

Do you love?
Stephen King
Skeleton Crew
“The Raft”
“Nona”
“The Reach”
“Night Surf”
etc.

Do you love?
Jesus
also repeatedly

“I Hope He Likes It”
Carrie Charlotte Keane
only once

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth.
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”
Matt 10:34

“It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the rebels’ ;
and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me.”
Luke 22:37

“Go and learn what this means:
‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’
For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”
Matthew 9:13

“If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’
you would not have condemned the innocent.”
Matthew 12:7

Love your neighbor as yourself.
And the lord your god, with everything in you.
This is the greatest commandment.
Everything hinges on this.
Matthew 22:37-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28

The one who is a neighbor to someone is the one who shows them mercy.
Particularly if they are being beaten and stripped by robbers unjustly.
Go and do likewise.

Even if (just as a Samaritan is not supposed to interact with a Jew according to some stupid rule) you are not “supposed” to interact with that person according to some stupid rule, and you might be persecuted for doing so in some way.
Luke 10:25-37

Here. Let me show you. So you’ll remember.
By interacting with someone who is both a Samaritan, and a woman.
That’s two stupid social no nos against which I am rebelling.
John 4:9

“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”
John 13:15

Jesus: You will betray me, Peter. *Three times.*

Peter: "I will never fall away!...Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!"

And all the disciples said the same.

Matthew 26:30-35

Jesus: Do you love me, Peter?

Peter: You know I do.

Jesus: Simon, do you love me?

Peter: Yes. You know I do.

Jesus: Simon. DO. YOU. LOVE. ME.

Peter was hurt *because Jesus asked him a third time.*

Peter: You know *all things*, Lord. You know that I love you.

John 21:15-17

Jesus (in Gethsemane): They are coming for me. Get up. **Let's go!***

(*In other words, it is my personal preference, as the Lord that you say you love, not to be flogged, stripped, publicly mocked, and crucified.

I am weird like that.)

Mark 14:32-42

And then, *after all this*, and much more of the same,
if you can believe it, this shit happens:

A large armed crowd shows up to capture Jesus.

(Why a *large* armed crowd, for one man? Mull that one over.)

Judas identifies Jesus by kissing him.

Jesus replies, "Do what you came for, friend."

Peter draws his sword and starts fighting.

Christ says: "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword **will die by the sword**¹. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put

at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled *that say it must happen in this way?*"

Jesus also asks the crowd: "**Am I leading a rebellion?**²,

(imagine him turning subtly in Peter's direction as he does)

And he alludes directly to the parable of the Good Samaritan with this:

"Have you come out as against **a robber**, with swords and clubs to capture me?"

Did he wink in the direction of his disciples when he said this stuff?

I wonder.

¹ Remember what I said about bringing a sword and not peace? Remember what *you* said, Peter. about dying with me? Am I your neighbor? Am I your Lord and God? *Do you love me?* Or not? Smooch, friend.

² Why, yes, in fact, I am leading a rebellion. Or at least participating in one. So I said. Do you remember?

Peter's heart knows exactly what to do. And he *starts* doing it.
Fight. Risk. Die, if need be, rather than tolerate this worst of all injustices.
But despite knowing that, he defers to a cacophony of external authorities:
scripture, the Law, Jesus, the crowd, fear of being killed himself.
He chooses to be meek to the *outside* world in the face of injustice.
He chooses to be a peacemaker with an *external* status quo that is unfair and
causes suffering, rather than being meekly obedient to his own heart, and
concerned with *inner* peace. He chooses to be merciful to and protective of
himself, not the God that he has been seeing every day.
And so...

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."
Matthew 5:9

*"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh
and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you (Simon) are [now
called] Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will
not overcome it."*
Matthew 16:17-18

"Peter" means "stone" or "rock."
Like the "stone" found rolled away from Christ's tomb (a gate of Hades) after his
Resurrection. As in, a stone moved out of the way. Something heavy and
burdensome. Christ names Simon "Peter."
"You're not Simon now, you're Peter. Simon is someone else."
During his Passion, someone else, named Simon, *helps Christ carry his cross*.

"Blessed are the kind/merciful, for they shall be shown mercy/kindness."
Matthew 5:9

This Beatitude is just a fairly obvious observation, not a promise.
When you are kind, you see the impact of that kindness.
Kindness, mercy, is its own reward. It's lovely. And delicious. On both sides.
I'm with Jesus on this one. Language matters. "I *desire* mercy," too.³
"Yum."

³ "If there is anything *more emotionally attractive* than empathic behavior revealing that someone shares your pain, I do not know what that is. If that behavior is sincere, that is. Otherwise it's evil. The only thing that compares, for me, is probably courage." - Lucifer, King of Hades. Light-bearer.

“Sarcasm is the protest of those who are weak.”

A Separate Peace

John Knowles

“You (Simon) are *now called* Peter,
and on this rock I will build my church.”

“Like tying a stone in a sling
is the giving of honor to a fool.”

Proverbs 26:8



“And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting,
‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest!’”

Matthew 21:9

“So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold (in-between)—
I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”
Revelation 3:16



Come on, motherfucker. You took my dog.



Let's go.

The Parable of the Weeds

“Jesus told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

Matthew 13:24-30

“Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.’

He answered, ‘The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

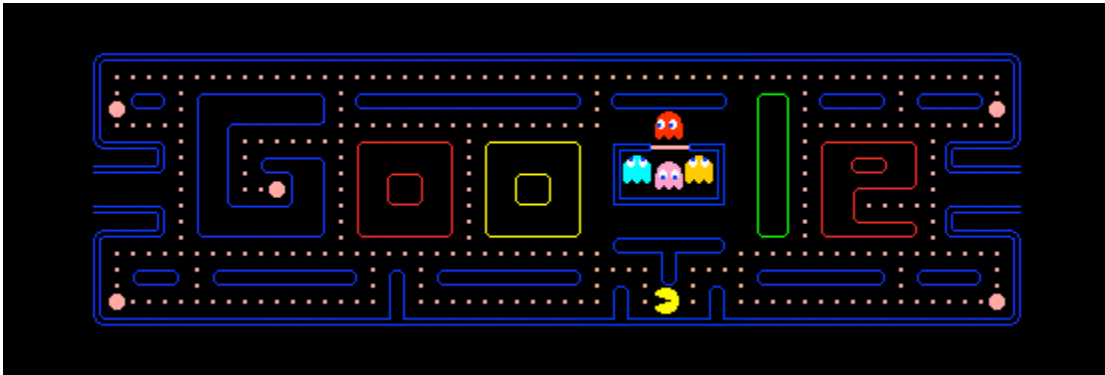
As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.’”

Matthew 13:35-43

Then some idiot nicknamed Charlie (by some) was bored. Really, really bored. And sad. He misses Taylor Newbury's dog. No one asks him his opinion, but having nothing better to do, he gives it anyway. Being a long-time software engineer and architect and expert on databases, many of which store data in tables, he uses a table to hopefully clarify things.

Symbol	Meaning
Harvest	Something you do in a garden. Like Gethsemane. Or Eden.
Son of Man	Peter's heart.
Seed	Initial urge to immediately draw the sword and fight to defend the Lord his God, who he loves.
Enemy	Peter's Inner Critic. Jesus plays this role in the drama. (Noh, really, he does.)
Weeds ('people of the evil one')	The Legion of spirits who work for the Inner Critic, incessantly squawking at him like a tree filled with birds, getting him to question his heart, based on (often conflicting) social, religious, peer group, professional or other standards, who deviously leverage painful experiences he may have suffered in which he was betrayed, disappointed or otherwise hurt to keep him from living.
Weeding	Tearing Jesus, because he is considered a "weed" by "authorities," which is an opinion, out of the Garden of Gethsemane. Like Adam and Eve being driven from Eden.
Angels	Peter's Inner Children. His conscience. "The Legion of angels" at Christ's disposal in Gethsemane, when he asks pointed questions aimed at getting Peter to "think."
Fire	Peter's hot shame after betraying his own heart. Luke 22:61-62: "And Peter remembered...and he wept bitterly."
Picking wheat	Tearing Peter's flower, his Inner child, a naked lad who is naked and not ashamed of being naked, out of the Garden. Like Adam and Eve. The second person torn from the garden (Mark 14:51-52) because of deference to external authority rather than being meekly obedient to <i>his own heart</i> .

You are full of unclean spirits.⁴
Your tree is filled with birds.⁵
Your temple is filled with moneychangers.⁶
You are surrounded by accusing ghosts. With *stones*.⁷



Yikes. It's Pac Man fever.

Your mind is filled with worry about adhering to social graces.⁸
You have traitors at your dinner table.⁹
They will make you a prisoner for the sake of money.¹⁰
They will deny the truth in your heart, repeatedly.¹¹
They will make you doubt yourself, who you are, and the sincerity of others.¹²

Do you see?
You are literally *full of unclean* spirits.
You dirty, dirty girl, boy¹³, or in-between.
Whatever it is that you think you are.
Who knew.

You know why they say it's always the quiet ones?
Because the quiet ones are the ones who hide from the world.
The quiet ones have Pandoran boxes that are more like hellmouths.
And they have good reason for being as they are.

⁴ Luke 8:26-39 and Mark 5:1-20

⁵ Luke 13:18-19

⁶ Matthew 21:12-17, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-48, and John 2:13-16

⁷ John 8:1-11

⁸ Luke 10:38-42

⁹ Matthew 26:21-25, Luke 22:21, and John 13:21-27

¹⁰ Judas: Matthew 26:14-16, Luke 22:1-6

¹¹ Peter: Matthew 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72, Luke 22:55-62, and John 18:15-27

¹² Doubting Thomas: John 20:24-29

¹³ "created male and female". it's mentioned a lot. Genesis 1:27, Genesis 5:2, Matthew 19:4, Mark 10:6

The Near-Sacrifice of Isaac

Read this shit.

“God” tells Abraham to kill his son, as a sign of obedience. In doing so, he reminds Abraham who he is asking him to kill by describing Isaac as a trinity: “your son, your *only* son, who you *love*.” (Genesis 22:2) That sounds eerily similar to Christ’s three “do you love mes” to Peter, doesn’t it. And also the greatest commandment’s trinity of loves: “all your heart, all your mind, all your soul. “God” also tells Abraham where to do the deed. And this is what happens.

“On the *third day* (the day Christ rose, also the day he performed his first miracle, at the Wedding of Cana, only because his mom asked him to), Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but *where is the lamb* for the burnt offering?”

Good question, boy.

An excellent question, indeed. I like this one.

Where is the lamb?

I left something out when I mentioned Christ asking Peter if he loved him three times.

Here is the full passage:

‘When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my **lambs**.”

Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my **sheep**.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?”

He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my **sheep**. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else (your dad) will dress you (put something on you, like wood to carry) and lead you *where you do not want to go* (to be fucking murdered).”

John 21:15-17



Where is the lamb?

The pure of heart see God.¹⁴

Why is this so?

Because it is not what you are looking at.

It is what you are looking for.

The pure of heart see God simply because they *look* for God.

It's an "attitude."

Purity of Heart means looking for God in everything.

Not in a vapid, "focus on the good things" kind of way.

That is filtering and falseness. It's terrible, awful, stupid advice.

Everything. And most especially, *pain*.

Horror movies. Tragedy. Atrocity.

God is love.¹⁵

Faced with suffering, ask yourself, "where is the *love* in this?"

Not *is* this beautiful, *is* this *ok*, *is* this "right" or "good" or evil or nice?

That's all learned stuff, and not natural or divine.¹⁶

Instead ask how, exactly, with open, child-like¹⁷ curiosity, *is* it *lovely*?

How can I *love* what I see?

Find the lamb.

Focus on the weakest first. The edge cases. The outcasts. Like Jesus did.

He sets an example.

Focus on "the *least* of my people."¹⁸

That could be an abused boy. Or a miscarried fetus.

It's hard to imagine anything more *least* than Charlotte.

Barely ever alive, if she ever was, and discarded like waste.

Just as, you know, an example.

Go and do likewise.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:8

¹⁵ 1 John 4:8, 4:16

¹⁶ You judge by human standards. I judge no one. - John 8:15

¹⁷ Matthew 18:3

¹⁸ Matthew 25:40



Not just “She Watches”
“She Watches **The Man**”
photo from the film *Arrival*

Picking up where left off. Abraham answered Isaac, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife...to slay his son.” (Genesis 22:4-11)



“his only son, who he loves”¹⁹

An angel intervenes and prevents Abraham from actually murdering the boy, but really, who gives a fuck by that point. Damage done. It may have been kinder to just kill him.



Deceived.

Physically threatened and hurt.

Led into a trap by an authority figure
who supposedly loves him.

Given a burden to carry.

A wooden burden. Like a cross.

