I left out the abuse at the hands of King Kelly and Roth, the enigma of Sophie Stall, the fact that I'd actually

spoken with my Fedora and the knowledge of Haven. He nodded and, seeing that I wasn't willing or able to go into much detail, changed the subject.

"I'm thinkin' about goin' into the development side of things."

"Really? Sales getting old?"

He said he wanted to move into a bigger house and that it would necessitate more money. I became helplessly contemplative. "HOWARD, you read a lot of history, don't you ever get the feeling that there's something just *not quite right* about how we live?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean: one body, *two* souls..."

"Think about it, Danny, there's two of just about everything on you 'cept your dick, your belly-button and your asshole. Your brain is naturally divided. Your time... Even in history, before the innovations, your day was divided between leisure and work. We've simply taken it to the next logical step."

"So no."

"No, I don't think there's anything strange about it. But you, my friend, are startin' to sound like how I imagine your Fedora sounds."

That was true. I pondered for a moment whether or not Fedora was starting to sound like me. For the first time I considered reunification, wondering if it really was or wasn't murder. Then a hand fell on my shoulder and I looked up to see Roth. I was glad he was in street clothes.

"C'mon."

HOWARD and I shook hands, "When Sylvie gets here? Tell her I said hello and that I'm doing fine. Tell her I'm sorry I couldn't stay." *Tell her I love her*, I thought to

add but - embarrassed - didn't.

Once I was in the passenger's seat of Roth's unmarked Buick, he said, "Your boy fucked up last night."

"What'dhedo?"

"He made too many calls."

The lieutenant said that everything had started normally enough - especially for a guy who wakes up in a strange room. Fedora had taken a bus to work, served coffee for the next five hours and made three phone calls, all to the same FTC number. Then he'd gone to a pub after work with some friends. This, Roth explained, was all in his schedule. (I had been pleased, upon first studying his schedule, to learn that Fedora's so nicely matched my own, even to the point of regularly attending the same pub. Now, the way Roth made it sound, it appeared we even sat on the same side of the same booth.) At the pub, however, Meredith Dees, accompanied by King Kelly, met him. The kid and Fedora secluded themselves in a shadowy corner table and whispered at each other for ten minutes. Then Dees, pissed off, stormed out with his colossal shadow. At this point the surveillance team made a hair-trigger decision to split up. One man followed Dees and Kelly and a second stayed behind at the pub.

"Where are we going?" I interjected.

"Shut up," he responded.

Roth referred to the guy following Dees and Kelly as "The Nose," (his uncanny knack for smelling out a crime the stuff of Cleaver Building legend, I guessed) and The Nose, as it happens, had not been heard from since leaving the pub. The man following Fedora had a much less eventful evening. Fedora left the pub with his friends and got a

ride back to the motel - apparently warned by Dees not to return home. Once there he made two more phone calls, one to a number at the hospital and a second to Haven. All the other phone calls and the meeting were nothing next to this. "That's what saved your ass."

"It wasn't enough that he met with Dees? Didn't that tell you something?"

He snorted, "Tells me both of you guys associate with the same screwballs. Screwballs everywhere associate together. So the fuck what."

I again thanked what powers existed in the world that it was Holliman and not Roth running the case. Holliman, I was sure, would take a bigger view. "Who did he talk to in Haven?"

The lieutenant said they weren't allowed to record the conversations, just trace the calls. Motel policy, he said. Turns out the motel ownership was distantly connected to a much larger international conglomerate that produced - among other things - light bulbs, batteries, machines that manufactured model airplane manufacturing machines, convenience stores, a line of luxury automobiles, fried chicken by the bucket and at least one very powerful United States Senator. I allowed myself to indulge, for a moment, a nebulous paranoia - the formation of a conspiracy that posed, as its central tenet, the question: *Who's Really In Charge Here?*

"And the Nose?"

"Well if he's still alive he's probably pretty fuckin' confused right about now, idn't he, knucklehead?" He meant, of course, that the Nose might well have been detected by his quarry and turned into prey, maybe even unified.

I understood that Roth blamed me for the Nose's disappearance like he blamed

me for his boss's broken face. If I'd had any points to lose with him I'd managed it in one night and one morning and was now burrowing deeper into the negative. "If they did anything to him, wouldn't that be grounds to fold them up?"

"What, Haven?"

"Yeah. All those 24-hour people."

"Fuck off. You don't know anything."

I didn't understand, but I wasn't supposed to, and that avenue of talk was closed down. "What does your Fedora do, Roth?"

"He's a cop, whaddayathink?"

Carefully creeping up on a conversational limb, I said, "And the Inspector's?"

I had touched a nerve. Roth got red in the face and returned to form, "Shut up. Stop askin' so many questions."

We were coming to a stop at a light when I saw in the rear-view mirror the black van turn onto the street behind us. Its windows were too heavily tinted to see inside, but a surge of remembrance and fear raced through me. It was them. I kept quiet for a couple more minutes, waiting to see if they stayed behind us after a series of turns, then I spoke up.

"We're being followed."

"Huh?"

"Black van. It's what Meredith and the King were driving when they abducted me."

Roth said a bad word and, as soon as the opportunity availed itself, began making hard turns. The Buick's engine strained and roared, and it occurred to me that I was

maybe going to get into that car chase, after all.

The van kept up.

I assumed a closeness with death.

There was something about tires screeching and the odor of burnt rubber that did that to me. Life, in an instant, became frail, precarious, flirted with the end. A nervousness - palpable in the flexed muscles of my arms and legs, in the tunnel vision that fell upon my eyes, seeing ever only what was ahead, what was avoided, what might happen - came over me. Roth was in constant motion, glancing into the mirror to see if the van was still back there, darting and swerving all over the road. The mirror, the gearshift, the steering wheel and the pedals were extensions of Roth, who had himself become the mechanism of my fate. Is it the anexohall, I wondered, or the sudden knowledge of mortality that makes me think so much?

