

TWOLVEHERN

an Anne Theology

by Charlotte V Sebastian

This is a work of nonfiction. Any resemblance of the characters, place and events to imaginary entities, while intentional, is just a ruse. Also, if paying close attention isn't your thing, this won't be, either.

“I must draw an analogy between the criminal and the hysteric. In both we are concerned with a secret, with something hidden...In the case of the criminal it is something he knows and hides from you, whereas in the case of the hysteric it is a secret which he himself does not know either, which is hidden even from himself...In this one respect, therefore, the difference between the criminal and the hysteric is fundamental. The task of the therapist, however, is the same as that of the examining magistrate. We have to uncover the hidden psychic material...”

Sigmund Freud, discussing the similarities and differences
between detective work and psychoanalysis
before a legal audience in 1906

“For those who have experienced abuse, [art expression] is one way to ‘tell without talking’ when they are unable or afraid to speak about specific events or feelings.”

psychologytoday.com

“A better analogy for the process of literary analysis is detective work. In detective fiction or real-world casework, the detective is given a text – the scene of a crime, the notice of a missing person. The initial scene is merely the surface of a much fuller story whose meaning is not yet understood. The detective then breaks the scene apart, carefully examining each detail and seeking more contextual information in order to uncover the meanings – motivations, consequences, even conclusions about human behaviour or the nature of justice – within the case.”

Kusch, Celena. *Literary Analysis: The Basics*. Routledge, 2016

—

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

Mark 4:34

Good luck.

The first book proposes first, in brief, the whole subject. Man's disobedience and the loss thereupon of Paradise wherein he was placed, then touches the prime cause of his fall. The serpent, or rather Satan in the serpent, who revolting from God and drawing to his side many legions of angels was by the command of God driven out of heaven with all his crew into the great deep. Which action passed over, the poem hastes into the midst of things, presenting Satan with his angels now fallen into Hell – described here, not in the center (for Heaven and Earth may be supposed as yet not made, certainly not yet accursed) but in a place of utter darkness fittest called chaos. Here, Satan with his angels lying on the burning lake, thunder-struck and astonished, after a certain space recovers, as from confusion, calls up him who next in order and dignity lay by him. They confer of their miserable fall. Satan awakens all his legions, who lay till then in the same manner confounded. They rise: their numbers, array of battle, their chief leaders named, according to the idols known afterwards in Canaan and the countries adjoining. To these Satan directs his speech, comforts them with hope yet of regaining Heaven, but tells them lastly of a new world and a new kind of creature to be created, according to an ancient prophecy or report in Heaven.

Paradise Lost, by John Milton

Book One

“The Argument”

Time's Marrow

Chapter I: The Stranger

On January 28, 1959, two young women and eight men set out for a cross-country skiing expedition in the northern Ural Mountains. One member of the group, a twenty-one-year-old named Yuri Yudin, grew ill very early on and turned around. Neither he nor anyone else ever saw any of the other hikers alive again.

Allegedly.

On February 26th, two weeks after they were scheduled to have returned, a search party found their abandoned tent. It was buried in snow on the shoulder of a mountain known to the local, indigenous Mansi tribe as Kholat Syakhl, or "mountain of the dead". This seemed an odd place to take up camp for a group of hikers as experienced as the nine missing people were known to be.

Artifacts from their camp site were collected, and over the course of several months, their bodies were found as well. Some died of hypothermia, but several had injuries more gruesome. The body of 20-year-old Lyudmila Dubinina, for instance, was missing her eyeballs and tongue. Other trauma in evidence among her fellow hikers included a bashed skull, broken ribs, and serious head wounds.

Evidence, including a slash in the tent, footprints, and the recovered journals of the hikers themselves, indicated that on the night of February 2nd, the hikers inexplicably cut open their tent from the inside with a knife and fled into the frigid, icy night, some of them in socks or bare feet.

This too seemed an odd thing to do. For anyone.

The bizarre, unexplained circumstances surrounding their disappearance and death have mystified historians and scientists for decades. There are many more theories than there were hikers in that ill-fated group. UFOs, yetis, covert government experiments, some kind of localized nuclear incident; if can you imagine a wild possibility, it has likely been suggested as the cause of the tragedy, along with more mundane solutions like avalanches or an unfriendly encounter with people native to the area.

But I know what really happened. The gory details. Because I was there. In the tent with them. Whispering into their ears and driving them mad. They were more frightened of me than of the night or the ice or wild animals or anything else.

I am good at what I do.

And after they dispersed, panicked, into the black wilderness I killed them. Some of them. Others I let the cold have.

Regardless of their cause of death, as each young person departed, I consumed What was leaving them before It could be restored to the Pool and Redistributed. I ate each person's Essence, you see. I absorbed what you might call their chi, or ka. Or soul, if you must.

And as a result I grew stronger, and wiser.

The last face each of those hikers saw was mine. It is not a face I show to many. If you see it, you can't tattle.

But I have been led to believe that the time has come for me to show that face to a wider audience.

There are things you all must now learn.

My name is Taylor Newbury.

I diligently recycle even when no one is looking because I love nature, not because it's the law, and I am an exceedingly polite driver. At work I don't curry favor with superiors and often defer credit that I deserve. I rarely swear except when in a room by myself or in my own head, where I often swear like a drunken sailor. I like hugs and weighted blankets and I volunteer at a hospital because I feel it is important to give back. I'm quite boring, really, aside from the one quirk that compels me to indulge in escapades like the above-described massacre.

I have become absolutely addicted to the experience of merging the souls of other humans with my own. It feels nice and I can't stop. This may sound awful to uninitiated ears. But I am not nearly as bad as you might be thinking. Some time ago I found a way, with some help, to use my talents for the betterment of others.

And I only kill people who are already dead.

Let me explain.

"twolvehern"

A soft rasp, barely audible. The lazy black-winged creature's lupine head tilts ever so slightly to one side.

But it does not look up from its spot on the couch to see who it is that has spoken.

It continues instead to curl itself into a ball at one end and feign sleep.

This (it seems) is the way of the singular shadow.

Then, from somewhere, again:

"twolvehern"

A fist unclenches. Lips twist and Teeth grind. Television light flickers late night infomercial absurdities around the room: the walls, the ceiling, the floor.

The not-doing beast fumbles for the remote. Knocks an empty beer can off a dirty fold-up table before finding it. So much for subtle. It presses the mute button. And waits.

more: *"solvent"*

"solve it"

"breathe"

Grunting, burdened, the creature slowly unfurls itself, sits up something close to straight, blinks, scans its surroundings.

Nothing is there is nothing. Both palindrome and tautology. I am alone, it thinks. I has always been alone. This is the way.

But now, today, suddenly, this voice. An altered circumstance. It ponders visions.

A pack of eight delicious romping canines lit by a curved and biting, brilliant moon. Orange flames exploding from a narrow, rusty cylinder. The smell of kindness and distortion.

Our wolf-bird becomes suddenly, acutely aware of the sensation of red rivers coursing strong through the highways beneath its skin.

"twolvehern"

Insistent. It gives her that. Heart-shaped faces. Shrieking and ululation. *Casualty*. Which is...

Huh. Wouldn't you know. What it's always wanted. What it hunted once but not again.

Every failure, you see, required a change of objectives.

There must be no repeated mistakes.

Aside, that is, from the one mistake it repeats over and over.

The one that hurts.

The ever leaving. Always going. Not returning.

Abandoned early, and contaminated, it abandons often. And utterly. It abandoned them all with (one might rightly say) abandonment. It abandoned everything.

The Never-There buries its hairy face in a pair of warm, moist palms and groans.

#

Later, in the same room.

Trembling fingers. Poised over a keyboard.

Inspiration (a dare, maybe) in the form of a photo (a guitar-toting entirely electric auburn-haired t-shirt wearing monstrosity) occupies part of the computer screen. For the better than dozenth time, the shadow reads the paragraph it has fashioned, which occupies the rest.

Like a sculpture it has carved and pruned and smoothed the verbiage.

It will never be satisfied with the results, and it knows this, but likes to pretend that it is possible. This is a game it plays. A strange breed of solitaire. Reading and re-reading.

At one point it sighs abruptly, very nearly deleting the passage and closing the laptop.

It contemplates hitting the Enter key, sending the message. Among the problems with doing so is the fact that while the dark-winged creature believes fully in miracles, it rejects even the remotest possibility of a happy ending. The natural result of it having witnessed the former on multiple occasions but never (despite paying careful attention) anything approaching the latter.

Despite what some may say (and do), this mindset is not correctly described as an "attitude". Just statistics and probability. Facts were facts, and the more it sought beauty the more it felt their pain. The first thing. To the extent there was one.

Which, it has increasingly begun to suspect, may be in large part its own fault. It, after all, seemed to be the one with the ideas.

Hope is costly, it observes for the many more than hundredth time. While despair is cheap and certain.

It sits back and wouldn't you know, it thinks.

#

It remembers.

Hours of watching on-screen horrors. Young women surrounded by men who laugh and jeer and whose only remotely creative urges involve means of humiliation.

Picture one. Some nondescript room with a mostly naked girl on the floor on a checkered blanket. The malevolent joy in the fuckers' faces. The confusing, inexplicable, poisoned thrill you felt watching. The crushing guilt after.

Picture it. Change the scene. Behind the fuckers, a door opens. Something enters the room. Something dark, with glittering eyes. And wings.

A phrase from a story it read once occurs to you now.

The war-mongering lords...

And so, inevitably, come talons and fangs and straight-edged razors. And screams. Alleged men made womanly now through terror and pain, scrambling for cover, instantaneously gone limp, pleading for a mercy that is not forthcoming.

Severed appendages and filled orifices. Slashing and snarling and bites. And over and over again, a question, a taunt asked through a wolfish mask.

"How do *you* like it?"

It takes longer than maybe it should. But he forgives himself for that. It's about suffering, after all, not extermination. It's about *empathy*.

When it's over, he checks on the child. Covered in crimson spatter but otherwise unharmed. Scared and trembling. He hands her a sheet to cover herself.

She is too shocked to speak, still unsure if he is a threat. The creature is still unsure himself. Was this the right thing? For reasons that are not his fault, he has difficulty ascertaining the difference between atrocity and play.

He studies her face for insight. A futile gesture. There is none there to be had. Until he blinks, that is, and it is no longer an anonymous girl he sees on the floor but suddenly, now, you. A winged wolf owlish whale of a gray-haired woe-man, helpless and bloodied, surrounded by the ravaged carcasses of victims and perpetrators alike, gazing up at a would-be rescuer in mutual, perpetual, silent confusion.

Shortly thereafter, having done what he has done, as not-knowing as ever, the creature does what he does better than anyone.

He leaves.

#

Back in the tv room, where things purport to be “real”, the thought of an *actual banshee* beckons. An undreamable dream. A maybe cure for what ails it. The prospects are remote, yes, but no longer thanks to the whispers quite unthinkable. Not quite an exact zero.

The singer. Operatic and thunderous and shrill. And, quite possibly, sincerely final.

Gameless, though. Without the clever required to slip off the jeans and pry open that grin for consensual entertainment. A long time away from a job he'd never mastered in the first place.

The creature frowns in pensive reflection. Its eyebrows wrinkle into belligerent seagulls.

It's these fucking feathers, it concludes. Realizes. The ones clinging stubbornly to leather wings that no longer require them for flight. For anything. They are less than decoration now. Vestiges of a childhood dressed like a little lord, like a fucking pansied sailor, a goddamned chip off the old block, and made to dance on street corners like a jester without a court to a tuneless melody played by a fat and complete buffoon.

He takes in the wasteland of half a century of servitude to a broken, mistaken ideal. A windblown, barren desert. Sand roasting in a setting sun. At last

I understand?, asks the first man. Adam. Ishmael. Christ. Lightbearer.

and then opens a holyunholy mouth.

#

It swallows the pills four and five at a time.

One for each feather, give or take. More or less. So, hundreds. More than it would have guessed.

It takes them with filtered water. Glass after glass. I'll need to piss soon, it thinks. Wonder if I'll make it to the bathroom. Don't care, though. At least there's that.

After taking its medicine, before things kick in, it designs an ending. The very last face. The voice he will hear speaking on the way out to elsewhere. Whose would it be? He is a creature accustomed to endless deliberation, his mind a perpetually hung jury on matters big and small. But this choice doesn't take long. Because he's already made it (without knowing). Before, when darkness settled like a slow-moving storm and he waited each moment to breathe his last free breath, he went to a place one night. Walked into a river until his head was nearly submerged, and just as the last of his face went under he gasped a syllable. The beginning of a name. Invoking (without knowing) an almost picnic that happened once in Rhode Island. He'd just saved her (and his toddler son) from a crazy farmer with a missing finger who had cornered her in a shed. A morsel of heroism in a coward's life.

Later they sat on soft grass and talked softly. Nothing before or since had compared.

Or was that grass a ping pong table in Hull? Or a game of cards? Or a girl?

So, the last face. The treasured memory to hold onto instead of a gun. So much easier than he suspected. Simpler. Logical. He'd never won a game of Clue until this one. Another unreachable, of course, another heaping of cruelty shoved down his throat, but at least now, at the end, he knows. For whatever that's worth.

He opens his mouth wider to utter their name(s).

misschief

The sun has only just begun to rise by the time the woman chances upon the clump of white feathers on the beach, and the only other people in sight are two distant figures holding hands at the water's edge.

Why the wind hasn't scattered the feathers yet is a question.

But the woman...oh, the woman. Perhaps she's the answer.

She makes quite an impression, with her unkempt mane of frizzy copper hair; her bronze skin and darting, mismatched eyes; the feral, scymian way she lopes barefoot across the sand in cutoff blue jean shorts and a white t-shirt with a decal on it too faded and cracked to read.

Like an animal suspecting a trap, she cautiously approaches the bird's remains and stands for a moment looking down at the mess before nodding. She kneels and plucks a single feather from the pile, then springs quickly to her feet and scurries away.

Her departure from the scene is fast, anxious and furtive, and she glances nervously behind her, as if she has partaken of something to which she is not entitled.

The woman will bring the feather home and spend much of her afternoon sharpening its hollow point by grinding it against a stone from her garden.

Later on she will sit in a white chair at her kitchen table and she will lay her right arm flat on the dark wood in front of her, palm facing up. Holding the feather in her left hand, she will press its tip against the soft skin on the underside of her forearm. She will increase the pressure, pushing harder and harder with the feather, slowly and deliberately forcing the quill into herself, puncturing her flesh with it and easing it inside. Blood will trickle from the hole she has made, a thin stream of rich red liquid that rolls down the side of her arm and onto the table. She will wince, gasp, gnaw on her lip as she continues to jab herself with the implement, transforming the nature of the procedure from a simple injection into a full-fledged excavation, driving the feather deeper in, digging with it, until at last she withdraws it and takes a moment to admire the glorious ink now covering much of the shaft.

There will be an open notebook on the table in front of her. Its pages will be white and eager and blank.

Its pages will be white. And eager. And blank.

Her forearm will be on fire, and her newly fashioned wound will be beauty itself: glistening and crimson and dark.

"Thank you, dead bird," the wild woman will whisper as finally, she begins to write.

[Researcher's note: The subject is known to have made at least a couple of attempts to locate someone described in the canon only as "tinker bell" (or alternately, "tinkerbelle"), in the form of two stories sharing essentially the same setting and themes, and many characters, but differing a bit on plot and having different protagonists at least in name. He apparently never completed either version; either that, or the completed story has been lost. Each of the available fragments is considered to be illuminating however in light of other discoveries, so both are included here.]

whatever happened to tinkerbelle: draft fragment 1

"Dawson?"

