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The University of Southern Mississippi

NEXT YEAR IN JUAREZ:

STORIES

by

Christopher Michael Brunt

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2014

ABSTRACT

NEXT YEAR IN JUAREZ:

STORIES

by Christopher Michael Brunt

August 2014

This creative dissertation comprises a collection of short fiction and a critical preface. The preface explores the concept of variousness as it affects the contemporary production of literary fiction. Reference is made to a range of twentieth century writers in order to position the dissertation in a context of literary history. The piece titled “The Essay on Longing” is the first chapter of a novel-in-stories.

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2014

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STORIES

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Christopher Michael Brunt

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2014

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PREFACE

A typical day of work for me begins like this. I wake up smelling the coffee my British-Antiguan wife has put on. The packaging of the coffee claims the beans are Ethiopian Fair Trade, and also that it is produced by Archer Farms, which is an in-house brand from Target, the second -largest retailer in America, which makes me wonder how rigorously fair one's trade with Ethiopian coffee farmers has to be these days to pass muster with the labeling authorities. Or if, for that matter, we still have labeling authorities in this nation of debt ceiling crises and budget sequestration. I am still in bed checking email on my iPhone, which is definitely not a fair trade item. I delete half a dozen auto-generated ads and announcements from Amazon, the *Kenyon Review*, etsy.com, Bank of America, my graduate school's listserv, and the president of the United States. Now upright, I spend an hour in my office on email, social media, an array of online newspapers and magazines and blogs, all of which feed back and forward across a swarming interconnection of platforms and personal relationships that would be much too tedious to try to describe here.

On Al Jazeera's site I read about a mentally ill inmate at Rikers who died from overheating while in solitary confinement. On nytimes.com I read an editorial condemning the Obama administration's secret drone wars in Yemen, Somalia, and Oman. A link on the editorial's sidebar takes me to the Twitter feed of NBA star Metta World Peace, who condemns Pat Riley for not taking his shirt off and reading Shakespeare, condemns the killing of little seals, and announces that he is changing his name again, this time to "Whole Foods Guacamole Dip" (Peace.) A Facebook friend has posted a four minute animation of what cosmologists believe may happen after our

galaxy has collided and merged with Andromeda. I learn that this event will be unspeakably beautiful, but also very dangerous. I ask Google, “What is the most dangerous neighborhood on earth?” then use Google Earth to take virtual walks through the slums of Caracas, Cité Soleil in Port-au-Prince, and East St. Louis. I watch a forty-five second recap of last night’s episode of *Louie*, pausing it midway to type notes for an essay I am writing about George Saunders. I respond to an email from an editor at a literary journal who is publishing one of my poems. I conduct all of this browsing with the background awareness that there has been another mass shooting in California, twelve US states are about to run out of water, and bloody explosions have rocked cities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria, and Thailand. With my second cup of coffee, I angrily read an article about the \$1 trillion of student loan debt owed by US students, and then I quit reading it and call my father. I want to know if the combined amount of student loan debt my wife and I owe is more than the value of my parents’ house in Texas. My father doesn’t pick up, but I already know the answer is yes. Something in me feels vindicated, alone, numb, powerless, and suspicious of every institution on earth. Based on my morning reading, I decide I am morally implicated in at least sixteen different incidents of social injustice worldwide, mostly having to do with my own consumption of goods and my failure to resist the forces of imperialism and exploitation both at home and abroad. My wife calls to me from the other room. We are running low on coffee beans. It is time to work, meaning it is time to write fiction.

How to represent modernity in art is a problem as old as modernity itself. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was a ripped-from-the-headlines response to the Gun Powder Plot of 1605, whose conspirators the playwright had personal ties to. It is not coincidental

that *Faust*, Goethe's tragedy of ambition and desire, appears in the middle of the Industrial Revolution, arguably the most dramatic economic and social upheaval in human history. Similarly, the intrusions and disruptions of mass media and culture are nothing new to the situation of the artist. Tuning out (or piercing through) the cultural noise is a problem taken head-on by the high moderns, satirized and savaged by the postmodernists, often ignored or surrendered to by American writers of the millennium. What I am interested in is the variousness of everyday life as the dominant feature of our cultural moment, and what the implications of this variousness may be for literary art. By variousness I mean the constant and unlimited availability of diverse narratives and discourses—the cultural, political, and historical stories that we both seek and are surrounded by, day in and day out.

The variousness of the writer's daily world can be paralyzing, even before the morning's second cup of coffee. But to pretend it isn't so is to write a false world. Storytelling is my response to the chaos and the noise—an attempt to impose formal order on the random mess of the world, to locate ethical meaning in the hurricane of history and culture. The variousness of our cultural moment warrants a varied literary approach. This means, for me, that crafting only one voice, one style or genre, one Yoknapatawpha County or one Dublin, will never be enough. My imagination runs a fever, turned restless by technology and globalization and American-style free-range multiculturalism and all other aspects of the variousness of living right now. My project then is to make a collection of stories that sends the reader through the gauntlet I run myself each morning: cultural whiplash, ontological bewilderment, the frequent unsettling sense of lost in translation-ness, bad faith politics and ecological dread,

vanishing boundaries in every conceivable organization of personal and social life. On the one hand, this strategy is a mimetic response to the world as I see it. The difference is that in my fiction, as opposed to the morning's newsfeed, the reader has a chance to see vivid human beings at the center of all that mayhem. I believe that it is still within literature's power to represent the human subject with depth of thought and feeling, moral complexity, inner darkness and light.

In the preface to *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman writes that modernism can be understood as, "The struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world" (15). He continues, "To be modern . . . is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find ones world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air" (15). I like these definitions because they put words to the tensions in what I mean by 'variousness.' There is much pathos in that modernist struggle, and nostalgia, and delusion, and rage: all prime emotional energies for fiction to make use of. Berman goes on to cite Nietzsche's "new man" who can create the "new values that modern men and women need to steer their way through the perilous infinities in which they live" (Berman 23). I believe the artists who came after Nietzsche *did* create new values. At the very least, they debunked many of the stagnant, retrograde ones, the ones which were rhetorical cover for conquest, superstition, and bigotry. I do not know many writers today who talk about creating new values. More often, we are trying to recuperate the values we lost with all the others: human dignity and freedom and mercy. This is a job that once again requires new language, new kinds of stories, new ways for literature to behave. To write fiction which traffics in the

variousness of everyday life is to run the risk of non-sequitur, or never-ending chains of associations, or a reference field with too short a shelf life. But it also promises the discovery of opportunities for alchemical wit, combinatory magic, revelations from the whirlwind. I am interested in the mess and the melting.

The stories in this collection range from the closely controlled realist drama to the fabulist comedy to the story-within-a-story which is also a literary imitation-within-a-story. They are, in other words, various in their styles, form, and technique. But each of these stories depends on the success of its voice, whether a narrating third-person or the first-person stories in a more oral register. The fictional voice becomes the single channel into which the maelstrom of the world is fed. It is the product of the chaos and at the same time a strategy to reconcile the various and competing facets of the story's reality. Taken together, these stories differ widely in their geography, the ethnic and class makeups of their characters, and the fields of historical and cultural knowledge brought to bear on the fictional worlds. But all of these considerations begin with voice, and voice is always a manifestation of character. My characters are, in one way or another, stricken with a bad case of variousness. They are exiles in their own cultures and times, struggling with the instrument of their own voice to make themselves cohere.

Another way to address the anxieties that come from variousness is to simply put the anxiety in the mouth of the character, as Denis Johnson does in this crude revelation about certainty in *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man*:

English thought of those days, the mornings, afternoons, and evenings
before the First World War, as a time when everything made sense.

Everybody shared a philosophy of life as basic as the soil and as obvious

as the sky. You couldn't go sixty or sixty-five down a turnpike and end your journey in a city of thunder and smoke. He envied the people of Bloomfield their assumptions, even though he couldn't have said, exactly, what their assumptions had been. He just knew that in those days the world had been founded on things everybody understood. (154)

It is fitting here that Johnson's Lenny English settles on the image of the car to represent his idea. This image has a double-sidedness which Marshall Berman would approve of: a machine of grace, speed, and power that delivers its operator to a state of confusion, disorder, helplessness, and awe. We create vehicles to cross borders and boundaries, to encounter the opposing truths held by others who appear to be unlike us. The new kind of travel in our millennial era is virtual, mediated by a screen and a wi-fi signal. The connections we can make now are faster and more far-reaching than ever before, but they can also deliver the traveler to an equal and opposite state of passivity and paralysis. (To echo Berman, echoing Marx: In the modern world, everything is pregnant with its contrary.) I don't envy the stable old world of Johnson's Lenny English and neither, I suspect, does Johnson. It is exactly this condition of flux, of philosophical confusion, of porous borders, of "cities of thunder and smoke" that I am trying to recreate and interrogate in my fiction. I am trying to find a way through the "perilous infinities," to discover what virtue can mean in this labyrinth of virtual reality (Berman 23).

"The Essay on Longing" presents a way to understand variousness as a kind of straight-faced surrealism for the postmillennial world. Reading about Rousseau and other socially maladjusted philosophers got me thinking about the public lives of great thinkers of the past, about their commitments to movements and states and to each other. The

Enlightenment legacy is supposed to be gloriously alive in our society's liberality, our freedom to think and argue and pursue truth at all costs without fear of censorship or official punishment. We now live in a world where everything is permitted, but everyone is watching everyone else. So what would happen if social media and reality TV and celebrity culture existed during the Enlightenment? Philippe's voice is a product of that collision of the public and private, the petty and the Platonic. Interweaving the historical period with the contemporary allowed me to ask in a dramatic way which of our classical ideas about romantic longing (and other forms of idealism) still hold in our commercialized society. "The Prodigals" is another voice-driven narrative but with a more realistic presentation of world. I wanted to take the narratives of fraternal feuds from ancient culture and import them into one of the most raucously modern places on earth, which is my hometown of Houston, Texas. The old narrative, however, seemed to demand a dual setting to accommodate its dueling brothers, and the story's action shifted to another modern city in the middle of the old world: Beirut. I am interested in how place can become fused with character, so that an abrupt change in geography becomes a disorientation in psychology, a crisis of belief motivated by environment. Vận is a character who thinks he is as worldly and open to change as Bellaire Boulevard, but the smallness of his emotional life and the limitations of his vision only become clear when he journeys across the ocean and is forced to come to terms with the alternate reality represented by his brother Dinh.

Taking on too much variousness can have its pitfalls, which is why the crafting of a strong, singular voice was so important for each of these individual stories. For any character, and even for the writer of that character, there is a line somewhere between the

charisma of an eclectic sensibility and an unproductive mania, between the polymath and the dilettante. In the story “Man and Other Vanishings,” I tried to imagine a writer, Frank, who ends up swallowed by the variousness of his own artistic imagination. His daughter, Natalie, is charged with a kind of literary reconstructive surgery: piecing the story of her father’s humanity back together through the mess of text he’s left behind. With Frank I wanted to create a character who could become any sort of person using his own creativity and passionate energies, but cannot sit still long enough to care for the people right next to him, or to let himself be cared for. He cannot see how his constant morphing and shapeshifting is a strategy for isolating himself from real human relationships. His fervors turn into delusions, and delusions can work as a protective only for a while. Frank turns himself into so many people that in the end, he is nowhere to be found.

All of these stories are attempts at capturing variousness and using it like a vehicle to travel to a new and provisionally stable ground. In this light, variousness is a similar idea to what Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* calls “the historical sense”: “Our instincts can now run back in all sort of directions; we ourselves are a kind of chaos. The historical sense really amounts to an instinct for everything, a taste and tongue for everything” (115). What is crucial for art is whether the artist can use all of the various cultural and historical ephemera to tell us something true and lasting about ourselves. What moral commitments are still possible, still necessary, in a society built on virtual connections? What should we value in ourselves and in each other when all the old categories of identity—familial, religious, racial, professional, national—have been

blended, stretched to the rhetorical breaking point, or emptied out altogether? These are the kinds of questions a fiction of variousness can ask.

I am trying to write a book that offers up a cross-breed compendium of every literary genre, verbal style, human type, and geographical and historical setting that catches my interest, not because I want my fiction to be all things to all people, but because that is how the world presents itself to me. I want a book that, when it's over, feels to the reader a little like Belize's heaven in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*: "A big dance palace full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion And all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers Race, taste, and history finally overcome" (210). This, more or less and variously, is the beginning.

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NEXT YEAR IN JUAREZ

The last time this type of celestial event was visible from Earth was more than seven hundred years ago. The Dark Ages. Dante was at work on the *Commedia*, writing in the mornings, breaking at noon to masturbate and have his tea, then back at his desk until dusk. King Philip IV ordered the kidnapping of Pope Boniface, had him beaten, taunted, and threatened with castration before letting him walk, after which he shortly died. Next, King Philip IV expelled the Jews from France. These events having no causal relation of which we are aware. One night over the spires of Avignon, over the mountains of Ethiopia, above the narrow sandy mouth where the Yellow River empties into the Bohai Sea, six thousand meteors burned sideways and fast across a sky already luminous with stars. The Aztecs land in Tehnóchtlan. The Hundred Years' War begins.

~

Javier left the stack of ungraded midterms on his desk and said a stern goodbye to Saint-Simon, his doubletail betta fish who a week ago had murdered her bowl-mate. He poked his head in the other TA's office to return a borrowed Bourdieu, then cut out early to beat the dreaded Houston rush hour. Javier was in his third year of graduate study to become a historian, which in 2013 was as sensible as saying you would like to become an apothecary.

But tonight was the night he was going to propose to Nalani. He couldn't afford a ring yet so instead he would give her a meteor shower. She had no idea what was coming, he'd only said they were going out for the night to celebrate her return home from Haiti. In their three years together she had let him surprise her many times and often, he could admit, in grandiose ways. But this was different. This was the universe going over the

top—his role in it was simple. At home he stashed what they would need in a backpack and took it down to the car: plastic glasses, a bottle of wine, a big wool blanket, and the binoculars that his father had given him years ago. Heavy vintage Bushnells his father used to wear around his neck to baseball games and pass to Javier so he could see the tiny left-fielder crouch in fine, stereoscopic detail, see the pleats in his pants, the wrinkles in his jersey. His father who had never proposed to his mother. The baseball fanatic and fearless journalist who had been dead almost ten years, struck down in the street by a police bullet while covering the labor union protests in Mexico City. His death had been almost surely unintentional, though this made no difference to the popular Left, who still celebrated him as a great martyr. “Every shot fired from a gun has someone’s name on it,” says Diderot in 1756.

“Are we going somewhere outside? Maybe I’ll get some hash,” Nalani said. She was standing in the lamplight of their bedroom, removing her bra. She had lost a little weight again in Haiti, her third and most frustrating trip this year. The NGO’s funding had dried up and she was the lead grant writer. It was a regular and permanent fact of their lives now, her flights to Port-au-Prince, but Javier still remembered the first time she left, how scared he was for her, how afraid he was for himself, of what he’d lose if anything happened to her on that wild and broken island, still smoking from where the earth had ruptured and cracked open and threatened to drown everyone in fire and sea. Javier twisted the wheels on the ocular lenses until Nalani’s nipples were perfectly in focus. Black as a night with no moon.

“¿Las drogas por nosotros?” Javier said. Neither of them had smoked in a long time. He didn’t want her stoned when he got down on one knee and delivered the elegant sentence he still hadn’t quite perfected.

“Lisa more or less requires it,” Nalani said, wiggling into her jeans.

“Wait, you invited Lisa?” he said.

“Yeah why wouldn’t I?”

“I thought we could have a night alone,” he said.

Nalani looked at him suspiciously. “What’s up your sleeve?”

“Nothing. Let her come. I’m glad she’s coming.” He watched his girlfriend watching herself in the mirror as she clothed her long, beautiful body. “You’re gonna want a sweatshirt,” he said.

Nalani moved closer until her stomach almost touched the binoculars. He refocused so he could see the minuscule grooves in her skin. An Englishman named Robert Hooke discovered the cell in 1655, staring through a crude lens at bits of cork. He called them cells because they made him think of the cramped domiciles of monks. Nalani lowered the binoculars with her hand, gently. She shrieked, then laughed as Javier scooped her around the waist and heaved her over his shoulder onto the bed.

Lisa was Nalani’s old friend from Cornell. She had finished her doctorate in Vienna and had recently accepted a prestigious laboratory job in Houston and Nalani had been inviting her everywhere they went. It was sort of like they’d adopted a thirty year-old foreign exchange student who had more money than they did. Which was alright with Javier, because he liked Lisa. She was smart and had lived all over Europe and spoke all the languages and was socially conscious on issues Javier hadn’t even known were issues

to be conscious about, such as bottled water, and mental health parity, and not putting cat litter in plastic bags. Javier liked to tell her that she was making good penance for having been born a white devil. “It’s not your fault,” he would tell her. “We forgive you,” Nalani would say.

Before they left, Nalani took a call and went out onto the balcony and Javier watched her through the glass. She’d started cheating on cigarettes again in Haiti and she lit one, leaning over the railing. Javier imagined her thirty years from now, still thin but in a long wraparound instead of jeans, her braids going gray, and the image he called up made him feel a somber kind of peace. Where he was rashly insecure and chased by self-doubt, she was salty, methodical, and had an almost lordly equanimity. He thought of the first time he saw her, at a gallery show where an awful experimental noise band was playing and where Javier, tipsy, had offered her a cigarette out on the sidewalk and insulted the music only to hear her respond that the guy playing the circuit-bent cello was her date. He watched her laughing through the balcony glass and imagined her pregnant, hand on the curve of her belly, smiling at him just as she was right now, only without the smoke wriggling up from her fingers. There was still a lot of ways he couldn’t conjure her. He would love her his whole life and never get to the bottom.

She slid open the door and came inside. “Hash is a go.”

~

Javier took them all for paella at a new Spanish place off West Gray where they sat at the bar and Nalani pressed Lisa for updates on the Samantha Situation. Lisa had only been out for a couple years and was always in some calamitous relationship and Javier liked hearing about her drama. He and Nalani were so steady, such natural partners

that hearing about someone else's romantic turbulence was somehow invigorating, like hearing a stranger talk about the dangerous city you used to live in but haven't visited for years. After dinner they walked to the art house cinema, where Javier had meant for them to see the new Woody Allen film—a madcap romance set in Rome. But when they got there, Lisa insisted that they see *Battle of Algiers*. Nalani cried twice during the film. Javier thought the movie was excellent, but it was long and exhausting and nowhere near the mood he had intended to set. Still, it was a distraction from his nerves, which otherwise would've been unbearable. He let himself be transported by the film, forgetting the big moment to come, forgetting Nalani, keeping all those feelings in reserve for later. It almost felt like a typical night.

“So much glamour in those kinds of wars,” Javier said, as the three of them walked out of the quiet theater, “I find myself trying so hard not to romanticize it.”

“He says, while totally romanticizing it,” Nalani said.

“Girl, please,” said Javier.

Lisa was gazing out at the glimmering lights of downtown. “You guys want to go to The Mink?” she smiled hopefully.

“We can't tonight,” Javier said quickly.

“Why not?” Nalani said.

“Just follow me,” he said, and turned to walk.

Nalani jostled Lisa's arm teasingly as they crossed the street. “Let her wonder where you are,” Nalani said.

Samantha was Lisa's most recent ex-girlfriend, a Belgian folksinger who had followed her here to Houston uninvited. When Lisa reacted with understandable alarm,

Samantha rented an apartment anyway and began playing sets in all the bars in their neighborhood, dating women three at a time in a sexual offensive, as if she was trying to claim every young lesbian in Houston before Lisa could get her bags unpacked. The Belgian Invasion, Javier had called it.

Nalani announced for the second time that she had not enjoyed the paella. There were bones in her fish. Walking behind the girls, Javier mulled over the book he hoped his dissertation would become. A daring reevaluation of twentieth-century insurgencies worldwide, from the Salvadoran Peasant Massacre to the campaigns of Ché to Hamas. It was the type of work his department liked to sneer at, more social criticism or political theory than hard-core historical research. But if he could define the abstractions with grace and force, make them crystallize, it would be a very important book. His notion of “radical empathy” could recast the debate for the west, force a new term into the stale dialectic of terrorists, states, and ideologies. He, it, could transfigure the dominant political realism of his era. This, Javier knew, was the real reason his professors were so critical of it. It was sloppy, they told him, and would never get published. They wanted him to be as small and ordinary and fastidious as they were themselves. But Javier did not want to be a sterile academic. He wanted to be a dangerous thinker, a public intellectual, no more a historian from Texas than Marx was an economist from Trier. And who better than Nalani, the firebrand activist, the person who had inspired the very idea of radical empathy, to be his partner and wife? They would be theory and praxis in the flesh.

It was dark for their long walk from one end of West Gray to the other. Javier slipped his arm around Nalani's waist and when they got to the cafe on the corner he guided her inside.

"Disgusting," Lisa said as they stood in line for coffee. "That war. The slaughter of children."

"Too long by half an hour," Nalani said.

"Everyone should have listened to Camus," said Javier.

~

"Galveston?" Nalani said, when Javier steered them onto southbound I-45. Javier could hear the hollow effort in her voice. Though she'd been back three days, she was still tired from her trip—not even the espresso had helped. There was a traffic jam on the causeway and Javier had to rev the little car in rocking starts up the steep bridge. It was easy to imagine them giving in to gravity, rolling backwards, smashing into the cars behind. At the top of the causeway they could see that the whole descent onto the island was a string of red taillights. A clear spring night over the waxy, dimpled bay.

"Are all these people doing the same thing we're doing?" Nalani said.

"I didn't know Texans were so adventurous," said Lisa, from the backseat.

"We're an outdoorsy people but this ends up creating lots of traffic," Javier said.

He was trying to text Lisa as he drove without letting Nalani see. "When I give you the signak," he typed, "Give uf some spave." He waited for the beep of Lisa's phone, watching her in the rear-view, but she stared out the window lost in some worry or fantasy. When the beep finally came she did not seem to notice.

They made it to the seawall and walked down to the dark beach where tribes of people were gathered around small fires and gas lanterns, shouting and laughing over the sounds of radios and drunken horseplay, the bark of dogs. A group of colorful people were gathered around lawn chairs and already holding signs up to the sky though it was barely past ten o' clock. The signs were done in glow-in-the-dark letters and said things like "COME TO ME MY DARLINGS" and "WE ARE NOT LIKE THE OTHERS." A fat man in a Texans jersey was grilling hotdogs. Two little sugar-high blonde children ran shrieking between Nalani and Lisa, the girl terrorizing her brother, her fingers locked over her ears like horns. They walked past a sober trio of women who seemed to be quarreling politely as they set up telescopes and lab-grade camera equipment. From the opposite direction, a man walked by them in the edge of the surf, calling out for "Quincy" in a grim voice. Javier led the three of them past the campfires, far out beyond the hotels to a deserted bank of sand and spread out their blanket. It was a little windy but the Gulf night was dense and warm and the wine made it warmer. They laid on their backs a few feet from shore and looked up at the sky, black and thick as custard. There was no moon. This, Javier thought, was perfect. Nalani lit a joint and passed it to Javier, who immediately passed it across to Lisa.

"Those binoculars are not going to show you much," Lisa said.

Javier thought about it for a minute, held the lenses to his eyes, saw abject darkness. He felt like an idiot. He put the binoculars behind them, out of sight. "I know," he said. "I just brought them to weigh down our blanket."

Nalani laughed through her nose. "Is there supposed to be an eclipse or something?" she said.

“How have you not heard about this?” Lisa said, blowing on the cherry so it roasted brightly in the dark.

“I been in Haiti, man,” Nalani said.

“Don’t tell her,” Javier said to Lisa.

“Yeah don’t tell me,” Nalani said.

They laid there like three mystics waiting for the sky to erupt and they talked about Samantha and the virtues of reckless love. Javier tried to listen but he had become nervous, all at once, that Nalani would say no. He needed her more than ever. Something about Lisa being here made him see that. He took a light drag from the joint to calm the skipping muscle in his chest.