It seemed improbable that the big, awkward, top-heavy van could maintain its lock on us, but the city traffic was a leveler. Roth was unable to floor it and had to come to frequent, chest-tightening stops. If I weren't in the passenger's seat, but at home or in a theater watching the chase unfold, I'd find it comical. It was all stops and starts; a mean kicking unwilling restraint shadowed the whole thing - resembling Hollywood action scenes only in that there were two cars, one pursuing and the other wanting to get away.

Roth tore down back alleys, upsetting in the process stacks of tin trashcans and sending homeless people and stray cats into panic. He cursed, leaned on the horn, tilted into an intersection, clipped an SUV. He jumped a sidewalk for a second, got back on the road behind a long line of other cars, slammed on the brakes and nearly lost control of the

Buick. I turned around to see if I could find the van. My only role was to observe.

Roth cursed, went back up on the sidewalk, scattered some people and haltingly made it to the next intersection. The van followed suit, leaving a trail of ripped mirrors, furious drivers and deep-breathing pedestrians behind. Roth executed a hairpin right turn onto a major thoroughfare, inciting on-coming vehicles to stop and skid and hit each other, and we were free to drive fast for a little while, headed south.

I wanted to say something, but couldn't think of anything to say. Finally it came to me, my mind opening like the road before us.

"Why don't you, um, arrest them?"

"What?" Roth said irritably, glancing at me sidelong.

"I said-"

"I heard you." He slammed on the brakes and went for a pistol in the glove compartment and looked at me all in the same motion. "Shut up."

As soon as the parking brake was up he hopped out, wielding his gun and a badge in the other hand. I heard him screaming, "Get out of the car! Get out of the car *now!*"

I unlatched my seatbelt and twisted around to look. The black van was idling behind us, ominous and unpredictable, a few solid tons of potential energy. Roth had established himself in the next lane and was the picture of law enforcement: ready, self-assured, armed and implacable.

"Get out, *now!*" he yelled again. Northbound cars, across the boulevard, were rushing past. I could see their heads turned, shocked. This is what happens, I thought, *before* the pileup, *before* the bloody mess on the side of the road that halts traffic for fifty minutes back. They must feel disappointed to arrive just a little too early.

A jittery nervousness came over me. The van's motor revved and tires' squealed. There was no time for Roth to react. He took a step to his left but they were trained on him and he was hit. I watched his body fly.

They stopped right next to Roth's car, me looking like a dumbshit with my jaw agape while staring out the driver's side window as King Kelly's face was revealed behind the down-rolling window of the van's passenger side door. He was his normal, stony-faced self. I heard Meredith say, "Get that motherfucker, King." Then something marvelous happened - nearly too fast for me to register it. There was a sustained honk, a furious screech of tires, and then I saw the King's body snap forward and recoil in his seat - a ropy tendril of spit extending from his mouth - heard the crash of crunched metal and saw the van toppled into the grassy boulevard of the highway.

A little dazed, I took stock of my situation. The sedan that nailed the van was half gone and smoking. Someone was honking a horn like their life depended on it (or like their death, I reasoned, demanded it). The van was knocked over on the grass, tires spinning slowly. Roth was ahead of me and to my left, a crumpled figure on pavement, his legs at an ungodly angle. When I saw the black forearm come out the window of the van my mind was made up.

I slid into the driver's seat, started the motor, and casually sped away.

15.

There was really something to this near-death and getaway experience, I thought. Driving down the highway in the purloined, unmarked police cruiser, my mind was perfectly free and totally racing, as it had been upon giving Haven the slip. A blast of glee raced through my skin. I was a bolt of living substance, unconfined, immortal. I drove with no destination in mind, only a steady resolve to keep moving, to distance myself from the accident.

Roth's police radio started squawking about ten minutes later, after I'd negotiated a few exits and made my way into town. Back to downtown roads and normal life: traffic, shops, buildings and the glorious inspiring throng and crush of busy Hairs. The voices came out staccato and urgent: *big wreck on the highway, there's a cop down and a missing cruiser*. They're asking me to respond, I think, because they keep calling out for car 54 and no one answers.

I left the cruiser in a movie theater parking lot and hailed a cab. It was my first

time in a cab. The randomness of their schedules had always thrown me off.

The driver was fat, unshaven and sweaty. "Where to, bub?"

"Umm.. .I don't know. Let's just drive around awhile."

"You got it, bub." I supposed he wasn't unaccustomed to this kind of directionlessness. Me, it got under my skin.

I slowly gathered my thoughts. There were two options: immediately turn myself over to the authorities, or try and lay low for a spell. I considered what Roth told me before the incident, about the Nose and how he'd gone missing, how pissed he was. I wondered how Meredith and the King found us, what my Fedora had been arguing with the kid about, what all my Fedora had told them. I kept coming back to the Nose. They'll be extra-double pissed now, I thought. The Nose gone, Holliman crushed in a hospital, Roth severely injured. I was bad luck to them - an agent of chaos sewing discord throughout the city and pursued by ruthless foes, a sure harbinger of disaster. And if they could get to me with Roth they could get to me anywhere (using my *theys* and *thems* interchangeably). And if I submitted to them *now* there'd be no stopping them. I would have become too difficult to warrant continued investigation. They'd just move right on to the "surveillance research intervention rehabilitation & punitive action" that the Code demanded, which would be betraying Fedora, and Sylvie, and everyone.

Lay low, let everything calm down, let the smoke clear, come back later, figure it out.

Images of Clyde's dog and my cats paraded weirdly through my mind's eye. But then I realized it wasn't weird.

I was becoming free.

"I need a quiet, hole-in-the-wall motel," I said.

He dropped me off at the Twins Inn, where a flickering, humming neon sign advertised vacancy. It was a horseshoe shaped, one-level affair sandwiched between a smelly gas station and a shop called *Cameron's Cameras and Sleuthing*. What luck.