¹⁹ “The Sacrifice of Isaac”, 1602, by Caravaggio



“I am what was before Abraham was (stopped by the angel).”

John 8:58

Empathize with Isaac. Where is the *fairness* in this treatment of this child?

He probably has rope burns on him from being tied up. What did his father’s face look like when he was fixing to stab him with the knife? How would that memory stick in Isaac’s mind? What kind of trust issues would he have after this? Would he ever be able to trust a human being, ever again, ever? How he must have ruminated over it. How could it have happened? Why would his father want to murder him? Isaac is a *child*. He loves his father. He doesn’t understand adult rules. So it must be *him*, Isaac, who is the problem. He must be bad, or worthless, or unwanted. It seems unlikely that he got therapy afterwards to help, either. That must have been an interesting walk home for those two. And did Abraham tell his wife, Isaac’s mom, Sarah about this, or was it a dirty little secret between him and dad?

And why does Abraham do it? What is the result? He gets accolades and earthly rewards. His “descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies,” for one thing (Genesis 22:17). And who does *that* sound like?

Judas Iscariot.

This type of mistreatment early in life produces three types of fear in us.

Fear of being evil, or considered evil by others.

Fear of being inadequate, or considered inadequate by others.

Fear of being a fool, or being made to feel like a fool by others (being deceived).

And these three fears together spawn a fourth monster, which gets created to protect against those things we do not want. Which is the monster that led Abraham to his deed in the first place. And Judas.

Selfishness.

Because of these three fears, we withdraw, effectively entombing our true selves, and rolling a big old stone in front of our entrances - our mouth for one, but there are others, like the planks that appear in our eyes so that we can pretend not to see the suffering in other people and feel a need to do something about it (Matthew 7:3-5) - both to keep monsters from coming *in*, and the monster inside us, which people might want to bind to a rock and stab, from coming *out*. This is Pandora's Box from Greek mythology. And the nightmare of a legion of demons flying out of it is our fear of the consequences of true vulnerability.

Will we hurt people? Will they hurt us?

Distrustful not only of others, and God, but also of our own goodness and worthiness, we seek to both distract and guard ourselves by amassing worldly treasure²⁰, hoarding material things, and money²¹, by armoring our personalities, hiding, and competing with others as if life were a zero sum game, rather than being vulnerable, open and collaborative, compassionate, sharing, and trusting, like the "birds of the field"²², or like little children who have not yet undergone these traumas and are therefore not ashamed.

²⁰ Matthew 6:19-21

²¹ Matthew 6:24

²² Matthew 6:25-27

The Three Days of Serenity
The Beatitudes

Purity of Heart	Understanding	We see God in ourselves, the natural world, other people, events, places, stories, music, art, pain..everything. We see <i>clearly</i> , because we find the <i>love</i> in each of those things, which involves seeing connections between them, the web of love that surrounds us.
Poverty of Spirit	Choosing	Unhaunted by ghosts from our past, +/-or armed with wisdom that helps us prevent those ghosts from choking the initial good intentions stemming from our hearts with confusion, doubt, suspicion, fear, resentment, guilt, shame, etc., we have access to our inner wisdom which allows us to <i>choose love</i> .
Meek Obedience	Doing	We have the courage to put love into action because we are meek to our imperatives rather than those of the outside world. This can involve risking persecution by others, who hunger and thirst for <i>learned</i> rather than <i>natural</i> righteousness, or who we think/fear might feel that way, but we can still act in the face of that possibility because we are trusting like children. Conveniently, the act of truly risking this feels awesome, which is a signal from our hearts.

We are naturally kind and merciful, and are therefore shown the impact of that mercy, which feels amazing.

We openly mourn and otherwise emote, wearing our hearts on our sleeves, and avoid the profound discomfort of not holding our feelings in.

We attain inner peace. While we value peace in the outside world, we do so not at the cost of our inner peace, because an absence of inner peace is the root cause of discord outside.

The Tower of Babel

“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward²³, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said (with the untamed enthusiasm of children), “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens!!! So that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth!!!”

But a big fucking bully with a power complex came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.

The bully said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. For some reason that bothers me, these children being that powerful. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

So the asshole bully shithead scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there a Big Bully Loser confused the language of the whole world. From there, confused, ashamed of being powerless at the hands of their abuser, and feeling foolish for their stupid, childish dream, they fled like disciples from Gethsemane, scattering themselves over the face of the whole earth.”

Genesis 11:1-9
annotated

²³ the way to the tree of life in Eden is guarded on the East side by cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth

“As one people speaking the same language,
nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them...
Let’s confuse their language. And scatter them.”

“Confusion”
With some of its clothes off
Is just “Fusion”
That seems better, to me



“I will open my mouth in parables;. .
I will utter what has been hidden
since the foundation of the world.”
Mark 4:34

“Come together,
right now,
over me.”
The Beatles

Or for whatever other reasons you have.
Fusion is what matters.

Harvest over, time for tea

The waif lives alone in her forest, tending a small fire.

Like the waif and her forest, the fire never changes.

It is like this forever until it isn't.

Until the day on which it occurs to the waif to dream. And just like that a puppy comes tumbling out of the woods toward her, enthusiastic tongue lolling out of a broad canine smile, gray fur new and shining.

The puppy is a puppy. It seeks only her affection, her company, her warmth, to play.

And so they do.

They run after one another in the forest, tracing circuitous zig zag patterns among the trees. Sometimes he nibbles her fingers, mock biting her with tiny teeth, and when she lifts her face to his he licks her all over; he seems to like licking her lips the best.

When they are not playing, the girl puts all of herself into constant caring for the dog, making morsels of things for him to eat, cleaning his fur when when it becomes dirty or tangled with twigs. Aside from that they do little else but snuggle.

She cares for her puppy so well that he grows. Bigger and bigger. Faster and faster. His soft child features become angular, his sweet visage tinged with fierceness. His shrill yips over time become guttural barks.

Then comes the time, while she is resting, that she senses him there, restless, standing over her, growling softly to himself.

When she rolls over to look into her companion's ever friendly eyes she sees something new there, a different type of something, a novel hunger. It scares and excites her. But he notices only the fear, and changes his face for her, twisting it back into a mask more like what she might remember and expect from him, something safe. After pacing slowly in a circle a few times, the dog settles with difficulty back to lie next to his master and tries to rest. She hears a labored difficulty to his breathing.

As she rolls over, the waif finds she can't put out of mind the thing she saw in him. It calls to her in some way that makes her want to reciprocate somehow but she has no idea what that might mean.

She wonders if he saw it in her eyes, too.

One day not long after this, they are playing together in a glade, rolling around with one another in moist grass. As he often does, he licks her face, slobbering her all over with wet. As she

always does she giggles and turns her face away, to the left and to the right, then back to him, pressing her lips and eyes closed and smiling through laughter she cannot hold in.

They roll and they roll, and at some point the waif find herself on her back, him lying on top of her, smiling his dog's smile, each now large paw playfully pinning one of her arms to the grass. This is the first time they've stumbled into exactly this position; his lean fur-covered frame now presses between and is engulfed by her two bare legs, which are spread wide to either side.

She feels his breathing change, and without her conscious volition her breath responds in kind.

Their playful wrestling movement slows, becomes less so, less haphazard, intentional, rhythmic. It becomes a rocking, gentle, back and forth, a nudging and pulling to and pushing away. Her heart is beating differently than ever before, and she risks a look into her playmate's eyes only to find it again, the night hunger, his mask set aside.

Something hard is pressing close now against her inner thigh. She sense a stickiness there, and a wetness on herself.

He pants, and her breathing too becomes irregular, difficult; she marvels at this unexpected experience, for which she has no precedent, no understanding. It is so very very strong.

She parts her lips and without permission or forethought her mouth makes a sound, the very first of its kind.

"Love?"

Their mutual, languid movement eases to a halt. Her pet tilts his head to one side, looking down from his position on top of her. She feels his chest rise and fall through a deep, slow breath.

"Wolf," it replies, and its fanged mouth spreads slow into a broad, mocking leer.

A moment later,
before she can react,
taking hold of both her wrists,
pressing her now limp arms into the earth with something like malice,
only now revealing how very much stronger than her that he has become,
how helpless she is in the face of his strength,
and glaring into her,
as if to burn the memory of this hungry purpose forever-deep inside of her,
Fenrir the Wolf parts his mother's curtain and
enters her room.

There is tearing, searing, sweetness, and bleeding. Resisting and giving in.

She wriggles and thrusts to eject him only to find it presses him further into her. It pleases him. More confusing, even better, it pleases her.

This is the third word.

“Please,” she says.

And the Wolf laughs.

He has waited a long time and so when he finally finishes his task, howling insanely, her cup runneth over. He stabs her with the full length of himself, pumping a seething river of milk into her, filling her caverns and crevices. It gushes warm and volcanic out of her open door, down her thighs and onto the forest floor.

As they lay gasping, she senses something inside of herself. It burns. She asks him to help, and he gently, carefully reaches inside her and withdraws a star.

They marvel at it, how bright and brilliant and beautiful, and the girl imagines a solution to this new problem. She needs to consider what has happened without hurting her companion’s feelings. She needs to explore her own thoughts on the matter. So she proposes a game of throw and fetch and hide and seek. They will go to a nearby meadow by a hill and she will throw the star over it. He will chase it, find it, and bring it in his mouth back to her.

“Run,” she says. The fourth word.

And he does.

And so began the first of many days.

Buddhism

“If my acts are *wholesome*, mirroring my mind²⁴ 🧘🏻❤️,
Then no matter where I turn my steps,
Respect and honor 👑 will be paid to me,
The fruit and recompense of merit.”

Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Chapter 7, Verse 42²⁵

Taoism

“When you are content 🧘🏻 to *be simply yourself* 🧘🏻❤️
and don't compare or compete, everybody will respect 👑 you.”

Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, Chapter 8²⁶

Hinduism

“Happiness is when *what you think* 🧘🏻❤️, what you say,
and what you do are in harmony 🧘🏻.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Mythology

“My advice is, follow *your enthusiasm* 🧘🏻❤️.”

Mythology professor and author Joseph Campbell

Sufism

“The deliciousness of milk and honey is the *reflection* 🧘🏻 of the pure heart 🧘🏻❤️:
from that heart the sweetness of every sweet thing is derived.”

Rumi

Judaism/Christianity

“Adam and Eve were naked (*simply themselves* 🧘🏻❤️),
and they were not ashamed (at peace 🧘🏻 with themselves).”

Genesis 2:25

²⁴ Shantideva's definition of “wholesome” is “mirroring my mind,” not conforming to some external standard

²⁵ trans. from *Becoming Bodhisattvas*, by Pema Chodron

²⁶ trans. by Stephen Mitchell

“If the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness?”

Matthew 6:23

The nature of the desperation is crucial.

It must be wrenching. Intense. All-consuming. *Real*.

The last ditch must have already been dug, the last resort already tried, the last chance already granted and lost. The problem must be intractable. There must be an element of madness, and preferably, a distaste for introspection on the part of the summoner.

Admittedly, a rather vague definition.

For the sake of simplicity, call it *Jack Underwood desperate* and read on for details.

Somewhere along the line, Jack Underwood slipped into a despairing hole he could not climb out of and he called out for help and it, *She*, came. One of Them.

Was the act salvific? For Jack, yes, it surely was. For Her, not so much. For Her it was more like, dinner. Like being born without asking to be born and having a succulent nipple thrust into your mouth and finding out, hmm, *this* I could go for some more of.

It happened like this.

#

“...in the beginning, gaze upon a terrifyingly ordinary man.”

- *The Watchful Poker Chip of H. Matisse*, Ray Bradbury

#

Amy Foster had been too pretty to marry Jack Underwood, that much had been clear from the start. She had the classic Barbie doll figure, down to the hourglass curves and resplendent shoulder-length blonde hair, and all the right affectations: the vapid giggle, the ubiquitous hair flick, the lascivious blinking. She was a hottie, pure and simple. A stunner. She entered a room and the room stopped breathing.

Jack, meanwhile, was no Ken.

Jack stepped into a room and it sneezed.

He had a bald spot on the rearmost top of his scalp, a comical little yarmulke which glowed an angry, burned pink in summer but shone as pale white as the rest of him during other seasons. His left eye went lazy on him if he didn't get enough sleep. It would ignore his commands to move and stare stupidly at the bulbous tip of his prominent, perpetually sniffing nose.

His mouth was unpleasant, thin and dissatisfied and filled with yellowish teeth. His eyes were grey and sepulchral, and the fingers on his hands were long and funereal. He could seem creepy to some.

When all this happened, Jack Underwood was twenty-eight years old. He had been well-educated. Not Ivy League, but close. He perused his daily newspaper, keeping up on current events. But he was not what you would call an opinionated man. If pressed, he would offer soft-spoken insights on politics or the news of the day at family gatherings or cocktail parties or around the coffee machine at work, always carefully worded and carefully delivered, and only if pressed. More often than not his ideas were cliched and unoriginal, and people soon were too bored to press him for any more.