Javier thought he saw a meteor but it was only the blinking light of a plane making incremental progress through the night. He listened to the still-cold waves folding over in their meek little rows. There was nothing to fear.

“What if you had to choose between love and the revolution?” Nalani said to him, knocking his feet with hers. “Comes down to one moment. There you are in the spotlight. It’s me or the struggle.”

“The *Casablanca* problem,” Javier said. The hash was making the words slow down in his mouth so he could feel each syllable form like its own object, a strange, sculpted, original thing. “*Rick...*” he said, in his Peter Lorre whine. “*Hide* me, please.”

“Stop stalling,” Lisa said. From the other side of the blanket her voice was thin and far away.

“I’d pick you, every time,” Javier said, finding Nalani’s warm fingers in the dark. He sounded sentimental, he knew, but tonight was a night to be sentimental.

“He’s the Anti-Bogart,” Lisa said.

“I don’t know,” Nalani said. Her slender body was between him and Lisa but she seemed to occupy more significant space than they did, like she was the main idea of the blanket. “Sometimes people hide out in love,” she said. “Hide from the world. It can be a kind of selfishness. Like if Rick had gone with Ilsa. You fall in love and all you see, all you want to see is yourself reflected back in the other person. Meanwhile the world is on fire.”

“Nietzsche says it’s only in love that we can forget ourselves entirely, therefore only love has within it the truth of the knowledge of death,” Javier said.

“Yeah,” Lisa said. “Because when I want to understand erotic love, I open my Nietzsche.”

“Don’t be scared of him,” said Javier. “He had syphilis. He knew.”

He heard Lisa flicking the lighter, trying to get another joint going, but the wind wasn’t letting it spark.

~

There were hundreds of stars but none of them would move. Javier decided he would do it soon no matter what. Maybe the astronomers had gotten it wrong. But he always felt lucky and brave when he came to Galveston. For five wild years after 1817, until Andrew Jackson finally had enough, this island was the pirate colony of the sensational Lafitte brothers, their haven in Spanish Texas for revolutionaries, smugglers, and slavers. The brothers’ politics were not discerning—ill-gotten gold was their lone criteria of alliance. Every inch of the beach the three of them were laying on had been dug up time and again by parties in search of that treasure.

“Let’s play the game,” Lisa said.

“What game?” Javier said. She had to have seen his text by now.

“You have to name things that aren’t worth being afraid of,” Nalani explained.

“We used to play this all night in the dorm at Cornell and it took forever because Lisa isn’t scared of anything.”

“But if someone names something you are afraid of, you have to admit it, and drink everyone’s liquor,” Lisa said.

“And then we laugh at you,” Nalani said.

“You start,” Lisa said to Javier.

“Alien abductions,” he offered.

“Poisonous snakes,” said Nalani.

“Resounding failure in one’s chosen professional field,” Javier said.

“Horrible disfigurement of the body,” Nalani said.

“I’m afraid of that,” said Javier, raising his glass. Nalani had shown him pictures of earthquake victims in Haiti, little kids with severed limbs and shrunken heads, women with burns covering their bodies like a second skin. The kinds of injuries he would rather die from than be asked to sustain.

Lisa finally got the joint lit. Then she let out a little cry of surprise, pointing high up over their heads. It was beginning.

~

Javier was gazing at another solitary faint blinking tracer when he heard a man’s voice carrying on the moist and salty wind. The voice got closer and closer and then it was right behind them, a young man’s voice.

“That’s what I thought. Y’all found my binoculars.”

Javier craned his neck around. There were six of them and they all had their shirts off, their white chests and shoulders a hazy pale blue in the darkness. Javier wasn’t sure, but it looked like a few of them were wearing makeup or warpaint or maybe some kind of camouflage. Another one said, “This is a private beach.”

Javier started to get to his feet but they crowded in on every side and the guy who spoke first came rushing in fast like he was going to drop-kick Lisa in the head. He stopped right before and laughed in a high, strained cackle. The kid was shorter than the others but muscular and stocky and his bald head veered around rhythmically, like he was hearing some hypnotic music in his head. Nalani sat up so Javier did too. He couldn’t see much in the dark but he could smell them, their onrushing stink of booze and sweat and something else, a fever. Nalani let go of his hand.

“What’d you take my binoculars for?” the bald one said.

“These are mine,” said Javier, realizing he was clutching them tightly with both hands. Then he added, “Did you really lose a pair?” and made a show of looking up the dark beach as if they might be laying around somewhere, stranded among the seaweed.

The bald one kicked sand in Javier’s face.

“Just leave us alone,” Nalani said. Several of them laughed in that same high cackle. They were out of high school but not by much, teenagers with no belief in consequences.

“Look. We’re here to watch the astronomical event,” said Javier. He realized that talking like one of their teachers was his only plan to make himself seem like a real person.

“This guy’s a fucking faggot,” said someone behind him.

The bald one was pacing now, swearing at Javier, getting more and more enraged as he slapped his own chest. He kept saying the same unintelligible phrase over and over, gnashing the words, his voice rising an octave.

All the kids were shouting now like this was what they had come to see. Like Javier was the Christian in a gladiator ring. “Do it, Mason!”

Javier stayed propped on his elbows. He knew the second he got to his feet they’d be all over him. One of the kids gave a twisting kick and a wall of sand flew up, swept over them all. Nalani shouted in protest.

Mason was standing still now, his arms held out open at his sides like a priest. Then he pointed at Javier’s face.

“You guys are pathetic. This is stupid,” said Lisa.

For a second there was a brittle silence. Javier could not believe she said that. As if she was the one who’d have to back it up. He felt the need to apologize for her. Then everyone was in motion. Somebody ripped the binoculars out of Javier’s hand as another yanked him by the hood of his sweatshirt, dragging him backward off the blanket.

“Ok, ok” Javier said, getting to his feet, stepping carefully over Nalani and in front of the one called Mason. “Look,” Javier said. He trembled. “We don’t want any trouble at all. Please. Just leave.”

Mason took a small step away and then lurched into Javier’s gut. Javier caught one of his own teeth wrong and almost bit it out. He was on his knees with all his wind knocked out, like his whole torso was sealed shut. He let out a croak for air but none came for an excruciating minute and during that minute he knew he would suffocate, his

fists squeezing mounds of damp sand. It was taking too long for him to breathe. He heard Nalani yelling something. Or Lisa. Both their voices mingling in the same frequency of panic.

When Javier could finally breathe, it was too late. The kids were ripping through his pockets for his wallet and phone. A thin kid with a mouth of smeared paint grabbed the car keys off the blanket and got up close to Javier's face and shook the keys, smiled ghoulishly, then whipped Javier across the eyes. Javier held his face in his hands and someone pushed his head down into the sand and as Nalani and Lisa were cursing someone kicked him in the ear. He lay there, a roundness of shock forcing his eyes wide open into the sand. The keys dropped on the back of his head and slid coldly down his neck.

“Monkey nigger!” one of them yelled at Nalani, and then they all started yelling it like a chant, surrounding her and Lisa. Nalani was screaming now in a voice that was feral and raw and that Javier had never heard before. He saw them grabbing her by the shoulders and twisting her by the feet while Mason leaned over and slowly felt at her pockets, his hands heavy and mocking. When he reached for her breasts Nalani ripped an arm free and knocked his hands away. “Get the fuck away from her!” Javier screamed, his voice stripped and weak. Lisa yelled that she was calling the cops, but then her cries were muffled. Someone's fingers were still tightening around Javier's neck. Nalani was snarling. The kids let out a whoop, laughing as she fought one-handed. A loud pop— Nalani had smacked Mason on his face with her open palm. Mason stumbled back and stood upright, stunned. The hand released his neck and Javier felt around in the darkness for the metal corkscrew. He was going to kill them all. Mason loomed over Nalani,

wordless, and for an instant everything hovered and seemed to expand. Javier gazed into the pale of Mason's throat. His fingers closed around cold metal.

And then they were gone, roaming in a pack down the beach. They went as quick as they came, walking farther west away from the hotels, deeper into the darkness, and soon they were out of sight. Javier watched himself running after them, skimming barefoot down the beach and hitting Mason in the back of the head with the wine bottle. Cracking his skull apart, hammering it into dust. But he hadn't moved. His body was shaking in spasms and he went down on one knee to where Nalani sat pulling slow, even breaths.

Lisa was standing a few feet away, close to the water, holding herself by her elbows. "Where are the keys? Do we have keys?" Lisa said. She was wandering back and forth but she wasn't looking at anything.

Javier couldn't see Nalani's face. "Are you ok?" he said, touching her arm. His hand was shaking and he could barely speak.

"I'm fine," she said, and the flatness of her voice was a shock in the dark and just then high up behind her a great white light sped throbbing through the sky.

~

Javier gunned it over the bridge too fast. "Motherfucking animals." His hands were shaking so violently, waving really, he had to bring his knee up to the steering wheel to keep control. He angled his face away from the girls and tried to breathe.

Lisa leaned up from the backseat and peered at the dashboard. "Can you slow down?" she said.

“We should’ve called the fucking cops,” Javier said, weaving around a sluggish van.

“No we shouldn’t have” Nalani said. “There’s a hundred kids on that beach. You want them to round up the usual suspects?”

“Yeah,” Lisa said, as if they were discussing something normal. “I think it would’ve done more harm than good.”

Javier slammed the steering wheel with his fist. Lisa’s head retreated. Nalani reached over and put her hand on the back of Javier’s neck and pressed her fingers there for a long time, kneading surely into the skin.

~

For days afterwards Javier was despondent and sore, staring into books without reading, staring out the living room window at the chinaberry trees while a dim white noise rose and fell in his mind. On Monday morning he tried to go to campus but the drive was a nightmare—every turn a head-on collision. He startled at phantom horns bleating in outrage each time he changed lanes on the highway. By the time he pulled into the parking lot he was late for his class and too racked with dread to get out of the car. His students would be eyeing the whiteboard, texting their friends, wondering when they could get up and leave. Their midterms still untouched on his office desk. He sat there for a while as if listening for a voice to speak, then drove slowly out the backside of campus along the bayou. A mile from home, he jerked against his seatbelt at the blast of a slow-moving train, the clang of harsh bells, and he was staring at the blinking red lights of the lowered crossing arms, the same red as the tail lights strung out in front of him, when he realized he was crying.

He didn't leave the house again for days. He woke one morning midweek in an empty bed. Nalani was in the kitchen with her oatmeal, sliding her finger rapidly over her tablet on the table. Javier stood at the coffee pot but it was switched off and cold. "Don't you think there was something about those kids that was evil? Unreal, almost. They literally emerged out of the darkness," he said.

"We couldn't have done anything different," she said.

"What if we had? What if I'd had a weapon? We didn't know if they did or not."

Nalani blew on her spoon. "Baby, can we please talk about something else?"

He went back to their bedroom and closed the door. When she came in to dress for work he rolled over and pretended to be asleep.

Later, alone, Javier began to call up friends and tell the story over and over, pacing with the phone on his ear from the kitchen to the bedroom, up and down the hall. "It was so bizarre," he always began. He would loath himself with each repetition, but he couldn't stop. The more times Javier answered the same questions, the more perplexed and furious he became by the simplicity of what had happened, its lack of any hidden logic.

A few times he caught himself in the middle of a strange action. One night while waiting for the tea kettle to boil he touched his fingers to the red-hot coils, on purpose but without really thinking. He shouted in pain and Nalani came rushing in. "Accident," he said. She took his hand and held it under the faucet without a word and he felt like a child as he stood there beside her, listening to the run of the tap. Another time, as a friend offered by-now familiar theories about the assault, Javier took a steak knife from the sink and sliced across the palm of his hand. The blood took a dreadfully long second to rise.

By the end of the week, he and Nalani weren't eating dinner together or going to bed at the same time. She'd go in their room at night and Javier, from his chair down the hall, would see the thin glowing line around the door and it would feel like a tense standoff between them until the light went out. He knew she was enduring daily crises at work, just from the length of her evening showers he knew, but her refusal to talk about the incident at the beach felt like a punctuation mark on some awful judgment, the terms of which Javier could not clearly see. He felt like he was living in their apartment alone.

One night he was in the bathtub when Nalani came home. It was late. He'd cancelled his classes for the fourth day in a row and had spent it smoking hash cigarettes and pulling books off the shelves, five or six of which were piled around the bathroom floor. He was on the phone again. "You could feel the evil coming off of them like fumes," Javier said. "My book, my whole theory is falling apart. I'm looking at it like, what the hell have I been writing? Is this a joke? All of it, all of it is worthless."

He heard Nalani come to the bathroom door and pause, then walk to their bedroom and slam the door shut.

"I don't feel sure of anything anymore," Javier said. "Only that I had this corkscrew in my hand and I knew I was going to stab these kids. It was in my entire body, this imperative to kill. It was like I had become as savage as them," Javier said. "They would've deserved it too," he said. "Maybe not in a courtroom, but if you had been there..." The friend tried to say something but Javier cut him off. "You see why people here walk around with guns. Nobody has the right to just come and do that to you. To terrorize you for their own deranged pleasure." The friend said he was just glad no

one was hurt. “If they hadn’t run off,” Javier said, “That beach would’ve had dead fucking kids.”

Then Nalani was in the bathroom, looking at him. Javier told his friend he’d call him back and let the phone drop on the floor.

“You have to stop,” Nalani said. “This is driving me crazy.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re obsessed. And I need you to stop,” she said. “Did you teach your classes today? What really happened to your hand?”

“I’m not obsessed, I’m just trying to fully understand...”

“You don’t need to understand shit, you need to talk it up till you don’t feel like a coward anymore.”

The water in the tub had gone cold and Javier pulled his knees to his chest. “But they were the real thing, they were actual evil, evil without any purpose or responsibility, evil in a tourniquet—” He felt like he was losing control, the words spilling out from some murky access of his mind.

“It was just a robbery,” Nalani said. Her voice was pitiless and calm. “They were kids. Stupid drunk kids.”

He was reaching for the volume of Hannah Arendt on the floor but his arm knocked the ashtray off its ledge. The stubs of hashish cigarettes floated in the bath. “— Because they’re the ones who refuse self knowledge and that’s where real villainy comes from, where genocide and—”

“LISTEN to yourself!” Nalani said.

Javier stared at her. Her hazel eyes were still and not cruel and Javier knew from the swoop in his gut that she was about to bring it up.

“I’ve *had* shit done to me,” she said. “And what happened to us last week was scary for about a minute and then it was nothing. Nothing. You’re fine, I’m fine, Lisa’s fine.”

Whenever Nalani made reference to that particular episode of her past, something in him felt ashamed, though he wasn’t sure exactly why. Maybe ashamed on behalf of all men, or because he had nothing to say to make it any less sick that it had happened, or because he knew that he did not and would never understand what it must have felt like for a nine-year-old girl to suffer that. Or because he’d catch himself scrutinizing these failures of his as she was still talking, trying to tell him how she felt in her measured voice, but he couldn’t hear her for all the vain, analytical natter in his head. Her bringing it up in this context, though, made him angry. It wasn’t fair to bring it up now.

He stood up out of the tub in front of her. Water dripped from his body all over the open white face of *The Wretched of the Earth*. He stood there, naked, staring at the fine braids of Nalani’s hair, the line of glistening sweat on her brow. “My dad’s binoculars are gone,” he said. “Forever.”

“I don’t think I’m in love with you anymore,” she said.

His eyes fell to her waist, then to the floor. He realized he was staring at a line of moving water as it spread in a thin column and made for Nalani’s bare brown toes, like its will was to reach her. Somehow he already knew everything.

“I didn’t cheat on you but I want to start seeing another person,” she said.

“Haiti?”

She nodded slightly. “He lives here though.”

It was very quiet in the bathroom. He could hear the steam moving in the air between them.

“I was going to ask you to marry me that night.”

“I know,” she said. “That’s why I had Lisa come.”

He took the towel she gave him and dropped it at her feet.

~

Most meteors are smaller than a grain of sand. They originate as the dust trails of comets orbiting the sun, then begin to orbit the comet, then finally move into our path. Or we move into theirs. Or it’s a bit of both. What we are seeing is the vaporization of cosmic dust as it makes contact with our atmosphere—the cloud that keeps us alive by letting us breathe. What this contact looks like, from our perspective, is a departure.

A MAN WITHOUT A CASE

The two young men slouched on a bench in front of a fountain outside the airport. The fountain was in a little courtyard area between the parking garage and the terminal across the street. The boys, one white and one black, both worked inside the airport. They were in white undershirts and had put their jewelry back on but still wore their uniform pants and ugly black shoes. They were waiting for the 4:40 bus to take them back to their side of town.

“What you working tomorrow?” asked Eddie.

Shaun did not answer. Tomorrow was his day off.

“Man I need a fat-ass L,” Eddie said. “*And* a fat-ass bitch.” He seemed to reflect on these desires for a moment. “Thick,” he concluded, spitting through his teeth.

The bus stop was over on the main airport road but Shaun liked to wait here in the peaceful courtyard, its iron benches in a half-moon ring around the stone fountain decorated with little teal tiles that glinted in the sun. The fountain flung up heavy cords of water, and the water looked fresh and cool. An old Asian man in a floppy hat and oversized dark glasses sat a few feet away on another bench. He sat there waiting as if at a cemetery, alone, sunk in some inviolable meditation. People occasionally walked across the courtyard, cutting from the terminal to the parking garage, but it was for the most part a calm, quiet place in the middle of the busy airport, which was itself in the middle of the enormous sprawl of Houston.

“My hangover back like a motherfucker,” said Eddie, working his thumb into his temple.

Shaun exhaled noisily and slunk down further on the bench. He had never liked Eddie. Not in seventh grade when Eddie accused him of stealing a backpack in the middle of Texas history class, or in ninth grade when Eddie tried to bum squares from him out by the track field nearly every day, or after that, when they'd both dropped out and would eye each other across the park courts or coming out of the smoke shop on Cavalcade, Eddie with his set, Shaun with his own.

The white boy had done him an incredible favor though, there was no denying that. For much of the last year Shaun had been a men's room attendant in Concourse B. His job had been to stand in front of the sinks three feet away from the urinal wall in restroom #4 and say to every entering male, including children, "Hi, sir." Occasionally he would wipe something. Hand someone a paper towel. Hold open a stall door for a disabled person. Mostly, though, he stood there and mumbled his greeting. In the beginning, he'd vary the phrase to fight back his bitterness, the lonesome, embarrassed feeling that God and God alone was watching him do this over a thousand times per day. "Bienvenidos." "G'Afternoon." With a little eye contact a nod might suffice, though too many nods in a row made it all the more difficult to get back on the horse, to resume saying "Hi, sir." Once, he went on a nod-only spree that lasted the whole day—the longer he went without speaking the more horrified he became of hearing his own voice, of saying those two idiotic words, but instead of enjoying it he spent all shift afraid his supervisor Miss Fatima would put an ear to the door and catch him failing to perform his one and only duty.

But then one day, Eddie—weird, volatile, dumb-on-purpose Eddie—had come looking for Shaun to offer his condolences about Kenise, and soon after that Eddie put a

word in with his manager and got Shaun hired at Yummy-Wrap over in Concourse E. It was like being rescued from an asylum. That was early December, and he was told to finish out the month, and he'd almost quit every single day, simply walked out of the men's room, the airport, the city, all Texas, never to come back. But none of that was an option. With Kenise gone his mother needed his help more than ever. And of course there was Alicia. So he showed up and clocked in and stayed on his feet for seven hours, coexisting with the slow, thudding plot of his own dark thoughts. "Hi, sir."

"Look at this blind motherfucker right here," Eddie said, staring contemptuously at the old man in the floppy hat. Eddie was chewing on a toothpick because he was all out of cigarettes. "What's he holding?" he said.

On the bench next to the old man sat a small leather case with a shoulder strap, the leather tanned and fine. The old man stared straight ahead. Even his silence seemed foreign, a non-English silence.

"Probably a camera or something," Shaun said. He didn't care what the old man was holding. He was hungry and anxious and sick to death of the sound of Eddie's voice. Forty hours a week now, he had to listen to Eddie talk. He imagined talking to God in heaven: "What did you do with your life, my child?" "I listened to Eddie." "What did Eddie say?" "Bunch of bullshit."

At Yummy-Wrap Eddie cleaved to him like they were blood brothers. Eddie, of course, knew what happened to Kenise and who was responsible. Everyone from the Gardens knew. The first week on the job, Eddie had asked at least three times when Shaun was "gonna ride" on that kid Tunde, and Shaun had shrugged him off, sullen, like he was disinterested. It was the last thing he wanted to talk about. Then the other day,

Eddie took out his phone and showed Shaun a photo of the apartment complex where Tunde stayed, even zoomed in on the two-tone Crown Vic out front he claimed belonged to the boy, and Shaun had snapped and told him to mind his own motherfucking business, strode into the back to refill the mayonnaise. Eddie dropped the subject, but this didn't stop his chatter. Nothing could. He would go on and on in his ghetto-mouse voice while they separated the meats and wiped down the toaster ovens, a nervous rant on whatever he and his boys had done the night before—the girls they'd been with, how much liquor they'd drank, how many L's he'd smoked before passing out on top of some bitch from round the way. Or else he prodded Shaun with questions—if he knew that one boy's bad sister or that crew from Sunnyside that sprayed up a car full of Latin Kings at a red light last weekend. Who his P.O. was, if he'd ever been to County down in Galveston, had he heard the Z-RO freestyle on 97.9 that morning, did he think the new sequel to that superhero movie was as tight as the sequel before it, it never stopped. They were the only two Yummy-Wrap employees from Kashmere Gardens and this seemed to mean the whole world to Eddie, his ash blue eyes always flicking over to Shaun, an impish smile in their corners. The nearly-Albino boy began any sentence to their coworkers with, "Me and Shaun," or "Round about where me and Shaun from, though?" Shaun was starting to wonder if he was the only friend Eddie had.

He checked his pockets again—a miserable habit. He had been working the sandwich kiosk for more than a month now but had not been paid yet, because payroll skipped your first paycheck. No one had explained to him why this was so. But he'd worked the math, and when the check finally came through it'd be less than a thousand dollars after taxes. Shaun knew ways to make a thousand dollars in half an hour and they

didn't involve any acne-scarred manager or cellophane gloves or the smell of old bologna. Or taxes. Or Eddie.

“Yo did I tell you what I heard about Tunde other day?” Eddie said.

“I don't wanna hear about it,” Shaun said.

“But yo.”

“Nigga shut *up*,” Shaun said. He wanted to get back home and go see Alicia. It was his night of the week to make dinner. Shaun took a lot of shit from his boys for making dinner for Alicia, even for trying to cook at all, but he had started to like it, walking the quarter mile to the Fiesta Supermarket after work and buying vegetables, chicken breasts, linguini, and canned sauce, or else ground beef and buns so he could make burgers, grilling them up on his uncle's barbecue pit, Alicia smiling at him while she played with his little cousins. He liked that, and he knew his boys would too if they could get a girl as fine and decent as she was, which they never would. But what he liked most was when it was Alicia's night—her house, her mother's recipes. Which he was going to have to tell her as nice as he possibly could, since today he was flat broke. The cigarettes in his pocket had been his last five bucks.

He lit one up and looked at the time on his phone: 4:29. Eddie was eyeing his cigarette with a lewd intensity and Shaun knew he would ask any minute. He craned his neck away from Eddie and stared at the garage. The evening smell of diesel, furrows of heat shimmering up from the curb. So many people—black, white, brown, Chinese, bobbed up the concrete stairs with their luggage or else stood at the bottom of the garage breathing hard in front of the elevators. All of them going somewhere thousands of miles

away, or coming home after zig-zagging through the skies. Shaun had never been on a plane.

“Lemme get a square,” Eddie said, running his finger along the thin white line of stubble on his face.