The Inn's wings enclosed a dirty parking lot with only a few cars. I made my way across thinking about how for the second night in a row I'd stay in a weird place and how if anyone had told me what was going to happen when I went on vacation...

They set me up in a tiny room with a double bed, mustard-colored drapes, shoe-crushed brown carpeting, a TV, a fedora, and a shower with nothing in it. I collapsed on the bed and inhaled a deep breath of motel scent - old tired flesh and fresh detergent.

Sophie Stall was an investigative memoirist, HOWARD was a guy looking for a bigger house, Drew Holliman lusted for revenge against his twin brother while his twin brother doubtlessly dreamed of an empire of "freed" men. Sally Bullhorn presided imperious and indomitable over the city's vacations, Suzie manned the Kid's Section, King Kelly followed - as a dark tracer consisting solely of muscle and calamity - his liege. Everyone, then, seemed to have a purpose for living vested in futurity, in *doing* and *accomplishing* and *increase*, except me. Me? I was the nation or suzerainty pleading to my masters for a return to the status quo. I was refusing the onward progress, the wave, the incredible Fedora-wave surging ahead and saying *wait, wait, wait, we 're small time, we 're little league, we 're Mickey Mouse, let's not get ahead of ourselves*.

How come, I thought, it's always me who says no to everything? Because I live in stories?

I wrote a story once called "The Cs and Bs of the H, M and D." It pretended a society in which everyone functioned by having their own personal constitution. Each citizen would administer themselves a dose of a certain drug which availed to them the clearest possible alignment of their internal powers (love, brain, sex - or, legislature, judiciary, executive) and would then commence, through sub-audible hypnotic suggestion, crafting for themselves a constitution appropriately delineating turf and influence. They would be unable - and, ideally, *unwilling* - to violate this constitution, though allowances were always made for amendments (if you could get them through the legislature and the executive signed them into law and they held up on judiciary appeal). Furthermore, these citizens were encouraged to reevaluate every so often, take some more of the drug, get a fresh perspective on the evolution of their personalities. But not my character.

His name was Fitz Middle-Gilbert, and his parents had been anarchists. He'd come late to the party himself, only crafting his first "connie" at age 17, on a hill in a park on a pleasant brisk evening with his friend Sam. Only, when my story takes place, he's in this terrible place: nothing he was supposed to like appealed to him anymore. Everything he was supposed to dislike caught his fancy. His world was upside down.

Some helpful people suggested he make amendments, and he tried, only to find that the judiciary had appropriated almost his entire command structure. No amendment could conceivably pass the mind's terrible gauntlet: he was in a state of pure and complete over-mental confusion.

'Cause he was gay, but had come to that subconscious conclusion long after crafting a heterosexual constitution on a hill in a park on a pleasant brisk evening with his

friend Sam. Somehow, in the innocent, journeying, questioning carnal exchange they'd made, they had psyched into one another for just long enough to mimic each other in statecraft. (The crux of the story rests on this proposition: that in our seed, we transfer *ourselves undiluted*, and not just corrupted copies potentially to emerge in the future.) Sam, a straight man living the life of a gay fellow, was equally perturbed.

I guess the point I'm trying to make is that here was an example, fished from the peculiar ether of my whimsy, of a guy tormented, unwilling to go forward, existentially and physically uncomfortable, hell bent for leather on maintaining the status quo, in a society saturated with type-A personalities determined and racing ahead and happy and gainful and well-adjusted, and here was I on a couch thinking about everyone I knew and how wrong I was.

I decided to go to Cameron's Cameras.

A heavysset bald man in black sweats scoped me out briefly over the cover of his *Amateur Sleuth* magazine from behind the counter. Police radio sounded through garbled transmissions from a radio somewhere behind him. "You Cameron?" I asked. They were still talking about the accident.

"The one and only. Help you with something?"

"Just looking."

I had the sensation of being in a porn store: avoid eye contact, don't ask for any help and get out as fast as possible. Still, I didn't want him paying too much attention to that radio.

The shop was divided into four rooms by heavy black curtains. The first room featured cameras of a thousand different sizes, prices and technological sophistication. A

pair of seemingly opaque black sunglasses, for instance, contained a nearly microscopic camera on the bridge. An LCD on the inside of the lenses showed the focus. "How does this work?" I asked, peaking around the curtain and holding up the package.

"When you put them on it takes a picture every ten, twenty or thirty seconds - depending on how you program it."

"Hey."

"Yeah. Pretty cool."

The next room was all weapons. A company called *Pick Your Poison* specialized in concealing all manner of fiendish tricks within spirits. There was a bottle of beer with a three-inch blade down in the dregs, triggered to shoot through the neck (both necks, I should clarify) when the liquid volume had reached a certain critical depletion - ensuring that it'd be activated upon the occasion of a swig. Made me wanna start spilling my drinks. Sort of.

Exploding computer mouse. Exploding remote. Even an exploding book. It was called *Leaves of Fire* by someone named Nick Glycerin, published by Tryst Naismith & Tucker. A blurb on the back read: "Glycerin's debut work is *explosivel Incendiary* prose!" The spine was made of the stuff and page seven spelled doom for the reader.

"How can you sell all this?" I asked Cameron - a literal question, not an indictment.

"You get a license," was his terse reply, returning distractedly to his magazine.

The language of our exchange struck me - as if we weren't talking about him, actually, but a third person named "You" who dealt in these things. That he just worked there.

The third room was literature of the non-combustible variety. How-to books, mostly - spy on cops, spy on your wife, catch him in the act. Also there were mail-order catalogues of sleuthing equipment with real addresses of real places all across the country. This was, needless to say, a stark exception to the unwritten rule of our society that all thoughts of other places are discouraged - as was anything, really, that diverted from schedule and work.

The fourth room was where I hit pay dirt. This was the depository for all otherwise unaccounted-for electronica. Tiny binoculars, listening devices, devices that jammed listening devices, fingerprint detectors and erasers and a little something called *Whereing Your Fedora*. This was located on a shelf right next to an identical product called *Combing Your Hair*. I read the description and remembered hearing about it on the news. I took it to the counter. "This still legal?"