"Dead."

"Spooner?"

"Deader."

"Carroll, then. Or Jacobs..."

"Just as dead. Both of 'em."

"Huh."

"All of 'em, everybody you named. Dead."

"Oh."

"Dead as shit."

"Okay."

"Deader than fuck."

"Okay."

"Dead as..."

"I said okay already."

"Doornails."

"Did I not say okay!"

The soldier Ronnie Vegas knew only as Toad wrinkled his face into an amphibian frown. Color-burned jungle light cast every crease, cranny and polyp on his fascinatingly grotesque face into exquisite relief. Squatting in a thick patch of blue underbrush with only his helmeted head and narrow sloping shoulders showing, Toad grunted, shifted his weight, and moaned.

Vegas grimaced at the sound of another wave of the man's diarrhea hitting the damp jungle earth. He swatted at the air above his head; flies had already begun to gather.

"How 'bout Washington, then?," Toad asked through gritted teeth, an overworked vein pulsing irregularly at one temple. "Where's Washington? He ain't dead."

"Is too," said the soldier they now called Mars. Mars was planetary: huge and round and red. He lay on his broad back on a patch, reddish deli fingers locked behind his utterly bald, perfectly globular head, staring up with gelid blue eyes at the unpunctured green canopy above them. He was gnawing on a broad flat leaf, which he periodically snatched from his mouth as if it was too bitter, then replaced.

"Washington, I said," grunted Toad.

"And I said: Dead. Choked on Lewiston's toe last Friday. You remember that," said Mars.

"Friday?," Ricky Shivers chirped from across the clearing. He had his back up against the gleaming trunk of one of the unnaturally smooth, onyx trees this part of the jungle was filled with, and an old comic book unfolded across his lanky knees. A purplish fly the size of a big man's finger nail clung unmolested to a fold of potato-colored skin above his left eye, rubbing its forelegs together as if trying to start a fire. "Friday, hey? Novel concept, days of the week. Night, day, all that shit. I remembered it once, too. No Fridays here, though, gents. Everybody's working for the weekend, ha." Shivers made a vague hand gesture, and trembled like a wet dog for a moment.

"Ay, Dios Mio," he whispered to no one in particular, returning his attention to the comic book. "This Red Sonja woman. Caramba. TGIF. Yikes."

"Yep. Big dumbass Lewiston sitting on a log clipping those nasty toenails of his," Mars drawled. He nibbled another small piece off the leaf in his mouth and grimaced. "Shell came in, musta landed right in front of him. Special delivery, ding dong boom. Washington heard it incoming, he was hollering for everybody to get down, next thing Lewiston's in a thousand pieces, one of which flies into Washington's mouth and that big asshole's done hollering for good."

"Just before the weekend, too," added Shivers, quivering and flipping a page.

"Criminy," gasped Toad. Another wrenching tide passed through him and onto the leaves. He groaned pathetically.

"You remember it," Mars said.

"Uh uh. Can't says I do..."

"You remember. Sure you do," Mars said without emotion. "You and Spooner and Lewis fished the thing out of Washington's throat with Spooner's pocket knife. You took it out, had it skewered like a shish-ka-bob, and later Lewis made a necklace out of it. It was you and Lewis and Spooner."

"Criminy. His friggin toe?"

Mars rolled over onto his side and coughed.

"Criminy, then," Toad muttered. "I mean, no shit."

"You remember," Mars said softly.

"No I don't. Really I don't think I -"

"Oh yes you -"

"Do."

#

Private Ronnie Vegas sat cross-legged on the damp earth, the third point on a tight equilateral triangle formed by the crapping Toad and the prone Mars, trying not to inhale the fumes from Toad's toxic excretions while feeling distinctly unwell himself.

His always asthmatic breathing was bad today, each exhalation a nasty wheeze like an old motor trying to start, and somewhere along the line he'd developed a squint he couldn't shake. This despite the fact that the sun had hardly pierced the cover of jungle trees above them for days.

He had just removed his helmet, and an unruly mop of sweat-dampened orange hair clung to the top of his head like some multi-pedal parasite. His narrow eyes floated in a sea of absurdly large freckles.

Like big fucking polka dots, Sergeant Pollard had liked to say of the freckles. Color them in with Magic Markers and play Twister, he would say, then shake his head and chuckle. Pollard had been a rubber-faced man, old for a grunt. Vegas had liked him. Pollard had been killed with Crayfish and Shaw, two days ago. Or was it three? Shit, it could have been a month, an hour, who the hell knew. The point was that something big had come stomping out of the trees one morning and then three more men were gone and no one had even seen what it was and no one mentioned the polka dots anymore.

Vegas had been scouting that day. He had been up ahead of the platoon and hadn't been there to see what happened. He had no memory of it, just the stories his fellow soldiers passed around, which over time became almost as good, flawed for sure but no less vivid for it.

Vegas *had* seen what happened to Lewiston, though. And it wasn't a shell that fell in front of the big Southerner like Mars said, though that was the way the story went. The stories were OK, but they were approximations. And even here, even among the members of Tom Company, propaganda slipped in.

The truth was this:

Vegas had gone off into the woods alone for a bath. He had stumbled onto a creek full of brackish green water that looked nasty but was cool to the touch. The water looked sick, vaguely radioactive, but the jungle fug had seemed to be blocking every pore in his body for

days, not allowing him to breathe properly, and he had been desperate to wash it off. So he had taken off his clothes and bathed in it. It had tingled on his skin like Pop Rocks, which was worrisome on one level but pleasant on another.

On his way back to camp, as he came around the last bend in the path he had hacked on the way down, he heard sizzling in the air overhead, like frying bacon. He glimpsed the broad olive expanse of Washington's uniformed back ahead of him. Then he looked up, and he saw what it was that came for Lewiston. It was not a shell, although it moved so quickly that if you didn't have the angle he had, you could have been forgiven for thinking that it was.

But he had never heard of a shell with eyes.

Eyes and a wide, leering grin and a vaguely humanoid body of orange fire. That was what Vegas remembered, like it was the spirit of the flame of the world's biggest candle plummeting from the peak of an arcing leap through the leaves towards Lewiston. Vegas opened his mouth to yell even before Washington did, but his throat had gone dry and only a hoarse whisper came out. He heard Washington say something, saw Lewiston start to look up, his big Southern face with its handlebar moustache looking godawful stupid, as dumb a man as he had ever seen, sitting there on the log holding his big bare foot with one hand and the clippers in the other while a creature made of hot death was coming right for him. Then whatever it was hit the earth right in front of Lewiston and the jungle was rocked by an explosion that propelled Vegas ten feet back down the path where he'd come from. He fell onto his stomach. The air left him. He laid there for a while, showered with kicked-up dirt and pebbles, waiting for another explosion that didn't come, and checking his own body for missing parts. Near as he could tell there were none.

By the time he got back to the spot he had been occupying when the fiery thing arrived, Toad and Spooner and Lewis were bent over Washington like a band of disorganized ER physicians, yelling instructions at one another and swearing. Their six arms moved up and down. It looked like they were sewing. In the smoky air and with the other men blocking his line of sight, all Vegas could see of Washington was one of the man's size fourteen boots, twitching as if being given a mild electric shock. There was nothing left of Lewiston, or the log he had been sitting on.

The air smelled like a summer cookout: hot, smoky, meaty.

People were yelling off to the left. Shots were being fired. On impulse Vegas drew his gun and fired too, first at the canopy of tree where the fire thing had come from, then at random points in the jungle. He glared at it and pulled the trigger: the impossible jungle that had been picking them off one by two by three for weeks. Leaves broke in the path of his bullets. Something broke inside him, softly, and he heard hissing like the release of gas inside his ears. He grinned fiercely.

"Okay," he said. Then he said it again, as if testing a new voice. "Okay."

He nodded and bared his teeth. Humming *Yankee Doodle*, he skipped back down the path to the creek and emptied his machine gun into its green water, the bullets kicking up miniature mushroom clouds.

“Doo daa, doo daa,” he sang, and laughed, and reloaded, and fired some more.

“Okay,” Ronnie Vegas said, and shot the water dead.

#

The variety of bugs in the jungle was endless. Multi-legged, flying things the size of big men’s hands; bulbous-eyed tree worms thick as snakes, with skin like an elephant’s hide and mandibles you could hear clacking in the distant night; small biting whirring things they would feel and hear but never see.

The soldier’s bodies were covered in nasty welts and bites that spurted blood and puss like tiny volcanoes. They itched and hurt and itched.

The insects descended like a plague upon the soldiers each day shortly after sunrise, but always disappeared at night. Where exactly they went was a matter of much speculation among the men and women of Tom Company. Caves, hives, nests, the sky, hell. All were options. None were true.

Incredible as it was for Ronnie Vegas to believe, he had to face facts: the bugs existed only in the soldiers’ minds.

Each species was a figment of someone’s imagination. An imagination that, thanks to the United States Army, the men and women of Tom Company now shared quite intimately.

The aim had been, as near as Vegas could gather, to create a network, a closed microcosm of the collective unconscious through which commands, intelligence, coordinates, and assorted other tidbits of data could travel, without fear of interception or modification.

The mechanism was conceptually simple, but hopelessly complicated in its actuality: a squadron of nanobots swimming in an amber-colored ‘vaccine’ the soldiers had been required to accept, each built for a single specific task, all working in unison.

Once injected into the soldier, the bots used microscopic probosces like cilia to paddle their way through the tunnels of their host’s bloodstream. Within three hours, they reached the soldier’s brain, where they set up camp and went to work.

There were recorder bots, several types of them, each designed especially for monitoring the activity of a certain part of the soldier’s brain.

The recorders reported this activity to the transmitter bots, which sent instantaneous, pulsing signals to receiver bots in the other soldiers’ brains, which in turn instructed the stimulator bots to generate activity in the appropriate section of their host’s brain. In this way, those thoughts the Army believed appropriate for soldiers to share were in fact shared by everyone in the company.

There was something beautiful about it, the way it brought everyone together, the closeness it encouraged; not to mention the logistical advantages it offered.

The problem was, Ronnie Vegas had thought on more than one occasion, it was a new technology. And as with any new technology, there were bugs.

#

The next day he killed Peter Pan. Shot the little dude right out of the air as he streaked across the sky of a patch of Never-Never Land the platoon had stumbled into. Like shooting skeet, it was. “Pull.” Bang. The brown-haired thing in bright green tights drops, fluttering like a knuckleball, to the ground. Thud, and the thing breaks.

Peter fucking Pan, if you could believe it.

Private Ginny Baker, First Class, one of their two remaining snipers, disposed of Captain Hook with a bullet to the forehead from eighty-five yards during the same skirmish. The Lost Boys got scattered and picked off early; a bunch of them were tossed like a salad by someone’s grenade. It was a slaughter; the only offense from the Neverlanders came from Tinker Bell’s fearless dive bombing. Fairy dust in the troops’ faces; Spooner screaming and gouging at his eyes and vomiting blood, his mouth spouting red into the air like a fountain cherub.

Vegas never saw what happened to Tinker Bell. He only knew that at some point it had stopped. The killing and the fairy dust, the whole thing. He assumed someone had killed her. Everyone else from the story, it seemed, was dead.

Later, he found Penny Loafer stepping out of some underbrush, zipping up his pants. Loafer gave Vegas a wink and gestured over his shoulder with his thumb.

“Your turn,” he giggled, slapping Vegas heartily on the shoulder as he passed. He nearly tripped over one of Hook’s henchmen, a patch-eyed pirate with a blue bandana and a red and white striped shirt who was face down in a puddle of brown-red blood.

“Fucking Viet Cong,” Penny Loafer muttered, and kicked the guy.

#

Later that night, Crenshaw started awake from sleep and called for Doc McCrary. Vegas was on guard duty and he couldn’t tell where Crenshaw was yelling from, but he could hear him, like some small hurt animal screeching in the darkness.

“It’s hapnin’ agin, Doc. Doc? Please? It’s hapnin’ oh Christ here it comes agin please...”

They were camped by a narrow black creek lined on both sides with low-lying plush greenery, nineteen men and three women, all that was left of an infantry regiment that had been eighty-five strong not two weeks earlier. Though the conflict in which they were involved was not called a war, a war it was, and it had been a long war already, and the jungle they had

fought this war in for a week had been cruel. Even now, at night, the thick air stifled. Inhaling was like breathing in through a heavy, sweat-soaked towel, and exhaling burned, and some undefinable pressure of the jungle squeezed them, fist-like and earthy and damp, from all sides. The bugs were organized and beefy and traveled in packs, more animal than insect. And there were plenty of other things to worry about: stinging birds with lavender wings and arm-thick millipedes with mandibles you could hear clicking in the night and who knew what else, creeping, crawling, buzzing around them, always.

Not to mention their enemy, who was out there, somewhere, or so they presumed, and who seemed to have more forms and weapons than the jungle had trees.

The men and women of the platoon had no idea where they were. They had no sense of mission beyond a single truism: Kill or Be Killed. Their global positioning equipment had long since stopped working and they were wandering with only the most occasional glance at the sun to guide them. They had not been adequately prepared for their circumstance. Where they had entered the jungle it had not been jungle at all, but a few acres of simple woodlands in and around the small city of Norton, Rhode Island. Within hours of hiking through a land full of evergreens and wide man-made paths that rose gradually toward the top of what amounted to a big hill, however, they were someplace else entirely, though none of them could say where, or how they'd gotten there. Vegas had already calculated roughly the amount of distance they'd traveled, and unless they'd been moving in a tight circle all the while, they should already be out of Rhode Island, either in Connecticut, Massachusetts, or the Atlantic ocean, and it was clear they were in none of these places. It was someplace else entirely. That was certain.

They were all sick, in one way or another. Toad had his perpetual dysentery and Mars had a cough and Vegas' breathing was beyond asthmatic. Penny Loafer had an infected toe and Shivers couldn't stop shaking and the guy they called Bogart's face had gone the color of ash the day before yesterday and hadn't changed back. Even Doc McCrary's forehead looked a bit clammy.

None of them were sick like Crenshaw, though.

Crenshaw had something Special.

Some of his fellow warriors wanted it, others feared it even more than the jungle and the war and the bugs and whatever they had been sent to fight. No one understood Crenshaw's affliction, but Doc was the one with the theories.

"A bite," she'd explained the other day, scooping the last morsel of mush from a can of their rapidly dwindling rations. "He has a circular marking on the inside of his thigh, right here. The interior contains two tiny puncture wounds, needle thin. Right around the wounds the flesh is white and slightly raised, and the circle is like a red halo." She put down her can, wiped her small mouth, nodded. "A spider bite's the most likely."

"No offense," mumbled Shivers through a mouthful of canned peach. His teeth still somehow managed to chatter. "But how's a spider bite make *time* slow down?"

Avalon McCrary wrinkled up her broad flat nose. She blinked slowly. Her hair was a wild bramble of frizzy brown growth around a perfectly round face. Vegas always got the impression that if he ever ran a hand through that hair it would come away covered in burrs. He did think about running a hand through that hair every now and then, too, in the same way he'd thought about the nuns at St. Joseph's Elementary when he was a kid. Doc McCrary was neither pretty nor ugly; she was asexual in the way that his schoolteacher nuns had been.

"It's just a theory," Doc McCrary explained. "A hypothesis, really, and a half-baked one at that. But bug bites are known to cause heart complications. And I think Crenshaw's problems ultimately stem from an arrhythmia..."

"Something wrong with his *ticker*," mumbled Bogart weakly.
Someone snorted.