Shaun shook the pack and held it out to him. Eddie pinched one and pulled a Zippo from his pocket, flicked it open and lit his smoke.

“Shit,” Eddie said. “That boy Tunde though?”

“Man what the fuck did I just say? You don’t listen, dog.”

They were quiet for a while, listening to the constant splash of the fountain which, if you didn’t look up, could fool you into thinking you were somewhere truly beautiful, designed with care and taste, instead of trapped in this fuming citadel of concrete. Shaun wondered if the old blind man was imagining himself back in Japan or Vietnam or wherever his people were from. A garden, a little wooden bridge, a pagoda through the trees.

Then Eddie said, “Let’s take this motherfucker’s camera.”

“You stupid, man,” Shaun said. “Why he gone have a camera, he can’t see shit?”

“The fuck do I know?” Eddie said. “The fuck does it matter?” He was staring into the side of Shaun’s face, ready for some rigorous back-and-forth.

“I work here, man. This a fucking airport. Police right there,” Shaun said, nodding toward the terminal.

Eddie puffed at the nub of his cigarette and flicked the filter at the fountain. It ricocheted off the rim and rolled back toward their feet. “What time is it?” Eddie asked.

“Where *your* phone at?” Shaun said.

Eddie repeated the question.

“Almost time,” Shaun told him.

+

Eddie got up and hitched his pants, looking from side to side, his buzzed-cut head now bleached in sunlight, pretending to gaze admiringly at the sparkling streams of water before him, then casually shuffled over beside the old man. Shaun watched, amused by Eddie’s blatantly suspicious way of moving. This white boy was a criminal first and last and anybody could see that. He had jittery blood in him, though. Thug Lite. There were uniformed police a hundred yards away, prowling around the driveway alongside the terminal, rollers lurking by the crosswalks with their headlights on even in the late afternoon sun, watching every monotonous thing from behind the glare of their heavy windshields, waiting for an excuse to hop out and knock some kid’s head against the curb. But even still, a little while ago, Shaun would have had that case himself, police or no police. Wouldn’t even fuck with a bus, would just walk down and pawn whatever was in it at *Sin-Preguntas* on Belfort and Scott. But if it was a little while ago, really, he wouldn’t be here at all, holding a tight-rolled apron in his sweaty left hand, a cap that said YUM!! in yellow cursive on his knee. Where he would be is a place he could still call up in full surround: the torn backseat of a DeVille, the sweet burn of liquor on his lips, his head nodding in curlicued smoke, two-ways chirping above the rattle and throb of the bass. His fingers tapping out the beat on the nine millimeter bulge at his waist.

The ink on his bicep said “KLC December Twenty-Five RIP” and everyone assumed the thorns that wrapped around his right arm were meant to hold him back, so he let them believe that. Dropped by a hot shot Christmas morning, face down on her man’s

sofa bed, veins in her arm blown out like spaghetti. Seventeen years old and gone for nothing. Something her trifling-ass man had allegedly done to Tunde. And Shaun's mother calling for blood the night she died, screaming at him and Jesus and that murdering motherfucker on the porch, screaming for the whole block to hear, loud enough for Shaun to never forget, a wail of a devastation that would not be cried out. He knew he wasn't her son anymore after that night. After he'd left her keening on the porch, gone back into the house, shut the door to his room. He was the one who was supposed to make it right, but would not.

Alicia was working with him on the GED. Eventually he'd enroll in college classes, maybe get a degree in hotel management. He could hardly imagine running a hotel, being the boss, not having to ask permission to go out for a smoke. In Shaun's hotel there would be no men's room attendants. This was a recent fantasy, what he'd think about at Yummy-Wrap while tuning Eddie out. As a kid he'd often daydreamed about becoming a reverend, but he was far too shy to preach. He couldn't say he felt close to God anymore either. Sometimes he still thought about it though, every now and then, since Kenise died. How that would show his mother, show everyone. He'd come in with a collar on, in nice polished shoes, holding a leather bible, and they'd all go quiet. He would minister to anyone whose heart was filled with grief and hate. They'd see him for what he is. He was no coward and he wasn't afraid of prison. He was filled with light.

Eddie was only a foot away when the old man suddenly stood up, with difficulty, looking like a newborn deer with his wobbly knees, and Eddie swiveled, fake-rubbing his head, and sat back down on the bench next to Shaun. They watched the old man extend his arms as if about to catch something, and then they saw a girl of about eight or nine

emerge from behind the fountain and rush into his arms, babbling happily, and the old man smiled and stroked her hair. He waved at someone unseen then sat down again and pointed to the fountain and the little girl ran up to it and splashed her hands in the water. She was Mexican, or maybe Native American, her jet black hair running straight down to her waist, outfitted head to toe in a mis-matched soccer uniform, and Shaun watched her hop up onto the stone rim of the fountain and stretch her arms above her head and tiptoe around the circle. Shaun looked at Eddie, who was staring hard at the girl.

“He choked somebody out,” Eddie said.

“What?”

“They said Tunde choked this bitch out. Over on Lockwood the other night. Girl like sixteen.”

“How you know that?”

“Cause. Jaleel told me that shit. She used to let him smash and then she started messing round with Tunde. You know Jaleel right? My homeboy with the fucked up eye?”

“How he know Tunde did it?”

“Everybody knows,” Eddie said. “Tunde said she stole from him. He ain’t even deny it.”

The little girl had disappeared around the far side of the fountain. Shaun stood, took a deep breath, and realized his chest was filling with something loud. He walked over and stood in front of the old man, tried to see the man’s eyes through his glasses but they were dense and thick as playing cards. He wasn’t ever coming back here again. Shaun reached down and swiped the leather case from the bench. The man cried out in a

weak, choked voice and struggled to his feet but Shaun and Eddie were walking swiftly away, around the fountain, past the little girl, and out of sight.

They walked by the two police cruisers idling in the terminal drive. The bus stop was a few hundred yards away on the main airport road. Shaun's pulse pounded in his fingers. The case was surprisingly heavy on his shoulder, made an odd rattle when it bounced against his side. He heard the solo whoop of a cruiser siren behind him and fought the urge to break out in a dead run. But Eddie's pace was steady, his head tilted and natural as ever, just another weary working man, a fresh toothpick dangling from the corner of his lips. In the reflection of a taxi's windshield ahead Shaun saw the cruisers still parked in the same position. No officers jogging after them.

When they rounded the corner to Airport Boulevard Eddie laughed, held his fist out for Shaun. Shaun shook his head. A crowd of other workers were huddled in the thin shade of the bus stop's awning. Shaun took the case off his shoulder and wrapped it in his apron, then cradled it under his arm like a football.

"You see that dude's face?" Eddie said, with quiet glee.

Shaun shifted the bundle to his other arm, then held it down by his side, then behind his back.

"My uncle probably buy it," Eddie said. "He makes videos and shit. He's got like a million cameras. You seen that Lil Flip video? 'Kim Kardashian?'"

How much could it be worth? A month's check, two, three? Shaun looked back at the terminal, smelled the mixture of wet meat, sugary dough, and industrial cleaner that would linger in his head all afternoon long after he got home. He walked over to a trashcan behind the bus stop, dropped the case inside, and walked back. Eddie's mouth

was open—his eyes twitched back and forth from Shaun’s face to his empty hands. The bus was wheezing up to the curb and Shaun took his ride-card out of his wallet. Eddie ran back toward the trashcan.

Shaun cut in front of a fat woman who was herding her kids into line and stepped up into the bus. As he walked down the aisle toward the rear he saw Eddie through the windows with the case around his shoulder, swung to his front. Shaun slipped into an empty seat and closed his eyes, heard the doors close and the bus sputter and pop into gear. He rested his head against the thick cool of the glass, felt the bus jerk away from the curb. Acid in his stomach. He tried to make himself think about Alicia’s skin, her voice, the way her hair tipped up when it hit the middle of her back. But instead he was thinking about how good it used to feel to walk past police cars, knowing they couldn’t catch him, that he had them beat, that he was nimble as any ghost. Now he felt old, flat-footed, half-blind. Going deeper into a debt he would never pay.

He opened his eyes as Eddie plopped down in the seat beside him, holding the open leather case in both hands.

“Damn, son!” Eddie said. “Look what dude had.” He tilted the case so Shaun could see, but Shaun kept staring out of the window. Another plane taking off.

“Shaun. Yo, man. Look at this.”

“I don’t give a fuck what it is,” Shaun said.

“C’mon guess. Guess what it is,” Eddie said.

“A bomb.”

“Nope.”

“A million dollars.”

“Nah.”

“A camera.”

“Shaun.”

“Two keys of raw.”

“I fuckin’ *be* so lucky.”

Then Eddie reached into the case and crunched up a handful of something and held his fist high so Shaun could see the copper streak raining from his hand back into the case. He did it again and again, shaking his head.

“Pennies, dog,” said Eddie. “My man smuggling a thousand pennies.”

Shaun closed his eyes. It was a good thirty minutes to their stop. Red light at the freeway entrance. In the round mirror at the front of the bus he saw two cruisers pulling in line behind them, patiently, lights off. “They were for shorty,” he said. “Make a wish.”

THE ESSAY ON LONGING

“Spinoza (1634-77) is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme.” - Bertrand Russell, A History of Western Philosophy

“He appears to have had no sexual life.” - Harold Bloom, The New York Times

Proposition

What you long for is what loathes you in your dreams, the inverse of the attribute you fear.

Corollary 1

This is not sufficient, but it is necessary.

Corollary 2

You may not will the end of longing. To try is vanity.

Axiom

Vanity is antithetical to virtue.

Scholium

Longing drags you away into the ring of dark trees. The trees are not your Will; nor your Reason. Indeed, they are not ‘yours’ in any sense. Like all things their essence is infinite, but unlike most things, their capacity for being is vast beyond thought, incommensurable to any metaphysic.

Definition

You are the animal that longs.

**

It was only last April when, surreptitiously slipping the letter into her bosom as you entered the drawing room, Josephine told you of her plans to leave Paris. "I must go at once to the Hague," she said. "I cannot bear it here any longer!" How had you not seen this coming? For a spell you were silent, words evading your tongue like shards of eggshell from the tines of a fork. "And why now?" you at last ejaculated. "Why this sudden urgency, after months of moping and quarreling and crying in the tub?" Ah, how the cruelty in your heart, once tapped, pours freely and without cease. Indeed, you had endured a season of alienation and strife which grew more primitive by the day. Her despondencies; her inexplicable walks after yoga, returning hours hence with muddy boots or a torn sash smelling of woodsmoke and wild animal; her riddling replies to your most logical interrogatives; her newfound habit of shutting down a quarrel *sans* warning with a blunt declaration ("I am merely finished"), rather than seeing it through to its natural hysteric and violent end; her increasing moderation in sex, drinking, fighting, and ergo, make-up sex; her frequent tête-à-tête's with the basset hound, Anaximander, secreting into his velvety ear matters of grave import. And worst of all the reading, her obsessive reading, of that goddamned infernal book. To interrupt her communion with it was to be leveled by her eerie ice-cold gaze, to feel the vigor gone from your brain, a stupor come over you, a kind of moral dumbfounding. Once, in response to some goading comment you made, she whipped a page across her lap, said blankly, "Fear for what may happen, hope for what may come; these are the sad passions." "Do spare me," you cried, "The talk of a bloody-fingered monk!" Some great metamorphosis at work within her even as she sat by the parlor window, face shielded by the leathern cover, the gold-leaf **B**

and **S** aglitter in the lamplight. That dreadful winter even the bones of her face seemed to alter, sharpen, cast foreign shadows down her cheek.

Yes, it was as if she was turning into someone else. Or as if *someone else* was turning her into someone else. Someone's masculine secretions and personal beliefs. Your youthful Josephine with lightning on her lips, who had inspired three-score the ordinary amount of passion since the day she first appeared two years ago in a long blue scarf reading Simone de Beauvoir on the steps of the Ecole Supérieure, who had frolicked and fucked and fought her way into the darkest chambers of your unconscious so that there was no such thing as not thinking of her, ever, who had come on hot and swarming with jealous exprobrations and never let up, who had cured your hiccups and thumbed the knots out of your lower back and stuffed your pipe with dreamy powders, who gave all her money to orphans and lepers and then cried hopelessly at her financial stress, since she was no longer kept in hush-hush luxury by her estranged and villainous father, the Archbishop of Lyon. Able, clever Josephine, who had assiduously transcribed each of sixty-four partial drafts of your *Essay on Longing*, the solitary end for which you ever were cast in this doomed human drama. And this most of all: not only was she its transcriber but its subject and *raison*, its blood and being. Without her, how could you ever finish? It was her beguilements and proximity that aroused all your premium impulses and sublime recognitions, that transfigured the urge of Eros into truth.

But perhaps there *was* someone else, *in literalum*. Impossible! But as a thought experiment, you made a list of any whomsoever it could be.

SPINOZA.

“Why now? Why now? Why praytell now?” you chased her around the house that horrid April day of her pronouncement.

“Because!” she cried, bolting the lock on the boudoir door as you slumped against its heft without. “There are things you don’t know, and can never know,” came her broken voice. “I choose to discontinue this rank affair. You decrease my power of active Being. And you shout at me.”

“YOU SHOUT AT ME,” you retorted.

“And there’s your drug abuse. Your waning viability as a male, this wretched, humiliating poverty, which given how much of my father’s wealth you’ve smoked and drank, Philippe, my God, how do you forgive yourself? Shall I continue to continue?” (She now sobbed.)

“Oh please,” you dared, “Don’t mince.”

“I am fated to be more than an amanuensis to a failure! Yes, yes, I’ll say it. Someone must. Sixty-four drafts of the same thirty-eight pages, endlessly revised and scrambled, endlessly abandoned, Philippe, you must give up your delusions and see, see before it destroys you. You have no great philosophic work inside you. You are a well-read fool and a selfish boy. Shit is over.”

Ah, but she’d gone too far, trying to throw you off her scent with vile herrings of the reddest ilk. “Might it rather have something to do with the letter in your bosom?” you parried.

“My bosom is no longer a concern of yours,” said the voice of Josephine.

Her voice. Her bosom. These realities now propositional behind the objective substance of wood veneer, with its ownmost proper will. Then came the ungainly sobs of Vascoigne.

Nights of agony, days of dread, the one swelling into the next. As she was no longer fixing your suppers you refused to eat in her presence, even falling down once from dizziness, so she could see that her decisions had consequence. She remained with you in the Paris flat for a week while making her arrangements, which was inhumane, for you were menaced by her every glance and whisper, obsessed with suspicions as to her comings and goings, the furious emails she typed at odd hours, her furtive conversations on the phone. But worst of all you were loin-shot with desire each morning she passed before you in her brassiere, performing her ritualistic stretches, gargling so sweetly in the bath. Josephine! Is there anything more fiendishly erotic than betrayal? In that week before she departed, the ministrations of her soft and bouncing flesh grew only more ministrating, and O the bats in your head did fly. How shrunk and spotted and feckless you felt, watching her spread peanut butter on both sides of her toast, humming healthily. She could be a very hard girl. It was in her blood, after all. There had always been a degree to which she frightened you, and that degree was on the increase. The strong move would've been to kill yourself in the kitchen, let her find your leaking corpse. But strength was never your forte. So you peered at her in the shower like a shameful little boy, slipped off more and more to your pipes.

And then, you awoke, and she was gone. There was a forwarding address for her subscriptions to *ARTFORUM* and *The Economist*, her Beauvais carpets, which you were obliged by her to send by carriage post, and the birth control, which she 'accidentally'

left inside the Louis XVI bureaux-en-pente. Such cool decorum, to reveal that address, such maturity, so conspicuous the pretense of peace in her little note: it drove you mad. “I do so wish you well and regret the indelicate expression of my judgments,” she wrote. “Please take the best care of Anaximander. I shall miss him terribly but he belongs here with you.” Her new address, said Googlemaps, was for a row house in a proletarian district of the Hague. The envelope was sealed with the red insignia of a rose, ringed around with the letters CAUTE. Caute indeed.

**

Bereft of Josephine, it was clear the only thing was to work, work incessantly, heroically, all day and through the gloomy raining nights until the tallows pooled around your slobbering skull. (How long will it take them to find you when you die alone, Vascoigne?) But the *Essay on Longing* would redeem you of this humiliation. Though her taunting must be credited to the spasms of a guilty conscience, it was true that your output had waned over the past season. Arguably the whole year. Even while your brother philosophers had kept up their daring assault on official ignorance and superstition, scaling ramparts, spitting in the eye of kings, suffering tortures and immolations. But all your new thinking had been spent upon the dogged pursuit of her, wily mercurial Josephine, though her phenomenal shape laid down next to yours each night. In your dreams you were forever running after that mystery, desperate to understand, to tame, to possess it. She was the question that mothered all other species of questions. Put another way, all questions led back to the problem of Josephine. How could you describe (with the crystalline logic philosophy demands) the moving target of a love as wrathful as this? No, not you nor anyone alive could be reproached for taking a

few days off now and then to recuperate your analytic energies, for leaning a bit too strongly on the dope. And now, in the newfound peace and stillness of your flat, with the enervating winds of injustice at your back, you would make good this debt once and for all. To theorize the great and unwieldy passion betwixt you would be, as far as you can tell, the sweetest possible fuck-you to that brigand Baruch Spinoza. The *Essay* a mighty rebuke, a grand answer to crash with typhoon force upon the public, stunning the literate classes into slackmouthed awe. “Welcome home, our wise Vascoigne!” they will exclaim. “Thank you for rescuing us from our illusions! Bravissimo, maestro!” This, this was the way out and through, to negate his *Ethics*. So you abstractly reasoned. To be honest, you never fully understood that book. It is quite confounding.

The morning of her vanishment, you meant to take the newest section, “The Critique of Pure Masturbation” from your study down into the cushion room to read and smoke and dabble about the margins. You would begin slowly, wading your way into the arguments with humility and patience. One cannot simply sit down and do philosophy. One has to wade into it. One has to be willing to weep a bit before beginning. Anaximander was stretched upon the sheepskin rug in front of the bureaux where you worked. He bowed, sniffed your palm and whinnied at your approach, rolled over to present his belly. Noble hound! But something was wrong. The desk had been cleared. You opened, then rammed shut the top drawer, causing Anaximander to flee the room. You slammed the side cabinets. You upheaved the waste basket. You ranged about the house, grabbing at each handle and knob. No. Impossible. A feeling as if someone was funneling ice water in through your ear. The *Essay on Longing*, every page of all sixty-

four drafts including the most current manuscript, was gone. As if it never existed. Stand there, Vascoigne, and be the empty thing you are.

**

The plump, cordial cheeks and rabbinical beard of Spinoza's avatar appeared on the screen. Though you were speaking internationally via G-chat, the drawing room yet reeked of garlic and heresy.

YOU: Dog.

SPINOZA: *My dog.* Oof oof.

YOU: Don't do that, Baruch. Don't pretend we are each others' dogs. You've Judased me.

SPINOZA: Is this a thing where I take a wild guess?

YOU: So you admit it!

SPINOZA: I want you to try to imagine, for once in your life, that there are other people. In the world. Actual people, sentients, in every single way just like yourself. These are people with hopes, fears, dreams.

YOU: Baruch... You... Of all... Fucking motherfuckers. You pig! I want you and your accomplice to understand I have NOT notified the police. I am coming to the Hague to kill you.

SPINOZA: Why shouldn't she leave you? If she's unhappy? Logically speaking?

YOU: Treachery, humiliation. You cuckolded me. Why? I who was your friend.

SPINOZA: Ok. Interesting. No I didn't?

YOU: I remind you of the title of your book, sir. Do your ethics now provide for flagrant deceit as well as *stealing my manuscript and seducing my own mistress??*

SPINOZA: Whoa. Man. Philippe. How much opium are we chiefing these days?

YOU: Listen to me, Baruch. Watch these words appear and know that they represent our destiny. I will carve out your heart and bring it to the Archbishop. I will decapitate you in your sleep. I loved you, you son of a bitch.

SPINOZA: So Josephine is my newest pupil. That's it. I don't know if you know, but she has a real knack for the Euclidean method. ;)

YOU: Lessons! Private lessons. LOLLOL, as they say. Surely THAT'S why she will not take my calls—because she's so busy with your LESSONS. Baruch, we are both wolves, you and I, but at least I have honor enough to admit it.

SPINOZA: Phillipe, in my last book, I executed a logical proof for the existence of God. On page one. I then proceeded to explain human nature in its totality, using the simplest words and shapes. This thing I'm working on now will make all that seem like juvenilia. To accuse me of having the time, much less the desire, to mislead you about your selfish love-life would be absurd. I have never lied in my life.

YOU: You'll lie beneath the dirt by Sunday.

There was a pause. Perhaps he now understood you were serious.

SPINOZA: You say you lost a manuscript?

YOU: Keep taunting, you chubby bitch.

SPINOZA: Talk to Voltaire. He might could learn you a little sumsum.

YOU: Learn me what???

Spinoza is offline.

**

You had a little over two hours before the 5am bus left for the Hague, so you wandered the Quartier Pigalle in search of Voltaire. The drear and drizzle of Paris before dawn, the rain-clogged streets, this cold interminable fever! No one would answer your texts, as if some great conspiracy was at work to drive you mad with despair. The horror, imagining everyone had known of Josephine's indiscretions all along. That you, idiot Vascoigne, were the last to know. That she thought so low of you she could sneak off in the night with your life's work and give it to your sworn nemesis. That bridge between you, however exhilaratingly perilous it had been, she simply walked across, trailing fuel, tossed a match, watched it incinerate. She was never coming back. You sent Jean-Paul another text: "911 EMERGENCY. PICK UP. 911." Finally Sartre answered, reluctantly agreed to see you. He came to his door in a nightgown, rubbing his jaw and twisting his neck as you spoke wildly of your suit. Without his glasses his forehead was even broader and his ears more gangly, his billiard eyes more startlingly out of line.

"Try Hegel's place," he yawned. "Fourteenth Arrondissement. You remember. We had the thing for Gödel there last July. Believe you threw up on the coats."

"What should I do, Jean-Paul? Is this not warrant for a duel? And whatever could Voltaire have to do with any of this? Is he entangled in some sordid thing with Baruch and Josephine? I can't even countenance it!"

"You need to be careful. You should keep away from Voltaire, he's on his hero's horse again. There is a great deal you do not know, Philippe."

"About what? About Spinoza's lechery? So you *have* known all along."

"Don't twist my words," Sartre said, glancing behind him. "I don't know and frankly I don't care whether he's schtupping your mistress."

“Schtupping??”

“Listen, Philippe. Has Josephine ever mentioned myself or Camus? For any reason?”

“What? How dare you! What are you implying? Her and Albert??”

Your face was hot. Sartre peered at you for a long moment, completely unconcerned with your response, as if you were a specimen he was observing. “Right,” he said. “Just thought I’d ask.”

“I have your second then? At pistols with Baruch?”

He gave neither disavowal nor assent. He still had not invited you inside, though his flat looked cozy and warm and your eyes were beginning to burn with exhaustion. “Radical freedom, my friend,” he murmured. “Tis a bitch.”

Down on the street in front of the building a youth was lingering in the lamp glow, flipping a coin in the air and deftly catching it by the crook of his arm. You had seen him hours before, meandering by the bar at a Jacobin cafe. He looked of rude birth and ill intent, the brim of his tricornered hat slanted above twitchy, seaweed-colored eyes, a toothpick in the side of his mouth.

“You look for my master,” said the wiry youth, edging much too close.

“*Now* you come out from the shadows! After I’ve been loudly seeking him in every pub on the Right Bank. You sir owe me, at minimum, two Metro tokens.”

He looked to the side and spit, then reached into his pocket and came out with something. A blade? You heeled back into the glass of Sartre’s front door, now locked and rattling cold against your shoulders. The youth crouched down and gave a whistle,

and a midget dog came clicking forth from the sidewalk's darkness. The dog snatched the biscuit out of his hand.