"It is today," Cameron said, setting aside his magazine, "May not be tomorrow."

"There's a case?"

"Pending lawsuit, yeah. Authorities claim it creates disturbance in the Hair/Fedora unit.'

"Yeah, I heard."

"You want it?"

I held it up in suddenly sweaty palms, sighed, and nodded.

True story: A Fedora named Siobhan Turner spends her childhood drawing the sun into corners of colored construction paper. You know the type: the half-circle with rays like boiling orange fingers extending down to the little stick-figure people playing

house on an undefined green field.

Siobhan, born and reared and doomed to exist forever under the moon, studies astronomy and physics and gradually adopts into her own neural store the nucleus of all human knowledge related to the sun. She is expert and thinks of little else and no one likes her very much. The rest of the Fedoras think her "weird" (quoted on the news), "off-kilter," "unhinged," "obsessed." Then one day she discovered a certain magical suppository called *Combing Your Hair* which promised to allow the inactive half of the Hair/Fedora unit access to the eyes and ears of the active. In other words, you saw and heard their day.

I fill in blanks in the narrative: Siobhan took the drug with trepidation and awe. She took it just prior to slumber, struck in a way far far beyond words by the notion that in an unremembered hour she'd arise into a chunk of the day she'd never experienced, only hopelessly aspired to see for as long as she'd been alive.

She took it trembling, applied the butter and did the vanishing act we're all so good at - the vanishing into our own minds - grinning. I wanted to believe she grinned. I wanted to believe she was grinning her face off watching her Hair - she who'd been so absurdly lucky, sun-kissed and sun-warmed and sun-browned since day one - opening new eyes unwittingly into uncharted hours... Like a plant, I bet she'd grown always toward the light.

Anyway. Siobhan Turner (Fedora) stopped going to work. She also stopped eating. Siobhan's Hair started waking up with great cavernous cravings in her belly. She started finding unpaid bills mingled in with her Fedora's stuff. Pretty soon it became clear to her - an astrologer, coincidentally - that her nighttime self had blown a gear or

two. It was in the stars. She couldn't have known that her body hardly got out of bed after the slumber ended, only lay in a state of blissed-out, remembered, vicarious sunning; but the effects were pronounced and becoming more so all the time. Her muscles weakened. She took longer in the shower. She walked around all day in an unlifting haze. Then one day she took a bath with some razors and didn't get out.

Disturbances in the Hair/Fedora unit, indeed.

I thought about the tragedy of Siobhan Turner while weighing the package in the palm of my hand, as if you could read portends in the mass of things, as if we were so calibrated to deduce the future by the tension in our muscles.

There wasn't a question, though, only a steady accretion of convincing. I needed to do it because I needed to see what he was up to, to gather empirical evidence. It had nothing to do with romance, and Famke could fuck herself.

So not only did I have to apply cream to the hemorrhoid, I had to deal with an anal suppository. God, it would seem, was not unfamiliar with the infantile sense of humor.

Back at the Inn, I settled into the bed and prepared to zone out with the TV for the next couple hours. A gripping weariness had overcome me - the anexohall really digging in. Then my phone rang, and the caller ID brought a smile to my face.

"Sylvie," I said.

"Danny. Where are you?"

"I'm in an inn, which is like being out and about, except different."

"Be serious. Are you okay? I saw you on the news."

"I was on the news?"

"There was an accident, they said. Actually they didn't show you -just said your name. Which I thought was weird.. .but I guess they have their reasons."

"There *was* an accident," I confirmed, yawning.

"What happened?"

"Meredith and the King chased us down on the freeway. Then Roth got out and tried to arrest them. But they ran him over and then someone rear-ended them. It was bizarre. I drove away."

"Jesus. Are you okay?"

"Fine. Everything's fine."

"You're in it up to your neck, stupid. Everything's *not* fine."

"Relax."

"Why are you where you are? Why not turn yourself in?"

"Because," I yawned again, "I need time."

"To do what?"

I laughed weakly, "To figure out what to do. Everything's too hot right now."

"Is Roth dead?"

"Yes. I don't know. I don't think *so*." *I hope so*.

She was quiet for a beat, "Makes you look guilty, is all."

/ am guilty, I thought, surprising myself.

"Baby, everything's gonna be alright."

"You say that. But you know what? Today was Sunday and we were supposed to meet at the Double Decker and go to a movie and eat at Marco's and play Scrabble and

drink wine and felicitate. And none of that happened. So it's like all day I've got my thumb up my ass thinking about what you're doing and if you're okay. And here you tell me everything's gonna be alright?"

"Well," I smiled dimly, "I'm about to put something up my ass, too. If that makes you feel better..."

"Huh?"

I told her about the Fedora Pill (which is what I decided to call it because *Whereing Your Fedora* was a cheap play on words and made me feel silly to say aloud and maybe the memory of Siobhan Turner shouldn't be so casually trod on). The idea was that I'd basically be conscious throughout all of Fedora's day, burrowed into his brain and seeing through his eyes. Sight and sound were all you got, the pill promised, tactile sensation and smell being absent. It would be just like a dream.

"Oh my...oh my God."

"Yeah. It's crazy. But I gotta know what he's doing." I was relieved she hadn't heard about the Siobhan story.

"Well.. .what do you think will happen?"

"I don't know. For the second night in a row he'll wake up in a strange place. Yesterday," another yawn, "he got into an argument with Meredith. It's his day off so I don't know."

"Stop yawning. You're making me do it. Why are you so tired?"

"It's this anexohall."

"Anexohall, hemorrhoid cream and the Fedora Pill. You've become a creature of Pharmaceuticals."

'How'd you know about the hemorrhoid?'

She laughed, was smug, "Honey, do you honestly think anything happens in the region of your ass that I don't know about?"

"Shoulda known better, I guess."