[This is the end of draft fragment 1]

whatever happened to tinker bell: draft fragment 2

On the morning before the day he killed Jesus, Private First Class Paul Cubbage awoke on a soft bed of sand along the banks of a stagnant yellow river. The sleeping bag he had wriggled out of during the night lay crumpled like the shedded olive skin of some implausibly corpulent snake at his feet.

Cubbage tried unsuccessfully to mutter something to himself, prying his dry lips apart with care, so as not to tear the already blistered flesh any worse. He propped himself up on his elbows and barked once, sharply. The back of his throat burned. He ran a furry tongue over the inside of a mouth swollen with jungle stink: a damp, mossy, sticky film that tasted of dirty coins and rotten vegetation. He coughed again. The pain in his throat flared up badly enough to make his eyes water, then subsided. His tongue found something that felt like an old piece of chewing gum in the back of his mouth, packed away into the space between his molars and his own gums on the left side. He tried to remember where the gum might have come from, but could not. Whatever. There was plenty he could not remember. The chewing gum was a hard, small, tasteless pebble now. It was the least of his worries.

He reached into his mouth, grasped the gum with his forefinger and thumb. He pulled it out and regarded it, turning it this way and that like a jeweler evaluating the worth of a pearl. It was covered in yellowish phlegm. Underneath the phlegm, the gum itself was gray. Any hope of identifying the brand, or even the original flavor, was now officially

"Dead," said Cubbage, and almost laughed at the sound of his own voice. He tossed the gum in the general direction of the river.

“Gleh”, he said, and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles.

#

The first time he killed Jesus it was not murder. Merely vandalism. He tore him from the cross and chopped him into pieces with his dead father’s axe and left him dismembered on the lawn of Saint Andrews Church. It had created quite a scandal in the town of Orbridge, New Hampshire, but still, it was only what it was: a Halloween prank. A small-town incident of little or no import to the world at large. Teenagers.

It was nothing like the second time, almost four years later, when Paul Cubbage killed Jesus for well and good. The second time it was cold murder. A bullet to the Savior’s forehead at close range is what it was. A spattering of disputedly divine gray matter all over the pebbles at their feet.

Homicide. Deicide. Murder of a child.

All of the above.

There were of course some mitigating circumstances. It was, after all, a war. And Paul knew damn well who the enemy was, and it was the enemy he had shot. Well, not really the enemy, but he had been duped. You had to take things in context. Like the role the jungle played. And his father. And Tinker Bell, that little bitch. You could not forget her.

In the end though, he supposed, murder was murder. Blood was blood was blood.

The jungle didn’t care whose blood it was, or why it was spilled, or right or wrong or anything else. The jungle didn’t make distinctions. Blood was blood and blood was what the jungle wanted and the jungle wanted blood, and Paul Cubbage had given it some, fed it like a caged animal, when he shoved his rifle into the face of Jesus Christ and pulled the trigger.

#

Behind him, someone farted. A long blast, low and mournful. A gruff voice male muttered: “Fucking foghorn, that guy’s ass”. Another voice, a woman’s, tittered. Fabric rustled as someone else rolled over in a sleeping bag.

Cubbage sat up a bit straighter. He blinked his turtlish eyelids once, slowly, in an effort to disperse some of the grogginess weighing them down. On the back of them he saw, just for an instant, a vivid snapshot: Peter Pan suspended a few feet off the ground against a backdrop of plush green jungle, his elfin features twisted in pain, one hand clutching at a gaping

beet-colored hole in his chest. Dark blood ran over the sprite's slender fingers. A rivulet of it trickled from the right side of his mouth. Pan stared in mute disbelief at the muzzle of an M-22 rifle, which smoked in the bottom left corner of the picture, still pointing in his direction.

Behind the rifle barrel somewhere, Cubbage heard someone humming *Yankee Doodle Dandy* frenetically through grinning teeth.

Then he reopened his eyes to the jungle and, like an old television set being turned off, colors contracting rapidly towards a single point, then blinking out, the vision disappeared.

Flashbacks, he laughed at himself. *The spoils of war*.

Standing on thick, stiff legs, he stretched his arms painfully upwards, toward the virid, impenetrable leaf canopy high above him. His elbows cracked. His fingers automatically felt the green air for bugs but found none. The dawn had not yet come. You told time by the bugs here. The sun rarely pierced the roof of leaves. The most it did was to lighten the shades of greens above their heads. Once the day began, though, the jungle fug would immediately begin to thicken with meaty winged things, more bird than insect, bloodsuckers and stingers and biters, every one of them. Cubbage's neck was knobbed with the evidence of their existence: big, angry looking welts and raised puncture wounds.

Cubbage glanced back at the sleeping soldiers behind him, olive sleeping bags scattered like seeds across the strip of the terracotta sand lining the river. He made out a few clumps of hair poking out from a bag here and there, but most of them were zipped up tight, in accordance with regulations. One bag wriggled slowly back and forth like a newborn maggot, groaning pathetically.

That one, most likely, was Crenshaw.

#

Somehow, he got the sense that dawn was close. There must be cues aside from actually seeing the sunlight, perhaps non-visual ones, which his subconscious picked up on but which he could not identify. Yes, he confirmed, dawn was coming. They would be marching soon.

A soldier was squatting by a bend in the river a little ways down, with his back to Cubbage. This would be whoever had been assigned the last chunk of the night watch. Cubbage forgot the schedule and couldn't quite tell who it was. He squinted in what there was of the color-burned light, taking in a broad back and a florid neck supporting a massive, squarish

head. Squatting and perfectly still, the soldier's bulky frame was compressed into itself like a rock. He was part of the scenery.

A thin stick poked out from between his legs and out over the river. A string dangled from the stick. One end of it was immersed in the utterly still, thick brown river water. It, like the soldier, did not move.

Cubbage recognized the crude fisherman by his size. His name, for all intents and purposes, was Mars. That was in fact not his name, of course, but it was what they called him here. Mars was from Alabama, or Missouri, or South Carolina. He was from somewhere, anyway. He spoke with a lazy drawl that made Cubbage laugh. Now that Lucas Washington was dead, Mars was easily the biggest man left in the platoon. Mountainous. And like virtually every other soldier with them, he was an irredeemably stupid asshole.

Mars was unpopular. He liked to rehash war stories, even the very bad ones hardly anyone else wanted to talk about. Even right after they happened. Cubbage found the casual, fisherman's manner with which he did it fascinating. Cubbage didn't mind the habit as much as most of the others: he sometimes liked re-hearing things and re-hashing details, because he had for some time been trying to figure a number of things out. The other men (and women) didn't care for it, which was understandable, considering what they had been through.

Or what they *thought* they had been through, Cubbage corrected himself.

After a moment's indecision Cubbage opted to leave Mars alone for the time being. As if in response, a single bubble formed on the river's surface and popped loudly. Like gravy, simmering in a pot of low heat, Cubbage thought.

Then he thought: Someone's hungry.

Cubbage went gingerly to one knee. He grabbed a handful of sand, sifted some lazily through his fingers. The sand was hot and ran smoothly over his skin, like oil. He brought a palmful to his face, his nose, and inhaled so deeply he coughed.

The sand smelled potently of some perfume he had prior experience with but couldn't quite pin down.

"Bullshit", he muttered.

He took another whiff, forcing himself to think of the scent of pine. It's pine needles and dirt, he told himself, sniffing. His nose filled again with the dizzying perfume. He sneezed.

“Fuck,” Cubbage said.

Something in the jungle tittered. Not an animal. Not a person. Just the jungle, a jungly titter.

Cubbage looked up sharply, scanning the vegetation for movement. It was a fool’s errand; it *all* moved. Fronds and ferns bobbed up and down lazily on their stalks. Every shade of conceivable green shifted and slipped. Branches dipped under the weight of unseen creatures further back. There was nothing there. There almost never was, but still, the jungle tittered a lot.

#

The problem with the jungle, of course, was its size. One problem with it, anyway. Its unpredictability was another. Its voracity was a third. The jungle was vast and random and always hungry. The jungle’s appetite for blood was insatiable, which was why things usually ended the way they did.

The nature of the jungle rendered the likelihood of happy endings remote.

#

Tinker Bell’s motive was singular. It was old. It was simple. It was this: the purest vengeance. Her friends and enemies had all been ambushed, waylaid, slaughtered, before her glittering, pea-sized eyes.

She had fought well during the skirmish, blinding several soldiers with fairy dust and driving one, a buck-toothed atavist named Carl Spooner who had thrived on the war, taken to it with an enthusiasm only a man having found his true calling could summon, into a pool of flesh-eating liquid by diving at him again and again, gossamer wings buzzings in his ears, little nails slashing again and again at the flesh on his broad, sloped forehead and prominent chin, at his perpetually squinting eyes.

She had been brave, and she had abandoned the battle only after all of her friends had died. She had evaded the weapons the soldiers trained on her as she fled, and she had evaded capture thereafter.

Tinker Bell wasn’t to blame so much as she was simply responsible.

#

Paul's father had been dead for four years. Paul was done praying for the old man's return. He had been a promise-breaker and had eventually gotten himself killed, Cabbage wasn't quite sure how, though vague associations with a mysterious woman had been raised here and there.

The day before the funeral Cabbage saw a bumper sticker on a car, or heard a televangelist talking, or both, telling him: "With God, all things are possible." So he pleaded with the crucified man above the altar to please, bring his Daddy back. He groveled. He promised a lifetime of loyalty and service, promised to undo what minor wrongs he was guilty of, promised anything, anything at all, for his Dad back. When he got no response he changed his demands: Just one night. A half hour. Five minutes. Long enough for one last hug. Anything, ANYTHING, just for one fucking hug. He said he'd be happy with a clear dream of a hug.

Nothing.

Not even a fucking dream of a hug.

But, and this was the dumb part, the embarrassing part, the pathetic part, he STILL believed in God, and despite the fact that he was growing to hate Him, the Almighty seemed to be the best bet for ensuring the return of his Dad.

You get more with sugar than you do with vinegar, his Mom said once.

Well, the sugar wasn't working, Cabbage thought. Here comes the vinegar.

On Halloween night, Cabbage and a friend of his, Regan, a nihilistic poser desperate for relevance, went to a local church with a pair of chopping axes and hewed down the large wooden crucifix on the side lawn. Then, with some effort and a great deal of mess, they hacked the statue of Christ off of it. They had to chop his arms off at the wrists, and ended up severing his torso from his legs because his rear end was firmly affixed to the cross. Then they lay the God torso over a makeshift chopping block and with a single satisfying blow, Cabbage hacked off the head. It was like a movie: it rolled away and landed facing up, the two dead eyes staring skyward, divine mouth slightly opened. Cabbage studied the neck and for a single, horrifying moment his heart stopped. There was blood. The neck was a bloody stump. He was stifling a cry with his hand to his mouth when Regan slapped him on the back.

"Christ, Cabbage, it's made of red pine." He said, rolled over, laughing. "You thought it was *blood?*"

#

He was just a kid. That's what it came down to.

Yes, in theory, the answer to the hypothetical “Would you go back and kill Hitler as a child” was always yes. In practice, however, when it came down to it, the options were much less clear. And besides, this wasn’t exactly Hitler, now was it.

He was a teenager, barely. If that. A scared kid, pensive and eerily self-possessed and lonely in the way great or sick people are lonely. He came to the stream to get away from the jeering of his playmates.

“Angel child!,” the other boys called behind him, and cackled, and threw small flat pebbles in his direction.

None of the pebbles seemed to reach the boy, but the insults settled onto him like motes of dust. He carried them with him through the archway formed by the wide-leaved trees, his slightly stooped posture speaking to their weight. He seemed not to take particular interest in the abrupt change that took place in the scenery around him, the way the stark, flat, sun-baked sand of the land on the edge of his village became plush jungle in a matter of a couple of steps. A boy used to miracles, thought Cabbage.

He was almost too intense to be handsome, his pupils a shade of darkness Cabbage could not pin down. Black light, he thought at first, but that wasn’t it either. The blank sides of well-polished eight balls was closer. The eyes were unnerving.

His cheekbones were high, almost effeminate, his skin a dark brown and his nose flat. He looked heterogeneous, a mish-mash. In some ways he did not look real.

The boy hummed something to himself, just beneath the reach of Cabbage’s hearing as he lay in wait on the far side of the stream, camouflaged in some underbrush that smelled of peppermint and whose buds perpetually sprouted pink berries like a faucet with a slow leak.

It was an impossible plant.

It belonged in this jungle for sure.

[Researcher's Note: There is a good bit more text in the fragment 2 manuscript, but it largely trails off into random phrases, short aborted sections and author notes that do not coalesce into anything deemed worth the effort to decipher and so are not included here.]

Better

When he was very angry, my father sang Christmas songs.

It was a scary thing to watch.

Dad crooned through big gritted teeth, his face florid and eyes protuberant. A vein on his left temple bulged and thumped erratically. His massive arms clenched and gesticulated like some frenzied conductor with an invisible baton. The muscles on his face spasmed and twitched; his mouth leered and his nostrils flared, and his fingers snapped as if grinding something living into dust between them, and the balls of his feet tapped like he wanted to thrust them through the floor.

Now and then, in between verses, those big teeth of his *chomped*. As if rending meat.

It was a *terrifying* thing to watch, and Dad knew it. He regretted it, terribly, but couldn't stop just the same. Dad had things in him most people would not have been able to bear. He was a hero, really, for doing as well as he did, for as long as he did.

I still don't know how he pulled it off.

#

Once, just the one time, my big brother Sean asked Dad about the Christmas carols.

It was mid-July, upstate New York was in the middle of a record-nearing heat wave, and business was slow at the hardware store, as usual. According to Dad we didn't have the money for air conditioners to replace the two that had simultaneously gone on the fritz a week earlier. In a couple of rooms feeble old fans attempted to stir air as thick and hot as Mom's fresh-made pudding while we all sweated and cursed them silently.

On Mom's request, Dad went out that afternoon to mow the back lawn. He had been holding off, waiting for the heat wave to soften, but the grass had grown high enough to tickle his shins, and we had begun to breed a host of ominously beefy mosquitoes back there that seemed to laugh at bug repellent and could drink a *lot* of blood. Mom was persistent, if gently so, and eventually Dad gave in, though it was clear he was not happy about it.

He mowed the lawn haphazardly, in quick unfriendly strides, back and forth over the grass with our rickety electric mower rattling in front of him like every one of its screws was loose and the whole thing was about to come apart. The lines he made in the grass were crooked, and the cuts uneven, and if he missed a patch he did not bother to correct his mistake.

The whole time he mowed, he sang. The words to the first verse of *Let It Snow*. Just the first verse, over and over again, out there in the sweltering heat in his shorts and t-shirt.

Oh the weather outside is frightful

But inside it's just delightful...

I remember thinking Dad must have been infuriated; I could hear him clearly over the whirl-clacking of the mower, even after I moved into the living room, at the front of our house. Volume was always a good indicator as to just how pissed off Dad was.

No particular place to go,

So Let it Snow Let It Snow Let It Snow...

I was old enough – seven, I think – to be embarrassed, aware that if I could hear him, the neighbors sure could, aware that what he did was not normal, aware that this reflected on me somehow. I was just beginning to dislike my father for this, but it was a dim emotion, muddled and without real strength.

When Dad finished, he came storming through the back porch door. He had moved on to a slightly softer, mellower version of *Winter Wonderland*, but he still seemed in no mood to cool down anytime soon.

Sean had the misfortune of being in the kitchen as he passed through. I watched from the living room couch as Dad snatched him by both hands and made him dance along with him while he crowed. Dad twisted Sean around with flourishes, making him do pirouettes Sean obviously (from the vaguely repulsed look on his face, and his reluctant, listless spinning) wanted no part of.