“What the hell is that? A pomeranian?”

“Don't watch her eat. Seen her chew a man's face off for less,” he said. He turned and led you briskly down the teeming red light streets, past the calls of lonely whores. Once or twice you nearly lost him in the bustle and flux of gold-chained immigrant men, the drunk and wailing Scots, the vulgar fish-faced girls. But for the bob of his tricornered hat he would've disappeared completely. He seemed to have risen out of this element, and so could maneuver in it expertly. In an alleyway he bent down again, grasping a circular steel grate and wrenching it upright to reveal a hole in the floor of Paris. He descended the steps to the underground. “Come in and pull it shut.”

You began to follow. “What about the pomeranian?” you asked, at eye level now with the dog's snout, who was sniffing the air nervously. The dog emitted a pathetic growl.

“What pomeranian?” he said.

Down the tightly-spiraled brick stairs into the catacombs, where filth and wet and darkness were the same. So this would be your lot, a destiny of sewers! An absurd end to a meaningless life! How guilty Josephine will feel when she learns of your pitiful end in the morning Twitterfeed. What began in falsehood ends in butchery. But this man would be embarrassed, at least, when he stood over your bleeding corpse and in the flickering torch light counted the nineteen euros in your bankroll. The skeletons of a million murdered fools down in these echoing tunnels, their flesh long claimed by vermin, their bones dissolving unseen and unaccounted for. You took care to keep the youth in front

where you could see him stepping nimbly around corners and ducking beneath the stone overhangs, a clever rat in the maze of the quarry passages.

“Is it much farther? I am quite fatigued.” Your voice rang through the pitch.

“Buck up, camper,” he shot back, hopping over a hairy carcass in a puddle of brine. You removed your doublet, covered your mouth and nose and began to jog. At last, he stopped. A rusty door was sunk into the low wall, like the hatch of a submarine. The lad gave a complex pattern of knocks and a peep-grate opened, then the door swung wide. A rolling wave of light and raw noise flooded the catacombs of Paris, and you stepped within.

It was an austere rock-sided cell filled with hundreds of lamps. The walls were tattooed with wild lettering, unintelligible slogans, equations, lists, all etched in black. Out of some strange instinct you scanned for Spinoza’s name among the words but did not find it. At least a dozen men you’d never seen before were huddled over tables, large bearded men, dark with the grime of the street on their clothes, the musk of beef and dark ale and furnaces. They were clinking glasses and arguing so that their many voices became one urgent weft of baritone. The youth led you round to a room sectioned off by a flag—the tricolor but with a doubled cross—and there at a card table strewn with maps was Voltaire. He was in his plush blue waistcoat leaning back in a chair, his powdered curls undone. Beside him sat the severe Fanon in full camouflage, a high black boot crossed gallantly at the knee. They both regarded you calmly. You felt like a lost child in their presence, aloof to whatever terrible knowledge they were trading in.

“Vascoigne! So you’re with us,” said Voltaire. “What sort of guns do you have?”

“With who? What is this wild goose chase? My paramour has left and... Hello Frantz, how do you do.”

Fanon gave the first half of a nod, then reconsidered and lit a cigarette. Voltaire stood and draped a velvet arm around your shoulder, putting his dusted cheek very near your own. He smelled of juniper and tobacco. “Brother,” he said. “The Guard of the Holy Curia apprehended Hume this morning. Not two days since he sent the book on miracles to his publisher and now they’re bringing him before the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Penitentiary. That drunken muddlehead will never stand through questioning. He’ll end up telling them everything only to demonstrate his intellectual superiority.”

“Tell them what?” you said. “What are you all doing down here? Is this one of your masonic parties? This is a bit obvious, isn’t it? Being literally underground?”

But something had begun to cohere, something dim and disturbing. The Holy Curia, the missing manuscript, Sartre’s odd paranoia regarding Josephine, and now this treasonous happening in the bowels of Paris. It was no secret that the Archbishop was the scourge of every *philosophe* from Alexandria to Stockholm. The secret was that, in addition to being a tyrant, he was a father. Of course Josephine had not seen her progenitor in many years, unacknowledged spawn that she was, but she did once send him a secret plea to spare the life of a Viennese mathematician who was to face the guillotine. Her request had gone unanswered, naturally, and the blade soon fell on that poor, brilliant man. The two of you had blown through her hush fund in a frenzy after that, and the account had never been replenished. But what now? Had her father come calling, or her father’s enemies? Could it be that your purloined manuscript was some kind of bribe or entreaty? Or worse, exhibit A for the Inquisition? Spinoza must have put

her up to it. Perhaps as a trade—your neck in place of his! Yes, that was it. She was buying her new paramour’s life for the price of yours. Stupid, foolish, weak Vascoigne!

Voltaire shook your shoulder with sudden ferocity. “Pay attention, Philippe. A week ago Locke and Diderot were riding the same train-car to London when it detached and came *this close* to tumbling off a thing. Camus and Sartre aren’t speaking, and no one knows why. Thomas More is wearing the hair-shirt again and none of us can reason with him. Now do you see? We were just informed that Bakunin ‘checked himself’ into the insane asylum without telling a single soul, haha, the *gall* of that one! The hour of action is upon us! They’ve pursued me forty years to the foot of the Alps and the brink of the grave. The sacred laws of nature are being violated as we speak and breathe. Philippe, see if you can guess whose eating disorder is back? And with a vengeance?”

“Wittgenstein?”

“Wittgenstein. Poor dear. They’ve gotten to him somehow. He’s down to a banana a day, he can hardly walk.”

“What about Baruch?” you said.

“No response to calls, texts, no answer at his door. He’s been tweeting strange things. Cryptic things.”

You snorted. “Perhaps due to he’s sexualizing the daughter of the Archbishop as we speak!”

Fanon got to his feet and came swiftly over. “This is a fact that you know?” he said, extending a rude arm so you could not pass.

“I know many facts, Frantz. One doesn’t have to spend one’s time in a bunker to be apprised of the latest juice, the goings-on, the shadowy—”

“What is her name?” Fanon interrupted.

“Her name...?” you said.

“Why are you looking for Baruch?” Voltaire said, as if suddenly remembering how you got here.

“Well,” you huffed, eyeing the front door through the red scrim of the flag.

“Obviously I sensed something extraordinarily nefarious was going on and I thought it was time Baruch was called to account for this little dalliance of his. Leaving us all so vulnerable. I mean, what if this girl were to deliver him into the Curia’s hands to be tortured? What then? He might sink us all. Even you, Voltaire. So irresponsible. It’s *unethical*, what he’s done. Choosing his gross sexual satisfaction over the lives of his friends. It’s almost as if he doesn’t deem us clever enough to discover what he’s been up to! Yes. He must think we’re fools! Fools who will stand idly by while he takes what was rightfully ours and—”

“What’s the girl’s name?” Fanon said again. He’d been busily typing at his phone and was staring at you, waiting for a response, index finger at the ready.

“Her name? you said.

“Goddammit man why are you—” Fanon approached you menacingly.

“Josephine!” you sputtered. “Her name is Josephine, I believe. That’s her. Yes. Spinoza’s girl. Archbishop’s illegitimate daughter. The great scandal of our epoch, if I do say so myself.”

Fanon backed off, went into the corner to fire off his communiques. Voltaire took you by the elbow, patted your arm.

“It’s good you came, Philippe. History will record that you stood with the just and the righteous. I know this, because I shall write the history, ha ha. Where are you off to now?”

“To the Hague to find Baruch, as I said before.”

“But be careful! And don’t accuse him of anything. He may be innocent, after all, but if he’s not, we can’t let him know we know, you understand.”

“What will you do about him and the girl? You’re not going to... do anything... big?”

“Don’t worry about that. Frantz and I will determine the necessary course. It will take a while to find a secure enough location for a press conference. Now listen. Put this number in your phone”—he handed you a card— “and should you need our help for any reason, use it. My man, you recall the youth who brought you here, will be at your disposal, ready to swoop in at a moment’s notice. He’s a man of fearsome capabilities and absolutely no scruples. He will swoop, Philippe.”

Then came a splash of shouting and protestation from the main room, an unholy racket as if some monster had come through the wall and was eating its way through the tables and chairs. You sprang into a corner and covered yourself as Fanon coolly slid back the action on his sidearm. A lunatic roaring as chairs scraped the floor and pleas from the men went up. “VIRGINS!” came the roar. “They promised virgins!”

Fanon lowered his weapon, gave a weary shake of the head. “Fucking Nietzsche again.”

“Get back to us as soon as you’ve seen Baruch,” Voltaire said, leading you out. The men in the room were silent at your reappearance, all staring at you except

Nietzsche, who had sat down and begun to hum to himself, his feathery mustache lifting in little tufts as he disemboweled an apple with an enormous knife.

You opened the cell door. How tired you felt, so tired you could fall down in tears, yet your thoughts were racing so quickly that your lips moved with them, as if you were trying to read what was furiously scribbled on the brick. The best you could do was nod your head. Yes, yes, you nodded. You were on their side. You were one of them.

**

In the park's warm meadow across from the Hague station you stretched and lit up a pipe. Springtime in Holland, children laughing in the distance. How pleasant, this city by the sea, with its gentle breeze making the apple blossoms sway as the evergreens shed their winter whiskers. You spread your arms and legs out in the grass and felt the slope of the earth beneath your spine. The earth, your ancient companion! You recalled those summers long ago, before Josephine, before it all, reading Heraclitus in the shade of papa's garden beside the little trout-filled stream, when you were ignorant and truly happy. The dark of the earth, the cool of the air, fire on your skin and water on your tongue, a feeling of immanence, of pure knowledge which you could swallow freely like the wind. What happened? Whence the agony and fury of your latter days?

It was only a matter of time before Josephine's true provenance was public knowledge. Voltaire would pick his moment and let slip the dogs of rumor, and then the Curia thugs would snuff her out. Things like this have happened before. Unless, that is, you got to her first and told her what was coming. That the whole world will soon know her name. Yours too, the way the media is these days. Perhaps then she would remember where your manuscript went. You would have to hide her in the most remote, primitive,

technologically-unspoiled terrain. Some tropic speck in the South Pacific. Grass skirts, toplessness. Drops of pineapple juice running down the valley of her breasts... Yes, you would forgive her, run interference with Voltaire, whisk her to safety and seclusion, away from the world, away from any pain, and there, slowly, her spirit would shed the corrupting influence of Spinozianism one axiom at a time, until she was again your radiant girl. Yes.

Although. It was possible that you had judged too soon, that she had filched your manuscript out of simple, crude spite, that it had nothing at all to do with the Archbishop. The *Essay* burned ingloriously in a trashcan somewhere. Or, as you first suspected, brought to Spinoza at his wicked behest. Were it not for the dread queasing up in your stomach, you could have enjoyed the flattering implications in that scenario. For Josephine must have taken a great deal of convincing to betray you, first as his lover, then as his accomplice. Which would mean that that colossus intellect of his, that immortal mind, had heard tell of the *Essay on Longing* and bowed before its grandeur, become consumed with a covetous passion. You imagined Josephine laying in her purple thong atop their sinful bed, some quaint hotel in St. Denis perhaps, blowing cigarette smoke and reciting your own axioms and corollaries as Spinoza rubs his belly, kneads his hands together in diabolical suspense. What would the *Essay* look like if it was Spinoza who brought your work to its fulfillment and end? His unforgiving gaze would vaporize your logical meanderings, seal up the trap doors, burn the language till it glowed white-hot and carbon-pure. Posterity would give the legacy to him, a noxious thought, but would the theory not be bettered? And wouldn't this eventuality relieve a greater share of the burden from every lover, every heartbroken soul who walks along the Seine? Had

Josephine believed this too, and so elected to betray you so brazenly out of a deeper obligation? As she laid on those sullied sheets, letting him stare into the delicate dark mole on the small of her back... O do not think of Josephine, curling her legs around his swinish torso as her nails dig in, a moan escaping her lips, a grunt from his, their mutual slobber. Z'ounds! As if you never existed! But whatever their motive, you would have your revenge. A dagger in his eye.

You wandered through the bustling, colorful Schilderswijk in search of his optometry concern. But Holland vanished in the smell of Moroccan spices, the Turkish vendors hollering from their stalls, the children running to and fro crying out in every language of the Orient. You gave your last euros to a toothless Spaniard woman for a pearl-hilted dagger and slid it in your belt. At last, on a side street in the ominous shadow of the Binnenhof walls, a handsome wooden sign hung from the iron rafter: "Spinoza & Family Opticall Lensery, established 1629." Enter Vascoigne, and do thy wicked worst.

The outer room of the neat little shop was still but you could hear the high-pitch whir of the grinding machine in the back. The late sun filtered in through the dust and warmed the rose-stained slats of the floors. You went to the cashier's desk and touched the bell. The whirring did not cease. You touched it three times more. Still, the whirring. You took up the bell and reared to throw it at the workroom's double-doors when the thought struck you: if it was still in their mutual possession, Spinoza was likely to have stashed your manuscript at his house. You would hide, track him, and have your confrontation there where he had no place to run. And there, with her lover at knifepoint, Josephine could be lured. You backed out of the shop and hid yourself behind a melon stall's umbrella, took out your phone and checked the latest bulletins. No breakage yet on

the scandal. The ruthlessness of the Archbishop was obscene and quasi-supernatural in its reach. It was said he preferred to remove the tongues of his critics before they developed the desire to speak against him.

You waited, the sun in glorious freefall, sweeping corrugations of orange and various pinks in the sky behind the gothic spires of the Binnenhof. At last, your nemesis emerged. He locked the front door, waved to a neighbor shopkeep, and waddled off alone. You followed him through the weird, short streets, across a vast public square where hundreds of Netherlanders laughed over beers at tables. Then over a canal as the lamps came on one by one against the crushed gray felt of night. All the while as you gave chase you had the uncanny sense of being trailed, but there was no time to indulge such paranoiac ironies. It was in the peaceful narrow sidewalks of the Jewish quarter, bells tolling in the dusk, the buildings high and quiet enough that footsteps could be heard, when Spinoza all of a sudden slowed and glanced behind him. You did a *volte face* on your heel and sauntered off a bit, pretending to inspect the bulbs of a firethorn hedge. Heart pounding, you counted to ten and turned ever so slightly to see him halfway across the avenue. Undiscovered still, Vascoigne the Fox! A few more blocks of expert shadowing and you arrived at his address, watching him fumble for keys in front of his spartan thatched-roof dwelling. When he turned to close his door, you leapt out, knocked him backward, kicked shut the door behind you, and showed your teeth.

“Philippe?” he lay astonished on his back in the mudroom.

You stood over him, dagger in hand. “Baruch the Blessed! You stand accused by me of *libido domanandi*—the lust for the power to transform a beloved, namely my Josephine, into someone else. Also of thievery. Plead for your life.”

“That *hurt*. I’m gonna sweep the leg.”

“Who the what?”

With a grunt he jerked into motion and your feet flew horizontal. Then it was you flat on the floor, your wind knocked out, your tailbone swelling in pain. Spinoza, burlier than you had reckoned, crawled over, racked you hard in the balls, and planted a knee to pin you on either side.

“I have a blue-belt in karate,” he said. Electric pain tore through you in sheets. Humiliation. Spinoza confiscated your phone, opened its face with the dagger, and smashed its circuitry on the ground.

“Where is Josephine? Where is my book? Villain, villain! I hate you. I hate you with everything I am. You’ve ripped my life from me and I never did a thing to deserve this.”

“Stop crying, Philippe. Stop it. Here.” He thrust a cotton kerchief into your hand and you dabbed at your throbbing face, blew your nose. Spinoza pulled you to your feet and led you into the kitchen.

He put the kettle on as you limped to a stool. “I knew you’d show,” he said.

The kettle was on full flame and produced a noise like a whispered scream. You swiveled to inspect the home of Spinoza. It was exceedingly humble but well-kept and very orderly: a wall of bookshelves, a cherrywood stand with a backgammon table set between two chairs, a row of dumb-bells in neat formation in a corner. There was no sign of Josephine. “What have you done, swept her under the rug?”

“She went to Rome,” he said.

“Rome? What for?”

“Her father is ill.”

“Oh god, Baruch! You believe that? Or you expect me to? Do you have any idea who her father is?”

The heat beneath the kettle was so intense you could feel it from where you sat, but still it would not whistle. Spinoza stood beside it, idly watching you. “I’m missing something too, Philippe.”

“What, has she absconded with your microscopes? Ha!”

“My newest work has gone missing. Just like yours,” he said.

You sat in stunned quiet. He kept looking at you, almost fondly but not quite, rather as if he was giving you the space to reveal yourself.

“I don’t know anything about this, Baruch. I’ve been racing to get here since yesterday morning, since waking to find her gone and my papers disappeared!”

“I know,” he said.

“Will you stop being so infuriatingly calm? Tell me what you know. What does all of this mean? When will the fucking water boil?!”

On cue, a whistle. The lid rattled atop the kettle. Spinoza watched it, then looked at you and smiled.

“I will smack you again,” you said, “And this time I will be forced to use the entirety of my strength.”

“Voltaire seems to think I am in league with the authorities,” Spinoza said. “Do you have any idea how he came to seem to think that?” Boiling water gurgled out of the kettle’s top and spewed down on the floor. You stood up, walked across the room, looked at the window, saw your own haggard, imbecile face in the dark glass.

“You are in league with the authorities, Baruch, whether you know it or not. Josephine’s father is the Archbishop of Lyon.”

He fondled the hilt of your dagger. “If you think about it, she does sort of look like him. Curve of the nose,” he said.

“The manuscript you’ve lost, what was it?” you said, closing your eyes.

Spinoza still had not moved. One by one the drops of water hit the floor. “It was a book-length proof of, well. I bet you can guess.”

“That god does not exist.”

“*Veritas vos liberabit,*” he answered.

“Why... How could she... This morning? But are you sure?”

“*Vero nihil verius,*” he said.

“Holy mothering *fuck,*” you replied.

**

At last prying Baruch’s phone away, you tried to get ahold of Voltaire but it proved impossible—he had gone into deep cover, Fanon along with him. Only Nietzsche still had his head above ground back in Paris, and your urgent guarantees of Spinoza’s innocence, your pleas for prudence, for the necessity of keeping Josephine’s identity a secret, were met only with the German’s bizarre and testy mutterings. “It’s all already happening, again and again and again,” Nietzsche said. At length, you convinced Spinoza to accompany you to Josephine’s address, which he said he’d never been to. You were beginning to believe him. Though she had vanished early that morning, allegedly on the 8am train to Rome, you wanted to search her flat for clues. The whole walk over you were riven by nausea, a bewildering humiliation—your Josephine cooperating with her

detestable father, the bloodiest devil in Europe, and for how long?—but there was too, underneath the horror, a twinge of pride. For after all, you had apparently been deemed worthy of inclusion in his great philosophic purge. Your *Essay*, Baruch's new *Prolegomena*, these heretical texts were seeming equals in the eyes of the most powerful cleric in Europe. You stopped on a bridge to admire the cypress moss hanging down over the still water. It was strange, the evening so exceedingly pleasant, while your conversation could not have been more horrible.

“The Archbishop, Baruch... Our work. They will surely kill you. They nearly got me to do it, and I'm one of your best friends.”

“The Archbishop is a lonely, senile, sick old man who is afraid to die. History will use him for a bedtime story. Ogres and knights and damsels in distress.”

“But we must do something! Several somethings! Voltaire and his cabal are blackmailing him as we speak! They will go the press at any moment. Josephine could be killed. Goddammit man, what is your plan?”

“I plan to finish a set of lenses for Vittorio Saltambucchia's telescope—technically it's his son Giulio's telescope. Giulio's turning nine next month and every nine year old needs a telescope, especially if you're in Umbria. Have you ever stood on an Umbrian hill in the springtime?”

You smelled the smoke before you saw it, silently trying to convince yourself that it was some local custom, a Friday evening bonfire, a football celebration, the holiday of an obscure Dutch saint. But then you saw the glow, uncanny against the night which was black as a dog's fur, the brown smoke funneling above the rooftops. A hundred sirens in the distance like an army bringing siege. Josephine's whole neighborhood was in flames.

MAN AND OTHER VANISHINGS

It came in the mail. After an early morning run I found a note in my slot downstairs telling me to come to the post office on Lenox. As the neighborhood began its morning rituals I lugged the box back up the block in my arms. A sickly thin boy in a tanktop and headphones called to me from a stoop, “Want some a my assistance with that, mami?”

I spread everything out on my kitchen table, drenched with sweat, my new Argentine roommate passing repeatedly through the room pretending like he wasn't peeking over my shoulder. Some of the manuscripts were bound with long metal clips, others were loose with their upper corners bent down. There were five titled “The Painting,” four more called “The Boborovich Painting” or “Boborovikh Canvas.” All of it seemed to be different drafts of the same long story or novella about a man named Vladimir. Most were between thirty and fifty pages, though a few of the manuscripts ran to over a hundred—nothing was dated or numbered or marked in any way other than a title. His name was nowhere, not the manuscripts or the shipping material, but I knew it was from him. Who else in the world would send me this? I stood there staring at the stacks of paper, panting, as the tea kettle lid rattled behind me and water splashed onto the stove, as my roommate lurched behind me to take the kettle off the burner, as the cat yawned on its shelf, as the morning clouds rolled off of the sun and light poured in through the windows to make everything, even the dust of the air, glow. My father, probably, was dead.

When I finally got a postal clerk on the line, he told me the box had shipped six days ago from Baton Rouge. He was not permitted to tell me the name of the person who

sent it. Six days was too long, far too fucking long. What can a person do about six days?

I called my mother.

“Have you heard anything about Dad?” I said.

“He just left for work, why?”

“No, *my* dad.”

“Who, Frank? Are you kidding? Why, what happened?”

I told her about the box. “I think it’s his unfinished work,” I said. “Work that he’s leaving unfinished.”

“Why would he give it to you?” she said.

Blood pulsed in my face and my neck and my fingertips. She hadn’t meant it the way it sounded. She hadn’t even understood what I was saying.

Then she understood. “Oh my god, Natalie, do you think he—?”

“Did you give him my new address?” I said.

“Honey, I haven’t said word one to him in almost twenty years.”

If there was some kind of protocol here I didn’t know what it was. I had no phone number, no email, no way at all of getting in touch with him or anyone that knew him. The last time we spoke was a week after I flew to San Francisco to meet him and he never showed. Weeks later, when he finally contacted me with a bizarre story about a Humboldt County forest fire and federal marshals in black helicopters, I told him, in a fury, that he meant nothing to me, that he had used up all my patience, and that he, Frank, could take his toxic circus act and bother someone else. That had been two, almost three years ago. Eventually I forgave him because he probably couldn’t help it, and we resumed our patchy letter exchange, though I never heard his voice again.

I found the last email. Over the rough dozen he sent, this was one of his most even-keeled, which for a long time I had taken as a bitter irony until I realized that many people are at their calmest once they've stirred everything around them into a sufficient chaos. That this was in fact the point of the chaos—to make a world that only they can bear to live in. I winced at the date—had he really not written to me in that long?

Dear Natalie,

I know you will forgive my unforgivable delay. I've given an enormous amount of thought to your last letter and am going to re-boot our whole discussion soon, I promise. You raise some issues that are difficult for me to talk about, but you're also right that you deserve to hear the truth. Please know how proud I am of you. You're an adult now, a college graduate, an artist, a brilliant young person, burning with truth & beauty. I am grateful every day to your mother for doing such a perfect job on you.

Sidenote: Putting finishing touches on the Russian thing. I'll send it to you when it's done. I'd love to hear what you think—just don't be too brutal. My old friend Adam is going to take it for his next anthology... thence to the agents, thence to the publishers, the world, the galaxy!