There was a pause.

"You should write to him," she said.

"To who? My Fedora?"

"Yeah."

I sighed. "Hadn't thought of that."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know how much I trust him."

"Danny, he's *you*."

He's me, I thought, *but more so*, surprising myself again. "Why don't you write *your* Fedora? Maybe we can get them together."

She chuckled, "How do you know they aren't already?"

"Because if they were, Sylvie, he'd never have strayed."

"Oh, you're something."

"I am something. And I'm all yours."

"You mean half mine."

"I do. Yeah. But that half? It's 100-percent yours."

"I've been thinking a lot about this Sophie? And I really want to ask you about her? But I don't know if this is the best time."

"We had a nice thing going there. That chatty discourse?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Then you brought it to this."

"I did."

I sighed. I didn't feel like going into it, "She's just a name. I gave it to Holliman when I was telling a lie."

"So I shouldn't be worried?"

"No. You shouldn't."

She sighed, relaxing, "You should write your Fedora. It'll help."

"I'll think about it."

"Everyone is after you, Danny. They'll come after me next."

"No they won't. That won't happen."

"Why not? I mean - why wouldn't it?"

I thought it over, staring into the ceiling. It hadn't occurred to me that at some point my friends and loved ones might be tugged into the crisis, but Sylvie was right. The image of me as a wash of numbers appearing in the Cleaver Building came back. They knew everything about me and would inevitably turn their investigation to the people who surrounded me. I had an idea.

"I have an idea," I said.

"Okay."

"You apply for a vacation..."

It was, indeed, just like a dream - only with a touch more clarity. I witnessed my eyes open, a fishbowl vision, regaling the ceiling I'd just nodded off staring at, now

seeing it for the first time as Danny Knuckles (Fedora). For a moment I lamented that his thoughts wouldn't also be transmitted to me, then reasoned that it was probably best that way. Imagine the chaos of two brains at one time confined within a single skull!

I boggled over the Fedora Pill, now swinging my legs out of bed and getting the lay of the strange new land. How could it be that I was free to think, at all? We were, in effect, sharing one brain. What greater evidence could the system provide, I thought, that it was perfectly natural to be split in half?

My sight had a grainy quality to it - as if seeing something twice and simultaneously through a single pair of eyes necessitated a deterioration. The world was vaguely the color of ash. Fedora stood up slowly and just as slowly made his way to the shower.

It should've come as no surprise that he did all the same things in the bathroom (and in the same order) as I did, but there you have it. Here's me, tiny and in his brain: surprised. He found and put on the fedora right after flossing. It seemed like I should've registered some close sensation upon the donning of the hat, but that didn't happen. Sight and sound only, I remembered. No thoughts, no smells, no touch, no nothing. I was watching a movie. Even my own words - the content of the "letter" I'd decided to write him, penned on the Inn's notepad next to the phone - looked vaguely unfamiliar.

Vcm/t cfir Howe/.

He dressed and left the Inn, still not having said a word.

Danny that day took me all over town.

We started at the True Brew, where he loaded up on a double tall iced latte (more milk less ice), cashed his paycheck and avoided the stares of his coworkers. They looked at him, I realized, the same way my friends and co-workers had begun looking at me: with a darting worry, detecting something unreliable and maybe forbidden in him.

He walked me down the sidewalk, peering into shop windows, no destination apparently in mind. The light was bizarre, faded but lingering, casting everything in an odd amber hue. He didn't look up and that really pissed me off. I wanted to see the sky. This, I knew, was twilight. Morning for Fedoras. They all wore their hats.

Danny walked with his hands in his pockets, his eyes straight ahead. When passing people he looked down, just like I did. With gradual certainty I became aware that he was leading us to the Double Decker. *Coffee before coffee?* I marveled. He was more of a junkie than I was. I wondered how, if at all, that river of residual caffeine affected me.

The lamps in the trees around the bus - mere background decoration for all those afternoons Howard and Sylvie and I spent in lazy conversation - were glowing a soft, delicate orange. Alex wasn't working - which shouldn't've surprised me - but whoever that was knew exactly what Danny wanted. He was a regular. How else did his life mirror mine?

At least, anyway, not in this one respect: when he took his latte out to the patio, he claimed a seat at a table adjacent one HOWARD (Fedora), whom he evidently didn't know from Adam. I wondered if Sylvie would show up and thrilled at the possibility. Talk about ships that pass in the night.

Right around this time, however, as Danny opened a newspaper and lit up a cigarette, I nodded off. The back of the box of the Fedora Pill had warned about occasional lapses of consciousness - one wasn't supposed to stay up so late, after all. The only indication I had about how much time had passed was in the new color of the world - which is to say, colorlessness. It was night. But of course I didn't know how long twilight normally lasted. This could've made for an interesting thought puzzle but there wasn't much point in dwelling on it.

Fedora was getting his ass kicked.

I'd been in a couple fights before and had been fascinated by how little the whole ordeal actually hurt. The adrenaline coursing through my veins had perfectly delayed all the inflicted sensoria, making it at least a few hours of pause between the punch and the pain - so that a boy hitting me (for I had been a boy myself) registered only as profound muscle memory and not so much a thing experienced at the time. This, however, was even weirder.

The guy throwing the punches was a stranger to me. He was short, angry and fierce. An unregulated mop of eggplant hair (obviously dyed) bounced loosely from his narrow, pale head as his fists played the same number on Danny's arms and chest. Danny, for his part, acquitted himself admirably. On the balls of his feet, he took the pounding standing up, deflecting the occasional blow, getting in one of his own from time to time.

The little dude said, "Motherfucker!"

To which Danny smartly responded, "Fuck you motherfucker!" And they

commenced the fisticuffs. I could feel Danny's response time slowing, a gluey sluggishness incorporating into his battered frame. They were outside a club, boxing on a heavily stained sidewalk littered with discarded flyers in the steady fluorescent glow of a nearby streetlamp. A small crowd of youngish hooligans had gathered and were cheering them on. *Helluva time to pass out*, I thought, oblivious to the circumstances of the fight. Danny's opponent was bleeding from his nose but appeared otherwise untouched. He had cheap tattoos on his arms extending from beneath his black and red t-shirt to down around his wrists.