I remember feeling badly for Sean. Sweat had soaked through Dad's shirt and dripped from his hair, his face was the blotchy purple of an old drunk's nose, and he was no one you would particularly want to be around, never mind get close to. When he sang like this his breath smelled too, something inexplicable, like rubber burning.

I also remember being relieved it wasn't me he was dancing with.

Dad glanced around now and then to see if Mom might be watching. She wasn't. She had gone upstairs to her room when the singing started and closed the door.

Leaving us alone with Dad.

She did that a lot.

In between “it’s a beautiful sight” and “we’re happy tonight”, Sean suddenly stopped moving. Dad tried for a few seconds to get him going again, then stopped himself.

“What’s a matter, kid? Don’t like CHRISTMAS!?”

Dad spoke like the voiceover of an obnoxious television commercial: too loud, saccharine, salesy. His big grinning yellow teeth glistened wetly. They gave me a pit in my stomach. I wanted to kick those teeth in. Or run screaming from the house. Or hug Dad until he just, stopped. I didn’t know what I wanted, really.

“Dad,” Sean asked, almost in tears. “Why do you do this?”

Sean was eleven, a few years older than I was, and a good bit more ashamed by Dad’s behavior, I think, than his younger brother. He fielded questions from the neighbors’ kids about my father, and I suppose he’d gotten fed up.

“Well,” Dad said, leaning over to get his face on Sean’s level. He was still grinning, a jaundiced, malevolent crescent that creased only his mouth and never reached his dark eyes.

“It’s better, ain’t it?”

“Better than what?,” Sean asked.

“Than killing your mother,” Dad said softly.

Then he went downstairs, to the basement. Still singing.

#

So Sean and I learned, over time, not to ask questions. My father and mother had secrets, or maybe it was just one big secret but they kept it so well we could never tell.

They almost never spoke to one another, except for Mom to tell Dad to do something around the house, and for Dad to argue until Mom was at him long enough that he agreed. Or at night, on occasion, when we were asleep, or they thought we were, and they held hushed, spitting discussions in their room. Sean and I tried hard to hear what was being said, but were never very successful; the walls in our house were pretty thick.

All we could gather was that Dad had problems that Mom wanted him to see Someone about, and that Dad would go to hell before he saw that Someone, and that was that.

Life was abnormal, but in a normal way. We lived on edge all the time, and gritted our own teeth while Dad gritted his and we enjoyed the tender moments he did manage to provide. He could be funny sometimes, and he wrestled with us on the coarse rug in the backroom of our house, playfully, like this big well-trained bear, soft and furry and strong. He never skimmed on the "*I love yous*", and he came to our Little League games, and he usually behaved pretty well. He did voices, too, when he read us stories: it was like he had a thousand mythological creatures living inside, at his disposal.

He never actually got violent with us. He took things out on inanimate objects: the butcher block beneath his hacking knife or a door that wouldn't open or a toy that got in his way. We never asked for pets.

We eventually learned to laugh along with the other kids who made cracks about him, rolling our eyes in agreement, and we got by.

Dad kept it to singing and things, he managed to keep us all safe, and we pretty much got by okay, until the day he hit Mom.

#

I was playing in the back yard and so I wasn't there when it happened, but Sean was.

It was late November, and they'd been fighting over a leaky radiator Dad refused to fix. For some reason Mom was a little more assertive than usual, getting into Dad's face and pointing her finger, screaming about how there had been no heat in the spare bedroom for two weeks and winter was coming.

It was a bad row, but there had been plenty of worse ones. Sean was only half paying attention. He was doing homework on the floor of the back porch and could see them facing off in his peripheral vision through the doorway. Their words ran together in one long uninterrupted stream, curses and insults and complaints hurled into the air, useless and redundant and uninteresting.

Sean paused only when he heard the unmistakable sound of a fist hitting a skull, and something heavy hitting the ground.

He looked up to see Mom sprawled across the kitchen floor, Dad standing over her like Ali over Liston, like he would hit her again if she dared get up. She didn't. She lay crumpled up on the floor, sobbing.

She was saying "Ow ow ow ow ow", over and over again and holding her face in both hands.

Sean jumped to his feet and ran into the kitchen. He told me later he had no idea what he should do, only that he should be in there with them. So he got in there and just stood. Dad stumbled into him as he backed away from Mom, and when he first looked down at Sean it was if he had no idea who the little kid in front of him was. Then something in his face changed, and recognition passed over his crumpled features. Dad took Sean firmly by both of his shoulders and fixed him with his eyes.

“You can’t *do* that,” he said somberly.

Then he tousled Sean’s hair and walked out the back porch door, out to where I was playing in the sandbox, bundled up in my winter coat against what was becoming a bitterly cold wind. With a half-attentive wave and a soft “hey kid”, he moved past me and into his tool shed at the far end of the yard. I heard the sound of something heavy moving across the shed floor and in front of the door, then silence.

The sound of Mom crying inside the house reached me then, just barely, and I knew something horrible had happened.

I knew, too, that something more horrible might be about to happen. Something truly awful. It hung in the air like fog, a moist blanket covering everything. It tickled my scalp like an impending electrical strike.

When the screeching whine of a table saw started to pour from the shed, and Dad started to sing:

You better watch out,

You better not cry...

I stood up, grabbed a couple of my favorite toys, and walked inside the house.

#

We left him out there for the rest of the day, while Sean and I devoted all of our efforts toward helping Mom. I got an ice bag for her face, the entire right side of which was blooming into one large bruise, and re-filled it as needed. Sean got her drinks, and we all held hands in silence for a while. I wanted to ask Mom what had happened; Sean had only been able to give me the barest details. But I knew better than to ask questions.

Eventually, as afternoon deepened, Mom told us that she was tired and going to bed for a while. On her shuffling, uneven way up the stairs she whispered a caution, twice.

Don't bother your father.

DON'T bother your father.

Once she was gone, Sean began pacing back and forth through each room on our first floor. He was biting his nails and muttering. I don't think I've ever seen a more conflicted human being in my life. His face, lean and lupine like mine and Dad's, and not what you would call kind, flashed emotions like a slideshow being continually replayed: a shifting mask of rage, sympathy, sorrow and confusion.

For my part, I was simply pathetic. I cried and stamped my feet and ordered Sean to calm down. I said we had to try not to make it worse. I really just wanted him to stop pacing because it made *me* feel worse. I wanted someone older than me to be in control, and he was the only one left.

At one point, the whine of that saw out back halted with a shriek so loud and sudden it was almost a bang. For a while we could still hear Dad's singing, though it was soft, muted and tuneless enough that we could make out only that it was his voice, and could not identify the particular song. The singing seemed to fade with the sunlight, and soon it was quiet.

Mom and Dad were in two separate places, both silent, with Sean and I in between.

After a while we got hungry. Sean went upstairs and knocked on the bedroom door but Mom didn't answer. Even though we were never supposed to enter their room without a parent's say-so, he did. With some difficulty, he got Mom to half-sit up, and gave her some aspirin with a glass of water from the bathroom sink. She told him she loved him, and asked him to tell me she loved me, too, and when he came down after fluffing her pillows, he did.

Sean made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and we ate them together at the dining room table, then cleaned up after ourselves.

Around eight or so, something fell clanging and thudding in the shed, like a stack of paint cans tumbling over. Out of habit I awaited a curse from Dad, which would most likely be followed by a short carol.

There was nothing.

It got darker, and crickets and tree frogs filled the silence, a little.

Sean and I got ready for bed then, a half hour early. We put on our pajamas and brushed our teeth and said our prayers, all of the ones we were supposed to say. I even knelt by the bed, hands piously pressed together, imploring.

We both went out to the shed in our pajamas and called good night to Dad from outside it. The dim light of the utility lamp he had hung in there seeped around the edges of the doorway. After holding his fist up to the door for close to a minute, Sean rapped lightly with his knuckles. We waited. Dad didn't answer.

Finally, Sean stormed off across the back lawn.

"Fuck you Dad!," he yelled, just before stepping inside the house and slamming the back porch door after him. A second later, he opened it again and yelled:

"Merry fucking Christmas, you goddamn freak!"

I stood alone in the darkness for a few moments, pressing my lips, my ears, then my lips again, up against the crack in the shed door.

"I love you, Dad," I whispered, then scurried away without waiting for a response.

I still wonder if he might have heard me. I doubt it, but I wonder. I like to think that he did.

We went up and kissed Mom good night and Sean fluffed her pillows again and gave her more aspirin. She mumbled a few things and hugged us, hard. She cried and told us she was sorry, so sorry, so so sorry...

And we said we knew she was, and we meant it.

#

Dad explained it all in the note. The carols, the constant, mounting anger, everything. As much as he could explain it, anyway.

He explained how his own biological father had murdered his mother on Christmas day. How he had watched the monster do it with a dull knife and sharp thrusts, right in front of him, his own eight-year old son, in their living room. How the son of a bitch had put the gun to his own head and pulled the trigger afterwards, looking straight into Dad's eyes as he did it.

How his father had been convicted, posthumously, of three other murders in Albany, based largely on evidence police had found in his bedroom after the suicide. Each victim was a

prostitute who had been mutilated. Horrible things, sights and details Dad knew of but could not bring himself even now to discuss.

How Dad had from that point on felt urges, like vermin scrabbling over the terrain of his mind, as if his internal wiring was just *wrong*, and he was fighting, constantly, to hold off an insistent darkness that wanted him and would not take no for an answer. How hard and lonely it had been for him, to have lived his whole life that way, struggling always against his own nature, and his past. How he knew there would be no curing him, not really. How he felt sure it was a physical malstructuring of his brain, or some other inherent, unfixable flaw he had inherited from his father.

How he had concluded the battle was his alone to fight.

And how he knew, from the beginning, that he would almost certainly, one day, lose.

He explained, too, how much he loved his family, how much he *had* to love us; it was his love for us, of his kids especially (he wrote this more than once, naming Sean and me in blue ink smudged with tears), that had kept him from giving in, that had kept him battling all these years.

God he loved us, he wrote.

He loved us so much.

And he was so, so sorry.

We found the note in the shed the next morning. It was on a side table right next to Dad. Sean and I had forced the door open to get inside, pushing the bureau he had blocked the doorway with out of the way with all the brute force two elementary school kids could summon. It had taken us nearly half an hour.

A frigid blast of air hit us when we finally opened the shed.

A blast of air, then the smell of our Dad.

He had done terrible things to himself.

Both of his hands were on the workbench, on either side of the circular saw that had severed them. He was seated on the plywood floor in the opposite corner of the room, his head lolled back against the wall, his now incomplete arms folded contemplatively in a lap drenched with

dark fluid, and his eyes staring upward, beseeching, as if seeking a peace that from the look on his face, he never did receive.

#

That was a long, long time ago.

Sean and I have since grown up.

Mom died of breast cancer a few years back. Funny thing, she didn't change much after what happened. She had known, I think, from the start what she was getting into with our father. Nothing in the note was news to her. When Sean ran screaming into the house for her and she made her way out to the shed and she saw what Dad had done, she was upset, sure, but she just didn't seem that surprised. It was more like you might act upon the death of a relative who has been terminally ill for some time.

On some days, I think that, in some ways, Dad cared about us more than she did. But maybe I'm being uncharitable. I should probably remember my own mother more fondly. She did not have an easy life.

Sean lives in Phoenix now, a long way away from upstate New York, and me. He has a wife and two children. A boy about eight, a real whiz kid, and a six-year old girl with Shirley Temple curls and the bearing of a princess. He sends me school pictures of the kids every now and then, and once he sent me some home videos they had taken. The kids are very cute, sweet.

They remind me of Sean and me, a little.

Speaking of me.

I still live just outside Albany, a couple of towns away from the one we grew up in. I spend my days in a cubicle, working as a claims examiner for a commercial insurance company. I'm generally regarded as competent and professional and sometimes even pleasant, though I like to keep to myself.

I don't have any family.

#

Horrible things still happen around these parts now and again. Every year, for instance, between mid-November and December, young women start showing up murdered. Mostly they're prostitutes, but sometimes they're college girls who've stumbled off while partying, or

even professional women out where they really shouldn't be late at night. A handful each year, a half-dozen to a dozen, then after the holidays, it stops.

The police are pretty sure it's the same guy, because of the temporal pattern, and because all of the victims' bodies share a certain characteristic.

Both of their hands are missing.

I get upset some nights, right around this same time of year. Agitated, I guess, is the word. It's a bad time for me, filled with unwanted memories.

Sometimes, I literally crawl out of my bed covered in sweat, with wrenching stomach cramps and a throbbing head. When this happens I usually call Sean. If he answers (or if his wife answers, annoyed, but she gives him the telephone), he helps me feel better.

If he isn't there, I get restless. I'll try him a few times, one right after the other, then I'll go out for a walk. Sometimes I get home and can't even remember where I've been.

Sometimes, God help me, I have an inexplicable mess to clean up the next day.

When Sean does answer, though, which is typically what happens, he takes the phone someplace private; I hear his voice lower and him moving around surreptitiously. He takes these calls very seriously, I can tell, but does not want his wife to hear.

I'm not sure if it's because he loves his little brother, or if it's something else that motivates him. I'm not sure if he hears about news in Albany anymore.

But we sing, both of us. Christmas songs to one another, over the phone.

Softly, too. Not angry, and not at all like our father once sang them. Sean has a nice voice, built for lullabies. His kids are lucky. Come to think of it, so am I.

When we're done, Sean asks me: How are things now, little brother?

And I say: Better.

And Sean does not ask: Better than what?

Because he knows not to ask questions.

harvest over (time to eat)

Verne Gibson laughed at Death.

He reared back his gleaming bald cue ball of a head, clutched at his distended belly through the loose-hanging flap of the hospital gown, and roared. Spittle flew from his mouth like water from a fountain cherub. His sallow complexion actually pinked.

Verne laughed so hard he convulsed.

His left arm thrashed about as if frantically seeking attention, tearing one of the intravenous lines free from his arm. The freshly starched hospital sheets beneath him began to turn a vivid, slick red.

Verne did not seem to notice.

He rubbed at his bloodshot eyes and wiped away gleeful tears. He covered his face with his hands. He peeked through the gaps between his stubby, swollen fingers, and there, standing at the end of his bed, he saw it still.

His very own special visitor.

Death.

The actual Grim Reaper.

An imposing figure in a bulky black cloak, the Reaper's face was shrouded in the shadows cast by its sinister-looking cowl. In its skeletal right hand it grasped the onyx shaft of a long harvest scythe. The sickle blade was a vicious silver crescent that managed somehow to glitter in the room's twitching fluorescent light.

Verne Gibson looked down at the end of his bed, he glimpsed the Reaper there, and his chuckles started all over again, with renewed vigor. He couldn't seem to help himself. Tears ran freely down his globular face. They dripped from the brown-black melanoma on the tip of his prominent nose. They slipped over his upper lip and into his mouth, sliding under his tongue and pooling around the soft, pea-sized tumor that lurked there, affixed to his gums, like a child playing hide-and-seek.

The Reaper waited a long time for Gibson's laughing fit to stop. Every now and then it shifted its weight from one ponderous leg to the other. For a while, it tapped a funeral dirge on the

floor with the butt end of the scythe's shaft. Once it checked the stock ticker running down the bottom of the television screen hooked to the wall in the corner, and groaned.

The wave of mirth spilling from Gibson did not subside. If anything, the longer the scene played out, the more intense his guffawing became. His hands grasped fistfuls of his blue-spotted hospital gown near his pained, swollen thighs. His legs kicked and spasmed and kicked.