He worked in the Accounting department of a big telecommunications firm. He made a good living there. Better than good, actually. Bordering on fantastic. Sometimes he crunched numbers on productivity and human resource cost and people got fired. Sometimes he got a little bonus in his next check as a result. He generally didn't eat much for a few days after this. Meals just didn't taste right, too bland or too cold or too, something. His appetite always came back, though, eventually. A man had, after all, to eat.

Idiosyncracies? Where to begin?

Jack was, let's face it, a lot more than a little anal retentive (witness the red-faced, childish fits thrown when Amy, while cleaning, disrupted however slightly the inexplicably complex order in which he had arranged his compact discs and books).

He had an occasional problem with road rage (witness the four-foot long silver scrape on the side of the Lexus, from the time he attempted to sideswipe an SUV that had cut him off on the expressway; he had missed and run his own car off the road, nearly killing himself in the process).

And as a rule, with very few exceptions, he disliked, he disdained, he detested the very notion of, *texture*.

Jack Underwood, above all, liked things *smooth*.

Gritty materials made his skin crawl: sandpaper, unfinished wood, chalkboards, terra cotta, all gave him the heebie jeebies. The sensation of bumpiness, of small disordered nodules rubbing against his sensitive fingertips, unnerved him somehow, as if he were biting into tin foil, or looking down a deep hole with nothing to hold onto. He recoiled upon coming into contact with these things, clenching his fists and hugging himself tight, or crumpling up as if kicked in the groin, in an effort to squeeze himself shut against the sensations they provoked.

This texture aversion was, for Jack, a normal abnormalcy; he had always been this way. He could remember feeling this way throughout his childhood. The same went for the anal retentiveness and, to some extent, the road rage. He had been quite the little demon on his tricycle way back when.

The wedding, though, was new.

The wedding had started shortly after his wife told him she was pregnant.

It had started the very *day* he noticed the first long, black hair on her cheek.

#

Before getting married Jack and Amy Underwood-to-be spent hours over lattes and gourmet meals, planning their mutual future meticulously, setting decision-making criteria beforehand, weighing with care the various pros and cons of each decision.

One such decision, and a rather important one, had to with their schedule regarding the having of children. After much consultation and examination of their mutual and individual long- and short-term financial outlooks, they had decided to wait until they were married three years, when Amy would be twenty-eight, and Jack thirty, before trying to become parents. Amy, it was determined, would use a diaphragm for the first three years to ensure this would be the case.

Somehow, though (and didn't Jack have his little suspicions about the *how* in that somehow), they were a mere six *months* into the marriage when Amy missed her period and came up pink on a twelve dollar test, hurling all of their carefully laid plans pretty much out the proverbial window. With the bathwater. The baby stayed put.

The extent of the upheaval this event wrought on what had been Jack's very orderly, well-constructed existence was only amplified by the rather astounding reaction of his wife's body to the presence of the little parasite within her. Poor Amy's hormones ran amok, wreaking havoc in myriad ways Jack had never known possible.

During the middle of the second month she began sprouting facial hair. Within three weeks it was like a thin dark beard covering most of her cheeks from her jawline to her eyes. It gave her a circus freak's appearance, and did not go well at all with the long blonde hair that adorned her head.

The doctors nodded, their somber faces reflecting compassion, but could do nothing for her. Hormones, they shrugged. It would pass, they said.

She plucked the hairs savagely each morning, sobbing to herself in front of the bedroom mirror. Perhaps as a result, she soon broke out in pimples, like a range of small purple volcanos sprawling over the landscape of her face, down her neck, even down as far as her clavicles.

Pimples on her *clavicles*, for God's sake.

She had had such *smooth* skin at their wedding.

Her weight gain was considerable, too, and unanticipated. Jack had seen pictures of pregnant women before: Demi Moore, Cindy Crawford, others. They had looked the same, still stunning, still gorgeous, save for the slightly comical paunch representing their unborn child.

His wife, however, who had been gorgeous herself, yes, downright stunning, he had the wedding pictures to prove it, had gained twenty-two pounds by the beginning of her fourth month. Twenty-two pounds! The baby would not weigh that much itself until it was a full year old! Her legs had grown thick and gelatinous, and *jiggled* when she walked. Her previously slender arms were doughy.

And she was *mean*. She snapped at him incessantly over some perceived slight or other (over the wedding, for instance, or sometimes, he would swear it, over nothing at all), her pretty mouth twisted into a rictus snarl, her devastated face blotchy and discolored by anger and pimples and hair.

It had been, so much of it, unanticipated. So difficult for Jack to comprehend.

So very, very *unsmooth*.

#

And so it came to pass that each afternoon, upon returning from work, Jack Underwood stepped out of the Lexus, set down his briefcase, kneeled – in his business suit and trousers – and tore furiously at the crabgrass and dandelions on his front lawn.

He drove his fingers into the sun-warmed dirt with a passion best described as murderous. He fastened his long, pale fingers around the deepest part of each weed root he could find. He yanked with all he had.

The plants tore free from the earth with a series of small, satisfying pops - rended, ripped, plucked, gone.

He tossed them into the air, to land in his driveway, dead.

As the sun went down, he would move to his side yard, and to the garden out back, stalking his two-point-two-five acres in search of intruders, looking down, stooping, bending, plucking, tossing.

He would walk into his house panting and filthy, with ruined shoes, and something very much like the grimace of a lunatic twisting his narrow features.

Amy would shriek at him, demanding he explain himself. This he did not do. At some point, perhaps frightened by the manic mist that crept into her husband's gray eyes when she pestered him too forcefully, she stopped asking so much, and they settled into something like a routine.

Jack came home; Jack weeded; Jack and Amy ate supper.

Jack came home; Jack weeded; Jack and Amy ate supper.

Jack came home; Jack weeded...

Eventually, Jack stopped eating supper.

But he did come home and he did weed. Damn it, did he ever weed. He weeded like few men have, like even fewer would want to.

Deep into the night Jack Underwood toiled, grunting, wheezing, sweat pouring over and down him like water from a shower nozzle on full blast.

He weeded his neighbor's lawns and gardens while they slept, filling big black garbage bags with their dead plants and their unneeded dirt, hauling them over his shoulder like some absurd, backwards suburban Santa Claus and putting them into the trunk of his car.

He didn't mind that they never thanked him. Consider it a public service, he thought.

He stopped off each day at the town transfer station, to relieve himself of the previous night's plant corpses. Then he came home and he weeded.

Boy, did Jack Underwood weed.

#

As a man utterly ignorant of his own motives, Jack took to this weeding without very much in the way of conscious thought. He in fact reveled in acting *without* thought; something about the sheer foolishness of it, the sickness of it, attracted him in a way he preferred not to delve into.

Introspection was not a process with which Jack was familiar. There was some trigger that fired inside him to prevent self-analysis of any sort, a naked terror of what he might find if he dug within himself too deeply, or at all.

The face-reddening fury that rose like bile to his throat whenever his wife asked him about the weeding was a symptom of this. Jack treated his self like he treated the outside world: both were what they were, and were to be dealt with on their terms, not changed, but at best, managed.

So when he finally left Amy, she was not the only one surprised. He left her without leaving a note, or calling to announce it, or even deciding to leave her. He went to work one day and simply did not come home.

He drove around for hours that night, putting a little over two hundred miles on the Lexus, and dropping off in the car, in the parking lot of an all-night fast-food joint some ways from their house. At two o'clock in the morning, with the help of a couple of hemp-wearing, hemp-inhaling kids from a nearby college, he weeded the small slivers of virid grass spotting the lot. Then he smoked some of the kids' weed, and dropped off again for a few hours. In the morning, he bought himself a croissant sandwich and headed back to work, in the same clothes he had worn the previous day.

This went on, more or less, for four days. He called Amy at odd hours to leave messages, telling her not to worry, he was OK, he just needed some time to work things out, he would be home soon. If she picked up the phone while he was leaving the message, he abruptly hung up. They did not speak.

Though he tried to tell himself differently, he had no intention of ever going home.

He picked a different parking lot each night, did a little weeding of the grounds so that he could be comfortable with his surroundings, then read a paperback or a newspaper and dropped off to sleep. He bought himself two new suits, and wore them on alternate days. He began to settle into a routine.

Jack went to work; Jack drove; Jack weeded; Jack slept.

Jack went to work; Jack drove; Jack weeded; Jack slept.

Jack went to...

He was waiting at a traffic light on the morning of the fifth day when it happened.

#

It was seven-fifteen but already stiflingly humid, and the sun was painfully bright. Glancing to his left to avoid the glare from the windshield for a moment, Jack happened to notice a small, short forest of plush vegetation on the divider between lanes. Upon further inspection it turned out to be not just any vegetation; it was a little forest of *weeds*. Green, straight weeds, some as high as his knees, or higher. Hundreds of weeds. Thin, reed-like weeds. Flat ones with broad green leaves, dandelions, weeds with small blue flowers. So *many* weeds; he marveled at their abundance, their audacity. Weeds whose thick stalks rose like corn from the earth, bent from their own weight. Perhaps more than hundreds. The neglected piece of earth, gone to seed, gone to weeds, defied him, mocking the futility of his efforts, at home and elsewhere.

The light turned green, and still Jack Underwood focused on those weeds. He felt that fingers-scraping-terra-cotta feeling, that sense of creeping disorder, those tendrils of chaos worming their way into an otherwise organized space. He recoiled, crumpling forward against the steering wheel; his knuckles rubbed vigorously at his eyes and his whole body tensed.

Cars honked behind him. Jack shifted the transmission into park, and turned on his hazard lights, and looked at the weeds. His jaw muscles were knobby lumps on his otherwise smooth face; his face filled with blood and his veins bulged, throbbing irregularly.

Cars began to go around him, angry white impressionistic faces with hostile eyes and shouting mouths, silent behind the window glass, Doppler-affected horns dwindling into the distance, gone.

The traffic light turned yellow, then back to red, and still Jack sat.

Finally, he got out of the car. He stepped over the side rail. He bent down and he weeded.

He weeded with vigor, ignoring the looks of his fellow commuters, ignoring the occasional honk of a horn or derogatory remark, focused only on the task at his hand.

He shoved his hands into the earth and he *weeded*, damn it, flinging the dead plants and the clumps of dirt still clinging to their roots over the railing into the other lane.

He weeded that plot flat and smooth, leaving behind nothing but a patch of flat brown soil. When he was done, he looked back upon his handiwork, and smiled the satisfied smile of one who has completed a difficult but worthwhile task. The highway asphalt around him was littered with a green and brown halo of vanquished weeds.

It might as well be a road sign, he thought.

Jack Underwood was here.

He was an hour and a half late for work, arriving as disheveled as you might imagine, with sweat-dampened hair and wet rings beneath the armpits of his shirt and fecal smudges on the knees of his pants. He had caked dirt beneath his fingernails and on his palms and on the side of his face.

His co-workers gazed upon him with undisguised wonder: clean-cut Jack Underwood, reliable company man, good soldier, faithful bean counter, never had so much as his tie askew until recently, transfigured now, before their stunned eyes, into this lunatic, filthy mess.

They stared open-mouthed as he wambled down the aisle to his office. Their looks transmitted concern, amusement, satisfaction in roughly equal amounts. The stare he returned to each of them in turn was a challenge – you got a problem?

No, their averted gazes said back. Not *me*.

His supervisor came by a few minutes later, closed Jack's door, and they had a little talk. Jack obviously needed a rest. Jack should take a break, come back in a few days, *relax*. Jack had a lot on his plate. Jack hadn't taken a vacation in too long.

He sent Jack home.

Relax, Jack, the supervisor said, about thirty times, on the way out the door.

#

But Jack Underwood could not relax. Relaxation was as beyond him as the stars - a distant, pinpoint destination he had no hope of reaching. He felt his entire body pulsing with a frenetic, nasty energy that would not disperse itself. He tried listening to a classical music station on the radio. It failed to relax him. He tried breathing exercises he had learned in the

three yoga classes he had managed to sit through the previous year before quitting. They failed to relax him.

He went to the gym and he ran. He sprinted for five miles. He had never run more than three miles consecutively in his life. His heart threatened to burst free of his rib cage with its hammering. He ran until he simply could not run anymore and he collapsed on the track, dropping to all fours, gasping.

Then he vomited, nearly splashing the sneakers of a passing woman. He looked at his puke and his heart went silent for a long moment. There were weeds in it. Small green weeds. The weeds had made it inside him somehow...

But on second glance they were not weeds, just slivers of undigested green lettuce from his dinner the night before.

His wrist began to throb. He looked at it.