When I had tried to reply that same day, it bounced back, the account already dark. That had been during his leftist revolutionary phase, and he'd been paranoid (ridiculous even to me at twenty-two) that the Bush administration was reading his email. He never sent me the "Russian thing," or anything else, until now. I had forgotten all about it, figuring it was just another of his projects on the scrapheap. There was the novel about the biographer who murders his Nobel Prize-winning subject, the book of linked

stories about Caravaggio, the epic sci-fi screenplay he described as a Black Liberation Robin Hood in a dystopian South Bronx. All of it sounded thrilling at the time, and none of it existed, so far as I knew.

My roommate wandered back into the kitchen and began to shove all the vegetables I bought at last weekend's farmer's market into a blender. I didn't have the will to explain personal property to him—I was late for work. I showered, crammed three inches of manuscripts into my bag, and headed out. Miraculously I got a seat on the train and was able to read the first two pages of "The Painting." It was not at all what I expected.

Vladimir Vladviliavich was a rich man, robust of appetite and spirit. His successes, which were universally admired, afforded him a grand estate on the outskirts of Kirov, a palatial gallery of apartments in Petersburg, the most exquisite fashions in dress and transport, fresh pears and apples every morning plucked from his own orchards in the valley, and enough fine vodka to drown the imperial army. Such abundant wealth had Vladimir Vladviliavich! One of the richest men in Petersburg, he was heir to a great timber empire in the North Caucasus built by his father, may his soul rest in peace. For many years after his father's death, Vladimir conducted the affairs of the family timber concern with rare acumen and shrewdness, expanding steadily by means of wise acquisitions and fair but hard-nosed negotiations. And except for an unfortunate delay in production during the Mad Summer of 1874, when he was obliged to deliver a portion of his labor force in manacles to the Imperial Guard, his revenue grew

with the forest which endowed it and the Russia who grew over top of itself, barracks and bank and factory, year after year a profit as inevitable as the winter frost.

He married a good woman of respectable birth, and though they had no children they were decent to each other, more content and peaceable than many of the husbands and wives Vladimir was acquainted with in Petersburg society. He was obliged to grow his mustaches long and everyday wore a dashing black tail coat with interior silk of the most royal red. But yet, with all this health and fortune, Vladimir Vladviliavich was not happy.

Poor Vladimir, like the great majority of mankind, was not an artist. And O how he yearned for the painter's stroke, the sculptor's touch from the time he was a child! The gift to create a true work of art was as unpredictable and dangerous as ball lightning. All he desired was the ability to make one single tree come to life on canvas; instead, the Almighty chose to bestow on him a timber empire. Even the most vast fortune in Russia would not console Vladimir Vladviliavich, and he knew it; yet there was nothing he could do. In his private moments, ruminating on some pastoral scene he longed to capture, Vladimir's mind would spur itself awake, begin to gallop. Yes, yes, he would think, staring hard into the middle distance and downing saucers of cold coffee, if he could only reproduce the natural image he saw so vividly before him. Such lucidity in the bending blades of grass, such vigorous rhythms of line in that copse of trees, the clouds in their free dance of abstractions, the sky a marriage of mighty opposites of color, all this stormed and alighted in the space behind Vladimir's eye. He

would snap his fingers and call at the servants for paper, brush, and ink, and set to work on a study. Then, inevitably, Vladimir would fall into a deep despair. His ineptitude caused him a pain that was almost physical. Ah, poor Vladimir, the fault was not his. Does a stag, loping through the forest with such sinuous grace and power as Nature has ordained in its body, stop at creek's edge to wish that it could swim?

If my father meant there to be some clue or signal to me here, I wasn't seeing it. It sounded nothing like his writing I knew from *Man and Other Vanishings*, his sole published novel which I had read so many times as a teenager. But that seemed to be the intention. It was a literary imitation, a fiction in disguise. Of who, I wasn't sure. I had no knowledge of Russian literature beyond reading *Anna Karenina* in college. But the dilemma of Vladimir, a rich man who yearns to be an artist, this sounded exactly like something Frank Gott would write. I decided to rule out the possibility that this box was sent to me by mistake, by someone unknown, by someone other than my father. I decided to believe that he was out there, somewhere in America, surely as sick as he's ever been but still alive. Waiting for someone to give him a reason to live.

*

From my cubicle I called the crime prevention desk at the Baton Rouge police department, searching their online newspaper while I waited on hold. The cops had nothing on the name Frank Gott. No incidents, no record of anyone by that name living in the city. I asked the officer if any suicides had been reported in the last week and he asked me to wait, then hung up on me. I called back, was left on hold for another ten minutes. My supervisor, Ahmed, walked past my desk and I minimized the *Baton Rouge*

Advocate and pretended to resume color-coding an actuation spreadsheet, but Ahmed kept walking. I don't think he knew my name. I was temp number 7 on the actuation team.

"Juvenile Sex Crimes, how can I help you?" the phone said in an advanced Southern accent. I hung up.

In the coffee room, my work-friend Erica told me to hire a firm called NYC Private Research. "My last boss at Lehman Brothers hired them one time to spy on his mistress. He found out she was also fucking his wife's father, who was a VP at Merrill. Can you say 'money's worth?'"

I Googled them on my phone and before Erica had finished telling me the story of her boss and his ballsy paramour I had a quote for Missing Person Services: they would locate my father for a flat fee of \$3,000. I had nothing like three grand. I made \$26/hr to sit in my Credit Suisse cubicle and contemplate my loneliness, which was more money than I'd made in my entire life, and even so I was still broke. New York, I had quickly learned, had a way of vacuuming up my money every week. It didn't care that I was grabbing bodega salads for dinner, that I held fast to a three drink limit, that I had never once taken a cab.

"Maybe the box wasn't shipped from Baton Rouge," Erica mused, "Maybe it just got routed there from somewhere else. A smaller city or something."

"I can't really actuate on that possibility," I said.

Ahmed passed by the coffee room windows, checking out Erica from toe to top.

"Yeah motherfucker," Erica said, "drink it up."

*

Finding him explained so much about me. Why my brain worked in the opposite direction of my mother's. Why I'm tall and stumbling and dark spirited, while my mother is petite and WASPy-looking and glides around on pumps. Either nurture was nothing or I had mysteriously adapted many of his traits in a vacuum. Or not in a vacuum: in perfect counterpoint to my mother. Sometimes I felt his mania lurking at the bottom of my somber moods. I forced myself to finish every canvas, sketch, drawing, and doodle, no matter how wretched it was, though often I felt a falseness in the end, a going-through-the-motions for the sake of a superstition. But it wasn't a superstition. What is in him is in me too.

When I asked my mother what he was like back then she would say, "charming" and "intense." Occasionally she would say "brilliant," or "reckless" or "overbearing." It was hard to reconcile this with the shaky, half-shy man I had met once in an Orlando diner when I was fourteen. Depending on her mood he was a failed writer, a stymied genius, a pathetic wannabe, a self-destructive con artist, a great American tragedy, a schmuck. She said when they first met he would sing that Ruby Baby doo-wop song to her, which in 1979 must've been woefully uncool: "Ruby, Ruby, when will you be mine?" Ruby John's answer had been, "not in this lifetime, amigo." Once, he casually told her he'd gone to high school in the Bronx with Dion Dimucci from Dion and the Belmonts. Never mind that he would've needed to be in high school at four years old. "I thought you were from Florida?" my mother asked him. "Kinda sorta, you know, all over," he'd said, even muttered, "Detroit" and "Las Cruces" in an exaggerated Spanish accent. He was a chameleon of a person, a mimic, a self-mythologizer, but, back then at least, he was something less pathological and more insecure than an impostor. He was an

imitator. She remembers seeing several photos of him in his Panther phase, one in particular where he wore fatigues with his fist proudly pumped in the air while two black men on either side stared blankly into the camera. In another photo marked Taos '82 he sat atop a rose-colored horse, wearing a cowboy hat and a tight grin like Paul Newman. He was a man who tried on personalities, even whole lives for a spell and then moved on, in search of whatever it was he was haunted by the lack of.

It's a credit to my mother that I cannot remember a time before I knew the story, so there was never a moment of reckoning, no jaw-dropping revelation where I learned the truth. I always just knew. My mother met a man; they "hung out" for a brief period in 1979-80; he went away somewhere, possibly California; seven months later she gave birth to me, raising me by herself until she married and had another baby girl. She never regretted any of it, never sounded sorry or embarrassed—it was a short, simple story. By the time I was in first grade I could rattle off the details to my friends in the same mature tone of voice my mother used. It wasn't until junior high that kids got savvy enough to ask the follow-up question: "So wait... Your real dad doesn't even know you exist?" And pretty soon that began to bother me.

One night when I was fourteen, I marched downstairs to the den where my mother and stepdad were watching TV and announced that I wanted to meet him, and then marched back upstairs and waited for my mom to come up. She didn't come up. Finally, morally outraged, I went back downstairs and saw to my surprise that she was at the kitchen table with a box of old letters and photos and yearbooks—her Only After I'm Dead Box, she called it—looking for the letter he'd sent her years ago from his parents' house in Texas. She must've found it, or found something else of equal use, because the

next thing I remember we were all in the car on our way to Florida. I remember my little sister screeching about meeting Pocohontos and Mulan. I remember my mother buying us cheeseburgers at a drive-thru, a rare capitulation on her part. I remember the pool at the La Quinta Inn with its cabanas and swim-up bar and the virgin strawberry daquiri my stepdad snuck behind my mother's back for me. I remember almost nothing about meeting Frank Gott, my father—the one time I was ever in his presence—only his sad gray eyes behind thick glasses, his stoop, a sense that he was sweaty with frustration at himself, editing his sentences as he spoke, struggling to be present in that booth with me. He was not handsome and that had disappointed me, like it somehow confirmed my worst suspicions about my own ugliness. I have a vague memory of him telling me he was from Miami and was half-Cuban, which, if it happened, I now know to be false. The whole episode is blurred in my mind—just a few still shots of his high, tan forehead and uncomfortable smile, the slick diner menu in my hands, the stubble along his jawline while his head was turned chattering at the waitress. I do remember a flush of embarrassment and something like existential confusion when he'd said to that waitress, gesturing with his menu, "This is my daughter." I can't even remember him giving me his novel as a gift, though I know I read it twice from cover to cover over the next three days at Disneyworld while my sister, barred inside a giant revolving tea cup, squealed with delight.

*

On my lunch break I went out to Madison Sq. Park and sat on a bench to read more of "The Painting." Vladimir, the timber prince, had gone off to the prestigious Dohynsistzen Academy of Arts in Petersburg, where he was schooled in draftsmanship

and painting and became great friends with the radicals Andrei Andryukhin and Nikolai Polezhdin. Hapless Vladimir was an awful painter and Andrei and Nikolai mocked him ceaselessly, but he was happier than he'd ever been, tagging after them to argue and drink all night at the uproarious artist cafes along Nevsky Prospect. This was twelve pages deep but the narrator's tone had begun to take on a satiric edge. "And then, one day, fortune intervened in the form of a boiled potato." Back at home, Vladimir's father choked on his dinner and had a massive coronary at the table, dying on the spot. Vladimir was summoned home to take over the family's affairs. He toiled there several years, expanding the business greatly with the help of his sensible wife Sonya, who he married after his mother passed away. (Sonya seemed to resemble the mother so much that they failed to register as different characters—which seemed like a mistake or possibly an undeveloped irony in this draft.) Still detesting his life and longing for the world of art, Vladimir oversaw the timber concern from Petersburg, where Andrei and Nikolai had established themselves as important critics of the new Russian painting and literature.

I checked the time—I'd been at lunch for forty-five minutes. I didn't care.

One day Vladimir went to see his friend, the critic Andrei Andryukhin at his apartments in the bohemian quarter. It was a time of day in late spring when Petersburg begins to swelter and cook and the new buds of the white birch tremble in the heat, and though one marvels at the bald blue intensity of an afternoon sky, one simply cannot be still beneath its glare. Many of the shops lower their shades to the sun and lock the front door for more than an hour, the official state buildings seem to fill up with a great and solemn stillness, while the

dogs along the river sleep noisily, and so Vladimir Vladviliavich expected to find his friend Andrei Andryukhin dozing in a hammock, or asleep in bed with a tavern boy, as Andrei Andryukhin so oddly did some afternoons. But when he arrived, the serving woman let him in and informed him that Andrei Andryukhin was at work in his study.

Ascending the knobby stairs to see that his friend was hunched over his desk writing furiously, bathed in light, unaware of his presence, Vladimir Vladviliavich greeted him with a shout. “What is this you’re writing, Andrei Andryukhin?”

Andrei jumped high off his chair, and seeing Vladimir at his door, laughed wildly, then scowled at the open clothbound book at his elbows.

“Ah, Vladimir Vladviliavich,” said Andrei Andryukhin in his affected lisp, “My comely man!” Andrei kissed Vladimir on either cheek. “I’ve been bribed again by the newspaper to review the new novel of Dostoevsky. I can’t bear to finish reading it. Garbage!” He swept the book off his desk in a quick tantrum. “What shall I tell them, Vladi? Ghastly, superciliously odd, supremely new...”

Vladimir Vladviliavich picked the dejected book off the floor and began to turn its pages. “It looks interesting,” he said. “*The Brothers Karamazov*. Strange title, but I rather like it.”

“Oh Vladi, you wouldn’t know a work of art if it knocked down all your timber!” Andrei Andryukhin laughed in an explosion of high shrieks and titterings, nearly like a soprano in some vulgar Italian comedy. Still, it was infectious, and Vladimir, not wanting to lose face, laughed a bit too.

“But anyway, enough of this Christian drear,” said Andrei, moving away from the desk to the dirty soap-stained window. “Is that a new ring, Vladimir Vladviliavich?” Andrei said, turning Vladimir’s hand over in his and lighting in one voluptuous movement his slender cigarette. “Come, let’s have a vodka and talk about this Tsar, this Alexander, that pig! Have you heard what he’s done, Vladi? I tell you, someone should slip into his chambers and cut his piggy throat in the night.”

As they moved into the sunroom, Andrei’s hand on his arm, Vladimir felt an old familiar deflation of his spirits. His critic friends always wanted to talk politics, or gossip about society, whereas Vladimir wanted only to hear about their work, this new novel of Desterevsky, for instance. And their views on politics were so vulgar, so unbound from rationality! So like schoolboys reveling in the low pleasure of obscenity. They knew nothing of the world of capital and ministers, armies and markets. Vladimir yearned to hear their fierce dialogues on aesthetics, their crackling exchange of ideas. To be included! But Vladimir knew, with dreadful certainty, that his intellectual friends reserved their elevated artistic arguments for later, at the cafes, under the drooping boughs of the elm trees, when Vladi was not there to muck it up and make his dense, club-footed observations. That is to say, Vladimir never received invitations to meet them at the cafes. As recently as last year, Vladimir had invited Andrei Andryukhin and Nikolai Polezhdin to attend the theater as his guests and go for vodkas with him afterward. “No, no Vladi,” Nikolai Polezhdin had said when Vladimir grandly announced the title of the production, “We cannot go. They are having a cat

strangling recital in the alley behind Andrei Andryukhin's offices and we have committed ourselves to review it!" And Andrei Andryukhin let go a high shriek as if someone had dropped a cymbal.

Imagine the dismay of Vladimir Vladviliavich when, that evening after attending the theater alone, walking along the boulevard sunk in thought, he should come upon his two critic friends hosting a raucous party at a cafe. Poets and prostitutes dancing arm in arm, the boots of Nikolai Polezhdin kicking glassware on top a table, delivering some absurd speech about the exalted soul of the proletariat. How foolish Vladimir felt then for wasting his evening at a silly play. They were right, it had been awful. But Vladimir could not enter into the revelry that night. When the friends of Andrei and Nikolai heard his name and rank announced, they turned from him and acted as if he were a ghost. And so Vladimir Vladviliavich had gone home to Sonya, who waited for him in her chambers, wide awake and possessed of a carnal humor.

"It will lead to another White Terror!" Andrei Andryukhin declared, and took a marvelous swig of vodka. Vladimir realized he hadn't heard a word his friend had spoken since they left the study. He was gazing at a miniature oil portrait behind Andrei Andryukhin's head—a boy in hunting clothes standing next to a luminous tree. He had never felt more alone in his entire life.

"Why yes, Andrei Andryukhin, it could, it very well could, I fear," Vladimir said. And so their visit went.

*

A man carrying all his belongings in clear plastic bags stopped in front of my bench and with great effort asked me for a cigarette, and then, when I reached in my purse, for money. I gave him two smokes and a dollar. “Always give to panhandlers,” said Walt Whitman, who knew from being broke in New York City. I wondered if my father had ever been homeless, or if he always had some long lost friend or an old lover, or some new lucky soul, to take him in. I know he squatted for at least a year once in an abandoned house in Costa Rica. That was when he wrote me the most often, his exile year in the tropics, which coincided with my senior year of high school. “I am working like crazy on the novel,” he’d written, “My first with a sci-fi element... Takes place in a future where humans have figured out how to abolish the day... They develop technology to control the earth’s orbit around the sun... But what about the lunar cycle, you’re probably thinking? The lunar cycle gets tricky.... Animals being especially reliant on the lunar cycle to regulate their biology and behavior... Difficult to nail down some of the hard science stuff from here—few books in English and closest library is a perilous haul down mountain, through jungle... May have to return to that banana republic called the US soon, if only for research...”

That had been what, fourteen years ago? Maybe he went back to Costa Rica. Or maybe he was never there at all. Maybe all along he’s been living in St. Petersburg, writing novels in Russian, plotting the overthrow of the US government, fathering more confused and melancholic daughters.

I felt a steep wave of nausea coming on, a seven chakra dizziness, and I sat back against the bench and closed my eyes. A rain drop exploded on my forehead. There was no way I was going back into the office today. I texted Erica: “Tell Ahmed I had an

emergency. Tell him I came down with a feminine sickness.” I would send him some sort of harrowing fabrication when I got home. On my phone, still queasy, I searched until I found a private investigations firm that cost less than the well-heeled outfit Erica had recommended. There was barely enough in my account, but it meant I’d have to duck my roommate on this month’s utility bills. I called the P.I. service and gave them all the information I could, told them I couldn’t afford more than two hours of their services, and begged them to do whatever they could today. They said it would help keep the cost down if I could provide them more information to get started with. The afternoon rain was coming early. I walked uptown in a drizzle and had a coffee under the umbrellas in Bryant Park, then stubbed my cigarette out on my heel and passed between the lions of the Public Library, trying to feel a faint hope somewhere between my ribs.

I told my story to a dread-locked librarian until she pitied me enough to help me locate his birth records in a database. He was born Frank Gott, not Francis as I had assumed, to Thomas and Mary Gott in New Roads, Louisiana. It was a little town outside Baton Rouge in a parish called Pointe Coupee, on the banks of the False River. The False River! I laughed sharply when I saw that, either offending the librarian or making her doubt my whole story, and she slipped away back to her station. The parish had an incredible history—originally a French Creole settlement that was home to slave uprisings and some of the oldest, strangest Carnival rites in Louisiana—but he had never once claimed the place, never even made mention of it. Both Thomas and Mary Gott died in the late ‘90s. I found some of their voting records, Thomas’s army registration, a few titles for houses in Galveston and Baton Rouge. I could’ve kept going but I had the irrational feeling that the more I learned about Thomas and Mary Gott, the farther I was

getting from my father, who'd spent his whole life erasing and rewriting whatever the past said about who he was.

His novel *Man and Other Vanishings* was cited in an article I couldn't find called "Neo-Noir Novels of 1989," and had been reviewed once in a magazine called *INTERLOPE*, which was also unfound. It was registered with the Library of Congress, showing in its first and only edition by Samizdat Books of Boston, MA. I felt a low creeping horror for him, this man who'd thought of nothing but writing and writers his whole life long, and was leaving barely a trace of permanent words behind.

I was about to give up when I found a mention in an Index of Images for "Gott, Frank." It was a biography of James Jericho, the great American magical realist. Up in the stacks I found the book and turned to peer at a photograph of my father I had never seen before. There he was, young and bearded and beaming with arrogant vitality, standing shoulder to shoulder with two other men, all of them leaning on an old truck, grinning ruddily handsome, disarming grins, like they'd just got finished stealing the other team's mascot. My father's hair was longer than I'd ever seen it. The man on his left had a frizzy mop and a thick, flat-ridged brow. The man on his right was a young James Jericho. Suddenly it dawned on me. I'd paid no attention to the countless oblique references to his two friends in the letters (he had a strange habit of putting people's places of origin in parenthesis as if they were congressmen, as in "my old friends James (SF) and Adam (QNS)")—and he'd been talking all along about one of the most famous writers alive. I wonder if he'd always assumed I knew that somehow without being told. The photo caption read, "James Jericho with classmates Adam Greenberg and Frank Gott in Iowa City, 1976. Jericho attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop from 1974-76,

returning to teach in 1995.” I didn’t even know my father had gone to Iowa. He’d written about his graduate school days with rapturous nostalgia, but never with any real detail, no full names or dates. It was maddening and seemed almost intentional, his vagueness and evasions, like some subconscious part of him had been laying this out for me like a trap for the past thirty years.

Adam Greenberg had a Wikipedia page. He’d published seven well-regarded science fiction novels, the last two in collaboration with his wife, a woman named Ann who was now deceased. He taught math and English at Brooklyn Technical High School for over forty years. I stared at a recent photo of him, tried to imagine this kind eyed man with the bushy white mustache laughing at one of my father’s jokes. Unless this too was one of his fictions, I was staring at Frank Gott’s best friend. What happened between these three men? What destroyed their friendship? One became an international star (and by all accounts a ruthless jerk), one put in a lifetime of quiet work, and one turned his own life into a mystery novel.

I called the investigators and gave them everything I’d found.

“That’s it?” he said.

“Yeah, well, that’s why I’m hiring you guys.”

“While I have you on the phone, the police pulled a John Doe out of the river in Baton Rouge a week ago. They haven’t been able to identify the individual.”

“The river?” I said.

“The Mississippi. Police believe he jumped from the bridge there.”

“That isn’t him,” I said. “He’s sixty years old.”

“We’re looking into it.”

“Sixty year old men don’t jump from bridges.”

“We’ll let you know what we find out.”

*

I went into the Rose Main reading room and took out the rest of the manuscripts, flipping through them, looking for differences, looking, I guess, for some kind of clue. If this wasn’t a matter of executing his literary estate, then it must be about finding him inside this story, hearing the distress signal, breaking the code. Then again. Though I’d never had any doubt that it was him that sent the box, I had to concede the possibility that these were not his stories. Maybe they were translations from the notebooks of some unknown nineteenth-century Russian writer. (Did Frank Gott know Russian? I figured not, or he would have shown it off before.) But I wondered if I should be up at Columbia showing all of this to a scholar. I spread everything out on the long gold table, under the ornate fifty foot ceilings and those marvelous arched windows, turning pages on four manuscripts at once and listening to the amplified coughing and scraping of chairs, dropped books, beeping laptops, whispers, the rare vicarious thrill when someone lost control and let out a few bright indecent notes of laughter. But soon, one of the drafts of the “Boborovich Canvas” veered off in a different direction than the others, and I was sitting down, lost inside its pages.

The next day, as Vladimir Vladviliavich drove home from his club, he did a strange thing. Perhaps the afternoon heat was making him delirious, or he had taken too much vodka after his lunch of duck and heavy gravy, but half of the

way down Nevsky Prospect he began to shout at his coachman, unwillingly, dimly aware of his own words.

“Olsip! Take a left! Any left! Only get me off of this miserable steaming ditch of a thoroughfare. I cannot bear it any longer.”

So Olsip, mute but with a miraculous sense of hearing, steered the coach across the intersection, cutting off an oncoming carriage and nearly trampling a pair of young girls clutching flower baskets, until correcting course on a quiet, lovely street in the shade of sycamore trees which ran parallel to Nevsky, and with a great sigh Vladimir Vladviliavich leaned back into the cool of his seat. Here was another world altogether. He closed his eyes and listened to the pleasant clop of the horse’s shoes on the cobblestone, audible now above the distant melee of Nevsky’s traffic. Then, just as he was considering a rare but well-earned nap, he saw a shop he had never seen before.