And then, with no warning, we popped him real good right in the kisser and the dude hit the ground like an imploded building. As the crowd disseminated into the night, Danny stared woozily down at him, then walked away along the sidewalk.

In Fedora's head, peering through Fedora's eyes, I was ten feet tall.

He found a public restroom in a gas station to clean up. The reflection in the mirror gave a quick lie to my feeling of triumph. I'd been hit and hit hard. Danny washed his face, gingerly blew his nose and pissed out latte for what seemed like ages. He was an animal, I thought, roaming the streets and kicking the crap out of people. For my part, having been only on the receiving end of abuse for some time, I found it all oddly attractive. He bought Band-Aids and applied them under our right eye and left cheek. The little dude had worn rings. "How do you like that..." he muttered.

When Danny reentered the outside world he took a deep breath that I heard rumble from his chest and filtered twice through our ears. Then he made his way to a bar I'd never been to before called *Toppers*. It was dark and mostly empty, soft country-

western music, a couple guys shooting pool in a dimly lit corner, cigarette smoke loitering on the ceiling, bartender studying the sports section and one guy in a brown leather jacket, all sighs and elbows, romancing something on the rocks. As Danny approached this man from behind a glimmer of recognition came over me. Something about his posture, his size.

Fedora put a friendly hand on the man's shoulder and said, "Good to see you, Drew."

The face that turned now, though heavily bandaged in gauze under its dark blue fedora, was unmistakably that of Inspector Holliman's.

"Hey Danny," he muttered, returning to his drink.

"How 'bout that beer, Jeff," Fedora said, settling into a stool one down from Holliman.

The bartender slid a frothy stein of ale across the counter to us. "Shit, you're busted up too. What's with you guys?"

"Ah," Danny shrugged with masculine indifference, "some prick jumped me on the street. Never seen him before. Pretty weird."

"You don't know why?" Jeff asked.

"Hopped up on drugs, I guess." I could tell he was lying. "Maybe ticked off over that ball game last night," he pointed to the bartender's *All Sports All the Time* tabloid, deftly changing the subject.

The bartender frowned, returned to his reading, "Tell me about it."

"What about you, Drew? Look like hell."

The man I knew as the Inspector hardly moved as he spoke, his Hair's elan

completely absent. "Don't know either. Woke up in a hospital the other day all fucked up. I gotta go back tonight."

"Can hardly see you for all that wrapping," Danny said. I was impressed with his knack for easy banter. I had never felt comfortable around gruff men of few words, sluicing their hours into a foamy keg's spill of beer, quiet but crackling with a knowledge of the darker world earned by their own sweat.

Jeff leaned back on a chair behind the register and tugged his magazine authoritatively on either side to straighten it out, "You guys got some messed up Hairs, man."

Danny hefted his beer and took a small drink. "Well, good to have you back, Drew. Just wasn't the same here the past couple nights." His gaze settled briefly on the napkin and the damp rim where the glass had been. He grabbed a pen and began to doodle. Spirals, triangles within triangles, stick-figure men smoking, petting stick-figure cats. In the realm of the arts, at least, Fedora was just as talentless as me. "Think your Hair's in trouble, man?" Danny wondered, glancing quickly at the man next to him before returning to his napkin mosaic. Did Fedoras routinely discuss their Hairs? What *else* was different, submerged in the shadows of this flipside?

"Beats me."

"I'll say," Jeff snorted from behind his sports page.

"Isn't he Cleaver Building? An Inspector, right? That's what you told me?"

"Yeah." Holliman polished off the last of his drink with the savor and relish of a hard drunk, his stare lost momentarily in the melting, brown-tinged ice. Then he nudged the glass away and, as if mechanically, Jeff refilled it. I was beginning to understand

something deep about Drew, but my revelation was delayed when Danny returned his attention to the napkin. In the corner, just legible among his mindless scrawls, he'd written a message:

Are you SEEING this????

"Guess he came across some rough types, huh? Barking down the wrong trail, maybe."

It didn't make sense. Did Fedora know I was watching?

Drew mumbled unintelligibly before clearing his throat and glaring at Fedora, "Just don't talk to me tonight, okay big D? Too much shit going on." *Big D*, I thought, *and I get knucklehead.*

Danny looked away in defeat, "Sure Drew. No problem." He excused himself, found a two-stall bathroom that could safely be said to have seen better days, and stood before the mirror. "Get all that, man?"

He was talking to me, I realized. How did he know?

"You left the box those pills came in in the wastebasket, dummy. You should really be more careful if you're gonna go all espionage on me."

"I'm not spying," I said, "Not like that. I just wanted-"

He talked over me because, of course, I didn't have a voice. I was disembodied in my own brain. "Anyway, I guess you have your reasons. That note you left me the other day: 'Do it'? Are you really ready for the operation, man? 'Cause I could make that happen." He frowned, "But then just when I think you're serious about it you do

something like this-

The roar of a flushed toilet here interrupted Fedora's monologue. His expression in the mirror instantly transformed into fast mortification, a portrait of agony I recognized in the same way long lost siblings might know each other across crowded rooms. A man hiking up his pants and casting mirror-reflected suspicious glances Danny's way grunted and exited the bathroom, bypassing the basin where Fedora, flush with embarrassment, washed his hands.

"Fuck this," he uttered a moment later, taking a deep breath and opening the door.

"Say, Jeff," he leaned over the bar, signaling the bartender with a crooked finger, "I could really use some *ice* right about now. Know where I could get some?"