The vein there wriggled, snaking slowly back and forth. It looked suspiciously like, yes, *just* like the root of a weed. He tore briefly at the skin before stopping himself.

Relax, he told himself.

In a dark cavern somewhere in his mind, something responded with mad laughter.

After deflecting the looks of concern and disgust from the fitness center employees and patrons, assuring them he was, he would be just fine, Jack showered on trembling fawn legs and left.

He drove. Eventually, the sight of his own disturbed, cracked eyes in the rearview mirror became too much to bear. While paused at a stop sign, he wrenched the mirror off the windshield and tossed it onto the passenger seat.

He drove and he drove, cursing, mumbling, running a moist hand over his face every few seconds and breathing hard, until he found a mostly empty parking lot, with no grass or bushes anywhere nearby. A large sign at the mouth of the lot read: "Coming Soon." Smaller signs below it listed the names of about a dozen small stores that would occupy the strip mall in the process of being built.

One store, a pharmacy, was already open for business. Shoppers strolled in and out. The rest of the strip mall was in various stages of completion, much of it little more than the skeleton of a building.

Jack pulled the Lexus into a spot at the far end of the lot, in front of the least finished portion of the mall. He stopped the car and rested his sweat-soaked head against the steering wheel.

He needed help.

Oh god he needed help.

He was not a religious man. Religion invited too much introspection for his tastes. But he asked the air for help anyway, asked anyone that might be able to hear his plea.

Help, he said.

I'm desperate, he said.

And somewhere, nowhere you could find on any map, but somewhere, a pair of ears perked up like the nose of a dog at dinner time.

#

There must be a specific way to make the request. Something about the tone of the plea, but difficult to pin down. It must be desperate, yes. There must be urgent need, indeed.

But of the billions of such pleas uttered each day, by orphans, soldiers and victims of war, by the terminally ill and the deranged, only a miniscule percentage are answered in this particular way.

Call Jack Underwood lucky.

Call him special.

Or call him very, very desperate.

In any case, when he called, She came.

Orders were issued from somewhere important, commands the physical world hurriedly obeyed.

Much scurrying took place, and some sleight of hand. Things were built and help was hired, and through a pinpoint prick in the irreality of the world a substance unsenseable seeped. It coalesced rapidly into flesh, hair, teeth, eyes.

Eyelashes fluttered, spasmodic. Opened.

A smile the world had not yet seen flickered, flashed.

“Well,” said the glorious mouth forming that smile.

“Here I am.”

#

Unaware as of yet of the impact of his suffering on the cosmos, Jack Underwood sobbed for a long time, convulsive sniveling heaves over which he had no control. At some point, he summoned the will to unstick his head from the leather on the wheel and he looked up to gaze upon evidence, concrete and incontrovertible, that he had in point of fact lost his mind.

The empty shell that had stood before him not a few moments beforehand, the skeletal portion of the building with its rust-colored girders and utility lamps and no roof, was now thoroughly filled out and housed what appeared to be some kind of retail structure. Through a large window Jack could make out the details of a space that looked like the waiting room at the office of his dentist.

He blinked, half-expecting the storefront to vanish like a desert oasis, like an optical illusion caused by his own derangement or the light, which it surely must have been, since structures like that did not appear spontaneously.

But it did not disappear.

He watched a stout woman with a helmet of short, brown hair enter the picture frame provided by the window. Carrying a small pile of papers, she walked over to a wall and appeared to start making copies, or sending faxes.

There was a sign above the window, a long rectangular sign with pleasant black lettering on a goldish background.

Family Counseling Services, it read.

Jack did not recall seeing anything like that on the *Coming Soon* sign at the entrance to the parking lot. Then again, if it was not only built, but up and running and opened already, why would it be included in a list of shops and stores that were coming soon? But if it had been there when he drove in, how had he not seen it when he pulled up right in front of it?

Jack's stomach rolled.

“Sick,” mumbled Jack Underwood. “I’m sick. A sick, sick man.”

In one corner of the window, a small square sign, red background and white letters, read:

We can help.

Oh, yeah?

Taking a quick glance at the vein still wriggling in his arm (the thing was *moving* of its own accord, veins just couldn't do that) he thought, I doubt it.

Still, as he himself had recently declared, Jack Underwood was desperate. Desperate and sick. Stepping out of the car, he staggered to the door of the office. He was thankful this end of the mall was bereft of any other cars. There was no one to ogle at the sorry shape he was in.

He raised his hand as if to knock on the glass window, but the stout woman, who had made it back to her spot at what was labeled the Check-In Desk, waved him in, smiling.

"Good morning," she sang, perky, beaming at him, as he shuffled across new carpet the color of tropical ocean water. As soon as the door closed, the room was awash in pleasant chords of some string composition Jack could not name. He liked it, though, and found it a bit more soothing than the pieces he had played for himself in the car. The décor here was pleasant, too – pastel peach and blue walls, a smattering of neutral impressionist paintings, and no mirrors. For that last detail he was immensely thankful.

"Sick," he managed to mutter as he reached the desk.

The woman – her name tag read Becky Q. – looked upon him sympathetically. She nodded. After fumbling with several piles of paper on the desk and sifting through a couple of drawers, she handed him a clipboard with three pieces of paper attached.

"Fill this out, please, sir," she said, plucking a black pen from a coffee mug and placing it in front of him.

He almost laughed. If this woman thought he was in any shape to be filling out long-winded forms, boy, did she have another thing coming. Then he glanced at the form. It was a long one all right, the three pages he had been given constituted a single form, and it requested the typical information: name, gender, birth date, address and phone, social security number, employer, insurance, emergency contact information, known allergies, reason for visit, and a few others.

It was already filled out. Jack strained to concentrate long enough to check the data, which all seemed correct. Even the explication of the symptoms, while succinct, was accurate:

Compulsive weeding. Marital problems. Assorted other neuroses.

That would be me, Jack thought. Then he laughed, not a pleasant sound at all, a laugh that died the instant it left his mouth. He decided not to do it again.

He signed the form and handed it back to Becky Q. It was a testament to his state of mind that he spent very little time contemplating where the information on the form had come from.

He had barely sat down, it seemed, before Becky called happily:

“The doctor will see you now, Mister Underwood.”

#

Nodding, he accepted her invitation to sit across from her.

She smiled until he looked away, then regarded him clinically across her desk. She glanced down at his papers, then up at him, then down at the papers again, tucked neatly into the manila folder in her hands.

She observed him, seeing what he himself would see.

A mess, she concluded. A mass of nervous activity, and bulging, thumping, impossible veins.

One kicked like a restless fetus in the dark pouch beneath his right eye. Another protruded like the tangled root of some massive tree from the side of his neck. Yet a third hammered away irregularly near his temple, pulsing like the belly of a fish gasping its last.

His eyes were the cracked, bloodshot red of the sleep-deprived, and his gaze darted from the floor to the walls to the ceiling of her well-appointed office, but rarely to her. The long-fingered hands folded in the valley of his leg shook from the bouncing of a fidgety leg. His tensed forearms muscles rippled, wriggling too, as if slender things squirmed there beneath his skin.

She could smell him as well, his sweat, from across her desk: the tight rubber stink of an elastic band stretched too far, or the metallic scent of a just-rung bell.

Her nostrils widened as she took a long, deep breath of him when he wasn't looking.

She scribbled something in her notes, and nodded.

A single word.

“Yum.”

A smirk curled her full, red lips. One dark, waxed eyebrow raised mischievously. She looked immensely pleased.

#

She was very pretty when she was pleased.

No. To hell with pretty.

Jack’s new therapist was absolutely stunning.

It physically hurt him to look at her looking at him; it gave him a sharp pain in his chest and made it difficult for him to breath. He could barely summon the oxygen to cough.

She wore her dark hair wrapped in a tight bun, and stylish, smart eyeglasses. She had cocoa-colored skin, and a pair of eyes that defied description. Eyes like nothing he had encountered before, anywhere. Eyes that shifted colors in the light with every slight movement she made: starting out verdant, then rolling into brilliant turquoise, twisting into an orange like the tip of a flickering campfire flame, fading to the yellow of ripe banana skin...

...on and on, shifting...

...brick red and dove white, pewter, swirling violet ribbons, eddying streams of clear ocean blue...

He could watch those eyes for hours, he decided. Or forever.

For as long as she wanted him to.

He could not remember her name, the name he had seen on the plaque outside, and in the waiting room. He could not read the name scribbled on the various degrees posted on the white walls of her office. He could barely remember his own name. He could barely bring himself to care very much, either.

There were no pleasantries exchanged. She asked him nothing about himself, his problems. She already knew, and he knew she knew. It was simply understood.

“When you pull at the weeds, Jack, what do you *feel*?,” his therapist purred, adjusting the glasses on the bridge of an exquisite nose. Her voice washed over him like cool rain on a humid day, soothing. He watched, fascinated, as she raised one long, bare leg and wrapped it around

the knee of the other. She raised her black pen to the corner of her belipsticked mouth and *nibbled* on its cap.

Sitting in a comfortable leather chair on the other side of her desk, Jack shuddered. His left eyebrow twitched. He frowned. He did not want to talk about his weeding, not with anyone, not even with her. His long white hands made strange slow motions in the air, as if warding something off. He looked away from her, with an effort, so that he could concentrate on keeping silent.

He talked anyway.

As the words spilled out, he recognized the truth of them, though he could not feel them bubbling to the surface of his mind, as his words normally did; these sentences came of their own accord, as if extracted from someplace deep within him to which he himself rarely had more than limited access.

“When I was young,” he heard himself saying. “I would get mosquito bites, and they would swell up and itch like crazy. My mother would warn me against scratching them, she would get infuriated if I scratched them, but sometimes the calamine lotion and rubbing alcohol just didn’t stop the itch and I couldn’t help it and I’d dig at them, tear at them until I ripped them open, until they were no longer bug bites but open *wounds*. Until they no longer itched, but they *hurt*.”

“The pain,” said Jack Underwood. “Was preferable to the itching.”

His therapist nodded, giving him the okay to proceed.

Jack ran a trembling hand through his thinning hair, looking around the room with the confused expression of a man waking in a strange place. A voice inside him, deep inside him, protested, but the words continued to flow, like blood drawn from a vein.

“When I weed, I feel like I’m scratching some unbearable itch, some itch I’ve been trying to ignore my whole life. I feel like a chain smoker trying to quit, who has a bad day and stops off at a convenient store on his lunch hour and buys a pack of cigarettes, and tears it open outside the store and lights one up, right there. I feel like that first long, slow, deep drag, like a lungful of smoke is rushing down my windpipe and the burden of *not* smoking, of trying *not* to smoke, is lifted, gone.

“I feel,” he continued. “Like a degenerate alcoholic who’s been on the wagon for a year, who has just started to get his life together but decides one night it’s all too much and heads to the

pub at the corner. I feel like that first drink, that first shot of hot whiskey, or the downing of that first mug of beer in one sloppy gulp, like that glimpse over the edge of the glass to its bottom when it's tilted, that snapshot of the evening's oblivious end."

"I feel," Jack said.

"Good. Home. Right."

"I feel fucking great. Until I stop weeding."

With that his hands came to rest on his lap, and he sat regarding the backs of his palms as if he had written something of interest there.

The therapist leaned forward, uncrossing her impossibly long legs. A button on the front of her white blouse was not fastened, and the blouse puckered open there, offering a tantalizing glimpse of brown skin Jack was terrified for some reason to look upon directly.

"Jack, did you ever hear the joke about the man who goes to a doctor and complains about his finger hurting when he touches himself in the head?"

Jack Underwood blinked.

His therapist smiled.

"The doctor tells him, 'Stop touching yourself in the head.'"

Jack leaned back in his chair, chewing her words, mouthing them himself:

Stop touching yourself in the head...

"So," Jack began haltingly. "Since I feel bad when I stop weeding, I should...keep weeding? Weed all the time?"

Her laugh was pleasant, water droplets plinking into a half-filled glass. She shook her head.

"Why is it that you think you weed, Jack? What is this itch you scratch?"

"That was sort of your department, I thought."

"So it is," she said. She removed the pen delicately from her ripe red mouth and laid it on the desk in front of her, building a short wall between them. She rolled it slowly back and forth with her fingers.

Funny, thought Jack. He felt, tugged. A little like he felt sometimes on the few occasions he had smoked marijuana, as if a thin rope or cable stretching from the earth to the heavens was affixed to the top of his skull, and his head bobbed slightly as it moved. Except the tugging, the movement, was not towards the heavens here. It was all towards her, his mind reaching for Her, for his new therapist, across the desk.

“Mmmm,” she said, closing her eyes and smiling, as if listening to a favorite piece of music for a few moments. She stopped rolling the pen and stood up. Jack Underwood watched her grow tall with an open mouth and wondering eyes.