"Oh, that is good," he managed at one point, knuckling one eye, rolling over onto one side, and laughing.

Eventually, with an exhalation that seemed to take all the air out of its expansive cloak, the Grim Reaper turned quietly, left Verne Gibson's hospital room, and made its shuffling way to the nearest elevator.

As it boarded the car a few moments later, stooping to fit in beside an elderly patient with a colostomy bag and a haggard face that wore the grimace of a constipated bird, the Reaper could still hear the bloated, cancer-ridden, rotten fruit of a man in room 416, giggling uncontrollably.

"That is good," Verne Gibson yelled. "Oh that is so good."

And he positively roared.

#

The echoes of Gibson's laughter stayed with the Reaper for a long time. They clung to him like small children hanging off a parent's limbs, cumbersome and clingy and clamoring for attention. Long after the elevator doors had closed and the car had descended and those same doors had opened again to let him out into the gleaming marble of the hospital's first-floor lobby, Verne Gibson's chuckles continued to echo off the walls of the Reaper's skull like the pealing of abrasive bells.

As it left the building, emerging into a humid June morning, the Reaper drew its cold cloak around itself, rubbing at its bony temple with an equally bony finger. The gesture was futile. The Gibson homunculus that seemed to have roosted in its head simply would not shut his wretched trap. Images of Gibson's blotchy pink face and savage mouth twisting into that broad grin, exposing rotting teeth and blistering sores, but still smiling, looking right at the Reaper Himself and smiling, damn him, and throwing back his accursed head and *laughing*, flashed incessantly across the screen of Death's mind.

The Reaper's hard, skinless feet found pavement and began to walk, but they did so distractedly. Death headed north on Lincoln Street without a real sense of where it was going, or the purpose of its being there at all.

It felt old. Weak. Off.

It forgot things.

Like the fact it was supposed to be hiding from view.

#

may your soul be as numb as your hands

to be laughed at by a

Christ! boy, don't you ever

fall

#

Jerry Cunningham and his nine-year old daughter, Jenna, went for walks on Saturday mornings, usually before the Irish bakery down the street closed. They strolled down the residential side of Lincoln Avenue, chatted, joked, picked up some scones and brought them back to Jenna's mother. It was a ritual, fun. And after a week of cheating people out of insurance claims it made Jerry feel almost human.

The north side of Lincoln, where they lived, was lined with two- and three-family houses jammed together like a row of slouching, multi-colored teeth. The area was urban residential, an actual neighborhood, and therefore a rapidly dying breed. It felt anachronistic to outsiders. There were kids. Lots of kids. And conversations: people on the steps of their apartments and homes, hashing over gossip and politics and bemoaning the slow descent of the world into madness.

Jerry and Jenna had a pattern they followed: up the North side of Lincoln, down the South. This meant that their trip home inevitably took them by the Harold S. Rivers Playground. They took this route for no good reason other than that they had done it that way the first time. The path had become part of their little ritual.

Just about the time Death was entering Verne Gibson's room, Jenna and Jerry were passing the Riv, as the neighborhood kids called the playground. The place was more than mildly depressing. The grounds consisted of a single rusty, precarious-looking swing set, a patch of dirt that could almost be mistaken for a baseball field if viewed through a set of faulty eyes squinted mostly shut, and a full-length basketball court with a backboard on only one end and a rim sagging from being treated like a jungle gym by the older kids. A cluster of characters, mostly teenage boys, but a couple of tough-looking girls who represented the last thing Jerry wanted his daughter to end up like in a few years, were engaging in something vaguely like a shoot around on the basketball court this morning. It could not have been an actual game, because there had to be at least thirty of them, and half were smoking cigarettes, or something anyway, and milling about.

All morning long Jenna Cunningham had been in an unusually expansive mood. She was being inexplicably open with her dad. A gangly, freckled redhead like her mother, she had nibbled carefully on her cranberry scone and talked to her father softly and awkwardly about, of all things, boys. At first enthused by his daughter's desire to communicate with him, a now terrified, overwhelmed Jerry was just starting to look for ways to steer the conversation in an entirely different direction. Jenna didn't seem to pick up on his discomfort. She had just named a particular boy -- Robbie Honan, he was going to have to find out about that kid -- when the first shot rang out.

Cunningham had lived in the city most of his life, which was plenty long enough to have acquired the requisite survival instincts. So as the first gunshot crack hit the air, he immediately grabbed his daughter, flung her to the ground, and covered her with his own body. He squeezed his eyes closed and squeezed her tight, and as he lay there waiting for the danger to pass he took a bullet in his side. A moment later another hit him in the collarbone, near his neck, and yet another struck just above his left buttock. None of them hurt much more than a bee sting, really. He thought to himself, three or four times in rapid succession: *I'm all right. Nothing serious.* Then the shooting stopped. A young male voice released a torrent of frustrated obscenities; girls, then men, were screaming; something heavy and metal fell over with a clang. An engine revved, tires screeched.

When it was clear the time had come to move, Jerry Cunningham grunted and rolled over, getting off his shaking, sobbing daughter. He smiled at her, made sure she was okay, then checked himself for injuries. He checked himself, then immediately looked away. He had already seen enough.

With a sigh, Jerry rolled onto his back. He watched his daughter watching him, her blue eyes connecting the dots that were his wounds. He caught her eye, tried to wink – it was all he could think to do -- and found he could not.

Right about then was when the discouraged Reaper left Verne Gibson's hospital room.

#

A few minutes later, Death finally turned onto Lincoln street, staring at the sidewalk at its feet. Its pace was slow, its gait ever so slightly unsteady.

Cunningham was writhing in agony on the sidewalk a block away. His torso was copiously leaking what was left of his life all over the asphalt. Little Jenna was trying desperately to plug the gaps in her daddy with her too-small, too-few hands, feeling very much like the little boy in that story about the hole in the dike, which her now-bleeding (*oh god don't die*) daddy had read to her just last week.

The Reaper made no indication of being aware of the commotion swirling around him. He veered deftly, automatically, around running pedestrians, screaming women, barking dogs. Cunningham's eyes widened when he saw the majestic, dark-cloaked creature lumbering towards him. He clutched at his little girl's arm, knowing he was hurting her, but scared and not wanting to let go. She didn't seem to notice.

Death stood over Cunningham for a moment, watching the man's blood pour over his little girl's pale fingers, watching him trying to crawl backwards, away from the Reaper. It knelt in front of Cunningham, took his right hand in its own almost tenderly. It bent over to speak directly to the man.

When it spoke, a ragged white crescent formed momentarily in the shadows of the cowl. A cloud of corpse stench blew into Cunningham's face.

NOT TODAY, rasped Death, in a wet voice like the burrowing of worms through flesh.

Cunningham gave it a confused look, one that requested clarification. Was he being saved, abandoned, tricked?

The crescent-smile widened. Death patted Cunningham's hand, once, then released it. It stood, tousled little Jenna's hair, and kept walking.

#

The Reaper moved on. It missed other appointments, too. It overlooked an eighty-year old woman named Emma Perot further down on Lincoln, who had slipped in the bathtub while taking her first shower in nearly a month. It walked right by her apartment without so much as slowing down. A forty-three year old school teacher at the Collins School on Lincoln and Stewart, who collapsed of a brain aneurysm while administering a spelling quiz for her third-grade class, was left to fend for herself as well.

Death missed its dates with both women, without even knowing it missed them. He was utterly consumed by the laughter in his own head.

At some point, without realizing it, the Reaper left Lincoln Street and turned onto Chesterton Avenue, a narrow side street lined on both sides by two- and three-family houses. There, in front of a nondescript two-decker with pale blue aluminum siding and a dangerously sagging second-floor porch, the Reaper finally heard something else besides the maddening snorting and gleeful guffaws. Between the pealing of Gibson's infuriating bells, a soft voice seemed to rasp something into the hole where his ears should have been.

The Reaper stopped. He jabbed at the sidewalk with his sickle and tilted his gruesome head, listening. The voice spoke again, then kept speaking, kept repeating itself, whispering its short phrase. It took Death a while to decipher the words; they were spoken so softly, and the Gibson memory was so loud. But he did catch the message, eventually. There were just two words, but when he heard them spoken, he realized their immediate appeal. Two words, they were, that brought something like a smile to the Grim Reaper's unseen visage.

I QUIT.

He heard those two words again. Again. Again. Every repetition brought more of something like peace to his mind. Gibson's roaring laughter gradually became a soft chuckle in the mind of the Reaper.

I QUIT, the Reaper said to Himself.

The Gibson in his head hissed. Sensing a turning in the tides, Death turned on him then, bludgeoned the fat, obnoxious bastard with the phrase – I QUIT - bringing it down on him repeatedly – I QUIT - like an executioner's ax.

I QUIT. I QUIT. I QUIT, said Death, who had a fondness for both executioners and their tools.

The Reaper's personal version of Verne Gibson shifted, grew brumous, hissed through nasty teeth, began to fade. Death felt Himself lightening, as if he might leave the litter-strewn sidewalk altogether and take to flight.

I QUIT, he announced.

He had never felt relief quite like he was now feeling. This sense of an unthinkable burden lifting was brand new to him, but no less unmistakable for its lack of familiarity.

With one final downward swipe -- I QUIT!, he bellowed -- the Reaper seemed to silence Verne Gibson's laughter for good. All he heard in its wake was the man's dying wheeze, the rattling of phlegm and blood and fluids in his black lungs, like an old motor trying, unsuccessfully, to start. He smelled his rancid death breath. He sensed no glee whatsoever, in any of it.

I QUIT, Death told Himself.

YES I DO. I QUIT, he said to Verne Gibson, once more, for good measure.

DAMN IT ALL, he said through a mouthful of fiercely grinning, jagged teeth.

I REALLY DO QUIT.

#

"You can't quit."

Death regarded Lucas Croft from across the poshly appointed restaurant table. His index bone had just stopped its merry drumming on the white tablecloth.

"We have a *contract*," Croft explained, pulling a thin packet of folded parchment from the inside pocket of his business suit. He unfolded the paper and laid it out in front of him, running a finger under the words. "You're signed up for...let's see...oh yeah, here it is: forever."

Croft turned the contract so that it faced Death right side up, pointing at the crucial phrase. He turned to beckon a waiter, who slunk over, bowing low like some castle toadie in an old horror film, and took Croft's request for another bottle of wine.

Chattleby's was one of the premier restaurants in metropolitan Boston. It was certainly the most expensive.

Death and Croft were seated across from one another in the best spot in the house, a corner table in the back room. To Croft's right was the date he had entered the restaurant with, a

young lady by the name of Farrah Lynn. Farrah was doing her best to look immensely bored, running a slender finger around the rim of a crystal water glass and sighing every five seconds or so. Occasionally she glanced around the room and yawned petulantly.

Her behavior was beginning to irritate Croft. Farrah was a minor celebrity of sorts, an heiress to a fortune built on medical equipment. She had a wild reputation for hedonistic partying. It was a rep which Craft had discovered first hand was not completely without merit, but still a good bit exaggerated. She was, like most female celebrities nowadays, disproportionately buxom for a size four, with sultry green eyes and smooth cocoa skin, and hair that fell over her shoulders like shiny black water.

Farrah was also self-absorbed to the point of absurdity. When Death had approached a few minutes ago, casting its long, bituminous shadow over their plates of food, she had betrayed no signs of noticing. It was only when Croft had gestured for the Reaper to join them that she showed any reaction at all: an irritated hiss through her teeth, followed by a clattering drop of her salad fork onto her plate. As if she had been saying: *Great, Lucas. How am I supposed to eat anything with THAT around?*

From time to time, Lucas had to resist the urge to cover Farrah Lynn's pretty face with his hand, just smother it for a moment, and *twist*, remake it somehow into something different. Something better. He was a man used to reshaping things: reality, the lives of others, myth. The impulse was inchoate.

He forced himself at these times to consider her good points. Her legs were stunning, for one thing, miles long and slender. Her lips tasted like honey. Also, she actually *ate* when they went to dinner, which was more than he could say for just about every other model he had dated.

And best of all, her finest point, he would be remiss if he didn't say this about her: She wasn't his wife.

Death's cloak expanded as he took a deep breath.

"THAT CONTRACT," he said calmly, sliding the pages back across the table toward Croft. "CAN BE TERMINATED AT WILL."

"Not by you it can't," countered Croft. He licked an index finger and flipped a few pages, pointing to an indented block of text towards the bottom. "See hear: 'This contract', blah blah blah, yeah: 'may be terminated at any time by the *first* party.' That's us, my corporation. You're the second party, Grim. There's no language in here granting you any such privileges."

Death blinked. Not that anyone noticed.

“I MISUNDERSTOOD, THEN.”

“I should say you did,” chuckled Croft, in a way that said: *Don’t sweat it, chief; we all make mistakes.*

“IT WAS MY BELIEF THAT THIS CONTRACT GRANTED TWO-WAY TERMINATION-AT-WILL PRIVILEGES.”

Croft shrugged amiably, took a sip of water from a crystal glass, placed a hand on his date’s knee.

“IT WAS MY BELIEF THAT THIS CONTRACT GRANTED TWO-WAY TERMINATION PRIVILEGES,” said Death. “BECAUSE YOU TOLD ME AS MUCH.” His skeletal hands gripped both sides of the table.

Craft shifted in his chair. He put up his hands.

“Whoa, now, big fella. Let’s not start throwing around accusations – “

“IT IS NOT AN ACCUSATION IT IS THE TRUTH YOU HAVE LIED YOU HAVE CHEATED ME –“

The air in the restaurant darkened like a solar eclipse.

Shadelove

I narrow my eyes and focus on...the mirror.

Cracked and filthy, long, and rectangular, it hangs like a panoramic work of art on the pub wall's dark paneling, above a lopsided pyramid of besmeared, half-filled liquor bottles. Reflected shapes shift about inside its glass frame. Light glints off of ale mugs. Feet shuffle in awkward dance. Shouting mouths are bent to ears. From behind me, almost lost in the braying of the jukebox, laughter ensues.

I see myself in the mirror: a member of what I am at the moment calling the *front line*. About ten of us, all but me gathered in clumps of at least two, talking loudly, swiveling slowly back and forth on our seats as we slouch over the bar. Behind us, over my shoulder, sprawls a cluster of a dozen or so dark round tables, about half of them occupied by a mish-mash of yuppies and townies. Finally, the line of dark-shrouded booths against the back wall, the black silhouettes of their occupants set against the amber backdrop of the lamps hanging low above their tables.

The ancient television in the corner is tuned to a strong-man competition, which near as I can tell involves a dozen or so enormous Slavic men with necks broader than my waist, vying to see whose temple veins can bulge out the furthest while performing the stupidest feats I've ever seen on screen. At one point an implausibly homely man with a good two dozen facial polyps and a body whose dimensions closely match those of my refrigerator is throwing cinder blocks onto a

heap of, well, other cinder blocks. A digital readout in the corner of the screen indicates he has thirty-two seconds left and counting.

Time passes. The man either fails or succeeds, and my attention drifts, from the television to the mirror and back again without ever finding a home. The strong men go away eventually, replaced by sports anchors in nice suits, seated behind long desks and mouthing words I can't hear in between replays of basketball players dunking and making obscene gestures at the fans.

Encouraged by my generous tipping, the bartender keeps the beers coming in a steady flow, so I get drunker with each wobbly rotation of the hands on the rickety clock above the cash register, and time passes some more.

My mission is simple: to be as blitzed as is humanly possible before I have to leave this place. My two-story brownstone is only five blocks away, but mine will be a long walk home. I want to be drunk enough not to notice anything on the way, or if I do, to forget it in the morning. Or at the very least to pretend I've forgotten it.