“Olsip!” Vladimir called, and only after the third time capturing his man’s attention, directed him to pull over at once. There, wedged squatly between a towering slum and an untended bakery was a gallery of New & Modern Art. Vladimir peered at the window but the glare from the high sun only threw his own image back to him, craning with a hand chopped against his brow like a sailor scouting the shore. Vladimir took the door handle and froze a moment, caught wondering if the fearsome, rickety slum next door was made with his own timber. He swung the door and stepped inside the gallery, hit by a drafty silence as if stepping underground.

It was small, but the sign atop the door had not misled him, for the walls were hung with pictures so boldly modern Vladimir wondered if their paint was yet dry. Grotesque nudes whose faces were unsettlingly candid, dingy factory scenes, a ruined Bavarian castle haunted by the crescent moon. Some of them were obscene, so much that Vladimir became ashamed for looking at them, even all by himself in the gallery. More framed pictures leaned against the walls as if waiting their turn to perform, and an elegant cherrywood countertop held all manner of broadsheets, journals of the arts, pamphlets, theater bills, and exhibition notices. A heavy door in the back Vladimir assumed led to the shopkeeper's quarters. On a wooden workbench to the rear of the gallery was a mechanism to stretch several canvasses at once. Vladimir peered for a moment at the topmost canvas being stretched, but he did not care for it—a ghostwhite noblewoman with her dog and three white-haired children scooped in her arms and spread about the folds of her gown. Sentimental, thought Vladimir, and moved through the gallery, savoring the better ones and snorting a bit at the bad, congratulating himself for knowing the difference.

And then he saw it. In the far corner from the entrance of the gallery, a moderately-sized landscape in a thin bronze frame. Vladimir cleared his throat loudly but nothing stirred from the backroom. He moved in close to the picture and gazed, lost, utterly lost to himself. It was exquisite. A river scene at sunset, a splendor of ambers and purple and gold, the eye brought first to a lone tree in the left foreground, dark, menacingly green, nearly black, its flush crown spread to occupy a great swath of the canvas. The tree sat on an outcropping over a placid

little creek, bending through a valley as if off to some secret, primeval origin. The creek's water was as glass, purely reflecting the fire-melted sky where it wasn't corrupted by vegetation the color of root. And in the distance, swirls of mountain faded gray, lost mountains in the ripening light, some revelation of a problem Vladimir could not name. His breath hit against the wiggling brush strokes, greens and yellows thickly combed, or curving arcs of tan and olive where the valley rose up, an ochre density in the sky, and a white spill like a busted yolk above the mountain's crest. Vladimir Vladviliavich was in love.

*

I looked up, realized the sun was out and I was crying. My father's voice was always only an unreal noise in my own mind and now here it was: alive, warm and impalpable as one of the beams of sunlight piercing downward from the Rose Main windows, illuminating the hovering dust. This painting that affected Vladimir so deeply was a literary replica of one of my first canvases.

"The Sunset at the Valley of the Bolshoy Akturu River," said an adenoidal voice behind Vladimir. He turned to see a terribly thin, possibly consumptive man wrapped in a striped scarf, with ashen skin and the longest fingers Vladimir had ever seen attached to a human being.

"Yes, yes," Vladimir said, turning back to the painting. "I believe I rather like it."

"Like it?" sniffed the man, causing Vladimir's face to darken. "It is exquisite," said the man, stepping very near the painting and committing his own gaze to its colors as if transfixed.

“Is this your gallery?” Vladimir said, almost sorry for interrupting the man’s solemn reverie.

For an unbearably tense moment the man made no move, as if Vladimir was not there at all, and so he repeated his question in a more imperious tone.

“I am Sergey Dezhnyov,” he said, slipping his absurd fingers around Vladimir’s hand.

“What is that? A Cossack name!” said Vladimir.

“No, no. No.” said Sergay Dezhnyov. “Though my people came to Petersburg from the Kuban in the North Caucasus, this was a long time ago.”

“Why, imagine finding a Cossack owning an art gallery!” Vladimir said, chuckling at his own witticism.

Sergey glanced surreptitiously from Vladimir out the front window to the parked coach, where the sun poured now onto Olsip, yawning idiotically in the high seat. It is nearly impossible to find a servant in Petersburg who does not fall asleep at every available opportunity, but nothing save the lash had been theorized as a possible reform.

“May I ask your name and rank?” Sergay said, still nasal but with a touch of grandeur.

“I am Vladimir Vladviliavich, Baron of Kirov,” said Vladimir.

“Of course, of course. I should have known. I am honored to have you in my gallery. A man of your sensibilities, sir, will no doubt be interested in the Playatovs, the Mehndels. I’m proud to show you a new Trblisi portrait, delivered

by hand from the master's studio only last week," he said, delicately urging Vladimir away from that corner of the shop by pointing his sharply cleft chin.

"Nonsense!" cried Vladimir. "This is what I'm interested in. Who is the artist? Such genius. How it makes me feel... I cannot put it into words."

Sergay drew a deep, mournful breath, and Vladimir wondered if he would cough up blood.

"I'm afraid this picture has already been sold."

"What? To whom?" Vladimir said. It was as if a servant had informed him someone had taken up residence in his house while he was away.

Sergay regarded him with hesitation, possibly even fear, and Vladimir guessed that he was the first nobleman to patronize the humble little shop in person.

"Why, to Count Vasily Luschenko, the great timber magnate of the east. Such a fine personage he is, a magisterial man of the empire, and hardly able to see anymore, so far in his dotage he is."

Vladimir could not believe it. Vasily Luschenko, his late father's own sworn enemy, his sole competitor in all of Russia, the ancient tyrant still greedily clinging to his ridiculous mortality! "Impossible! I will have it. But who is the artist? I must know his name."

"Surely you have heard of Mikhail Boborovich?" Sergay said, lacing his fingers in and out of each other as if kneading some invisible bread dough.

The name meant nothing to Vladimir. "Ah... Mikhail Boborovich, of course. I should have surmised."

“Indeed, let Paris keep her smudge-makers, her amateur oil spillers. If ever there was a European prank it is this Impressionism!”

“Indeed, indeed. Though I rather like Msr. Renoir,” Vladimir said.

Sergay, apparently unhearing, proceeded to the cherrywood counter and took out a ledger. “Here it is, Luschenko - Boborovich, April the tenth. I’m afraid there’s nothing to be done. I personally have guaranteed its delivery this week to the Lushenko estate.”

Vladimir came around the counter beside Sergay, who closed the ledger book and seemed to shrink beneath Vladimir’s shadow. “Sergay, I will pay or do whatever it takes.”

*

The painting was one of my first that I finished at Oberlin, an early mimetic attempt at an oil landscape. It was the only thing I did that year that I was really proud of, and I’d sent my father a photograph of it. He’d been living here at the time—I remember writing out the address to somewhere in Queens. Maybe it was Adam Greenberg’s house. He wrote back right away, tripping over himself with compliments, and enclosed a check for five hundred dollars. He wanted to buy the painting. I wrote him back in thanks, but I couldn’t sell it until after the spring campus show. He told me to keep the money anyway, as a security. I told my mother about it and she pretended to be happy for me. What I didn’t tell her was that the check bounced.

I flipped through the other drafts to the scene where Vladimir sees the painting, but found that it was different in many of them. In the drafts called “The Painting,” which

I now took to be the earliest, Vladimir himself paints the picture, which is a self-portrait of himself as a boy, leading a sorrel mare by the reins.

The train would be packed for rush hour so I stayed in the library past seven, finishing the “Painting” drafts. When I got off at my stop I had a voicemail. It was a 212 number and I felt a rush of adrenaline, hoping it might be the P.I.’s office with an early report. But it was someone at the temp agency that placed me at Credit Suisse. I had been fired.

On my block I saw the same skinny boy from the morning, sitting now on a different stoop with several other boys. Hurrying past, I tried to keep my bleary, ruined face turned to the side.

“It been a rough day huh mami?”

*

Maybe he sent these stories to me because they were never meant to be published. Maybe they were intended only for his ideal reader, and I am that reader. What is in him is in me too. Maybe it will only be true that my father is dead if I stop reading. Maybe the world works like that, and we just never knew.

*

That night I called a suicide hotline. A man answered the phone. He sounded gentle and old and like he was in a very comfortable position, possibly reclining in bed.

“I think my father is going to kill himself. Or he might’ve already.”

“Oh my goodness.”

There was a pause.

“Do you have anything to suggest...?” I said.

“Ok, who am I speaking with?”

“Natalie Johns. My father’s name is Frank. Frank Gott. The writer Frank Gott.”

“I am so sorry that this is happening. When was the last time you spoke to Frank?”

“It’s sort of hard to say. A few years ago?”

“Oh—well that’s been a little while then. But you’re concerned for him tonight?”

“He sent me something in the mail. I think it means he’s going to do it.”

“Where is Frank right now?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about his address? Do you know his address?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Natalie—”

“I have nothing. No information. He literally could be anywhere.”

“I see. Well it becomes difficult to intervene without a contact...”

“It certainly does,” I said.

“You’re not in a position to rescue him, Natalie. That isn’t your responsibility.”

“I think I just wanted... I think I just wanted to talk to somebody.” Tears were falling down onto my hands.

“How are you doing with all this?”

“...Pretty bad.”

“Where are you right now Natalie?”

“Home. My home. I’m at my stupid fucking house, Jesus Christ.”

“You’re a good daughter for trying to help him.”

“...I’m not.”

I was kneeling on the floor.

“Would you like to stay on and talk to me?” he said.

“...Yes.”

*

In bed that night I finished the shorter of the “Boborovich” drafts. Vladimir hangs the painting, my painting, on his wall. He’s finally come to terms that he will never be a great painter, but is now resolved to be a great patron and appreciator of art. He realizes that all along what he wanted most was the company of “beautiful souls” like Andrei and Nikolai, to be accepted by them and for himself to be loved and admired the way they love each other. (It’s clear that this will never happen—the two torment Vladimir without mercy while taking advantage of his wealth and social prestige.) Though they’ve recently had a falling out, Vladimir decides to host a dinner party for Andrei and Nikolai at which time he will reveal his new painting and regain his place in their circle. But when they arrive, his friends only want to gossip about palace scandals and argue about peasant revolts. There’s some suspense in that neither critic notices the painting hanging on the wall behind them, even as Vladimir makes several pitiful attempts to draw their attention there. Vladimir squirms and suffers until finally he can’t wait any longer and rushes over to the painting.

“My dear Vladimir Vladviliavich. What is this?” Andrei said.

“It is ‘The Sunset at the Valley of the Bolshoy Akturu River,’ Vladimir said, struggling to control the muscles in his face, so that his expression was a deranged contortion of a smile and a clenched jaw.

“Yes,” said Andrei, evenly, glaring at the picture, “So it is. It is... sublime.”

The heart of Vladimir Vladviliavich seized up in joy. Andrei Andryukhin cocked his head impishly back toward the table.

“Sublimely dreadful,” Andrei said. “I think that this is the plague. You have captured a visual plague and you have hung it on your wall.”

“Stand back, Andrei Andryukhin,” said Nikolai, “you shall infect us all!”

At this the two critics went into a fit of laughter, Andrei Andryukhin spraying the table with a mist of vodka, while Nikolai Polezdhin bellowed roundly. The blood went out of Vladimir’s face. Each second of their laughter felt longer and longer, like it would never end, like they would remain here in the dining hall forever and he would suffer in a purgatory of their cackling. Was the painting truly this bad, or were they saying so to mock him? Either way, how could he have been so foolish?

“It is by a new young artist named Mikhail Boborovich,” said Vladimir, recovering himself slightly by announcing this detail. Perhaps if he could describe the transcendent aesthetic experience of seeing it for the first time. “To me, it is like... it is like...”

“Like something hanging in a brothel!” cried Nikolai.

Andrei nodded his head in agreement. “Yes, but in the parlor. No brothel would hang this picture in a working boudoir. It would decimate productivity!”

Andrei Andryukhin made a crude gesture.

“It isn’t so bad,” said Vladimir quietly. He had the strange sensation that his fingers were covered in ash. “Besides, the purchase was more a matter of family honor. It was to be sold to my late father’s rival. I nearly had to pry it from Monsieur Sergay’s hands.”

“Who?” cried Nikolai.

“Sergay, the art dealer near Nevsky Prospect.”

“Not that trash peddler? The swindler! How much did you give him for this?” Andrei said.

“Why, I don’t remember, perhaps fifteen hundred roubles,” Vladi said.

Andrei and Nikolai were delirious. “Look at it, the bourgeois *taint* of it!” Nikolai said.

“Mikhail Bobo... what did you say his name was? A Russian wunderkind! Better he should go by *Anonymous!*” Andrei cried.

“I rather like it,” said Vladimir Vladviliavich quietly, and at that both Andrei and Nikolai doubled over with laughter, neither one able to breathe for a long time.

*

Oh father. You giveth and you taketh away. What kind of mentally ill monster of a parent does a thing like that? Did he think I was some kind of artistic fraud? Frank Gott

accusing anyone of fraudulence would be too much. If that's what this was all supposed to mean, I'll kill him myself.

I kept reading, though I wanted to put everything back in the box and heave it out the window. The "Boborovich" drafts depart completely from each other after the dinner party. In one, the servant Olsip appears and informs Vladimir that a wildfire has spread through the timber fields, threatening to engulf the entire Kirov estate. In some drafts, Vladimir is too despondent to care and sends his Sonya to handle the crisis, and she dies when the fires overtake the manor. Another draft has Vladimir galloping off that night, first storming into the art dealer's house in back of the gallery, where he discovers an anarchists' meeting underway. Vladimir drags the art dealer out into the street and beats him, then travels up to Kirov. When he arrives, he learns the fire has been set by his own workers, who take him prisoner and read him a list of grievances dating back to his father's reign, then execute him. In another draft there is no fire—instead Vladimir flies into a rage and banishes Andrei and Nikolai from the house, then has the art dealer thrown into prison, after which he falls into a state of delirium and chops down the white birch in his own courtyard, cursing the memory of his father. Then Andrei appears, sheepishly inquiring about the Boborovich painting, which he wants to purchase. They quarrel, and Vladimir kills him with the axe.

They were all exciting endings. He could have chosen any one of these versions and called it finished. There was something deeply masochistic to his return to this story, over and over, rewriting it completely each time over what must have been many years, even decades. The story was a political fable and a morality tale, a psychological portrait of a lonely, lost, self-deluding soul. It made no sense at all that he'd written it in this

mock-Russian style, but that was the lone element which never changed. I wondered if this was his autobiography-in-progress, the events changing as he changed. Andrei was James Jericho, Nikolai was Adam Greenberg, the Petersburg Arts Academy was Iowa City. When he was angry and bitter at James for gaining literary accolades, he'd punish Andrei in that draft. Later, he'd forgive him, rewrite the story with a worldly emphasis, a tragic romance of coming revolution. The Boborovich painting, obviously, was me, though I still cringed to think what that meant in some of these versions. Whatever it meant, I could forgive him for it. Maybe the painting was a sublimation of his sense of himself as a father. No matter the draft, it didn't have much to recommend about his love life. Poor Sonya.

*

Though my eyes watered and burned, I didn't want to stop reading so I started again from the beginning, and I didn't want to go to sleep even though my body ached. I was afraid if I fell asleep I would wake up to find out he was dead. In the kitchen I lit candles and made a cup of the *yerba mate* tea my roommate was always pushing on me, then sat in the chair by the fire escape, reading as the rain came down.

At four in the morning I tore off the last two pages of the longest version, the one I'd been reading, and went up to the roof. The rain had stopped a little while ago and I found a dry spot against a brick ledge to sit. I had a view of all the bridges stretching over the Harlem River, could even see the wires of the Triborough sparkling between the towers of the east side. My father loved New York City, was obsessed with it, though I don't think he ever managed to live here for more than a few months at a time. The one

time he talked about suicide in his letters was in the middle of a crazy, ten-thousand word, almost incomprehensible praise song to the city.

I searched my phone for the email. It was from my sophomore year at Oberlin. I had told him in a letter that I was visiting New York for fall break and he'd written me this in response.

I get sometimes violently sad thinking about it—that there was a time (summer '77, November through New Years '89, the blizzard in '96) when I was a person who was nowhere but there and I remember where I was even *walking* in those particular times, and who else was there walking next to me, and what the streets looked like at night with the snow reflecting off, and the falling down buildings, and the jewel lights swooping across the bridge... And I remember what the president said, and what we were listening to, and the clanging in the pipes, and who we loved, and that time has passed now and those people are gone and none of it or any of us can ever come back and it makes me want to go die a private death, unknown to anyone, the way an infant falls asleep when no one's watching it. I feel my particular New York Cities scattering away in the wind in my mind, leaving only their aura and the sorrow. This girl I left behind on Eastern Parkway—the plea in her eyes was as brittle and delicate as Japanese paper—why did I do that to her? and I think, Natalie, I really think that I should kill myself. Though what I actually wish is that I had never been born. I can't keep keeping sane in a world where the only beauty is so horribly sad.

*

I'd read up on jumping. What kills you, often, is asphyxiation by water. After falling two hundred feet, the impact shatters the bones of the legs, arms, ribs, sometimes the spine. In the seconds that follow, if the jumper retains consciousness, the pain will cause him to open his mouth to scream, filling his lungs with water. Because he has plunged so deep and his arms and legs are broken, he can only thrash, unable to swim to the surface. Deep in the water it is too dark to see. He continues to thrash, choking in more water. Seconds go by in terror and unimaginable pain until his brain runs out of oxygen and it is over.

The really difficult thing to imagine is what could be so horrible, back up there on the bridge, that this was a better option.

Folded up in the pocket of my sweatshirt I had the last two pages of the novella-length "Bobovorich" draft. I decided I would stay up here and wait for the sun to come up over Queens, where Adam Greenberg lived, and the Bronx, where my father sometimes pretended to be from, and that nothing irreversible would happen so long as I sat out on this roof in Harlem and kept the watch and did not, no matter what, look away.

At last, Vladimir Vladviliavich stood looking out over the valley. He felt his insides tremor. Below was a sea of fire. Thousands of his acres of forest gave up in flames, more spasms of light hit Vladimir's eyes than it was possible to bear and he had to clench them shut every few seconds, and the hairs of his nose crackled. A peculiar reedy hum accompanied the hissing and roar of the engulfment.

Above the smoke, the dust rose up and glittered in a hazy swarm, a static field, making strange furrows of light where the sun cut through. Swirls of ash and charred matter ascended heavenward like offerings. And through the chaos, barely visible, was the steppe beyond the valley, inviolable and pristine. Vladimir Vladviliach fell to his knees, coughing and weeping, transfigured in the glow of a great and wondrous destruction.

How long did Vladimir remain there on his knees, there on a high cliff above a sea of fire?

High up in the void the dust commingled, snapping with a static charge. A pure space opened itself in his mind and held there, in absolute balance. It contained the whole world, and nothing at all.

THE PRODIGALS

Sunday was the day I was supposed to go look for an apartment. I intended to rent the nicest apartment I could afford on a teacher's salary, so as not to fall too far out of the middle class overnight. But early that morning while I was still at the kitchen table reading the internet, Mother called to tell me she was dying. "Today?" I said. "Could possibly be today," she said. I asked her what she was dying of but she wouldn't tell me over the phone. "This better not be some sort of ruse," I said. I expected her to cluck her tongue and yell violent threats, but she began, amazingly, to sob. This in itself shocked me more than her claim of imminent death. I told her I'd be over right away. "You remember how to get here?" she asked. "That's very funny Mother."

The litigator greeted me at the door with a firm handshake and a mimosa. He looked the same as always—crisp polo, silver hair, blue eyes crinkled with intelligence, an expensive smell sort of wafting around him. "Where's Iliana?" he said. He'd always had a glimmer of a thing for my wife. "Gone to Zion. Joined a kibbutz. I haven't heard from her since the start of Pesach." He wagged his head. I didn't blame him for being disgusted with me, but I couldn't exactly alter my personality for his benefit. The whole presentation of him—the jawline, the onyx watch, his colonial viceroy manners—turned me from a grown man into a slouching, shitty teenager. "Your mom is out in the garden," he said. "Listen, Vậ? You need to know that she really is very sick. I'll be right here if you want to talk when you get back." I noticed then that his eyes were dry but glassy, like someone who'd been forced to look at a horrid truth too long and all by themselves. The bottom of my gut dropped.

I walked through the hot sog of the backyard around their ridiculous infinity pool and down the flagstone path to the trellis. When I rounded the corner, I pulled up short. My mother was in the middle of a garden, sweating in canvas gloves, her wisps of silver hair streaming from a straw hat. She looked almost elderly, shrunk to half her size. All around her was the buzzing, humming splendor of verdant flora and hanging bushes and complex rows of plants so lush and charismatic they looked like they might rear up and speak. Two stone lions perched above a shallow pond where plump tropical fish curled around each other in cool, clean water. A lime green hedge, shoulder-high, was sculpted into the form of a dragon in flight. I half-expected a mute serving girl to wheel a tea cart around a corner. “You got a guy that does this?” I asked. “No you idiot I do this,” she said, kissing me on the cheek. I didn’t know if the warmth from the kiss on my cheek was her sweat or lipstick or my simple embarrassment. I wiped it off when she turned back to her flower.

We never had more than a few potted herbs growing up—Mother spent all her time in the kitchen cooking endless platters of food or upstairs cleaning or at the dining room table playing *Tiến Lên* with my aunts and uncles. When had she learned how to do this? Who was this woman, this aesthete? The garden was a tour de force. Everything bloomed to its full magnitude, but not a blade of grass grew outside its boundary. This was the last thing I expected to see in the pine wastes of northwest Houston, much less my mother’s personal backyard. “How long have you been working on this?” I said. She didn’t answer me, making tenacious snips at a hibiscus vine with her shears. “I can’t even deal with how amazing this is.” With my fingers I traced the smooth popped eye and jagged beard of the hedge dragon, surprised at what a solid shell the green made. It was

very hot but the shade from the trees and vines made the heat seem proper. “Proud of your mama?” she said, with a kind of knowing resentment. She kicked a rock back into its place on the lip of the thin stream, which coursed down into the pond and in a zig-zag pattern through the garden. The water was falling from somewhere I couldn’t see, but I could hear the murmuring.

“Mommy has breast cancer,” she said. “Three-C. It’s too in-there to operate. You want to go inside? Don’t fall down.” I sat on a stone bench beneath a kumquat tree, my vision fuzzing at the edges. Red paper lanterns hung down from low branches. It must have looked magical at night. I was having trouble breathing. This tree, I suddenly remembered, had been here when they moved in. It was all that had been here, just an ignorant meadow of grass and this one tree, the back acres of their property ringed with high pines. Most pine trees were not naturally occurring, they were genetically engineered by Nazi scientists, I think I read somewhere. “When did you find out?” I said. “A month ago,” she said. “A *month*? Mom...” She shrugged. “You talked to your brother?” she asked. I took another breath—I was no longer in danger of whatever I had just been in physiological danger of. “You’re seriously asking me that?”