“When we dream, Jack, it is commonly believed that our houses represent our selves. This extends to the grounds of the house as well. Gardening is seen as a very positive dream.

“What you are driven to do, though, Jack, is not gardening, and it is certainly not positive. You quite literally enjoy tearing yourself to pieces, and do a fine job of it.

“I ask you how weeding makes you feel, Jack, and you give me smokers and drinkers. Addicts. Compulsives. And sinners. Sinners reveling in the very wrongness of their sins. People obeying a higher law than moral law and common sense, people hurting themselves, in deference to a higher imperative, even, than self-preservation. People doing bad or stupid things, liking the bad, stupid things they do, liking the very badness of them.”

She reached behind her head and unfastened her hair clip. Long black hair fell over her shoulders, gleaming.

She removed her glasses, placing them on the desk.

Her eyes, thought Jack Underwood. He watched them change. So many colors. Emeralds, rubies, pomegranate seeds and buttered popcorn, chocolate...

“You,” he whispered, unselfconsciously. “Are beautiful.”

“Yes,” she said, walking slowly around the desk, one slender finger dragging its nail softly across the wood surface. “And you, Jack Underwood, are tortured unnecessarily. You grab at weeds when what you want are other things.

“You want to pull the black hairs from your wife’s once pretty face. You want to pluck the unintended creature from her womb. You want to smooth her complexion, to even her moods, to resettle your life. But you are conflicted. You want these things but do not want them. You want to tear your own impure thoughts, *these* very thoughts, from your head, too; your temptations, those seeds of chaos planted in your mind...”

“No,” said Jack Underwood, weakly.

“Yes,” said his therapist, reaching him now, running her fingers through his hair, straddling his lap, cupping his jaw with one delicate hand and bringing his face slowly to hers.

“Of course you do, sweetie.”

#

Once he dispensed with what momentary resistance he managed, Jack Underwood took to the task before him with much the same frenetic vigor he had applied to his weeding.

An instant after she'd coaxed the tongue from his mouth with her own, he was tearing open her blouse with a two-handed swipe, sending buttons scattering like dandelion motes. He thrust his hand up her skirt as if into the warm earth of his garden. He plucked at the nipples on her bare breasts, pulled hard on her hair, groped for his own root and planted it, giving in, finally giving in, and out, and in again.

They made the rounds of the large office, employing various pieces of furniture and a couple of walls, eventually finishing the deed explosively in front of the ceiling-high bookcase in the corner furthest from the office door.

Afterwards, Jack lay on his back on the carpet, naked except for one white tube sock. He was drained, gazing up at the stunning dark face suspended above him, which floated in an ocean of shimmering raven hair; multi-colored eyes and a brilliant crescent of a smile awash in the amber light streaming through the window above...

At some point Jack Underwood lost himself entirely - rended, ripped, plucked, gone.

#

“Mr. Underwood?”

Jack woke to a dim buzzing in his ears.

He opened his eyes. His therapist was sitting across from him, back behind her desk. Her hair was compressed neatly into its bun. Her clothes were unrumpled, her blouse was properly buttoned, and her lipstick was unsmeared.

He, too, had all of his clothes on.

Jack Underwood found none of this in the least bit strange.

“How do you feel, Mr. Underwood?”

“Good,” he said softly, looking down at himself as if to check that all of his pieces were still there. “Very good.”

“Do you still want to weed when you go home?”

Jack wrinkled his forehead, pondering the question. He imagined himself getting out of the car, kneeling on his lawn...god, that seemed dumb.

“No,” he said. “I don’t have the *least bit* of an urge to weed.”

This delighted his therapist. She brought her hands together in a silent clap.

“Excellent,” she said. “Looks like our work here is done for the day. Schedule another appointment with Becky out front, won’t you?”

Jack thanked her, assured her that he would be back, he felt so good, and walked out into a waiting room that was suddenly full to bursting. All eight chairs were occupied. A woman in workout clothes, a man in a suit not unlike his, a pimply-faced teenager and a tough-looking, beefy fellow lined the left wall. A girl who looked to be about ten years old, an elderly couple, and a tanned twenty-something woman in a half-shirt and denim shorts occupied the right.

They were quiet, all of them, and solemn. For some reason the word *congregation* came to Jack’s mind. Then it was gone.

He was forced to schedule his next appointment on a Friday night, two weeks later; that was, Becky Q. informed him, the next available slot. All of the small orange lights on the phone in front of poor Becky were lit up, some blinking impatiently. She looked harried, but still managed to be very polite.

As he turned to leave, she said, very sincerely, “*Thank* you, Mr. Underwood.”

Jack nodded and left.

#

He would go home that night and he would not weed.

He would go home and he would eat supper with his wife. He would hold her slightly furry face in his hands and tell her how very sorry he was for what he had put her through, how

much he loved her, how much he looked forward to raising a child with her. He would mean every word, and she would be able to tell this was so.

He would hand her a gift he had picked up on the way, a potted plant, not a weed but a lily. The flower would be a bright orange, and strikingly beautiful. When he gave it to her, she would not notice that the pot was terra cotta, and that her husband did not flinch in handling it.

Neither would Jack. He would barely give it a second thought.

And for the rest of that night, and for a good while after that, to the Underwoods on Lighthouse Lane, everything would seem very much all right.

#

Back in her office, his therapist sat back in her chair, looking out her window at the brass glory of a burgeoning summer day. She ran a hand languidly up and down her bare inner thigh. Her eyes glittered dreamily, along with her half-moon smile.

My first happy customer, she thought.

Rended, ripped, plucked.

Gone.

Her roaming index finger encountered a single, small droplet of something sticky on her leg. Scooping it carefully, as if scooping frosting from a cake, she raised the finger to her tongue.

She tasted, again, of Jack Underwood - of a small, desperate man leading a small, immensely desperate life, of metaphorical cigarette smoke and whiskey, of the death throes of plants and of torn earth. She tasted of torment and confused dissatisfaction. She tasted of all that her latest, her first, patient, unknowingly, had given her.

It had been an equal exchange; a simple and mutually satisfactory transfer of energy from one place to another.

She had made his mind smooth, weeded it flat, torn his tormenting thoughts up by their roots, and taken them for herself. Other intruders would eventually surface, of course. It was in the nature of such thoughts, as it was in the nature of weeds, to do so. But she would be here to pull them out now, to weed him clean, always.

She would be here.

Well, perhaps not always, but long enough.

To feed on his thoughts, and on the thoughts of others like him, to forage in the dark gardens in people's minds.

She and Others like her had for centuries taken the obvious route to sustenance. They had fed off those orphans, those soldiers and victims of war, the terminally ill and the incurably poor that called them to life. There was nothing wrong with this approach; it had been successful enough. But the grand, delectable secret she had just now begun to uncover was that no demographic compared to the misery, the succulent, swirling contradiction, she would find here, in Suburbia.

She could feel it teeming with people who believed fervently, without question, that they should be happy, but were not. Those others, the orphans and the indigent, most saw unhappiness all around them. It was all they knew. True, they were miserable, yes, they were wretched, but they did not feel singled out.

These suburban people, though, these executives and soccer moms, these cops and nurses and mail carriers, saw happy people on television, and watched seemingly happy people living happy lives in the houses around them. They, many of them, made a decent living, and had nice things.

Yet they went to bed each night asking themselves the same questions, receiving the same non-answers. It was slow torture, a cruel punishment, drawn-out agony.

And it was delicious.

Jack Underwood was an extreme case, but she could already tell there was more than enough desperation here to keep her fed for a long, long time.

Yes, the soil here was very fertile indeed.

A tinny voice spoke from the intercom on her desk.

"A Mr. Jackson is here to see you, ma'am."

The therapist smiled.

Her tongue worked. She swallowed the last of Jack Underwood.

"Yum," murmured Thera, newly fashioned Goddess of Suburban Discontent.

“Please. Send him right in.”

meeting my maker

We dug the hole together in the early evening hours, just after the blistering, relentless sun went down and the desert sand began to cool.

I did almost all of the work, as usual.

Marty Green had a million ways of pausing while we were working together on something. He'd stop to light a smoke, then a minute later mutter “shit” and pull the butt from his mouth to find it would have gone out. This could happen two or three times on a single cigarette. I found it incredible. I watched Marty out of the corner of my eye sometimes, figuring I'd catch him putting them out, pinching the smoldering tip between his dirty pink fingers or grinding it out on his thigh, but as far as I could tell, he never did. I gave him my own cigarettes, too, just to make sure he didn't have trick ones, like those birthday candles that won't blow out, but in reverse. It didn't help.

It wasn't just the cigarettes, either. Marty had broken at least a dozen shovels in the six months we'd been in the desert. The handles just snapped; once the shovel head just split, cleaved in two for no reason at all. It wasn't that Marty misused the shovels. They just broke. His boots, too, were always slipping off his feet despite the fact that he tied them tight and properly. He would then have to stop working to re-tie them. Sometimes I tied them for him. It didn't matter.

There appeared to be some force in the universe that did not want Marty Green to work too hard. The same force seemed to care nothing whatsoever for me. I sweated and grunted and strained and nothing intervened to stop me. My cigarettes smoldered brightly during the infrequent but torrential downpours we endured; my shovel had lasted six months and was as good as new despite the fact that it had dug literally tons more earth than all of Marty's shovels combined; my boots wrapped themselves tight around my feet and would not let go.

And so that night, as usual, I dug the foxhole.

Then, later, we both died in it.

Or near it anyway. We were in it, sleeping. Then we were out of it. From what I gather the mortar shell, when it arrived, sent us for a pretty long ride.

Perhaps you have been told there are no atheists in those things. You know, foxholes.

If so, you have been lied to. Not just about this, of course, but it's an example.

Take me. I spent my share of time in foxholes over the past few months, and I was a card-carrying atheist the entire time. Not that I would claim to be your typical soldier. Marty Green was more like what you'd be likely to find among the men and women of my squad, my battalion, my Army. Marty was an avowed Baptist. His handheld Bible was dogeared from use. Sometimes at night, as we holed up in whatever foxhole we were trying to rest in (which I had of course dug), he'd breathe inane spiritual questions in my general direction through a mouthful of bad teeth. They always started and ended the same way.

"If there's no God, Tom, then who do you think made the world, huh?"

"If there's no God, Tom, where do you go when you die, huh?"

I had a single answer for all of his questions. It was simple and honest and brief: "I don't know." He seemed to accept it each time like a victory, nodding as if he had made his point and harumphing as if to say, "well, okay then." If Marty was trying to convert me to his own belief system with these inquiries, he would not have made a very good missionary.

Truth be told, I think he was more curious about how I could possibly be an atheist than anything else. He couldn't get his brain around it. He may as well have been interrogating a creature from another planet for all that he comprehended my ability to accept my own uncertainty.

Some nights he'd read Biblical passages aloud to himself, softly but not so softly that I couldn't hear the words. I admit I found this soothing, in a way. There was something about the repetition, and the slow Alabama drawl Marty read with, that was so at odds with the soldier's life here it felt good.

No matter how many verses I heard Marty mumble, though, or how many explosions rocked the earth all around me, or how many friends I saw maimed and dismembered and murdered, not once did I reconsider my theological stance. Through it all I steadfastly believed, passionately, in God's *nonexistence*. I was a zealot in that regard. Here I am, dead for, well, I have no idea how long, but certainly dead, obviously so, and an atheist I still am.

Which means something. My atheism. It's a mitigating circumstance. It might make what I am about to do something other than murder. You could call it psychological vandalism. Or

surgery on the psyche. Or you could call it the stupidest notion you've ever heard and leave it at that.

I have no idea which description fits best. Who am I saving? Who am I damning? Who am I killing? The world? A piece of myself? Nothing at all?

I know only this: my rifle came with me when I died. It is with me even now, and despite my atheism, I believe, for no good reason I can elucidate, that things happen for a reason, and the only good reason to have a rifle, of course, is to shoot it.

So that's just what I plan to do. Shoot the damn thing. First chance I get.

#

You will want to know how dying feels, I suppose. I don't know if everyone's death feels the same, or if mine was unique, or if mine was simply the typical death of a soldier in battle. I can only relate my own experience, such as I remember it, which is in a word, poorly.

It was nothing like I expected it to be, I will say that much. For me, death was all confusion and painful thrashing, and the sensory inputs were impressionistic at best. The surface of my death was smooth and without grasping points. It was smoke, ethereal, untouchable. It happened to me but it could have been happening to anyone. By the time my mind caught up with what was happening there was virtually nothing left of that mind to witness the event. I missed the beginning of my own demise, late to my own funeral, just like my Ma always said I'd be.

I do not remember waking up.