This is the point I have reached. I need to maintain plausible denial with myself.

At some point, late in the evening, a middle-aged, rather disheveled businessman I have not seen before emerges from the shadows at the rear of the pub, drink in hand, and begins wombling for the bar. He should not be of any interest to me, but for some reason he is; I can explain my taking special notice of him no better than that. As he approaches, I catch sight of peculiar details: a squat body and a crumpled face, like a relatively tall man who's been placed, head to feet, in a large vise, and *squeezed*. He appears to lean at a forty-five-degree angle to the floor, veering improbably across its dark wood: an optical trick, no doubt due to the angle placement of the mirror I watch him in, or to my own insobriety, or perhaps to a combination of the two.

When I realize where the guy is heading, I suppress a groan and avoid another glance in his direction. As he plops himself down heavily (grunting, wheezing, sighing) into the empty stool next to mine, I stare intently into my half-empty drink. When for no good reason he slams his own glass onto the bar top hard enough to draw a stern look from the bartender, I start, but don't look up.

"Hey," he finally says. It is almost a whisper.

I tilt my beer, all but finishing it, feigning fascination with the backwash as I swirl it around in the glass bottom. He touches my bare forearm, lightly, with a

calloused finger. This, sadly, I cannot ignore. I look up, a little too quickly. There are two of him. I pick one and focus.

“Dark things,” he says. “At the edges of your vision. The periphery. Am I right?”

His voice is gruff and old, somewhere in the vocal territory between Ed Asner and Tom Waits, and he slurs his words. Vision is *viszen*, and periphery is *perfy*.

“Hello,” I say thickly to the version of him on the left, which is ever so slowly merging with the one on the right. I find this briefly fascinating.

He leans a bit closer, blowing a cloud of stale beer into my face that sits me up a bit straighter.

“Oh yes. I see it now. I really do. Furtive movements from half-black places, snapping your neck around: huh?” – he wheels violently on his stool, earning another dirty glance from the barkeep, then turns back – “to find nothing; naught but shadows, skulking in shadows. I imagine it happens when you’re alone, mostly, in a street at night, but sometimes, too, when you’re in a crowd. But no one else seems to notice.

“Dark sounds, too. Clusters of light footsteps, yes? Like the scurrying gait of what, spiders? Yes. *Big* spiders. And an indeterminate *scraping* that blends, on occasion, into unintelligible whispering, half-heard, in an unknown tongue.”

“Am I right?”

“I *am* right. I see that. Yes?”

He grabs his glass, tips it, polishes off the rest of his beer, grimacing, and waves two beckoning fingers at the bartender.

I want to tell him to go away.

I want to tell him he is so far off base we’re not even playing the same game, that I don’t have the foggiest clue what he is talking about, that I’m just here to have a couple of drinks to dampen worries completely unrelated to dark things, skulking shadows, spider feet, and the like.

I want, in other words, very desperately, to *lie*.

But that is one useful art for which I have never acquired a knack, and recent events in my own life have left me a bit, shall we say, vulnerable. So, I nod, almost imperceptibly, confirming his diagnosis, or at least his explication of the symptoms.

He nods back. His mouth appears to be working on something chewy, like a kid with taffy, or a cow with cud.

He grasps my shoulder with a knotted hand.

“Let me explain,” he says.

...

We make our mutually uneven way over to a table in the corner. A trench coat I assume to be his is draped over the back of the booth. He carries two glass mugs filled with beer. When we slide in on opposite sides, he pushes one of the mugs in front of me.

“So,” he says.

“So,” say I.

“Larry,” he says, thrusting that tree root of a hand at me across the table. I grasp it lightly by the fingers.

“Jim,” I say.

Larry repeats my name and nods, as if it suits me. He coughs consumptively and reaches into the pocket of his rumpled dress shirt, extracting a half-crushed pack of cigarettes. He gestures with it, offering me a smoke, but I decline. Shrugging, nodding, this guy is always nodding, I’m beginning to notice, he fires one up for himself.

“Offshore outsourcing,” he says, very slowly, gazing straight into my eyes with his own cracked, red-blue puddles. He takes a long, profound drag from his butt.

I feel like Larry’s waiting for a response, so I blink, twice, vividly.

“That’s the problem we’re dealing with here,” he goes on. “Work moving offshore, and I mean *way* offshore, Jim. It’s Them That Run Things, trying to Run Things on the cheap. And what suffers? The quality of the work, of course. And the customers.

“Us, Jim. You, me, everybody suffers, or just about everybody.”

My new friend Larry exhales what must be six lungfuls of thick smoke into the air above the booth. It hangs over our heads like a storm cloud about to let loose with a deluge. He tugs at his blue necktie, which sprawls askew over his bulging midriff. I notice with equal parts amusement and revulsion that some yellowish spots I first took for polka dots are actually, upon closer inspection, mustard stains.

I roll the flesh at my temples with my two forefingers in a futile effort to alleviate a gathering ache, and belch.

“You ever have a problem with your *shadow*, Jim?” Larry asks me, squinting through the curtain of cigarette fume he has just hung between us, pointing at me with his middle and index fingers and the cigarette pinched in between.

“A problem...with my...shadow,” I say.

“Yeah. It ever, what, misbehave? Look wrong? Look like someone else’s shadow, maybe? Move in ways that you aren’t?”

I feel warm blood rushing to my already flushed cheeks. The first comments he made were interesting; this latest is downright eerie. I try to hide the reaction by taking a vigorous swig of the malted beverage Larry gave me.

“Not that I know of,” I say, a little too quickly.

“Hmph. I would have thought you had.” Larry looks pensive for a few seconds, surveying a set of dirty fingernails and continuing to chew whatever it is that’s in his mouth. “You seem like the type who would have noticed. You know, like me. A *sensitive* type.”

...

A sensitive type, Larry says.

The phrase brings me back to three weeks ago, when all this strangeness began.

The night I left Dave.

Sensitive I was not.

Sensitive I never am at the end. It’s not what I would call a strong point of mine.

See, I did not just leave Dave. I left Dave crumpled up on his pretentious Navajo throw rug in his hallway, knees on the floor, palms on his knees, weeping and mewling and moaning.

It was a pathetic display. One I cared for not at all. It was also typical Dave: sniveling, without dignity, overly dependent. It was a snapshot of the last nine months of my life, and it only hardened my resolve to get the fuck out. As he lay there and begged at my feet, I just turned away and strolled out of the apartment. I closed his door with a soft, satisfying click behind me. I ignored his wailing, which I could hear through the closed door all the way down the hall.

I had been thinking about leaving for weeks, if not longer, so walking home from that apartment, the jaunty, giddy weightlessness of long-sought liberty attained at last injected a definite spring into my step. The discomfort of those few wretched moments -- standing over Dave as he knelt, sobbing uncontrollably, and yanking at his own hair and babbling babbling babbling to make me downright ill - was already starting to fade in the light of the glorious reality of my sheer, undisputed unencumberedness.

I was free.

But somewhere around Lucas and Twelfth, my victory lap through the pale illuminated circles cast by the streetlamps began to slow. The problem was almost imperceptible at first: a feeling like I had a thin string or something similar around my right ankle, nothing dangerous or posing any sort of obstacle to my ability to move, just enough to be noticeable. With little or no conscious thought, I lifted my right leg higher for a few steps, expecting the thing to shake off.

It didn't.

I kept walking.

The symptom if that's what it was, the *sensation*, continued. Then, just before I got to my brownstone, it stopped.

Shrugging it off, I went upstairs, kicked back my feet, and poured myself a glass of Riesling. I felt, honestly, better than I had in a long while.

I changed my locks the next morning, and over the course of the next few days, I avoided answering my telephone or my door. Both rang early and often. I wanted to confront Dave, but figured apathy would do the trick better than confrontation. As it

turned out I was right. Within a week the phone calls had dribbled off to maybe one a day, and the personal visits had stopped entirely.

All was well, with one minor hitch.

I was suddenly, inexplicably, *anfully* clumsy.

I tripped over everything in sight. Sometimes I tripped when I saw nothing to have tripped over. The falls were small things, nothing serious, mostly just stumbles I quickly recovered from, but by the following Friday it had gotten to the point that I began to wonder if perhaps a medical checkup wasn't in order. It could be an inner ear disorder, maybe. Or something worse I did not want to consider. I put off the appointment for the time being, expecting the peculiar syndrome to clear up soon. Perhaps I needed more sleep.

It was all relatively normal, all well within the range of the easily explicable, until that Friday. I was at a modeling gig over on the East Side when things crept over the border of, and well into, the realm of the truly strange. In the time since I have been traveling ever deeper, it seems, into that realm, and it has not been an experience I care to repeat.

...

Some corporation wanted to start up a recruitment advertising campaign, and I was one of seven models, four guys, three girls, who would be posing as polished corporate pawn types who just loved being, well, polished corporate pawn types.

It wasn't the type of work I would normally do. *Normally* I'd be frolicking somewhere on a beach with my shirt off and my nether regions covered only by ludicrously expensive designer briefs, or lying mostly naked in bed with an equally gorgeous female model, my nether regions hidden only by ridiculously overpriced designer sheets.

The thing was, my friend Jared was the photographer, the pay was actually on the high side for this sort of thing, and I didn't have any other offers, so I figured, what the hell.

So I spent most of the day bending over a gleaming conference room table in one of the better hotels in town, furrowing my brows pensively and pointing at manila

folders or computer screens. We all wore ties and, of course, Armani suits. The guys all had our sleeves rolled up.

We were getting to work.

That was the slogan for the campaign.

Getting to Work. How creative.

One of the other models was Kevin Proust, a guy I had worked with a few times before. He was tall, with ocean blue eyes and a short head of silky blonde hair. He had creamy white skin and a chiseled jaw. Classic looking, he was. Over the course of a couple of our breaks Kevin let on that he had heard about me and David and our “little breakup”. I flirted back a bit, but I had no intention of carrying it any further. He was too much like David, a pretty boy, and I couldn’t stomach another round of that type of thing. I did just enough to make him think I could be interested, so I could soak in some of his attention and feed my own ego.

Cruel, I know. Insensitive, you might say, and I would agree. But there it is. I am a model, after all.

Jared, the photographer, seemed to be having a tough time with the shoot. He had a reputation for being irritable at times, and a bit short with his instructions, but this day's shortness was of a different order entirely. He was being downright rude. Something was frustrating him immensely.

Jared was short, and so overall *small* I sometimes marveled that he could be a complete human being, that all his inner parts could be present and fully functioning in such a diminutive frame.

Mostly, I found his anger funny.

After one of his outbursts, a run of shrill naughty words, followed by a minute or so of pacing around the room gesturing with his hands, one of the girls asked him what was wrong.

“Lighting,” he snapped, waving her off. “Lighting is all fucked up. You’re all doing fine, really. Let’s keep moving...”

Things worsened as the day proceeded, though. Finally, Jared reached into his bag and pulled out an expensive looking digital camera. He had us all pose again, said he was just trying something a little different, and took a few shots, then spent a couple of minutes scrolling through the photos. His frown deepened with each one he looked at.

“Jim,” he finally called. He didn’t look up from the camera to find me. Smiling, I walked over to where he stood, figuring that he wanted to trash one of the other models, and he needed someone with which to vent. I was more than happy to oblige.

“Jim, what the hell are you doing?”

This, needless to say, left me flabbergasted. Even when Jared was being (pardon the pun) short with the other models, he had been extra careful in giving instructions to me. The other models were all top quality, good workers, a couple were up and comers that might turn into something, but my stature in the industry was of an entirely different order. Having me here for a shoot like this was, I thought, a minor coup.

“What,” I said, not very pleasantly.

Jared shoved the camera at me.

“Look at these, Jim.”

I took (okay, I snatched) the camera from him and sifted through the photos. At first, I had no idea what Jared was complaining about. We all looked diligent, engaged in our little business games, the shots were very clear for a digital camera, and I was as dashing and gorgeous as ever.

Then, on my second pass through, I noticed something in one of the shots. Something behind me, something dark, like a smudge across the picture. It half covered Kevin Proust’s crotch and the face of one of the girls. I leaned over, squinting and leaning in to get a better look. The smudge clarified a little, into something vaguely man-shaped. A shadow. It could have been my shadow, it could almost have been my shadow, except it was coming off at an odd, a clearly wrong, angle.

That, and it appeared to be flipping Jared the bird.

...

Things went downhill from there; at a pace I would not have believed possible. Jared actually kicked me off the shoot. I was incredulous, too flummoxed even to respond, but in retrospect I can’t say I blame him. Almost every picture he had taken was no good, because I was in almost all of them, and everyone I was in had that shadowy presence fucking things up. It had an impressive repertoire of obscene

gestures, which it employed to what would have been comical effect had it not been my career it was screwing with. In a couple of shots, it had detached itself from me entirely, floating on the ceiling wagging its private parts at the female models, or sticking itself to the walls like a cartoon character being flattened.

I tried very hard to shrug the whole experience off on my way home. I walked to my apartment, all the way across town, hoping my mind would clear. It was a lame gig anyway, I told myself. Next week I was off to Cabo San Lucas to shoot some shots for rum commercials. The sun and the sand and maybe a sweet-talking local boy would make all this nonsense go away. That was real work, the work I was suited for, which was no work at all.

By the time I reached my apartment I was feeling a bit better. I was almost ready to blame Jared, the little shit, for fucking up the shoot. When had I ever had trouble like this before, anyway?

Never, that's when.

There was a package in front of my door. I studied it long enough to realize it was some dishes I'd recently ordered online. I was barely able to get the door opened, the box was so heavy. About two steps over the threshold, in the middle of my foyer, I tripped, hard. It felt like something light but strong got in the way of my feet, like they'd been tangled for an instant in a Christmas ribbon or something.

The dishware had been on backorder for six weeks. I put its safety before my own, clutching the box and rolling my body in such a way that it wouldn't hit the floor directly because I would. I therefore couldn't use my hands to buffer my fall. My shoulder connected with the wood floor, and I felt (and swore I almost heard) something *rip*, then my head smacked the wood for good measure.

I ended up with a dislocated shoulder, a mild concussion, and a massive lump on the side of my head. Cabo San Lucas was out.

...

Meanwhile, back in the now, Larry is still holding court. In what appears to be an attempt to cover as many paranoid fantasies as is humanly possible in a single conversation, he has moved on to, let's see, aliens.

“Roswell was nothing, Jim,” he tells me. “A freak accident, a minor traffic incident, really, with no long-term consequences to speak of. The creatures in that ship were from an endangered race fleeing a dying planet, probably the last of their kind, and they were practically dead by the time the government found them. Sure, we got a minor technological boost, but really...”

He waves dismissively in the air. Then he points at me with his first two fingers again, the cigarette pinched in between.

“*Norton*, though. That’s a different story altogether.”

“Norton,” I repeat.

“Norton,” he says, nodding, again. “Rhode Island. Population 3,500, give or take, not counting the aliens, heh. I was there in 1978, when the ship crashed, or soon thereafter anyway. You won’t hear about Norton on the news, or in the movies, or in books, but in terms of interplanetary relations, at least those involving earthlings, Norton’s pretty much the most important thing that ever happened.”

“Norton,” he says solemnly, with the air of a man at long last getting to the crux of the matter, “is the reason we’re using shadows from other planets.”

Even in my logic-impaired state, I realize right here that I’ve been latched onto by a God’s honest fruit loop. Shadows are, of course, the result of refracted light. Or something like that. They do not come from other planets. They are a purely natural phenomenon. They are in many ways, not even real.