“Dinh—I mean Vân—you go see your brother. You explain it to him,” she shook her shears at me. “Explain what to him? Cancer?” She gave me a withering look. “Explain I’m dying. He doesn’t believe my doctors. He says they are stupid about everything.” I imagined Dinh laying into a torrent of medicalese in his snide voice, as if he was being quizzed on rounds instead of explaining to his own mother what was killing her. “So let him think that,” I said, “Fuck him. I hope by now you’ve written him out of your will.” She ignored me. “You go make up with him and make him understand! Then

you both come back. I want both my boys to say goodbye to me.” Her meaning, finally, was clear to me. I couldn’t believe it. Maybe the diagnosis had pushed her over the mental cliff at last. I searched her eyes for a sign that she was as crazy as what she was telling me to do. “You want me to fly... to Lebanon... to persuade Dinh that you’re really dying?” She didn’t reply, just stared at me with an affirmative twitch in her brow. She looked proud of herself. “Can I just email him?” She swung her shears closer to my nose and I jumped back on the bench, getting a flash-recall of the time she chased me around the house and threw the big kitchen knife, narrowly missing what would’ve been my kidney. “Paul bought two tickets! Spring Break time—you and Iliana go. Be a good boy.” I protested again. When Mother was really angry she lapsed into her harsh Vietnamese, stabbing her words as if her fury came direct from Da Nang. “Don’t come back until you and Dinh ok and until Dinh understands Mommy *dying*!” She pointed at the ground when she said it. *Dying*. Like she was burying the word in the soft dirt with a stake. “Wait a minute,” I said. “He literally refuses to come home and see you?” She turned and began to walk through the garden. I chased her. “Unbelievable. When did you tell him? How long as he known? Clearly you told him first.” “Not important,” she said, back in English and over her shoulder. “No, how could it be important?” I said. My mother wobbled on the balls of her feet, shot a hand out to lean against something but found only the flimsy stalk of a palm frond. I ran up to brace her. She was frail in my arms. “It’s in my lymph nodes up here,” she said hoarsely, tapping her collarbone with her fingertips while I kept her from falling, while the bees had their way with her runny-nosed flowers, while the fish swam after each other, oblivious to everything but the differential of cool water to warm, of light to dark.

Inside, Paul slid the tickets across the table. “You can log in and change anything you need to on there, the dates, whatever.” he said. “Do you know how to log in?” “Yes, Paul. Logging in will not pose a challenge. I need a location on Dinh though.” He took a card from his wallet, slid it across the table. A Beirut address was written in anal little block letters. “Thanks for doing this, Vậ. You alright?” I handed him my empty glass. “Why wouldn’t I be alright, Paul? What about you? Are you alright?” He frowned at his woven placemat, rubbed the knob of the steel salt shaker. Then he looked up at me, his eyes drained of any pride. “I love your mother,” he said, then his shoulders started to bounce and he made a sound like an elephant taking a long slurp of river water. “She’s my whole life,” he said. As I opened the front door I heard the sounds from his throat crack apart.

When I got home Iliana was in the living room with a glass of wine and a German novel. It was early for her and wine to be together. I laid down on the couch beside her and put my head in her lap. It was likely the last time I’d get to do this. She ran her fingers through my hair and I gripped the crater of her knee. I imagined I was a fish in Mother’s pond, not a particularly important fish either, just one of the rank and file, spending all day every day in the sun with no responsibilities but to pace myself, to keep alert for the real work of the evening. “I’m so sorry, Vậ,” said Iliana, meaning she had been apprised, meaning I did not need to say that my mother was dying, meaning she knew I was lost and wounded and dangerously confused, meaning she knew she wouldn’t be there for me when all of this came to the end. “Your mother loves you,” she said. “Is that a thing women even do?” I said, “Love me?” She sighed, drummed her fingers on my skull.

That night I called Dinh and we had our first conversation since Bush was president. Who, I would add, Dinh voted for twice. I swore to myself that no matter what got said, I would not bring up our father, or the money, or the lawsuit, or Leslie Chang, my tenth grade girlfriend I am convinced he finger-banged in the backyard while I was in the front yard shooting h-o-r-s-e with cousin Nguyen. “What’s up?” he chirped. “Our mom is dying,” I said. “She’s not, actually,” he said. “Her sentinel lymph node biopsy called for an axillary LND to prevent a regional recurrence—” I couldn’t imagine being Mom and having to listen to him with this shit when all she wanted was her loving eldest son by her side. “If you knew that’s why I was calling then why’d you say ‘what’s up?’ like this might be a social type call?” I said. He clicked his teeth loudly into the phone. “Dinh,” I said, trying to deep-breathe away my rising contempt, “I saw her today. She collapsed into my arms. She weighs like eighty pounds. Can you picture that? She’s fucking sick as fuck.” Tears, for the first time, blurred my eyes. But Dinh wouldn’t budge. “I don’t agree,” he said. “Tell me something, Dinh. What goes through your mind when your mother asks you to come home to her deathbed? Do you think, what can I do to make this easier on her? What will I say to her in these last days that will be meaningful and heartfelt and compassionate? Or do you think, what’s my percentage of the final payout?” There was a pause. “Why are you calling me?” he said. “She wants you back here. We’re Vietnamese. Is something about this vague to you?” He chewed on that for a minute. “Go fuck yourself,” he said. “You’re a moral catastrophe,” I said. “It wasn’t enough to kill Dad, you need to stamp out any chance Mom has too?” I’d flooded the engine, was totally out of breath. I realized Iliana was in the doorway, watching me with horror. “Hey Vậ,” my brother said calmly, “the next time I see you I’m gonna rip

your tiny little dick off and feed it to you.” I stood on an armchair and shouted into the phone, “I will fucking *kill* you if you ever so much as step *foot* in America again you fascist motherfucker.” His chuckle was all I heard as I hung up.

*

Jesus didn't know shit about family. He did what every ambitious young visionary does, be he from Galilee or Galena Park—he bounced, never looked back, no woman no cry. Here he is in Luke, coming with that real talk: *If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.* Harsh, but so real. The Kingdom of God is a place where you shall feel no guilt about abandoning your peoples so long as you have a really good reason. Such as you are the son of man. My theory is that this dark undercurrent in evangelist thought is the real reason my mother gravitated to the church when she came over, though she cannot see that, much less admit it. Her eldest brother of course having turned on the entire family back in Da Nang. My young mother fleeing the country with her ten-year-old sister (and my six-month-old brother) while Grandmother and Grandfather stubbornly stayed behind, were shortly thrown in prison, lined up on the wall with the other western imperial collaborators so accused and were mowed down. My young mother with baby Dinh at her breast, shushing the other children on the boat so the Thai pirates wouldn't hear their voices carrying through the night wind. On her way to America to rendezvous with her Navy petty officer, on her way to create me, looking up at the moon over the South China Sea for a sign of luck. A true disciple, but of what?

Consider the roll call of brothers preceding Jesus. Jacob and Esau. Joseph and his eleven older. Moses and Aaron. Of course your original duo: Abel and Cain. Murderous disasters, all of them. Nothing but guilt, loathing, and betrayal in the tall grass. And what about the brothers of the Lord? Their names are James, Jude, Simon, and Joses, and not one of them is accepted outright by scholarly consensus as the son of Mary and Joseph. The Church bends over backward to argue these are stepbrothers, cousins, random dudes from the neighborhood. Obscure Jewish customs are invoked. Apocryphal texts are trotted out. Aramaic grammar is cited and diagrammed to explain why Jesus *had* to have been an only child. And why? Because it's true, or because no one who believes in a messiah can also believe in the real possibility of brotherhood on earth?

My brother Dinh is a surgeon for Doctors Without Borders. He has an expensive house in Lebanon, goes all over Africa, Asia, the Middle East. You look at his photos online and you think, here is the biggest goddamn hero alive. He's on a camel with a towel on his head, squinting into the sun; he's carving up a glittering three foot fish while two little nude Congolese boys watch, their faces lit by postcard grins; he's delivering a C-section baby in a hut in the Malaysian jungle; he's smiling his crooked, false smile in a hammock in the shade of a prehistoric eucalyptus. We haven't seen each other in eleven years: all our twenties and deeper everyday into our thirties. Not that Mother didn't tried every last manipulation in the mom manual to get me to forgive him and resume bilateral talks over the years. Iliana was a black-belt at exposing her ploys. The only way to understand Mother's loyalty to Dinh is to appeal to Old Country tradition, i.e. stupid sentiments about firstborn sons. She can't even get my name right when she talks to me. But I'm the one who got her mentally stable enough to snag Paul the Litigator at 59 years

old. I'm the one who took care of her all those years after Father died. I'm the one who made sure she didn't burn her own house down, that she had food in the pantry, that she paid her bills, that she got to church every week to see her bat-shit friends. I'm the one who did all that, with Iliana's help. What did Dinh do? He kept moving: to Prague, to Mumbai, to Buenos Aires, kept taking speed, went hand-gliding. Nobody knows what the fuck Dinh did. When I was still in college he bankrupted our father, slowly at first over a series of terrible investments, then spectacularly and for good when Dad had to bail him out of serious jeopardy. Dad's construction business went under and it still wasn't enough. Dinh kept calling home, begging our clinically depressed father for larger and larger amounts like some insane roulette player, swearing if he didn't get a wire for fifty-two grand he'd be thrown in a Brazilian prison. I don't know how much of it was true and how much of it was just a cold swindle. It doesn't even matter anymore, if it ever did. Dad had a heart attack and a year later Dinh sued me for eighteen thousand dollars. Mother always refused to see what he'd done. If I was her I'd want him as far from my dying as possible. I'd be worried he'd rob my grave.

*

On Monday one of my students—Tariq, the class wit—tried to railroad our discussion of Han Dynasty imperialism with little obscene puns all involving the Han Dynasty Express, a takeout place in the Third Ward notorious for health-code violations. After the fourth disruption I gravely ordered Tariq to “Go see Miss Khanthavongsa down the hall” to a happy chorus of ooooh's. In reality, this was just so I had an excuse to drop in on her later. After Tariq made his slow, triumphant exit, we spent the rest of the period spitballing about authority, dissent, the revolutionary power of humor, and capital

punishment. I pulled Camus off the shelf and read them some pages more or less at random. I came dangerously close to telling my captive audience of sixteen year olds that “discipline” is a sham, that they don’t really have to listen to anyone and probably shouldn’t, that half the time, the worst that will happen is they’ll get to skip out of class and go talk to the likes of Mai Khanthavongsa. Of course the other half of the time (and this is what I actually told them) they’ll be thrown in prison and possibly punished capitally while the rest of us look on, terribly saddened but powerless to stop it.

Fortunately, Tariq wasn’t there to point out the hypocrisy in all this. But I still felt the limb I was out on start to bow. “Look,” I told them, just to be safe, “My authority as your teacher is the good kind of authority. That’s why it’s ok for me to kick Tariq out of class. You actually become *more* liberated by submitting to my authority. It’s everyone else’s authority you should be deeply suspicious of.” “What about our parents?” someone said. “Especially your parents,” I said. They think everything I say is a joke, which on some level it is. The truth was I liked Tariq quite a lot and was feeling guilty for banishing him from class, but I was also jealous of the arrogant little bastard, who probably spent the next thirty-five minutes scheming to look down Mai’s blouse while she hung up her students’ watercolors.

Iliana is good because unlike me she does not fear people, and is therefore trustworthy, which I have honored by falling helplessly in love with Mai. To be clear, this happened against my will, and after she’d asked for a divorce. I’d prefer to go down as the virtuous one, to conclude no fault, to have nothing to answer for but my own mediocre life, but that was a pipe dream. There was no way I was coming out of this marriage with any surplus integrity. Mai Khanthavongsa is heat lightning, sin in a secular

world. When she's not coaching the girls' track squad, she teaches art down the hall. This means she has the legs of a pole vaulter, dresses like 1968, occasionally enjoys a cigarette. Mai is the daughter of Lao immigrants, is in her flush late twenties, is hilarious, is somehow ravishing and plain, is maybe a bit naive. I played it cool for a year, but I've recently let myself admit that I am going to have a whole rocky thing with her.

After my last class I went to the art room window and took my first look of the day at her. Every M-F it was a criminal thrill just to see what she decided that morning to look like, what she wore, if her hair was up or down, if she wore long Navajo earrings or a simple silver necklace, if a sweater hung off her shoulders or a pencil ran diagonally through her gathered-up hair. Today she was alone, reading *The Bacchae*, one hand twisting her ponytail around in a silk black coil, her lower lip vibrating. I came in and sat in the chair in front of her desk. "That's a banned book," I told her. It was downright unprofessional the way she smiled at me. "Tomorrow is Dionysian art," she said, and waved a blank white mask in front of her face. "Sorry to unload Tariq on you earlier," I said. "It's fine," she said, demurely stretching her neck so I could see, I guess, her classically proportioned chin-to-earlobe ratio, "Tariq is good company. See that?" she pointed to a squat clay urn on the window sill. It was decorated with intricate designs, brightly-colored animals and humans in Hellenic pose. "He painted that in twenty minutes, while explaining to me how the Han Dynasty emperors had mad shit in common with Ronald Reagan." I picked up the urn and turned it in my hands. It was beautifully done. I tried to suppress my swelling pride. "You're lying for him, to make me feel like a superb educator. To sort of bolster my confidence. It's interesting how you're always trying to bolster my confidence." Mai got up from her desk and came around to lean

about a foot from my open knees. I took the book out of her hands and let the pages flip through my fingers in one motion. I looked her dead in the eye. She grinned. The sexual tension between us had reached a surreal point. It seemed entirely possible, and entirely right, that we might maul each other right there in the art room. She did something cruel with her legs, then sat in the chair next to me, very close, and pointed down toward our laps at the book. "Ever read that?" she said. "Uh-huh, totally, sure." She knocked her knee playfully into mine and then let her leg stay there so it pressed against me. "It's really... a good book," she said. I got hard. One hundred percent as hard as I know how to get. I wore light-colored pants and there was no way she didn't see. I made a strong decision not to move. It stayed there, my leg pressing against the soft bumper of her lower hip, and she didn't move either, or speak, she just kept touching the book, tracing the page slowly with a fingernail so I could hear it scrape down the paper. It was the most erotic seven seconds of my adult life. I decided to go for it. "You know there's the Greek festival tomorrow evening," I said. "Of course I know. That's why we're making Maenad masks," said Mai, gesturing to the papier-mâché masks left to dry on the back row of desks. "I didn't know Maenads wore masks." "My Maenads do," she said, standing up and crossing back behind her teacher's battlement. "We should meet up," I said, "At the Greek Festival. With each other." She smirked. "Ok," she said, "Maybe at the Greek Festival we can hang. Or after the Greek Festival is over." I got up to leave. "The Greek Festival," I said, and let the door swing shut.

When she was a little girl, Iliana's secret desire was to become a rabbi. She ended up becoming a bankruptcy lawyer. From our first interaction it was clear she was my moral superior. For her birthday this summer I am giving her the divorce she asked for. It

will be like cutting a weight from something hovering in the water—she'll rise to the surface and I will sink and sink, down to the dark bottom where the weird fish swim, unloved, unlovable. We had become incompatible, or perhaps we were never that compatible to begin with. What an old dull story that is. I met her through my father, posthumously—she was part of the firm that helped Mother get out of the nightmare Dinh had put us in. I think she loved what was damaged in me. Last year, Iliana's parents died in quick succession: mother on April 5th, father on April 14th. Or was it May? I was not sufficiently "there" for her, though no one can I say I did not try. But I barely knew her parents—they lived in Chicago—so how could I grieve them? Iliana was who I knew, and she was lost inside a private garden of sorrow. One day I brought her a grilled cheese sandwich and she threw it across the kitchen and ran upstairs crying so hysterically I wondered if I should call some type of medical authority. Even a year later we would have conversations in the evenings, debates about friends or work or politics, and her views would get under my skin like never before. Or not her views, but her stridency, the limitations of her perspective that she could not see. I'd lost my natural sympathy for her, she'd lost her admiration for me, and we were punishing each other. I'd keep an argument going on purpose, whizzing past the checkpoint that read "Stop Here To Remain Civil."

Ten years from now, when we're almost fifty, she'll be rich and married to someone terribly important. Maybe we'll still be close friends. Maybe best friends? I'll come over to the mayor's mansion or wherever the fuck for cocktails and small plates on the veranda, make devastating and witty remarks to her husband as Iliana smirks into her glass, sneaks me a wink. Or the husband will be the one making innuendo to my former

beloved right in front of my face merely to flaunt his white power, and I'll just croak with laughter and hiccups and have nothing whatsoever to say until I get home that night, drinking champagne in front of the bathroom mirror as all the brilliant rejoinders come to me in one infuriating wave, and then I'll sit down in the dry tub and try my best not to order a hooker. Anyway, we're getting a divorce. Divorce is an interesting world, like college. It makes you a stranger to yourself.

Tuesday night I found Mai at the Greek Festival and she led me across the street to a bar on Montrose where we ended up doing tequila shots and arguing about which of our fellow teachers was most likely to inform on us for fraternizing. We continued back at her place nearby where Mai turned up some racy degenerate pop music and began to dance right there in the kitchen, which alarmed me. Was she some sort of clubbing Asian girl disguised as a bohemian teacher? Was I expected to dance? I opened her fridge and tried to draw some conclusions about her based on her foodstuffs, but I couldn't concentrate or keep my eyes off her rolling hips for long. She wore a black tank-top with her bra showing through and these little jean shorts that were letting more of her out than I'd ever seen before and it was very, very impossible to think of anything other than the sex we were apparently about to have. Right as I pulled out my phone to check the time, Iliana texted to ask if I was ok. "No," I typed then turned the phone off. "I might eventually love you," I said to Mai, who was singing the chorus to the new Beyonce hip-shaker. She pressed her cheeks and bent over laughing. "Seriously," I said. "I know, it's so sad," she said. I crossed the room and kissed her. She leaned up fiercely into the kiss with her eyes closed like she'd been waiting for it, like I had done exactly the right thing. It was the first time in six years I kissed someone other than my wife and I was shocked

by what was different: the cool of Mai's hair angled smooth across her forehead instead of Iliana's soft curls brushing my face. How Mai had to stand on her tiptoes until I lifted her right off of them. Then on the couch both our shirts were off and she was straddling my lap and I felt like an uncomprehending animal alone on a boat in the middle of an ocean in a hellacious storm. "I have to go to Beirut," I said, pumping my hips into hers. "Ok," she said, and bit my ear. "My mother is dying," I told her. "Yeah," she said. She unzipped my pants and put her fingers around me. "You should come with me to Beirut," I said. "Uh-huh," she said, and then she knelt on the floor and moved her head down and I was able, thank God, to stop talking.

Yes, I felt guilty when it was over and I laid there slick and panting in her bed in the low red glow of the lamp and stared at the Magritte print on the far wall, trying to decide when I should go home and what to tell Iliana. I decided based on the Magritte that the right thing to do would be to not tell her anything. To take a turn towards the silence of authentic experience. The Magritte was the eerie one with the guy seated on a sandy cleft above a beach. He's wearing a long scarlet poncho and a wide straw hat, but because it's a Magritte painting he has no head. The poncho is open at his chest and where he should have a torso there is a birdcage and where he should have organs—heart, kidney—there are two white doves. You can tell the man is kind by his soft shoes, his thick peasant hands, the witty, helpful tilt of his head which isn't there. What's most interesting about the painting is that the bars of the cage do not form a full enclosure—there's an open square right in front. Yet the doves roost calmly in the cage. I realized lying next to her that it hadn't been at all difficult to delude myself into feeling pushed into Mai's arms. "I think you're insanely beautiful," I said to Mai when she rolled over

and put her head on my chest where my heart should be. “I think you’re moderately handsome,” she said. It was ugly, but I had found the only way out.

Early the next morning I went home and told Iliana I had been over to my mother’s house and ended up sleeping there, which on top of being cowardly and repugnant even to me, was an idiotic lie, since the two of them seemed to be having their own ongoing dialogue in the shadows. “That’s an interesting thing for you to do,” Iliana said, while jamming up her toast. I fucked myself. Maybe it was subconsciously on purpose. How would I know? I can’t afford a shrink. But here’s what I did not see coming: after all that lust and culmination and guilt, the spell wasn’t broken. When I pulled into the school parking lot that morning I was dying to see Mai. She was the only answer to the problem she had created. I needed the safe harbor of her body to even begin to deal with all the traumas going on. Even in the light of day I was serious about her coming to Beirut. She would think I was ridiculous, pathetic, maybe she’d even be a little freaked out, probably rightly so, but I did not care. I waited in the lounge at lunch but she didn’t show at her usual time. In my last period we talked about the Confucian ideal of filial piety and how this ideology is leveraged by a bureaucratized state as a means of control. To explain this, Tariq drew a helpful and semi-lewd comic strip on the board. He called it “How To Make Empires the Han Way.” I regretted that soon we would have to move on to Genghis Khan.

I was getting in my car to go home when Mai, all geared up for track practice, came hustling over and leaned her head in through the window. She kissed me on the lips and I smelled everything from the night a second time. “Can I see you later?” I said. “I’m thinking about that,” she said. I drove around town for the next three hours, unable to

make a commitment about where to get out of the car and eat a taco and wait for her to call. Finally, sick of my own listlessness, I parked near the roundabout at Hermann Park and walked around the Mecom fountains and then over to a plaza across Main toward what looked like a monument to Dionysus—white marble columns domed by iron filigree. It was gorgeous and severe, somewhat out of place in this busy nexus of museum district traffic. In college I came to an anti-war rally down here and the whole area was cordoned off for the march—people spilling down Main and Montrose and thronged around the fountains, all of us chanting “No Blood For Oil” and feeling beautifully righteous there together. Dinh had supported the war and I remember despising him for it, loudly refusing to eat with the family at Christmas when he came home from med school, and their basic indifference to that act of refusal. This monument, however, had not been built yet. I had seen it many times while driving past this area, but I’d never gotten out to read the plaque. When I stepped underneath the dome and read the inscription on the floor, I laughed. The wit of the universe abideth patiently, is what it ought to say. It was a memorial for cancer victims.

I sat on the metal bench inside the memorial and put the address Paul had given me into my phone and pulled up a map of Beirut. Dinh’s house was next to the Jewish Cemetery in the center of the city. The address seemed familiar. I pulled up his Facebook page and swept through his old photo albums, realizing what was wrong. Dinh had moved over two years ago—had lost that house for financial reasons, which don’t even get me started, and moved into a smaller place. I couldn’t believe it. They would’ve sent me over there to wander around Beirut like a lost little boy. Paul answered when I called Mother’s house. I explained to him his error in a reasonable tone, traffic whizzing by.

“It’s just a good thing I figured this out now, before I went all the way over there—” but Paul interrupted me. He was heated, zero to furious in one second, “Vận, I can’t really solve this issue for you, pal. You know, you call over here so pleased to tell us what we did wrong, it appalls me. She asked you to do one simple thing. Maybe you could tie your own shoes this time. That sound ok to you, big guy?” I realized through my shock that I’d been staring at the names of cancer victims hammered into the winding burnished-metal plate. My mother’s name materialized at the end, chiseled in I think by her ghost, which suggests a paradox. “I’m not in favor of your insolent tone here, Paul.” He roared back at me, “Call him up and ask him! For the love of *Mike!*” I laughed. “Who the fuck is Mike?” I said. “Just go do whatever you want as usual, Vận.” His disgust, at last, had topped out, and he hung up the phone.

How typical of Dinh not to give them his current address. Not that they would ever acknowledge the fact. There were years when we didn’t even know what country he was living in—years he was hemorrhaging our family’s money—but Mother kept up the pretense that she and Dinh were on the same telepathic page. It was absurd.

There was only one person in our family who actually kept in touch with him on a semi-regular basis. Cousin Nguyen ran a tea shop on Bellaire Boulevard, a strip mall storefront in the middle of six square miles of exuberant Asian commerce. This was Nguyen’s world, the ever-expanding Chinatown of dim sum palaces and phở houses, three-story fish markets and motorcycle gangs. Even in the evenings it was sweltering here—the overabundance of reflective surfaces, the reek of gasoline fumes, it all gave me a headache. Nguyen dealt in tapioca-ball milkshakes and fried sugar dough. He spent all day clowning around with his teenage customers and all night in his room upstairs at his

parents' house, watching movies and making atrocious techno-rap beats on his computer. I never understood why he still lived at home when he owned a cash cow like the tapioca shop. He was almost forty and would probably never get married. His mother, Cô Anh, treated him somewhere between a servant and her shameful upstairs secret. Sometimes I wondered if he was gay and scared to come out, if his mother knew that too.