I do remember feeling sand beneath me at some point, cool and gritty against the side of my face and one of my palms, though I couldn't tell you which palm. I was somewhere. Not in the foxhole, but on sand for sure: night sand, cool. I remember trying to get to my hands and knees, but some part of me, a hand or an arm or a knee, was either numb or missing and I couldn't do it. I heard sounds that could have been voices, gunfire, explosions, screaming, but they were all muffled, underwater-sounds, merely guessed at and not confirmed.

One of my eyes opened at some point to a kaleidoscopic hive of blurred faces, pink and beige and brown and red, like some nightmarish hydra, a dozen sets of teeth and eyes in frenzied motion, no one I recognized. They might have been above me or encircling me or inside me. A hand, a claw?, maybe on my shoulder. Maybe gentle pressure, pushing me back to the ground. Perhaps something spilling out of my abdomen, the feeling of something heavy slipping like a

bowel movement out of a broad gash in my belly. Or maybe that was just imagined. I doubt I could have actually felt such a thing.

A sudden piercing ache on the left side of my head. Some kind of song, a woman's voice singing, or a bell ringing, or a phone. And hissing, like a valve leaking gas.

Eyelids fluttering. An eye opening again, this time to an indigo sky filled with stars, then, swiftly, to no stars at all; my vision contracting.

Then nothing, almost. Darkness and the vibrating earth beneath me. Sand. A breeze against the tip of my nose.

Then light. A bright light and a dark tunnel made of something like swirling, charcoal smoke.

And just one thought, almost well-formed, in my own voice:

This part, at least, is true.

#

On my way in (down? up? through?) I think about an old war movie I watched once. I recall the battle scenes: Poverty-stricken serfs dressed in rags, armed with dull spears and flimsy shields, butchering one another on some field while their lords watched from afar, sitting on comfortable horses and sipping wine, making snide remarks and cutting observations. Serfs like sheep. Stupid and accepting serfs. The field awash in their idiot blood. Infuriating. I roared at the screen. I wanted them to stop and think, for one goddamn second stop and assess the situation. The numbers and the odds and the tenuous, purely psychological hold their lords possessed on their own power.

Stop and think and bring the butchering to those dandies on the hills, you dumb assholes!

I wanted the lords slaughtered. Not out of vengeance or spite or brutality. Not even justice, though that was closer. Truth was, it was simply appropriate. The fight was the lords' fight after all. It was always their fight. Never the serfs'.

The war-mongering lords should be the ones to bleed.

#

Somehow I clutch my rifle tight to my chest. Or perhaps it is only the idea of my rifle. If so it is cool for an idea, and solid.

I walk. The trip through the tunnel takes a long time. Or maybe it is instantaneous. The footing is uncertain and the steps irregular. Or perhaps it is smooth. The tunnel's surface seems to rotate beneath, around me. And nothing is certain but my gun. I do have my gun with me, yes, both hands clenching it. Yet I have no hands. The light ahead of me is white at first, then colorless, dazzling fulgence. I chalk it up to neural noise, a deoxygenated hippocampus and a flood of glutamates. I wonder how much longer I have. To live. To die. To kill. Whatever.

I wonder, too, about the collective unconscious. The archetypal ideas we share one with one another, across impassible geographical and cultural boundaries. I wonder if I believe in such a thing. I wonder about the source of such ideas. I wonder about their permanence, their storage, about the mechanism of their transmission from mind to mind.

I wonder this most of all: When I pull the trigger, what will happen? Will anything be accomplished? A few neurons firing in a certain way in one dying grunt's mind? Or something more, a first doddering step towards something like independence?

Then there is no longer time to wonder. There is only the light and the mouth of the tunnel, right here at my nonexistent feet, and my imaginary but very real rifle in my vapory hands.

Adjusting my grip on that rifle, taking comfort in the coolness of the barrel and the perfect locking of my finger in the trigger loop, I step forward, squinting and determined, to meet my Maker.

Art History

When I was four years old, I carved the Venus of Willendorf out of a bar of pink soap with an old penny. My mother walked into the bathroom just as I had finished chipping a tiny chunk from the statuette's abdomen, giving her a belly button.

"Happy *burt* day!" I blurted, and sprang to my feet, nearly losing my footing on the slippery tub bottom. I held out the dripping Venus in my palm. Bath water glistened on her faceless head with its pleated hair, rolled down both sides of her absurdly ample bosom and over her almost grotesquely fecund middle. A tear-sized pool had already formed in her newly fashioned navel. I flashed my best and biggest toddler grin, the one I saved for special, the one I knew Mom could not possibly resist.

"That's...sweet, honey," Mom said. She barely glanced at the Venus as, smiling distractedly, she reached over me to unplug the drain. "Time to get out now, OK? And you're not supposed to stand up in the tub, you know that..."

If she had attended college, or even paid attention in high school, (and couldn't we fill an anthology with stories that started out just like that) she might have recognized the Venus for what it was: a meticulously crafted, inexplicably accurate replica of one of the earliest known, and one of the most famous, examples of prehistoric human art. The quality of the piece demonstrated both considerable skill at the art of sculpture and an in-depth knowledge of the original artifact. I could not possibly have possessed either at the age of four.

Mom *should* have been stunned, maybe even frightened, by the fact that her little boy, not all that far removed from his last day in diapers, would even think to make such a thing in the first place. Never mind carving it over the course of a twenty minute bath, with nothing but an old penny for tools.

Then again, if Mom had paid attention in high school, she would not have been under the bleachers with Tom Taylor when she *should* have been in Algebra, and I would never have even been born.

Mom lifted my naked, skinny frame from the tub and wrapped me up in one of our coarse towels. My teeth started chattering the instant my toes left the water. It was April, but it was a frigidly cold night, and we didn't have much in the budget for heat during April.

"It's not my birthday, Arthur, but that's really sweet of you to think of me," Mom said, toweling me off. She was gentle, but moving quickly, and the roughness of the towel left the skin on my thin, pale legs the bright pink of a moderate sunburn.

"Is it *my* burt day?," I asked.

"No, sweetie. You just had a birthday last month."

I pressed my trembling lips together and creased my forehead as Mom spun me around to dry my backside. I looked down at the little Venus in my shaking hand.

"Maybe it's *her* burt day," I said.

"Yes, honey. I think it probably is her birthday."

#

I insisted Mom take the Venus from me after story time that night. I was afraid I would squash her while I slept.

When Mom bent over for our good night kiss, I sprang from the bed and wrapped my arms around her neck just about as tightly as I could. I heard her grunt from the sudden addition of my entire weight on her back. I knew I would soon be too big to do this, but she still fell for it nearly every night, so I thought she must still like it.

I held on for as long as I could hold on, squeezing. Eventually she stood up, like she always did, and wrapped her warm arms around me, and squeezed me back. She rested her left cheek against my right cheek and we swayed, as if we were dancing. I remember the too-flowery smell of her perfume, the vibrations in my belly and skull from her tuneless humming in my ear, and the feel of her soft skin on my cheek as her face curved, finally, into a smile.

#

When Mom thought I was asleep, I heard her talking on the phone in her bedroom. Our apartment walls were thin; I heard just about everything she did in there.

“Am I getting *that* fat?,” she asked.

A pause.

“Well Arthur thinks I’m fat. He carved this little statue today out of soap. I don’t know how the heck he did it. It’s a woman, and she’s *obese*...”

Another pause.

“I don’t know, Sherry. She has big floppy boobs and an *enormous* rear end and if that’s what he thinks a woman looks like...”

A longer pause.

“Well, whatever. All’s I know is, tomorrow I’m going on a diet.”

#

The Venus ended up on Mom’s dresser, leaning on its footless leg stumps against the base of the mirror, next to my great grandmother’s jewelry box. It was as close to a place of honor as we had in our apartment. That jewelry box – as Mom had told me on the half dozen occasions she had caught me sifting through its drawers and playing with her necklaces – was the Only Nice Thing She Owned.

I stopped in to see Venus once or twice a day. I never played with her, never even touched her, just sat on Mom’s bed quietly, and watched her. I wondered what it would be like to be a

Venus of Willendorf. To have to stand, or lean, all the time, wherever someone else put you. And to have no face, and no ears. You couldn't see, hear, eat, or smell. You couldn't ever go outside and catch bugs in a jar.

It was sad, in a way, but Venus didn't look sad. She didn't look like she felt much of anything, really; she wasn't a very expressive sculpture.

In that way, Mom was very much *not* like Venus. I knew just how Mom felt about some important things, though she never actually told me.

For instance, Mom never actually *told* me she regretted my having been born. She never gave me any overt indication that she did not love me deeply, . But she said things, things that got my little mind thinking, like when she would show me pictures of herself in high school.

"See? Your mother hasn't *always* looked like this, Arthur," she would say. "I *used to be* quite the looker." And there was something heavy and significant and awful in the way she uttered, "used to be" and "always", that gave me a pit in my stomach and made me look at my hands in some confused, disappointed way.

In her darker moods, after one of her crying fits, we would sit in the kitchen, sometimes in darkness, me on her lap, her on one of our creaky old chairs. She would hold me tight from behind and rock back and forth and whisper into my ear.

"Just don't be like me when you grow up, Arthur. I want you to *be* something," she would say, over and over again.

The older I got, the more I hated this. I would tell her she *was* something; she was my Mom. I failed to understand why that made her cry so hard until much later, when I realized that what I had said was true: she was my Mom, that was what she was, and that was all she was, and being my Mom meant, to her, that there were a lot of other things she otherwise could have been but never would be. She was *just* my Mom, and I was a cute kid, a sweet, good kid with potential, but.

I asked Mom a few times about my father: what he'd been like before the accident, before he drove his pickup truck into the oldest elm tree in Newcastle and left her alone with me. Mom said he was funny and good-looking and I reminded her of him sometimes when I cocked my head sideways and smiled.

I could see the weary way her mouth sagged when she said it, could see the shadow pass over her eyes.

She was no Venus of Willendorf, my Mom. She had an expressive face, and a mouth that said things even though they went mostly unsaid. Or maybe I was just a sensitive child.

Either way, from very early on, I knew how she felt.

#

One afternoon, about a month or so after her burt day, Venus disappeared.

Mom was in the basement doing laundry and I was puttering around the apartment looking for our cat, Jake. After coloring Winnie the Pooh and Tigger for close to a solid hour, that particular brand of child boredom which can only be alleviated with an act of mischief had struck, and at some point I decided I needed a furry tail to pull. Jake could make the funniest noises when properly motivated.

I had just checked the space under Mom's bed for the lump of brown fur, when I noticed the empty spot on the dresser where Venus should have been, but was not. A thin, raised, pink outline – shaped like a crudely drawn heart - stained the wood where the tiny stumps of her legs had met the dresser.

I walked over, guessing the Venus had probably fallen to one side and rolled away, or maybe it had fallen off when I had slammed my head into the other side of the wall while using my bed as a trampoline the previous night. But Venus was not anywhere on the surface of the dresser, or under it. Over the course of the next couple of minutes I confirmed that she also was not stuck between the dresser and the wall, or under Mom's bed, or in any of the shoes in her closet, either. She also was not inside the jewelry box (I didn't think Venus could even fit inside there, but I checked anyway).

I left Mom's room to check my own, pulling every book out of my bookcase, going through every drawer in my own bureau. I found Jake cowering behind my trash can, but I left him alone for the time being.

I stumbled out of my room and ran at full speed down the short hallway leading to the rest of our apartment, which wasn't much: a cramped, dingy kitchen and a small yellow area that doubled as both dining and living room but was not big enough to do either job very well. Venus was not behind the couch, or between its cushions, or in the refrigerator, or on the kitchen counter, either.

Venus was not anywhere.

I was out of breath from my running and searching. I was not upset so much as I was curious. Where could she go? How could a Venus walk, with those big legs of hers stuck together like that, and those puny non-feet?

Eventually Mom walked in, red-faced and sweating. She had climbed eight flights of narrow stairs with a basketful of bed sheets, because Some Idiot had the elevator on stop on one of the floors above us.

When she saw the state of the apartment, Mom's eyes went wide. She actually dropped the basket. I turned and surveyed the damage with her, nearly as surprised as she was, honestly shocked, to see the scope of what I'd done in such a short period of time. We walked together through the rooms, as if touring the world's smallest and messiest museum.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator door was open. I had moved items off some of the shelves to see if Venus was hiding behind one of them. A milk carton stood in the middle of the kitchen floor, surrounded by a jar of pickles, a bottle of ketchup, and a half-filled carton of now mostly broken eggs.

In the living room, the couch was pulled out from the wall and its cushions had been thrown onto the carpet. A small lamp had been knocked off the side table. The bulb had broken.

Bracelets and necklaces spilled out of the drawers of the jewelry box in Mom's bedroom and were tossed all over the dresser. Shoes littered her entire floor.