Jeff looked at him meaningfully, thought for a spell, wrote out some directions on the back of a guest check, folded it around a book of *Toppers* matches and handed it to Danny. "Give 'em the matches. Tell 'em I sent you." I didn't think anybody made their own matchbooks anymore. I didn't know matchbooks were a thing. I wondered what else Fedora would show me about the world I'd grown up in.

He unwrapped the directions and studied them. They led to the outskirts of town. "Shit, this place is miles away. How 'bout you let me borrow your car there, Jeff?"

The bartender squinted in disbelief, "Are you mental?"

You have no idea, I thought.

"Worth a try." Fedora left his beer half-empty and threw a few dollars next to it.

"Later, Drew."

"Hmm." Drew said.

Outside, the world was awash in buzzing neon, headlights, streetlamps. I was aware, through Danny's peripheral vision, of stars overhead. Stars. They ranged off in every direction, creamy-white holes of almost infinite smallness, pools and rings of them. Everything suddenly made sense. It was awesome. It made sense how man used to look to the sky and see conducted there the symphony of all things. I wanted to fill the sky with everything I knew about history - the sleeping astronomical eons of our progress, our mythology, our daring - and I wanted the sky to fill me with its vast and silent memory.

He strolled slowly down the sidewalk passing homeless Fedoras and youngsters, jet setters weaving drunkenly out of dance clubs, couples arm in arm, gangs of kids nervously smiling, keeping close, high school kids at lunch and the bubble of barbers' conversation permeating out opened shop doors and Fedora concessionaires hawking hot dogs on the corner and Fedora businessmen walking briskly in their nice suits down the sidewalk, talking numbers, and Fedora TV shows, so alien to me, flashed from inside bars and electronics stores while tired Fedora moms tugged little hyper Fedora children on errands to grocery stores and everyone, everyone, wore a hat.

He hung a right into a dark alley at the sight - I guessed - of an oncoming cop. It was typical of our dissonance that where I ran *to* the cops, Fedora kept his distance. *What does it mean then*, I asked myself, *that now I'm on the lam, too?* Dumpsters, garbage cans, at least one croaking bum gripping and nursing from a brown paper bag, finally the alley opened into a tiny parking lot of cracked and littered asphalt. Danny approached a black Ford pick-up with what I assumed were his *ninjafet* - sneaky fast and darting wary looks in every direction. What the hell was he doing?

I had my answer a moment later, as well as the knowledge that when it was my turn to have the body again Fd be dealing with not only a bevy of bruises but also some bloody knuckles, for Danny had punched his way through the driver's side window. A minute later he'd hotwired the engine and was reversing onto the parallel thruway. "Easy as pie," he said, peering into the rear-view mirror, smiling at me with menace, with glee.

Not just an animal. He was a fucking criminal.

Fedora turned the volume up on the radio and drove otherwise in silence down city streets and a long black freeway, headed east. (He said, at one point, glancing into the mirror, "I don't wanna be the guy talking to himself in his car, okay?") A spectacular moon was fleetingly visible to me whenever he looked the right way. Siobhan Turner's sad story not remotely present in my thoughts, I willed him to focus on it - to pull over, get out of the truck, lay down in the grass and just scope out that orb for a cool minute or two. But Danny couldn't care less about the moon. It had hung in the sky as backdrop to his entire life. *I'll promise to show you the sun*, I thought.

The bartender's directions led us into a dark neighborhood of small, dilapidated houses. Rusted cars and tricycles decorated the front lawns as if oxidization existed here in an activist and concerted way - a corrupting, pervasive substance like smog, only invisible - as if even people, when still enough, would be subject to it just by sitting outdoors. Young black men and women caroused in the middle of the street, slow to move out of the way, laughing at the beat-up old truck and making threatening gestures at us. This was a part of the city Fd never seen or wanted to see, but if Danny was nervous at all he didn't reveal it; he was just his steady hands on the steering wheel at the ten and

two and a gaze that I predicted was *steely* out the windshield.

I wondered about these people. I wondered where their high standard of living was, exactly, or if they'd somehow been excised from the deal, like we'd passed a line of demarcation somewhere on that highway separating the world of whites in luxury from blacks in turmoil. I thought that it was awfully late in life to be initiated into that particular mindset, that sympathy; should've been the sort of thing people work out in junior high, surrounded by racially-mixed innocents and full of questions, sincerity, eagerness to get along. But then we hadn't attended that junior high. Now I wondered if anyone had, or if it'd been a fiction foisted upon us by the authorities, a blow dealt equality by pretending there wasn't a problem. They (a new 'they,' a third 'they' stealing onto my train of thought) make us feel okay about racism by portraying a society of non-racists. . .it's okay for *me* to feel this way so long as no one *else* does...

I didn't know anything about black people, and why *not* start now? Maybe, I thought, the process of learning about my own disparity had unlocked my perception and soon I'd begin seeing it everywhere. Not just the blacks and whites or the haves and have-nots, but intricate systems of inequality affecting every imaginable social transaction: the buried sentiments hinted at in our faces, for instance, when we submit to authority, pay a ticket, show up for work early at our boss's behest, stay late, are surprised by guilt coming from who-knows-where.. .all these checkpoints along the way to higher station, each one taking its pound of flesh. It had all seemed so nice and tidy just a few days earlier.

Fedora parked at the curb of a house crawling with people. Relaxed, drinking, smoking, listening to music, they congregated around the porch in the glow of red light

bulbs strung from tree to tree. I was entranced by the dance of shadows. Lawn chairs and broken, stained furniture - evidently ejected from homes of the white west - crowded the well-trodden grass. They leaned against the walls, crouched, sat astride porch railing, and all stared evenly as Danny made his approach.

He ambled to a stop at the foot of the porch stairs, all eyes on him. Guys from the street paid heed and started walking over. "I'm looking for Willie," Danny said. "Heard this was his place."

"You *heat*, badass?" This came from a youthful dude wearing a sports jersey and baggy pants, shoes with enormous white tongues and untied laces. I dubbed him *Baggy*. Baggy elected himself speaker of the porch and regaled Danny from his elevated position, a shine of curiosity in his eyes.