I make a half-hearted attempt to get my legs to stand, but they snicker at me and stay where they are. Oh, hell, I decide, I’ll just stay where I am for a little longer. You know. Humor the guy.

“Why would we use shadows from other planets?” I ask.

My head suddenly feels very heavy. I am wondering if perhaps I might have overdone it. I wanted to get home in a stupor, but I did want to get home.

I’m pretty sure I did, anyway.

“Earth shadows are expensive, Jim. You’ve got insurance, labor laws to deal with, high salary expectations. And the unions...” Larry says, trailing off. Like he’s talking about software engineers or airplane mechanics.

“Celery spectations,” I slur, giggling.

“*Salary*,” Larry says, leaning over the table a bit, irritated. He works his face as if moving that thing around in his mouth with his tongue. Briefly, something small and brown and thin and twitchy juts out from between his lips.

Could that be...a leg?

Then it’s gone.

“What do you think, they need all that tax money to pay for schools and the military? You think those things could possibly cost that much? They run everything, Jim. *Everything*. They give people shadows so they won’t be so lonely. They give them shadows to give them substance, or the illusion of it anyway. Companionship. Jeesh, they keep people’s hearts beating so they can do work, for *them*, of course. They run *every blessed thing*,” Larry says.

“Whas n yr mouf?,” I ask.

Larry’s stare is querulous.

“Yer mouf,” I say, enunciating with care, so as to be clear. I bring my finger up to point at the part of the face I am talking about. It pokes into my right, or is it my left, cheek.

He apparently decides it’s okay to ignore the drunk gay guy for now.

“The aliens they encountered in Norton were from a planet populated almost exclusively by creatures we would identify as shadows, Jim. They appear paper thin, dark, and featureless to our eyes, and their bodies are remarkably elastic. We call them Kildarans, because one of the few noises they make that is within the realm of human hearing sounds a little like that. Or so some people claim. If you ask me, it sounds more like ‘children’, but I was only ever just a grunt, a field agent, and not much of a decision-maker.

“In any event, whatever you want to call these slim dark folk, some banter between the leaders of the two planets occurred, a little foreign exchange took place, some negotiation, and whammo, suddenly we were outsourcing our shadow work offshore to Kildar. Not that anyone wondered whether this was really a good idea or not. Some bean counter somewhere crunched some numbers and got Them That Run Things all in a huff about cost cutting, and that was that.

“So those shapes you’ve been seeing lately, on the edges of your vision? Those are unemployed, native human shadows. Released from their duties as a result of this little arrangement, they wander the streets, mostly at night, to be less conspicuous.

They have nothing better to do. Right now, most of them are enjoying their newfound freedom and are sightseeing, staying out of trouble; at some point it won't seem so much fun anymore, though. That's when the mischief will start.

"And that's just one problem. A much bigger one stems from the fact that most of these Kildarans hate serving as our shadows to begin with. I mean think about, would you? It's a slave's life, always dictated by the whim of the shadowee. The simple, hard truth is that we've had centuries, hell, millennia, to train our earth shadows. We long ago tore apart their familial structure, quashed their religious beliefs, crushed their will for freedom. At this point they're as much like domesticated dogs as anything else, all stupid grins and wagging tails, happiest when they are pleasing their masters.

"These new shadows, though, are quite literally a different breed. I mean, think: They've been plucked from their homes light years away, ripped away from their loved ones and compelled by force to serve us, to keep us company, to stabilize the status quo here on a planet they couldn't care less about."

"It was only a matter of time," Larry says. "Before things began to go sour."

I nod somberly, or think I do, and reach for the mug in front of me. Though it seems like my hand isn't within five feet of the mug, I knock the thing over, spilling its contents all over the table, much of which rolls swiftly toward my pal Larry. He jumps to his feet, swearing and grabbing his overcoat just in the nick of time, before the rivulet of beer trickles off his side of the table and onto his seat.

"Christ," he says, eyeing me disdainfully with his cracked eyes.

Then he says: "Come on, Jim. Let's get you home."

This is the point in the story where, if all of this hadn't really happened, I would probably say something about warning bells going off in my head. In fiction, my subconscious would pick up on something in Larry's look, the way he reaches for my arm, the rapidly spreading fuzziness in my own head that's starting to feel less and less like the result of too much alcohol and more and more like the effects of some powerful drug. But the simple fact is, that fuzziness is so profound and stultifying, I can't form the thoughts required to fire off any warning bells. My mind feels like a computer running low on memory: all the applications are running in slow motion, and there's so little activity occurring in my head I seem to be able hear individual synapses firing. They sound like a video game from the early 80's:

pew...pew...pew...

So, when Larry takes my arm, I do not protest. I just concentrate on making my legs move. It's a lot to do. I can hardly feel them, but they somehow feel ponderous at the same time. We stand, walk, move, float. We do something. Lights swirl and breezes flit against my skin. At some point later, it could be hours or seconds or never or now, Larry and I are standing outside the pub. Street lights render the fat snowflakes falling around us a brilliant, blinding white.

We start walking, Larry's hand firm on my arm. A synapse fires (pew), and all of a sudden I can't wait to be in my own bed.

I don't realize we are headed east, in the opposite direction of my apartment, until we are at the edge of Columbus Park, five blocks from *Murphy's*, ten from my brownstone.

"Hey...", I manage.

"Sit," says Larry. Not in a hostile way. Not friendly either. Just an instruction. He gestures at a white park bench that seems to have magically appeared in front of us.

I do sit, my rear end sinking into several inches of new fallen snow. My legs mutter their thanks from a million miles away.

Larry stands over me, studying me for a few seconds. He is still chewing.

"I'm sorry," he says. "That I have to do this."

I nod sure, whatever, pal. Go home now?

Larry fumbles in one of his coat pockets. He extracts an instrument of some sort; light from the lamp above the bench reflects on the brassy metal surface of something roughly the length of a man's forearm. It looks like an old seafarer's telescope. Then Larry flicks his wrist, and all of a sudden, it looks like a knife, a very long knife.

I open my mouth to remark upon its glittering length, the vivid sharpness of its tip; to plea that it stay where it is, in his hands only and not in me somewhere; to ask if, perhaps, he would be so kind as to put the thing away.

He laughs at my mumbling, which sounds incoherent even to me. I sound like someone whose mouth is stuffed shut with Styrofoam and duct tape. I know what the problem is. My synapses and my lips are all out of sync. For all the good that does me.

“The medicine I slipped into your drink should keep this from hurting very much,” says Larry. He runs the blade across another, much thinner piece of metal that I did not see him take out. It looks like a breadstick made of pewter. The blade rings when run across the stick, and amber sparks spray in all directions, and the knowledge of what it is pierces even the layer of muck that has wrapped itself around my thoughts.

The stick is a knife sharpener. Larry is going to cut something with the brass blade, and he wants the blade to be as keen as possible. Of even more interest is the fact that he is even now heading in my direction, that very same blade held out in front of him, an intent look in his eyes.

“Please,” I manage. Or something close to it. A waterfall of spittle rolls over my bottom lip and down my chin. I want to say more but my tongue writhes worthlessly in a mouth filled with cotton. I command my body to move. I manage only to get my left arm to twitch.

“From what I understand, Dave really loved you, Jim,” Larry says flatly.

I must really be confused. Gloriously fucked up, for sure. I have never met this man Larry before tonight; he does not know my latest, pathetic ex-boyfriend Dave. I must be so drunk or drugged up that I’m mixing up conversations. Or I am mishearing things. Or hallucinating.

“Yep, Dave loved *you*, and Dave’s *shadow* adored your *shadow*,” Larry says. “Three Kildaran days before they were to be married, or the Kildaran equivalent of marriage anyway, the Kildaran that became your shady companion was ordered to service on Earth. It was not an order it had the option of disobeying. Its companion had no alternative but to get itself assigned to similar duty and spent a few years transferring from one assignment to the next – lots of early shadowee deaths, I suppose - until it became Dave’s shadow and was able to find you, and by extension, the love of its life.

“See Jim, as long as you and Dave were together, *they* could be together. They held hands when you did. They shared the same bed when you did. And at night, while you were both sleeping, they could go off and have time with one another, alone. It was a slave’s life, but their companionship made it tolerable. Something close to blissful, actually.

“Then came the night you left. It was over, done with; there would be no more Jim. Sure, it devastated Dave, left him crumpled in his hallway, but it crushed your

shadows almost beyond repair. To have come so far, to have traveled light years and lived in servitude and isolation for so long, to have found one another at last, and to have achieved the measure of imperfect peace that came with their reunion, only to have it ripped out from under them like Dave's Navajo rug...

"It was too much to bear."

Larry reaches up suddenly to pull something out of his mouth. He holds it up, pinched between his forefinger and thumb. I squint to get a closer look at the dark thing he is trying to show me.

"Do you know what happens," he asks me, taking a step forward. "To a human being without a shadow?"

I see what it is he is holding. A bug. A big bug, a beetle or a cockroach, brown and writhing. Writhing and alive, fresh from his mouth. Its many legs cycle in the air.

"The world starts thinking you're dead, Jim," says Larry. "And it treats you accordingly."

...

The world explodes with pain.

The blade in Larry's knotted hand runs quickly over the top of my head, and I feel literally scalped, a scalding slicing sensation that shocks me to almost full awareness; so much for the so-called medication Larry mentioned.

Oh, fuck does it hurt.

He runs the knife down the back of my head, following the curves of my skull, down both sides of my face. I feel my skin peel off like butter beneath the hot blade, a thin papery layer of what must be flesh, the weight of it hanging off me, and I realize he *is* scalping me, he really is.

The blade moves slowly, but it performs its task well. Larry does not need to stop and saw at my flesh. It simply falls away, tearing off my skull like meat from a well-cooked rib. He works on my face, my chin and jaw and cheeks, a demented barber shaving a customer with a straight edge razor. I wait for consciousness to leave me, but it's stubborn. I can neither move, nor speak, nor, I am just now realizing, see.

I can only feel.

He takes my eyelids away.

Then he is done with my head and face. Larry stands me up, pulls the coat from my shoulders, and unbuttons my shirt. He cuts open my back; he runs the knife over the skin, up and down, moving steadily over each square inch in straight lines, like you might mow a lawn. Everything it touches, burns. It peels off my epidermis like a meat slicer working on a ham hock.

Somehow, I don't scream, though my throat opens to do so. My mind is too focused on the sensation of the slicing to engage in any other meaningful activity.

Interesting, I think at one point, as Larry pulls down my pants. I don't feel any blood. I should feel sticky liquid running down my back, over my face and head, but I don't. I try to open my eyes to see how much red there is in the snow, then remember that they are opened. Opened, but useless. The world is snow white, dazzling white, blinding white, the purified color of pain.

Larry tugs me a few steps to my left. I stand on one leg while he pulls off my shoes and socks. He kneels me down, rolls me onto my belly in the snow. My body obeys his nudging without dispute. I feel no cold; I am smoldering. He goes to work on my buttocks, my legs, my feet, peeling away the soft barrier of my flesh. I feel raw, ripped open, vulnerable. I squirm but his tree root hands hold me tight.

"Almost over," he says.

Then he turns me over, runs the knife over the tops of my feet, slashes my shins and thighs. I cup my hands around my genitals, but he pushes them away, gently, and peels me there with the blade too, like the skin of a banana.

I think I hear him whistling.

Then it is over.

"All set," he says, with the air of a dentist after a routine cleaning of a patient's teeth.

Then he says: "Aaaah. Much better."

I writhe, naked, in the snow, waiting to die. The blood loss must be terrible. I am still blind, looking out onto a canvas of pure white. My skin, or whatever was under my skin – I picture red musculature pulled tight, gray sinews, dirty white bones – burns as if I were roasting on a spit.

“You’ll feel better in a couple of hours,” Larry says casually.

I feel him reach under me, hoist me over his shoulders. Later I find myself fully dressed. Strong hands are tossing me onto a car seat. I smell the insides of a cab: vinyl, Indian food, sweat. It occurs to me to wonder what kind of maniac he is, hailing a taxi and bringing a dying, sliced-open man into it.

“I really am sorry,” Larry says.

I open my mouth to agree, but the whiteness in my vision becomes blackness, and I am gone.

...

I was a dead man.

Or might as well have been.

You might have guessed already that my pal Larry did not in fact skin me alive that night. In fact, hard as it was for me to believe, it was *my shadow* he cut away.

The knife he wielded was made of a Kildaran metal not found on earth. He had lifted it years ago, as a souvenir, while working on the team investigating the crash of the spacecraft in Norton. Among the metal’s properties is a certain corrosive reaction when put in contact with the substance used to fuse Kildaran shadows to human bodies.

Larry, I found out later through various means, had long ago offended the Kildarans, and been fittingly punished with the removal of his own shadow. He had lived a half-life for years, a truly wretched existence, until the day he was contacted by a Kildaran messenger.

Do this for us, the messenger said. And you’ll have your life back.

The “this” was me, that night. He was to deliver an appropriate dose of revenge and punishment, and as compensation he took my shadow for his own.

Within days, I later learned, he rented an apartment in Dave’s building. They soon met, not as lovers, but neighbors. Then they became friends. They lived close enough to one another so that their shadows could renew their lives together.

I saw Larry once, not too long ago. He is looking much better. The change has obviously done him good.

I am not sure how it all works, exactly, but Larry was right about the way the world treats the shadowless. It must be a sign of having fallen out of favor with those at the Top. Them That Run Things, as Larry called them. The world picks up on it and makes you feel distinctly, how you say, unwelcome. Bugs treat you like carrion; it is a constant battle to keep them away from you, out of you. Only the revulsion I felt at the notion of being invaded as Larry was, having critters crawling around inside me, peeking out of my every orifice, kept me alert enough, paranoid enough, to avoid an outright infestation.

The sounds too, the spidery steps and scuffling, and the whispers, became a thousand times worse after I was unshadowed. It was if, without my shadow, I was entering the *land* of shadow – substanceless, untethered to this world, unwanted by it, accepted only amongst the dark and unreal.

My appearance changed swiftly, and not for the better. I took on the squat look I had detected in Larry in the mirror at *Murphy's*. My face aged terribly; my skin took on a decidedly unhealthy pallor.

For months I holed up in my apartment, dwindling, receding, fading.

Then, tonight, just a few hours ago, I got a phone call.

It seems Kevin Proust had a bad breakup recently. This opened up an opportunity for someone like me.

I accepted their offer, of course; what alternative did I have?

But I am wondering, as I wait here in the darkness at the back of the club for the guy to show up: how many of them are there, really? And how many men like Larry and soon, me?

And who, exactly, are the slaves of whom?

She Watches the Man

And oh yeah, sugah, she talkin' 'bout

the MAN:

Walkin' (check that) *saunterin'*, as in:

The MAN:

Positively *saunterin'* down that mo-fuckin' hill, gold patches of late summer afternoon sunlight streamin' through bright green tree leaves, lightin' him up likes a fireworks display. *Saunterin'* with what could be perceived as a distinct air of *joviality* down that steep, cracked sidewalk on the other side of the street, got himself some eyeglasses and a tweed jacket and a baseball cap with white letters on black fabric that'd be too far away to read jes yet, sugah, if'n she could read at all.

See-it, she whispers, one and a half syllables through a mouth with jes them four nasty brown peanuts for teeth.

See-it, it's the MAN:

Half-grinnin', half-cocked, half-fallin' over, looks half out of his mind, but oh lawd ain't he all the way into hers.

See-it, she whispers. *Shee-it*, sugah, ain't it jes like

the man:

Saunterin' down Crew Hill, jes 'bout past that big ol' lilac in front of the clinic now, and she sees it: shee-it. He tilts his head a little bit, toward the pink-purple blossoms.