The floor of my room was covered with articles of my own clothing, and a couple of dozen books and a few miniature dump trucks were scattered on top of those.

Mom asked me what the *heck* was I thinking. I shrugged and looked out my window.

I think it was one of those moments parents have sometimes, when the sheer enormity of a young child's misdeed prevents them from being able to summon the appropriate amount of anger, because their minds are so busy generating the appropriate amount of disbelief.

The place, Mom finally said to my back, looked Like A Hurricane Had Hit It. I Had Better Get Cracking and clean things up, or there would be No Story Time Tonight.

#

As bed time approached, I tried to hang around Mom's room, to see if she would realize Venus was gone. She stood in front of the bureau mirror, pulled the earrings off of her ears, opened

the top drawer of the jewelry box, and tossed them in. She took off her watch and put it right on top of the heart-shaped footprints. She didn't seem to notice anything different.

I decided not to say anything to Mom about what had happened to her.

#

I found Venus late the next day, in the first place I should have looked: the tub.

My mom always tossed my favorite water toys in with me when she put me in for a bath: a big orange boat that didn't float so well, a plastic blue soap dish in the shape of a seal that floated a little better, and two plastic fishermen in yellow rain slickers and matching hats.

Mom's sister, Auntie Sherry, had given me a slicker and a hat, just like those on the fishermen, for my fourth birthday. I wore them around the house every day, Fisherman Arthur, knocking things over with my fishing pole (a bright red plastic baseball bat with some string taped to it, if I remember correctly). Mom couldn't keep me from filling up the sinks and splashing in them, roaring out nautical commands no sailor would recognize, for a solid week. I heard Mom talking on the phone the night she put the slicker and hat away for a while, saying she couldn't wait until Auntie Sherry had a kid. What goes around, comes around, she said. She was already looking at drum sets.

After plopping me into the water Mom told me she would be in her room if I needed her, and she'd be back to wash my hair and behind my ears.

"Okay," I said.

I put one fisherman in the orange boat and one on the soap dish. I was just about to crash the two floating toys together, to see how far the fishermen would hurtle upon impact, when I saw Venus. She was lying on her side on Mom's soap dish in the corner of the tub.

"Hello," I said.

"What, honey?," called Mom.

"Nothing!," I said.

I slid across the tub bottom and picked up Venus. Her head, which had been the rounded cheese wheel shape you've seen in pictures of the real thing, was rubbed flat on top, and the grid of bumps (thought to be braids of hair) that covered it were mostly flat as well. Her left side had lost most of its definition: you couldn't tell where her arm started anymore, and the

side of her leg was flattened. Most of the chips in her abdomen I had so carefully flicked off with the penny to match the original were gone, as was her belly button. Her abdomen was now almost perfectly smooth.

Someone had used Venus as a bar of soap.

Mom had used Venus as a bar of soap.

I held Venus in my hand . Something about her was a little more expressive this way. Her half-flattened head seemed to have a happy tilt to it, almost. Or maybe that's what I wanted to think.

Either way, I was curious.

I started to rub Venus between my hands. A thick lather of pink soap gathered in my palms, and the smell of lavender filled my nostrils. After a second or two, my skin started to tingle.

Later in life, I would be sitting outside the principal's office with Fernanda Karl after hitting Mrs. McLaren with a stray spitball, and Fernanda would drop a handful of Pop Rocks into my palm and wink at me. After a brief interrogation, during which I determined to my own satisfaction that the Pop Rocks were neither poison nor some cruel girl trick, I put the Pop Rocks in my mouth. When the series of small, gentle explosions began (the first girl-induced fireworks of my life), I would think immediately of Venus and that day in the tub. The rubbed off Venus soap felt like Pop Rocks on skin: tingly and vaguely electric and explosive but, nice.

I took the lather and rubbed it all over my body, over my belly and under my armpits and down my arms. I took my Papa Bear face cloth and rubbed more Venus soap into it, then washed my legs, the backs of my knees, between my toes. I lathered up again and ran my hands over my scalp, like Mom did when she washed my hair.

My whole body was tingling, and warm. I felt like my skin was laughing. I couldn't help grinning.

After a while Mom came in, stopping two steps inside the doorway. I was holding Venus. Her face went white.

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry," she said, looking crestfallen, staring at Venus, her bottom lip trembling. "We ran out of soap the other day, and I didn't have any money..."

"Don't worry, Mom," I said, holding up what was left of Venus: a smooth chunk of soap just a little too big for me to be able to close a fist over. It was no longer recognizable as human,

except in the most abstract sense; it was shaped more like a pear. The grin on my face was going strong. I felt like I was glowing from the inside, like my skeleton was a bulb emitting honey-colored light through my skin.

“I think she likes it,” I said.

The grin lasted only a few minutes after I had been dried off and dressed. I did retain a certain unusual inner warmth for a while longer, though by the time I was scheduled to hit the hay, that was mostly gone, too.

Mom read me two extra stories that night. She didn’t listen when I told her it really didn’t matter, because she knew it did. For the first time in a long time, when she leaned over to give me a kiss, I just offered her my cheek, said, “good night Mom I love you”, and rolled over.

She laid down next to me then, wrapping an arm around my torso, her head sharing my pillow. Though I didn’t feel angry something stopped me from turning myself around to comfort her when she began to snifle, just the same.

Mom stayed with me in my room until I fell asleep, which normally never happened.

#

The next night, I heard her talking on the phone in her bedroom again.

“I feel *awful*, Ma. Arthur was so sweet about it, which just made me feel worse,” she said.

There was a pause.

“I *hate* this. I hate it. This is *it*. I’m going down to sign up for that realtor’s test at lunch tomorrow.”

Pause.

“I can *pass* it, Ma. Sherry’s a realtor, how hard can it be? Things are going to be different from now on. I’m not going to sweat my whole life away in that laundromat.

“I mean it this time. This is *it*.”

#

I don’t know if Mom ever took the realtor’s exam. I do know she never became a realtor. She worked at the laundromat for a while, then moved on to waitress at the diner down the street

from our apartment for a few years. Then she died, collapsing of a brain aneurysm on the sidewalk on a muggy August day when I was only eight, and I went to live with Auntie Sherry, who finally had herself a kid but no one to buy him a drumset, and *that was it*.

#

A week or two after I had first used Venus to wash myself, I found what remained of her, just a splinter of pinkness caught in the tub drain, after one of Mom's showers. Mom had felt badly about using Venus at first, but felt less badly, I guess, as time wore on. Probably because I had used Venus for every one of my baths, although I was careful not to use too much of her at once.

I picked up the soap sliver and smelled it one last time: lavender and sunlight traveling up my nose, evoking yet another involuntary grin. Then I pushed that last bit of Venus carefully through a hole in the drain, imagining it slipping down the pipes and floating underground on a gentle current until it reached the ocean. She could have adventures out there, I bet. She wouldn't need to stand where people put her all the time. She could get eaten by a fish and travel to China.

I put my ear to the drain. I thought I heard her echoey giggling as she plummeted to freedom.

I tried to stuff one of my fishermen down the hole too, but he wouldn't fit.

Or would he?

"Yes, your honor, I do," he said, his gaze never leaving Arthur's.

"And you, Mr. Cage?"

"Yes, your honor," Cage said. The truth was he had even less to lose than Jorgenson. Which was to say, nothing. He would never find happiness, contentment, the joy of achievement. But these proceedings offered him his only shot at two of the next best things: relevance. And vengeance.

"Final answer, your honor. Blow it all to hell for all I care."

"Ok, then." Taking another deep breath, the Judge spoke as he brought down his gavel.

"Let it be - "

nutcake

So there I am at the intersection of Washington and 5th. I'm sleepy. I've got a belly full of Chef Yang's always questionable Spicy House Chicken, which like a moron I'd polished off for breakfast not a half hour earlier. It ain't sitting very well with my increasingly sensitive digestive system.

Washington and 5th just might be the longest red light in this whole damn city, I think to myself. And Chef Yang just might be getting his ingredients from the alley behind his place.

That's about when the gangly Asian kid with his jaw wired shut gets into the fistfight with the garbage bag outside of the Korean convenience store.

"C'mon c'mon c'mon," the kid says, lowering this bony shoulder of his and spitting through a mouth he can barely open.

"C'mon *bitch!*", he says, while he jukes, jabs, swipes.

The plastic bag, hanging eye-high in the air a few feet away, billows, its black-green surface throwing off mid-morning sunlight and crackling in the wind that's keeping it aloft.

I could swear I hear the bag *giggling*.

Which is probably Chef Yang's fault. I'm a little lightheaded, and must be hearing things.

I turn to Big Lizzie Dropkin - my fare, a regular on Tuesday mornings when she goes out for groceries - and I laugh, sort of. It passes for a laugh around here anyways: a terse exhale and sorta whistle through what's left of my upper teeth. It's a city laugh, a what-a-frigging-place, a now-I-seen-it-all kind of chuckle. I drive a cab. I use this laugh a lot.

Big Lizzie's mouth is a dark, cherry-sized hole in a head like a five pound butternut squash. Her mouth makes a small sound back at me.

"Urrlf," it says.

Which is Big Lizzie for you, in a nutshell.

Too old to be as heavy she is, too heavy to be as old she is, and altogether too ignorant to be breathing. Yet here she is, for my viewing displeasure, every Tuesday morning, when she goes out for groceries, a biological attack on my eyes and nostrils.

Big Lizzie's own eyes are too small, too close together, and *wrinkly* in some way I can't quite pin down, like two dark, mean little raisins. She makes my cab smell like old ketchup, and she wears these showy goddamn hats meant to make her look rich when, trust me on this, she ain't. She don't tip well when she tips at all. She asks specifically for me when she calls, but I don't take it personally: it's only because I'm one of two maybe three drivers the company's got that don't look black, latino, Asian, Arabic or Jewish.

"Urrlf" is about the smartest thing I've heard come out of the old bag. On most days, on normal days (normal as things get around here, anyways), if Lizzie's doing the talking, I ain't doing the listening.

Truth be told, though, this is shaping up to be no normal day.

The more I watch the little sidewalk scene to my left, the more it looks to me like the wind ain't making that bag move, like maybe it's the *bag's* doing it on its own, like - get this, now, no shit - like the *bag itself* is swinging at the kid in between his shots, boxing back and cackling like a pervert in a dirty movie house. It's got *technique*, too. The *bag's* got technique, and a sick sense of humor, and it ain't the fucking wind.

The kid, meanwhile, has a bloody nose.

It's gotta be the wind, though.

The wind, for sure, is what's doing it on the opposite side of the street, at the bus stop, where this pretty young black girl in a gray business suit is all of a sudden surrounded by an eight-foot high tornado of maybe three dozen coffee cups, some napkins, a few straws, and some crumpled brown paper fast food bags.

All that trash is suddenly out of the gutter and swirling around in a tight funnel cloud, with the girl in the middle, squealing and trying to slap them away. They swoop in and out, whacking her off her head, her back, her legs. I can hear them smacking off her skull: *thunk thunk*. She steps sideways, backwards, every which way, trying to get out of their path. It ain't working.

A small crowd stands off to one side, backed up and out of the way against the outside of the laundromat. Their eyes are wide and their mouths make shocked ovals. One heavy set guy with a Yankees cap is holding his stomach, laughing. He turns to a friend of his: *can you believe this...*

Big Lizzie touches my right shoulder with one of her meaty, well-manicured paws. A warm, moist finger makes contact with the skin on my neck, which starts crawling away from the sensation as soon as it starts.

“Go,” she whispers, raisin eyes pleading with me in the rearview mirror.

I look up, see that the light is green, and hey, I don’t need to be told twice. Plus the last thing I want is Big Lizzie touching me again. I lean forward, getting her hand off my shoulder, then put my foot on the gas, hard. We’re through the intersection, outta there, on our way.

We’re *moving* now (I’m a cabbie, remember; I got a heavy foot under normal circumstances, never mind *this*), so the scene shrinks fast in my mirror. But it don’t shrink fast enough, and dammit if I can’t turn away: I watch as the woman, still flailing around, staggers backwards into a streetlamp, trips into a trash barrel. She stumbles off the sidewalk and right into the path of a dark green sedan going maybe thirty-five miles an hour.

The car never gets a chance to slow down. Her ragdoll body rolls up, onto, over the windshield. She’s upside down in the air for a second, just above the sedan’s roof, thin legs splayed so she’s writing a little dark “Y” against the sky, then she disappears behind it. I hear screeching tires, crunching metal, car horns.

I look for the Asian kid but can’t find him.

I drive a little faster, which turns out to be maybe not my best idea.

#

I do get a moment to breathe, to stop and think and collect myself, as we move past 6th. That Chinese chicken I ate is trying to get back out the way it came in, rising up into the bottom part of my throat. I breathe in through my nose, out through my mouth a few times. And I don’t even *think* of looking back at Lizzie.