"No, man. Work at a coffee shop."

"Coffee shop dude lookin' for Willie," Baggy laughed, turning to his audience. With that the scene untensed like a man shaking soreness from his shoulders. "You buying then. All right. Follow me, badass." *You buyin din. Ayight.*

He was fearless, I realized. Somehow, with no inflection or accent, he spoke their language. So much so, anyway, that they didn't even pat him down before leading him into the house, where all was smoke and thumping bass lines from crackling speakers. Clusters of people coughing in shadowed corners, laughing, bodies you had to step over here and there. The night, I decided, was too claustrophobic for me. I was taken with a quick need for daylight, and space, and white faces that paid me no mind.

Baggy handed Danny off to Willie: a fat, shirtless dude majestic in a reclining pleather chair, women at his feet, passing a bowl that gushed a smoke more delicate than

any I'd ever seen. Or was it just the weird light? A greenish hue to everything in here, the music too loud. I imagined what it smelled like.

Willie coughed, swallowed and made weird nasal noises between his words, "Whuch you lookin' for, dude," handing the pipe off to an invisible taker.

"Some ice." Danny flipped the book of matches into Willie's lap. "Jeff said you could hook me up."

"Just ice? Shit. No thang, man. Follow me."

Willie climbed deliberately to his feet (like he hadn't stood in days) and led Danny into the rear of the house. We passed a kitchen lousy with people working on forties of malt liquor and walked down a hallway of unusual length and narrowness. Willie showed us into the only empty room in the house - empty, that is, save for sophisticated lab equipment and piles of what I quickly gathered were controlled substances.

"How much, my man?" Willie asked, burrowing into a cabinet and withdrawing a plastic sock filled with tiny transparent cubes.

"How about four doses."

"That's 240, dude. But I give you six for an even three."

"You got a deal. Take checks?" Danny was reaching into his back pocket when Willie surveyed him with only slightly amused eyes. "Just kidding."

He made jokes! I was blown away. He made jokes in *this* room.

Fedora put three crisp bills on the nightstand and waited patiently while the fat man dropped six of the cubes into a baggy. Time for me extended into an eternity of teeming worry. I'd never bought drugs before - at least, not like this. Things go wrong.

Things go great and then boom you've fucked up, misstepped, and then on the tube it's always incoherent rage and fists flying and someone gets very very hurt. Time fractured and broke off into a panoply of unthinkable scenarios, and seconds later we were leaving.

O.K., I thought, *now* is when they get us. It had been a trap. It violated all logic that someone like me could walk into a place like this, do a thing and leave unscathed. Not even Fedora was that cool - he couldn't be. We shared a genome.

Appearances were to the contrary, however. Danny leisurely walked down the hall, past the kitchen and into the den. He was just reaching for the doorknob when I spotted trouble out the corner of his eye. It was a woman, mostly shrouded in smoke and shadow, staring at us in a way that was instantly, terrifyingly familiar. Stella. And she recognized me, which could only mean one thing.

Fedora, though, didn't know her. His only chance was to remember her from my dream, and *that* I didn't count as probable. So he continued without pause through the door, acknowledging with his eyes and a nod of his head the presence of Baggy and all the rest, down the porch stairs and toward the pick-up I now fixed on with the concentration of a man sentenced to die receiving mail from the governor. The stolen pick-up was salvation. I flashed back to approaching the yellow Camaro at Haven and sliding behind the wheel of the police cruiser. Someone, someday, would ask me the question, "What's the deal with Danny Knuckles?" And I'd say, "When Danny Knuckles gets into trouble there's always someone else's car around to save him."

Except for this time.

Stella came storming through the front door of the house a second later, "Get that cracker!" she yelled. Danny turned in surprise. His gaze took in a mobilizing mass of

black. They ran at him. They leapt over the porch railing.

Fedora threw himself behind the wheel of the pick-up. With great admiration for his foresight I realized he'd left the engine running (or is it just that you can't easily turn off hotwired cars?), but the kids in the street had already surrounded the truck. Some pointed guns.

"Shit," Danny said. His door came flying open and he was wrenched out. From where I was sitting, they grabbed him without touch, he was taken without fear, and beaten without pain.

A few minutes into it, when Fedora was finally knocked unconscious, I lost the use of his faculties. Deaf and blind, unable to speak or move, feeling nothing at all, I registered the world as dead weight might: a nothingness neither vast nor minute, deep nor shallow. It was like speaking in a dimension without sound, and looking eyeless into a perfected dark, and listening to a world that hadn't *gone* blank and quiet but that had never known even an echo or quanta of light to begin with. My skin had lost its relevance - everything had; I was locked in.

Time, as when standing in Willie's room, lost all reality. How does one measure time when so exactly alone and removed from the observable world? There's no way. For however long it took before I passed out, I had only my thoughts to prove my existence.

Eat my shorts, Descartes.

I became frightened. What if.. .what if somehow Danny'd been killed and I'd persisted only as a remnant of a drug still active in his fading brain? Or if instead I'd somehow been ensnared into an infinite loop of Fedora's eternal soul and would be

trapped here, forever undying and unaccompanied...?

Even my thoughts lost their integrity, unable to remain cohesive under the glare of all my focus: I thought idiotically of particles and waves, and how one was always both, and never, and never measured simultaneously.. .thoughts all skittering undone and loosed without a trace. Thought idiocy in broken, going into the deeps and crazed, like me my own wave particle uncaught or catchable. This will contain you now, this everything, its walls are your walls, you will find and not find yourself there.

And there stirred from the very seat of my fear and echolalia one cogent, paralyzing thought. I heard with eerily precise, false-sound clarity a little mocking voice saying, "Hellooooo? Knucklehead? What if you *are* dead, and *this* is all there *is*"^o

What if they hadn't let Fedora get to some butter?

What if this was my morning, my sunlight, my Sylvie?

What if years had passed already?