Sure enough, when I got to his shop Nguyen was hitting on a trio of Cantonese jailbait, creeping them out a little. "Come watch me spar, girl!" he was saying to a waif with braces who rudely popped her bubblegum in reply. "Vận!" he cried, "Tell them who the masta killa is!" I frowned an apology at the girls. "Nguyen is without question the masta killa," I said. "Girl, I thought I tole you!" he crowed. Nguyen smiles so widely it triggers a vibration in his lower throat and he makes this soft moan of true happiness. He was by far the dumbest and most spiritually content person in our whole family. The door jingled and a flashy crew of high school boys came in, tough as can be, wholly oblivious to how labored their efforts were. "This him?" one of them said, jutting his chin at Nguyen. The bubblegum girl nodded. "Hey, old faggot, you hit on my sister?" he said. His boys shuffled around him, posing, tossing up meaningless hand signs. "She hit on me first, homeboy," Nguyen said, and I couldn't suppress a laugh. The girl's brother turned on me, came over to where I was sitting and threw his chest out. "You want some too you bitchmade fob cunt cum-guzzling fuckin' faggot-hole? Huh? You wanna *slap*?" He flicked out a hand in front of my nose and I blinkered back. Now the bubblegum girl was laughing, and I was getting butterflies. I hadn't expected a visit to Nguyen would require that I physically defend myself against a boy who could be one of my students. I stood up, pleased that my chair scraped loudly over the old tile floor like it would in the

movies. Unfortunately, I was the same height as the boy. He actually might've been more broad-shouldered than me. Then Nguyen, who during the distraction had tied a dish towel around his forehead, came flying over, shouting incoherently, and all the boys began to holler. "You fuck wit him you fuck wit me!" Nguyen was shouting, repeating it to each of the boys as he swung his body around in rigid circles, his hands ready in a fake-jujitsu posture. "You fuck wit him you fuck—" and then an incredible shatter, and all the kids broke out. Someone had pushed the tip jar off the counter, glass shards sprayed all over the floor. The door jingled shut. We were alone. Nguyen smiled, purred, put his hand in the air for a high five. "We straight *handled* that shit, son!" he said. "Mother of fucking Christ, Nguyen."

After we cleaned up, I asked Nguyen if he knew Dinh's current address. "Fuck yeah I know that shit, dog," he said. He went into the back and came out with a spiral notebook. I tried to look at the pages he was flipping through but he jerked it away and held up the notebook's cover, holding his head at a dramatic stealth angle as he read. "This is the masta book," he beamed, stabbing the pages with pride, "All Chinatown's secret business right here." He flipped through page after page. "Is it in code?" I asked. "You *know* this shit is in code. Shaolin code direct from the monastery, cousin!" He flipped another page. "Do you understand the code?" I said. It took him forever but he finally found it. He still wouldn't let me see the page so I made him read it to me three times, one letter at a time, to make sure I had it correct. "When's the last time you talked to him?" I said. "Man, we probably talk like almost every other day. I'm like his consigliere," he beamed. "How would you say he's doing?" I asked. Nguyen nodded but his eyes flitted around like he didn't understand the question. "He's great! Doing his

doctor thang, you know. Dinh's crazy, man. Beirut." "Thanks, Nguyen." He slapped the notebook closed. "Son that's just how we *do*." "You hear about my mom?" I said, getting up to leave. Nguyen stood too, then to my surprise wrapped his skinny arms around me, gave me a squeeze. "She gonna be aight," he said, softly patting the back of my head, "Even cancer scared of her."

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Mai told me she had seriously considered not seeing me again for about an hour that afternoon and then went to the salon to get a wax. We had sex in the front hallway, the shower, and on an oddly-shaped puff chair in the bedroom. I had forgotten how dangerous and important sex could feel. Afterwards, making tea in the kitchen, she lit a clove cigarette and said, "Do I need a visa?" She hadn't been on vacation since grad school and had never been to the Middle East. "Me either," I said. "Though this is really more the Levant." She ran out of the kitchen suddenly, and when she returned I told her it wasn't that important what she called the region. "Your cum was dripping down my leg," she said. "Oh," I said. "I didn't realize that happened." She huffed, "You been married how long?" It was an unintentionally deflating turn to the conversation. We lingered in the kitchen silently for a while, lighting more cigarettes. I awkwardly stroked her back. "What's your wife going to say about this little jaunt?" she said finally. "Nothing," I said, "I haven't told her. She's basically moved out already." "So does this count as adultery?" Mai asked. "I think it depends on which, well. Yeah. On the level of reality, it counts." She sat at the kitchen table and pulled her knees to her chest. Outside her apartment there were birds chirping though it had been dark for hours. She rested her chin on a knee. "I've never been an adulterer before," she said. "Except in fourth grade. In fourth grade I

was the other woman in a *menage a trois* with Travis Copeland and Sarah Mettenhaus. Someone put a note in my cubby with this drawing of, I guess it was supposed to be Sarah Mettenhaus and Travis walking through a flowery glade, and then me, stabbing Sarah in the back with a huge sword. Blood all over. My likeness was very poor but each of us was clearly labeled. They did manage to give some detail to the facial features.”

“Squinty eyes?” I asked. “Big, giant, super squinty eyes,” she said, “bigger even than the sword.” “I doubt Iliana will stoop to that kind of racial caricature,” I said. Mai paused, opened her mouth to speak and then thought better. “What?” She shifted uncomfortably. “You never said her name before,” she said.

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Bush->Heathrow->Beirut International, 19 hours counting a three cocktail layover in London. I was dizzy and pre-verbal when we walked out of the airport into the wash of sun, like I hadn't slept in three days, which basically was true. Here we were, in bible land. The night before last, Iliana had come home furious with me, and I was sure she'd found out about Mai. “When were you gonna tell me about Lebanon?” she demanded, and I stuttered and dodged until I could determine that she only thought I was going alone. Which she still believes. For now. I'll explain everything to her when I get back. “Don't kill each other,” she said, when I gave her a goodbye forehead kiss. In the Beirut taxi I kept glancing at Mai who was glued to the windows, wondering if the feeling would pass once I got some rest or if I had in fact made a terrible mistake. It's not that I wished Iliana was here, but Mai was alien to me, even threatening, vaguely, a problem waiting to reveal itself, and which I had asked for. I made it clear on the plane that we should not expect a warm welcome from Dinh. “That's an interesting thing to keep to

yourself until now,” she’d said. Somehow I had left my trust of her back in Houston, and I didn’t know how to summon it again. But now on the Beirut roads, Mai’s excitement was burning through her jet-lag. She pointed at the minarets in between skyscrapers, sighed at the carnivalesque market streets that we drove along, and when we came up a bridge and caught a view of the Mediterranean glimmering below the high hills she entered her own private state of ecstasy. I couldn’t even think about seeing Dinh yet so we checked into a hotel by the sea. In the room the stiffness between us grew even more awkward. She closed the bathroom door to change. I tried to think of something funny to say, a joke about the weird mood, but before she came out I was asleep. Over the next twelve hours one of us would wake up, feel the other lying there until they shifted, say, “Beirut, you’re in Beirut with me.” Once, I woke and Mai was sitting up, smoothing her hair between her fingers. She looked disturbed. “You called me Iliana,” she said.

All the next day we walked around the beguiling city, our noses in the travel guides on our phones, hardly aware of each other. In Nejme Square I had a Turkish coffee in a Greek cafe, served by an Arab waiter who spoke French and doted over Mai like an Italian. He told us the world’s first law school had existed right where we were sitting, built by the Romans in the third century. “Beirut is Mother of Laws,” he said. “I fucking should’ve gone to law school,” Mai said. At the beach we watched Muslim women wade out into the surf in full dress and headscarves, their children splashing naked out ahead. In the city center we walked through a neoclassical Maronite cathedral, side by side to a mosque with a turquoise dome. The longer we delayed, the more I dreaded seeing Dinh. There was no telling what he was up to here—smuggling drugs, or just taking gobs of them in some dark cellar, spinning a revolver at the ceiling. Maybe he

worked for Al Qaeda. Or the Mossad. It wouldn't come down to ideology for Dinh, but who was willing to supply him with explosives and reasonably strong immunity. While Mai snapped pictures, I instinctively scanned faces on the plazas along Hamra, fearing my brother would come around a corner and spot me, and then what? "Maybe you should go see him by yourself," Mai said over our dinner of tangy fish, the sun behind her a wide leaking redness. I had gone mute, couldn't even discuss what was holding me back anymore. I missed my mother, felt pangs of fright for her, felt sure I was going to have to take the fall for this. She would die in disappointment, take her last breaths wondering why I couldn't just deliver her favorite son.

The next day after a drinking breakfast we took a cab to the address Nguyen had given me. It was a pink house in a row of modest Venetian two-stories with flowers on their balconies, a relaxed neighborhood with French street names, not at all far from our hotel. We could've walked there. There was a small courtyard with an orange tree that looked like it had been struck by lightning, sheared clean down the middle of its trunk and teetering off to its side. A barefoot girl of about eight or nine was out front on the steps. She had a stethoscope around her neck and was gravely delivering a diagnosis to her doll. She looked Arabic but was bareheaded, too thin, happy. A wide, white scar along her collarbone. "This is the wrong fucking address," I said, and Mai squeezed my arm. "Excuse me," Mai called out in a friendly voice. "Do you speak English?" The little girl's eyes darted up at us and she froze. "Hi," Mai said, crouching down a little at the gate. "We're friends of Dinh Sang, does he live here?" The little girl stood, clutched her doll, then turned and ran inside the house. "Let's go," I said, but Mai didn't move. Then the front door opened again and a young man came out. He was Arabic, wore a starched

white dress shirt and polished Oxfords, moved briskly up to the locked gate. “Yes?” he said. “We’re looking for Dinh Sang,” Mai said. “Who is calling?” the man said in an accent I couldn’t place. “This is his brother,” Mai said. The man’s face showed no reaction. “Please wait,” he said, and left us standing at the gate. “So he lives here, Dinh?” I said. “Please wait,” he said, and disappeared inside the house. Mai smiled at me, nodded. “Did I tell you he threatened to cut my dick off?” I said. “When?” she said. “Like a couple days ago.” The man in the white shirt reappeared and let us in. We followed him up narrow stairs to a handsome, high ceilinged flat. No one seemed to be home. He led us into a bedroom which could’ve been Dinh’s or anyone’s. A double bed, a framed Gauguin print on the wall. “You may wait until he arrives,” the Arab man said in what I now heard as a British accent. “Please make yourselves comfortable. My name is Khoury.”

Mai went downstairs and soon I heard her chatting with the little girl. After a while I went down too, studying the girl for some sign of who she was. “Is that your father?” I asked her, when Khoury had left the room. The girl shook her head. “Do you live here with Dinh?” I said. She nodded. “Do you like it here?” She nodded again. Mai shot me a look—I was starting to frighten the kid—so I went into the kitchen. As soon as I was out of the room, the girl, who said her name was Khadija, was babbling away at Mai. I walked out through French doors to a terrace. His view was a cubist zone of backed-up apartment buildings, the dirty walls of six-story houses, laundry lines strung between the windows, flowers on the sills. Traffic sounds from all around, the same sounds as every big city in the world. This was wrong. We shouldn’t be here. I went back inside as the front door was opening and I heard Dinh’s voice, quietly conferring with

Khoury. I was staring at a long, thin knife on the counter when my brother came in and stood in front of me. “*Salām*, motherfucker,” he said.

Brief introductions were made, and then I followed Dinh out front to his courtyard. “Don’t you have a wife?” he said. “Who’s the girl?” I said. He lit a cigarette. His hair was long and greasy and he looked thin, but he’d always looked thin, almost stooped. “I can’t believe you came here,” he said, looking out at the street. Some people had secrets about themselves, their personalities, where they went or who they saw—Dinh had turned his entire life into a secret. “What have you been doing here?” I said. “You wanna see?” he said, then stomped his cigarette out. Dinh went in and observed my girlfriend until he seemed satisfied. Khadija was eager for Mai to stay and look after her, so the two of us got in a roofless jeep and headed through town to Dinh’s clinic at Shatila Camp.

Khoury, who I now realized was uncommonly handsome in his mirrored sunglasses, drove smashmouthed from one traffic jam to the next, and then over wide arcing highways, heading south out of the city where the street names were in Arabic script and there were checkpoints every few miles and the black Benzes were no longer new and gleaming but banged up, rattling, coated in dirt. Far ahead, the afternoon sun turned the Mediterranean into a brilliant, blinding mirror. “The Lebanese can’t drive for shit,” Dinh shouted over the wind, “except for the cabbies.” Khoury looked back at us and grinned, “People always say that about the city they’re in,” he said. Dinh laughed. “How in the fuck would you know that, Khoury?” Dinh leaned back and shouted into my ear, “This guy was the worst hash dealer in West Beirut when I found him. You should’ve seen him. He weighed all of ninety pounds. Like you.” Khoury swerved around

an army transport and for a while it was just miles of slums, rain clouds moving in, the rhythmic throb of our tires on the chewed-up road. We slowed at a metal gate flanked by towers, a grandiose soccer stadium looming in the distance like some Arabic coliseum. Several soldiers with Syrian flags on their uniforms blocked the way in front of us. Dinh hung his head out the side and showed a guard an ID badge. "This is my brother," he said, motioning at me. The soldier stared at me a minute. "You are brother of his?" he asked me, and grinned wide. I didn't get what was funny. They let us through.

There were twelve thousand Palestinians living in the one square kilometer of Shatila Camp. It was the most suffocating place I'd ever been. Cars don't fit down the narrow, winding alleyways of Shatila, so to get to the clinic at the heart of the camp we had to walk. Tenements keened in on either side, seven, eight stories high and crumbling inward, blocking out the sun, built on top of rubble, bombed out, and built up again. The murals of imams took up entire building walls, their black eyes surveilling block after block, and the green banner of Hamas was everywhere you looked, in windows and strung swooping over the littered streets. Goats and children ran in between the bikes and carts. Artless graffiti covered the ramshackle walls. Pipes and hoses and extension cords went from window to window, tangling overhead in thick webs. People looked like they hadn't slept in days, old men smoking over aluminum barrels and looking at us with sunken eyes. The younger men in bright American brand t-shirts whizzed by on scooters, crying out sharply at each other and, as far as I could tell, at us. "Power was out last couple days," Dinh said. "It's back on now, see?" he pointed to a flickering florescent lamp inside a tiny bodega and chuckled. I couldn't decide if he seemed at home here or if his ease was more of a condescension, the rambling humor of a man whose boot was on

your neck. We passed by a dumpster with a little boy inside, up to his waist in garbage, tossing small cardboard boxes up and over the top, some of them hitting and falling back in, which he laughed at every time. A girl, maybe his older sister, was barking orders at him. They were both laughing like it was a game. It almost looked normal, a kid in a sandbox, digging for treasure.

The clinic was small and crowded but smelled clean, a hint of sage or something like it. For a moment I blanked on why Dinh's clinic felt more comfortable, more human, than medical rooms in the west and then I realized it was pleasantly warm. He introduced me to Ismat, a nurse, who was checking pulses, ears, and throats in what looked to be a waiting room. A boy with a rash all over his face was screaming in the arms of his mother, looking around him to broadcast his ordeal to all of us. Women in headaddresses moved slowly through the place, speaking quietly amongst themselves. Here too there were children everywhere, tiny kids, yelling and laughing, chasing each other. A little girl with a backpack bigger than her own torso ran in front of us, plodding on flat feet. Dinh called out to her in Arabic and she stopped, turned only her head to look back at him wide-eyed, her mouth open with that mischievous kid's look that is a universal language.

I sat in a corner and watched as my brother unscrewed the prosthetic arm off a young boy and left the room. I tried to smile at him but he wouldn't make eye contact, this kid with blue scars mottling his shoulder and his thin chest. I thought of my students, of Tariq, growing up in the relative abundance of a Houston ghetto. All this time I had thought I was the one doing missionary work. A few doors down, above the general racket of the clinic, we heard the roaring squeal of what must have been an electric saw. The boy swung his feet, humming softly to himself until Dinh finally came back in

holding the arm. “Let’s try this,” Dinh said to him in English. He reattached the prosthesis and gently rotated the boy’s arm. The kid looked up at him, nodded. “Better,” he said. I watched Dinh work for the rest of the afternoon, seeing patient after patient. No money was ever exchanged the whole day. For the most part Dinh ignored me. He had brought me here to bear witness.

On the drive back I asked him again about Khadija. “She’s my kid,” he said. “Must take after her mother,” I said, and Dinh shrugged. He said she was from Samarra, that he’d taken her in over a year ago. I asked him what the fuck he thought he was doing informally adopting Iraqi children and Dinh climbed into the backseat while the jeep was moving, put his arm around me, more a restraint than an embrace. “She’s here, Vãn, in Lebanon, because her mother and father and her little brothers and sisters were shot by the Sunni militia back in Samarra, while she watched. Two years later an Israeli missile hit her house in the Al-Bas Camp, though I’m sure you didn’t hear about that in fucking Texas. Whoever else was her relative over there got ripped to shreds. I found her with her head sort of hanging sideways off her body. So I sewed it back on. And now here she is, playing dolls with your mistress. Please tell me how the fuck you got my address?” I pushed his arm off, slouched down in my seat, dazed. “Nguyen gave it to me,” I said. Dinh laughed. “That guy’s such a loser,” he said. “Does he still think he’s in the Wu Tang Clan?” The Greek Orthodox church looked familiar at the edge of Dinh’s neighborhood—we were nearly back. “If she’s Iraqi why was she in a refugee camp here?” Dinh leaned forward and had a rapid exchange with Khoury in Arabic. “Her people were Palestinians,” he said to me. “The ones she went to live with after the thing.

It gets complicated, over here, little bit.” “Does Mom know she has an adopted Palestinian-Iraqi grandchild?” Dinh shrugged.

In Rembrandt’s painting there are three others looking on as the kind old father embraces his prodigal son: a servant, a nobleman, and the non-prodigal brother. They lean forward and stare raptly at this moment, the servant touched by the tenderness almost to the point of melting, the nobleman transfixed and hesitant to judge, the other brother staring off the end of his nose and clutching his gut like the nausea is welling up, a permanent condition, a dreadful confirmation of everything that is sick in this world.

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That evening Khoury served the four of us dinner out on the terrace, a simple feast of lamb curry and olive bread and plates of cheese and dates. I was experiencing something between the tingly nausea of altitude sickness and a full-fledged panic attack. Dinh poured Mai a second glass of wine as far away under the blood-orange clouds we could hear the call to *Maghrib*, sunset prayers, and no one spoke as I felt myself growing more and more unnerved by the *muezzin’s* plea of restless beauty. I watched Khadija with envy as she joyfully ripped a piece of bread into thin strips and smeared them around in oil. The kid had been through several hells. Why couldn’t I be half as positive as her? Dinh drank mineral water instead of wine and it seemed to me he had been sober for quite some time, though he didn’t bring it up. His eyes were brighter than I remembered, more vital and alert, and he no longer had the air of volatility that hung around him like a cloud when he was a drunken speed freak. Khadija was explaining to Mai the ideal dimensions and color pattern of her winged horse. “Dinh,” I said, over Khadija’s head, “Let’s talk about Mom.” He frowned at Mai. “You realize that she’s at MD Anderson,” I

said, “the best cancer hospital in the world?” Dinh nodded like he was distracted. “I know you bought a medical degree from Borneo or wherever and you’re really smart and everything but...” “Ok, stop,” Mai said. “Why did we come all the way over here if you’re going to talk to him like that?” Dinh sat there, a spectator, silently reading the subtext between us. I tried to backpedal, “I’m just—” but Mai had placed herself in command. “Speak to him like a person,” she told me, “A person whose mother is sick.” I took a deep breath. Dinh flashed me a putrid grin. “What’s wrong with your mother?” Khadija asked Dinh. He scooped another ladle of rice onto her plate. He wasn’t quite fatherly with her but they shared an obvious trust. “My mom has cancer right here,” he said to her, tapping his breast. “Will she be ok?” Khadija asked. Dinh shook his head, “It doesn’t look like she will.” I had no idea what to say. So he did believe it? And still wouldn’t come home? I made several introductory noises, leaning into the space between us. Dinh shrugged. Finally Mai spoke up. “I guess the question is when you two are going to leave, together.” Dinh and I stared at each other. It wasn’t her sickness he’d been refusing to face, it was me.

For the rest of the evening, Dinh coolly assured me that he would fly to Houston with us, but I didn’t believe him. He kept saying, “Sure thing little brother,” and “Count on it,” in a maddeningly friendly tone, but I couldn’t figure out what he was being patronizing about. Later, Mai told me quietly that Khadija had no documents, that there was no way Dinh could take her abroad, and he didn’t trust Khoury to look after her. I carefully brought it up with Dinh and he shut me down. “It’s fine,” he said. “That’s nothing to worry about.” When I asked Mai if she was ready to go back to our hotel, Khadija threw a fit, demanding we stay the night, and finally I gave in. Dinh seemed to

want us to stay too, which I found just as confusing as his false surrender. “There’s a day-bed in my office,” he said, “I sleep in there all the time. You two can take my room.” Mai protested but Dinh made a big show of telling Khoury to “prepare the opium den,” which made Khadija giggle, and I was afraid that she actually knew what the joke meant.

I woke in the night and spewed into the toilet bowl. I vomited like someone under a Greek curse, like I was the one with cancer. Delirious, I hugged the floor in cold needle sweats. I could hear voices downstairs in his office. He was in there with Mai, laughing about me. Of course, I thought. He poisoned my food, stole the girl I love. The same as he poisoned our father, robbed us of all we had. He gave our mother cancer. He wanted her to die. He is the destroyer. I would have to kill him. I dry-heaved, felt my pancreas try to eject from my stomach, then clonked my head on the tile and passed out. When I came to, I was wrapped in a heavy quilt and Mai was rubbing a cold towel on my forehead, trying to help me sit against the wall. “Seriously?” I said. My mouth was so dry it was throbbing. “Must’ve been something you had this morning,” she said, rubbing my back. Was she in on it too? I searched her face for a sign of conspiracy but she was looking at me gently, full of concern. “You want to come to bed?” she said. I shook my head. When I opened my eyes again, it was dark in the bathroom and I was alone and the house was quiet. So this was the Levant.

I wrapped myself in the blanket and went downstairs. The moon was shining in through the high windows, enough light to make everything the deepest blue. Dinh was sitting on the couch with a glass. A bottle of gin on the table in front of him. I could smell how drunk he was. “Shh” he said, then pointed to the half-shut office door where Khadija slept. We went outside to the terrace. The night was warm, a humid breeze coming in off

the Mediterranean. Dinh lit two cigarettes and tried to hand me them both. “This a nightly thing for you?” I said. He tilted his head all the way back at the sky, let out a puff of smoke. Tall, rangy Dinh, the magic dragon. A terrible noise, something in the alleyway below, a muffled wail, a scraping, metal dragging across the street. “The hell is that?” I said, peering over the ledge. “It’s nothing,” he said. Then a whimpering directly beneath us. “I’m going down there,” I said. I went back through the house and out the courtyard and found my way to the corner, then turned into the alleyway. I heard more scraping up ahead. The dog was wedging itself between the wall of the house and a dumpster, its head stuck inside a metal can. It seemed to sense I was there and cowered in its corner. I’d never seen anything so pitiful. “Don’t touch it!” I looked back and saw Dinh in the middle of the alley, the moon glowing above his head, his shirt open and trailing in the breeze. He was still holding the bottle of gin. I sprung forward and grabbed the can before the dog could leap out of its corner and it started to hop and wiggle its head, snarling, pushing in the opposite direction with its paws. Feeling the edges catch behind his ears, I pried the can and in a split second the dog was racing up the street at top speed, free, and I was holding the can. “That was really stupid,” Dinh said, “It probably has rabies.” I threw the can at him. Like always, he dodged it, or I missed.