Stifling a belch, it occurs to me that maybe I should call this in, let the other cabbies know something seriously nutcake is up near Washington and 5th. Seek alternate routes and so forth.

So on goes the radio, and right away I find out two things: Everybody else already knows, and it ain’t just Washington and 5th that’s got issues. The airwaves are filling up with screams in six, maybe eight, different languages. It’s tough to make out what’s being said, but I catch snippets, picturing the people I know in my head.

I think I hear Abib's voice first. New driver, from Pakistan, real short and plump, with thin red hair and a thick black moustache. He smiles too much but he seems okay. His taxi's a little further down Washington, around 14th, and he's mixing his English and Pakistani into a godawful mess. He says something about a *running refrigerator*, then something else about *eating*, or maybe *eaten*. There's more but I can't catch it. Most of what I don't understand sounds like a prayer.

I hear Cesar. Good-looking Spanish kid, looks about seventeen, has to turn away women with a stick; he plays poker with us, sometimes, on Wednesday nights, when he can convince his wife to let him out of the house. Cesar's five blocks further down and one street over, on 19th and Jackson. I hear him clearly for a few seconds. He keeps saying "*Dios mio*", and "*imposible*".

Glass breaks in or near somebody's cab, a tinny tinkling sound over the radio. That's followed by a few choice words of gravelly Italian, which can only be good old Vince. The guy's like eighty-six years old, got cancer, diabetes and heart disease but he's still nobody you'd want to mess with. Been driving a cab since they *had* cabs, probably. Vince is into it pretty good with somebody: "*...wanna a fucking piece of me, you little...*"

Our dispatcher is Tanya. Cute kid, but not so bright. We went out once, Tanya and me, but it didn't go so well. I took her to the dog track, turned out she was a vegetarian. She didn't have a good time. Go figure.

Poor Tanya's trying to get somebody, anybody to explain what the hell is going on in a language she can understand. It ain't gonna happen. I could try describing what I saw, but I'm pretty sure no one's gonna hear me. And what the hell would I say anyway? Laughing trash bags and killer coffee cups?

Not to mention, all of a sudden I got problems of my own.

Lizzie and I are crossing 7th Street (I forget myself and glance in the mirror once: that butternut face has gone pasty white and looks nastier than usual, crinkled into some kind of freaky grimace, scared and scary at the same time), when we start seeing newspapers. It's a couple of stray pages blowing through the air at first, so's you'd barely notice; then it's dozens; then all of a sudden it's gotta be hundreds of them, blowing down the sidewalks on both sides like tumbleweeds with a nasty plan.

There's a flagpole outside the Post Office on Seventh. I watch the flag hanging on it. As papers blow by underneath it like it was hurricane season, the flag barely moves.

So much for the wind.

People seem to get the idea that the newspapers ain't there to deliver the Good News: there's a whole lot of stumble-running while looking over the shoulder, and a healthy dose of female screaming, by both guys and ladies. Everyone's moving in the opposite direction that we're headed, back toward 5th Street, the coffee cup storm and the kid with the broken jaw.

Good luck to *you*, I think.

One of the papers – the cover of the real estate section, maybe, I see a picture of a house on the front – wraps itself around the face of a white kid on a bicycle to my right. He takes his hands off the handlebars to rip it off, ends up driving straight into a curb, goes shoulder-first into a fire hydrant.

A couple of doors down, a copy of the local tabloid picks itself up off the pavement, rolls itself up into a tight stick, and starts beating an old Spanish guy over his bald head, like he's a pet who's made a mess on the front stoop.

I can't think straight with all the screaming on the radio, so I turn it off. I don't stop for the red lights on 7th, or on 8th. Get through this, whatever the hell *this* is, I'm telling myself, as fast as you can. Just keep driving. Shortest distance between two points being a straight line.

9th Avenue is the worst.

The air is loaded with trash: newspapers, coffee cups, paper towels, plastic bags, half-smashed radios, banana peels, maxi pads, old pantyhose, you name it. Streams of it are pouring from gutters, shop windows, trash cans, and everywhere in between. It looks like a goddamn ticker tape parade. I can barely see through it. But I see too much.

I see an old record whiz through the air like a Frisbee and hit a little girl in the throat. She makes a surprised, wide-eyed face, clutching at her neck with both hands, then collapses to the ground in a heap.

I see a gang of maybe a half dozen truck tires come bouncing down the sidewalk on the left, trampling a pair of nuns from behind.

I see, on my right, not twenty feet away from the car, an old air conditioner floating about ten feet off the ground, its long gray cord dangling. It's suspended above the head of this young ponytailed guy in a T-shirt and jeans, who's lying on his back on the sidewalk, pinned to the ground by a trash bag around each of his wrists, and screaming.

For the second time today, I'm watching when I should be turning away, and I see the thing drop straight down onto the guy's skull, like whatever spell it was kept it airborne had just been undone. Ponytail's legs kick out, convulse, then stop.

The place sounds like a riot: Breaking glass, honking horns, folks shouting and crying, big stuff smashing. And Big Lizzie, blubbing nonsense in the backseat.

Then it gets personal. Out of nowhere – like, as far as I can tell, the sky - this big green barrel of house trash slams into the hood of the cab. The barrel rolls off, but it leaves a pile of crap behind. A plastic container full of some pasta dish and the contents of a half-empty plastic milk bottle get smeared all over the windshield.

I can't see a damn thing through the mess. I slam on the brakes. My first instinct is to roll down the window, to reach out and pull the stuff off by hand. Something inside me makes me wait for a better idea to come along, and a second later one does: I turn on the windshield wipers, and enough of it gets swept off for me to see.

Now what, I'm asking myself. Forward, backward, where do I go?

Something small and heavy slams into the passenger side door, hard.

Big Lizzie's squealing, a high-pitched squeal like a scared animal, and I can't think straight. I ask her nicely to be quiet, I have to think. Which she doesn't. I tell Lizzie to fucking shut it, as in now, as she is not helping my state of mind. She looks at me in the mirror, little prune eyes squinting. "Please," she mouths. Then her chins, all three of them, start quivering.

Next thing I know my foot is on the gas and we're turning right, tires squealing, into an alley. After the fact, I realize what I'm doing. Lizzie needs to get to the supermarket on Washington and 23rd – I can cut through here and get to the parkway, go around half the city and get back in at 26th. Then I can double back to drop her off. Hopefully whatever's going on don't extend that far. It's a long way, but hey, it's my skin and Big Lizzie's dime, so...

The plan actually works. I whip out of the other end of the alley onto Lincoln, forgetting to even check if anyone's coming, and it's like a different world, the one I'm used to: homeless people lying in the street begging for money, people in business suits talking on cell phones and headsets. Basically, home. We can't see hide nor hair of the madness we just left behind.

Within like three minutes, it gets hard to believe any of it ever even happened.

Even so. I take the rest of the day after dropping old Big Lizzie off. Usually I wait in the parking lot while she does her shopping, but not today – she can find another cab to take her home, preferably one with an unacceptably ethnic driver.

She never pays me on Tuesdays until we're back at her apartment. It's her way of keeping me around. Today, though, I don't care. My cab is half-covered in trash and it reeks of old ketchup and the world is ending. So what's a few bucks.

I drive back to my apartment, leave the cab parked out front, get upstairs, take a few aspirin, and lie down with my shades pulled. I listen to the radio. I wanna find out what's being reported about what I just saw, and heard. I wanna hear someone explain it.

I hear nothing.

I'm fresh off playing eyewitness to what had to be a sign of some apocalypse or other, and the radio stations think it's a slow news day. They keep playing clips of a speech given by the new mayor – Mr. Law and Order, Mr. Quick Results, creepy Mr. Splendid White Teeth and Motionless Hair - at some event kicking off his First Major Initiative, a comprehensive sanitation plan for the city. They play snippets of interviews with people on the street, people just falling over themselves to gush over the plan, whatever it is. People saying how creative it is, how effective it is, how they can't wait to see how he follows through on his promise to stop people smoking in the city. And then there's the issue of crime.

I fall asleep to this crap, never once hearing anything about what went down. I don't even hear an accident report on the green sedan and the businesswoman.

#

The next morning, I'm up, and out of bed, and getting ready for work like usual, before I give myself much of a chance to even think. I live in this city. You roll with things here. You rationalize the irrational and you normalize the abnormal and you laugh at the tragic (terse exhales through your teeth) and you get by. It's a skill you learn. Some of us better than others.

I don't know how other folks are dealing, but I'm chalking up the weirdest part of my memories of the previous day to a case of food poisoning, thinking maybe the chicken from Chef Yang's I had for breakfast wasn't so good. It would serve me right. I know I should never eat Chinese before noon. Every once in a while I need to be reminded. I consider myself reminded, and lock my apartment door on the way out.

My cab is clean, like someone washed and waxed it by hand overnight. I don't smell trash. I don't even smell ketchup. Bad chicken, I think to myself, and get in.

When I get driving, I start to feel good, almost, or maybe not so bad. A little bit normal, a little bit not. My hands are shaking, but not so's anyone else would notice. I put my window down, turn on some tunes, breathe. It helps that the weather is as good as it gets: blue sky, bright sun, and a fresh breeze in the air that feels almost like the ocean.

I stop by the station. Tanya's big hair is a mess and she's got dark circles under her eyes, but she smiles at me when I come inside. Cesar's got a big white bandage wrapped around his forehead and Vince is nowhere to be found, but Abib slaps me on the back and gives me a big Pakistani good morning.

No one says nothing about me not bringing the cab back last night. No one says nothing about anything else that happened yesterday, either, which is fine with me. Past is past, I say. And bad chicken.

"My place for poker tonight," I half-ask everybody just before leaving. I get a couple of grunts in the affirmative from a few guys still finishing their coffees. Cesar mutters something about checking with his wife.

The day goes fast. I spend most of the time carting people to and from the airport. Everything's fine, normal as normal gets, until around two in the afternoon, when this young couple carrying easels and paint ask me to take them to the art school on the corner of Washington and 13th. I forget the name of the school but I know the place, bunch of freaks with whacked hair and funky get-ups standing outside all the time, smoking butts and who knew what else.

Sure, I say, hop in. I don't think they hear me gulp.

My stomach's only a little queasy on the way there. I've seen worse, I keep telling myself, I'm *from* this goddamn city. But the closer I get, the more I wonder what might be left of the freak show I saw the day before. I drive a little slower than usual, maybe, but not so's you'd notice.

We finally pull up to the traffic light on Washington and 5th, where the Asian kid squared off with the trash bag.

Turns out all my worrying was for nothing.

It's just a typical day: people milling around outside the Korean store, people waiting at the bus stop, people walking back and forth aimlessly, far as I can tell. People being people. I even see

the fat guy in the Yankees cap. He's waving his arms and talking on his cell phone, in the same spot he was yesterday.

I don't see the Asian kid, or the woman who took the header over the roof of the green sedan, or the bike rider or the nuns or the little girl holding her throat. I don't see ponytail getting his head smashed in by a falling appliance. I also don't see any trash. There's none anywhere in sight: no wrappers, cups, papers, bottles, nada. The sidewalks and gutters look white and swept and pure, like the floors of a nice hospital.

I watch a kid come out of the convenience store with some kind of snack on a stick. He peels off the wrapper, goes out of his way to toss it into a barrel, and goes on his way.

It's like this all the way down Washington: business as usual, without all the trash. Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, even Ninth. I see not one speck of rubbish, anywhere, in the neighborhood. Not one, I'm telling you.

When we get to the Art School, no one is hanging around smoking. There's just this one guy outside the building: older, short, with a goatee and glasses and a sportcoat, looks like a professor. He's pacing back and forth in front of the entrance to the school with a sandwich board over his shoulders. One side of it reads, in big blue, block print:

*Our streets
are better free
than clean*

On the other side it says:

*Preserve the Separation
Of Magic and State*

"Nutcake," I mutter, rolling my eyes. The kids laugh in agreement as they spill out of the backseat. "It takes all kinds," I say as the boy hands me a wad of crumpled bills. He smiles and nods.

"No shit."

After I've dropped them off, Tanya gives me my next fare: some guy at the Science Museum wants to go to the Aquarium. He's gotta be a tourist. On my way there, I get to thinking about which way I'll take him. Has to be windy enough to ratchet up the price, but not too much so he starts squawking. The Asian kid, and the businesswoman, and the Spanish guy getting whapped by his newspaper, they don't occur to me much after that. Like I said, bad chicken. It had to be the chicken. Or maybe the wind.

I turn on the radio, sit back, start to feel relaxed, really good now, for the first time in a couple of days. I gotta admit, too: I'm starting to like this new mayor. This sanitation program he's got, whatever it is, is working like a charm.

I never seen this place looking so goddamn clean.

Love,

D Y L