The man:

Got himself some big mo-fuckin' nostrils, yo. They open up wide and

the man:

inhales, deep and slow. That half-smile turns into two thirds maybe of a grin. He don' slow down, he gots business, yo, he don' stop, but

the man:

oh yeah, the man:

He smells the flowers.

...

She watches the flower shop.

Two doors in from the corner of the bottom of Crew Hill and Cooper, got a window full of bright colors and vases done give her a headache to look at some days and a nice old guy with big glasses that runs it. Sees him smilin' outside some days, sweepin' the shee-itty-ass pavement and whistlin' show tunes and wavin' at cars. Some days she sees him but not today, because today it's

the man:

Strollin' through the doors of

the shop:

jes 'bout four minutes 'fore the ambulance and the po-lice. And then it's

the man:

Leavin' jes when they get there, holdin' the door for the paramedics, tippin' that cap like he was a genteel-man in one of those ol' movies as they goes rushin' inside. Got himself a bouquet of roses under one arm.

the man:

Still grinnin', heading right back towards her.

...

the lady:

who's yo, what a mess.

Crumpled up in dirty pain like her bags of trash on a wet park bench, stinkin' like her cancers, sweet and sour, make your eyes water, yo, don' get too close.

Got bumps all over, got 'em inside and out, and hands like rubber gloves blown up like balloons: swollen bad, with puffy thick little fingers done shrunk, and don't they hurt like the hell where she's headed, which might be better, sugah, than the hell where she is.

...

The park:

Is what they call the place, patch of dirt and a strip of see-ment on the side of Crew Hill, got nineteen blades of grass and three posts (used to be a fence) and a broken kids' swing and jes the one bench that ain't been smashed.

The park:

is where

the lady:

gonna die.

...

Because today it's

the man:

glidin' now, as in

the MAN:

effortlessly *gliidin'* up that hill, other side of the street now, yo, *her* side, maybe *her* turn, sugah. *Gliidin'* and grinnin' and stickin' his big white nose in all them flowers he got and sniffin'.

the lady:

wipin' a tear from a red-yellow eye and watchin'

the man:

getting' closer, and

the shop:

where the old guy's done already gone. Got some woman cryin' outside on the sidewalk and the po-lice car's lights flashin' and the paramedics shakin' their heads and shruggin' like there was nothin' they could do.

...

the man:

stoppin' in front of

the bench:

where

the lady:

tries to sit up for

the man:

bends down, puts his mouth near her ear, smellin' like roses, less maybe it's the roses he's holdin'.

Says one word to

the lady:

then

the man:

takes her hands in his hands and hands her the flowers and winks and glides
away and

the lady:

thinks, check it out sugah I got roses and hands that don't hurt no more and a
word from

the man:

who said *Soon*.

I Hope He Likes It

I hope he likes it.

I hope it works.

But if he finds something wrong with it? If he shakes that big head in disapproval, or runs one beefy index finger - tsk tsk tsk - over the other...?

I don't even want to think about it.

He won't let me stay here if he doesn't like it.

I hear him now, like a thunderstorm a few miles off:

That booming voice cracking jokes, and other people guffawing along with him, as they always do, obediently. He's headed this way. I don't see him, not yet, but I know what he'll look like, what he always looks like. Nothing about him ever changes. He'll have a pasty soft suburban face, but his uniform will be dark, and as sharp as the blade on a city kid's knife. You could lose a finger running it over the crease in his pants. You could lose the contents of your bladder looking into his deep-set eyes.

You could lose everything, just by pissing him off.

Trust me on that.

I take it out again, turn it over in my hands. It looks good, feels fine, I guess. No obvious imperfections, nothing I can detect but then, who am *I*, and what do *I* know about these things? I don't even know the name of the woman I bought it from.

He's the expert. *He's* the one who knows.

And he's so close now, just a few feet away, god he's fast. As I sink lower in my seat, pressing my knees against the cushion in front of me, I glimpse the dark black tip of his hat. The thought of hiding occurs, hiding or fleeing, but it's too late for either.

He thanks someone, thanks someone else - god he's polite, he hides that malice so well - thanks a heavyset woman in a tank top two seats up. He says something clever, to which someone else chuckles. Across the aisle from me, a balding man in a business suit smiles, too.

I should force a smile. That would be good, but the muscles on my face refuse. My bladder feels full. It's almost my turn. One more row of seats and he'll be here, practically on top of me, scrutinizing, dark eyes probing, for what I don't, I really don't, know. I never know what he's looking for, what he's *really* looking for...

He takes his eyes from the woman in the seat in front of me and drops them right. on. me. He presses a small plastic counting device in his left hand - click – and smiles plasticly, raises his thick eyebrows beneath a dark blue cap like a pilot's, and nods. It's my turn.

"Ticket, please," he says.

My hand trembles as I go for my wallet, where the little blue stub is. I've never used this one before.

I just bought it at the station before I got on the train.

I hope it works.

I hope he likes it.

Jorgenson

Jorgenson.

The voice in Arthur Cage's ear spat the name out like a mouthful of sour milk. He looked up from his crossword puzzle, pulled the tip of his pen from his mouth, and frowned.

Jorgenson, the voice said again, and something clicked somewhere; a neat, distinct snap, the sound of something slipping snugly into place. It took Arthur only a moment to realize that the sound, like the voice, had originated from inside his own skull.

"Donald *Jorgenson*," he whispered, letting the hand holding his pen drop to the kitchen table. His thin lips curled into a prim smile. He nodded.

"Of course," he said.

"Jorgenson", he said.

Jorgenson, indeed.

Jorgenson, Jorgenson, Jorgenson.

Oh, Jorgenson.

That horse-faced boor, with the booming salesman's voice and perpetually gleaming shoes.

That preppy blonde haircut of Jorgenson's.

Those big, bleached teeth.

Those squinty blue eyes.

Jorgenson!

His crisp, corporate gait. Those thin trousered legs parting and meeting like the blades of scissors snapping open and shut, cotton rubbing vigorously against cotton. The relentless, aggressive stomping of Jorgenson's soled, authoritative feet on the office floor.

Arthur's nostrils flared. He clutched at the checkered tablecloth. He felt something harden in his narrow, bird's chest, as if a lump of quick-drying cement were coalescing inside of him. He dimly recognized the mass for what it was: resolve.

Jorgenson! his mind screamed.

The bastard philanderer. His late nights at the office.

His "business lunches" with "clients."

Jorgenson.

The schmoozer.

The way his fingers - hot and moist, almost feverish - slid lasciviously off your palm as the handshake ended.

And worse, worst of all by far.

Jorgenson.

The sloppy pisser.

The careless, sloppy pisser, goddamn the man. Jorgenson who pissed with the company toilet seat down, and spattered small puddles of bright yellow urine onto it and did not wipe them off; puddles which lay in wait for his unsuspecting coworkers, like Arthur Cage himself, who on one occasion, distracted by his own thoughts, and not paying attention, had sat down in them, revulsed nearly to the point of vomiting to feel the cold effluent of another man's bladder smeared against his own bottom.

Jorgenson.

Yes.

Jorgenson.

That was it, all right.

It was Jorgenson whom he would kill.

He had to kill someone.

It would be a *misuse* of his Special Dispensation to utilize it in any other way. And he would never be given another if he did not use this one appropriately; he was certain of that. All the decapitated snakes and gutted cats and bloodletting in the world would not change his fate if he screwed up the opportunity that had been so generously, unexpectedly afforded him.

He would, just like that, fall out of Favor.

Arthur withdrew a mustard-yellow, dog-eared business card from the back pocket of his jeans. He pinched it between his forefinger and thumb, hefting it. The card seemed almost to hum. Though it felt like thin cardboard, it was heavy in his hand, like pewter.

The front of the card was blank save for a black, menacing eye at its center, almost so small as to escape notice upon casual inspection. He turned the card over, revealing a patch of miniscule, iodine-colored scrawl. The handwritten glyphs did not belong to the English alphabet, nor to the character set of any language spoken officially in any corner of the globe. They were utterly indecipherable to anyone not privy to the Secrets.

Thankfully, Arthur Cage was privy. Very much so. Years of study, hard work, and commitment had seen to that.

He was not about to let those years go to waste.

Arthur tucked the card into his back pocket. He sauntered over to the silverware drawer and extracted a large carving knife.

Whistling cheerily under his breath, he slid the blade into the inside pocket of his long, dark winter coat, snatched his keys from the hook by the front door, and left the apartment.

If he hurried, he was thinking, he just might make it home before the evening rerun of “Who Wants To Be a Millionaire.”

The Emissary had claw-delivered the card to his apartment the previous night. Congratulating Arthur, declaring him a valued “contributor” — at this it had raised two of its many red talons and made clumsy quotations marks, executing a ponderous wink of its single reptilian yellow eye and grinning a wet ochre smile -- it had cautioned him to be prudent in his usage of the fortuitous, unexpected windfall which was being bestowed upon him.

Then it had patted him on the head, almost affectionately, and squeezed itself back through his apartment door, leaving a malodorous puddle of glutinous, pussy discharge on his rug.

Arthur wanted, desperately, to be prudent in this matter.

Choosing Jorgenson felt right, certainly; it probably was right. The problem was that there were so many other options.

He had been wronged so very often.

On his way to Jorgenson’s brownstone, standing by the doors of the subway car as it rattled uptown, Arthur thumbed through his extensive mental Rolodex of offenders, weighing their offenses against Jorgenson’s, just to be sure.

In his mind’s eye he regarded Mary Wilson: the stooped hag from the senior housing project down the street who had, just last week, been inconsiderate enough to enter the express lane at the Mighty Mart with, by Arthur’s count, sixteen items, when the sign had clearly indicated a maximum of twelve. She had compounded her error by insisting on writing a check to pay for her groceries, something else which was strictly forbidden according to the sign, which was right there, in big block print, plain as could be.

Arthur rubbed the handle of the knife with his thumb and frowned.

He considered his downstairs neighbor, Richard or Ricky or Ronald something. Despite Arthur's frequent complaints to the building superintendent the man insisted on revving the engine of his old car out front of the building for several minutes each weekday morning, a distinctly unpleasant alarm clock that Arthur had no choice but to heed.

Anger rose to the back of Arthur's throat and his small fists clenched in his coat pockets as he contemplated these wrongs. These and many more. They ran across the screen of his mind like the slides of one of Jorgenson's interminable PowerPoint presentations.

The smirking, jaunty mailman who, Arthur was convinced, kept all the good catalogues for himself.

The youthful barber who was never quite able to stifle a snicker in the mirror whenever Arthur requested his preferred cut: a comb-over that stretched a few lonely, preposterously long strands of ivory hair from one side of his pink head to the far side of the other.

His mother, the witch, who it seemed would never die on her own, and who to this day could not greet him without grunting about that hair, or straightening his collar, or wiping invisible dirt from his cheeks with a spit-covered finger, always regarding him with her turtlish frown.

They were all deserving, to be sure.

But none more so, in the final analysis, than Donald Jorgenson.

Each time Arthur began to reconsider, to doubt his choice, the skin-curling image of dollops of bright yellow pee on a white toilet seat interrupted, sealing the case.

“Cage?”

Jorgenson stood in the doorway to his apartment, looking mildly disheveled and puzzled, with one hand on the open door. He wore a velvety green robe that stopped just above his knees, and matching slippers. Where exposed, his long legs were pale and white and coated in fine blonde hairs. Though still a good bit taller than

Arthur, he seemed a good bit shorter than his office alter-ego. Arthur wondered for the first time whether the man put lifts in the soles of those splendid shoes of his.

“Hello, Donald,” Arthur said, and smiled.

A giddy cackle bubbled up from his abdomen, rising to his throat. He managed to convert it into a brief coughing fit at the last instant.

Jorgenson (the ignorant fool! blind like the rest of them! utterly unaware of the Deeper Mysteries the world held! Jorgenson forever scrabbling for a leg up in a rat race that did nothing better than to confirm one’s status as a rodent!) made no move to allow him entry. What could be seen of his half-closed, icy blue eyes glittered in the track lighting above his head. Arthur noticed with satisfaction that the man’s normally flawless hair was ever so slightly unkempt.

“Well?” Jorgenson said.

“Jorgenson,” said Arthur, fingering the handle of the knife in his coat. He could feel the card in his back pocket, hot there, impatient. He clutched the blade and looked at the exposed, V-shaped tuft of blonde hair and the patch of white flesh beneath Jorgenson’s neck.

Swiftly, with a nimble deke in one direction, followed by a brief slide to the other, Arthur eased his way beneath the overhang formed by the arm with which Jorgenson gripped the door, moving past his surprised coworker and into the man’s apartment.

“Hey –” Jorgenson managed.

Still grinning, Arthur reached around him and slammed closed the door.

“What’s this about?”

Slippers and fuzzy robe or not, mussed-up hair or not, Jorgenson was rapidly kicking into full Jorgensonity. He already looked less surprised, less the man caught unawares at home, and more the arrogant, ambitious head of Underwriting that Arthur knew from the office. He seemed to have swelled and grown taller. His slit-thin eyes bulged, and red blotches mottled his face. His teeth were enormous and white.

Arthur stood for a moment or two, feeling a little silly. He hadn't given much consideration to what he would actually do once he got inside the man's apartment. Then an idea occurred to him. A brilliant, poetic, irresistible idea.

"Can I use your bathroom?" he asked politely, wandering further into the apartment, looking around.

"No! I mean, Cage. You just can't come barging in – "

"Over there, yes?"

Arthur's smile was beatific, serene. He moved with a self-assuredness that bordered on grace.

"No, I mean, it's over there but...what the hell are you doing in my apartment? Cage?!"

Arthur found the room quickly enough, just off a large, white-walled living room with a ceiling that opened all the way up to the second floor. Arthur saw black leather furniture and an expensive-looking oriental rug. A vast flat screen television hung on the wall in the corner. The face of some famous athlete chatting at a press conference filled the picture.

The bathroom itself was surprisingly small, a half-bath with sage green walls and a waist-high strip of white wainscoting. Over the sink hung an ornate mirror with a bronze frame. The space was cramped, and smelled potently of potpourri, making Arthur suspect that Jorgenson at least had a woman in his life, if not living with him. He wondered if she was here, tonight - a possible complication. Then he felt the weight of the card in his pocket once again, and grinned. She could be here; she could not be here. It wouldn't matter either way.

Arthur closed the door behind him. He fumbled the lock shut. An instant later Jorgenson was on the other side, his big voice bellowing through the crack.

"Cage! Cage, what the...this is...I'm going to have to tell Farnesworth about this tomorrow morning, you know –"

Laughter came from Arthur like retching. He reared back his head, and his cackling bounced off the white, popcorn-plastered ceiling. His avian chest heaved and hitched. Strands of hair came unstuck from the left side of his head and stuck straight up, like a wispy, ivory horn. He staggered and nearly fell before catching himself on the hand towel rack.

Jorgenson raised his voice, thumped more loudly on the door. The knob rattled and shook.

Arthur managed to calm himself. Panting, he stood over the urinal and looked down. The seat was up. He lowered it. It was immaculate, new-looking, and bright white. It sparkled like an infomercial for a cleaning product.

Chuckling softly now, Arthur Cage unzipped his fly.

“You sick little bastard –”

Jorgenson stood in the bathroom doorway, his equine features contorting themselves into a mask of revulsion and mounting rage. He surveyed the condition of his formerly pristine toilet. He wheeled on Arthur, who stood in the middle of the living room, both hands tucked into his coat pockets.

Arthur waited for Jorgenson to take the first step before he pulled out the knife. He did it with a flourish, holding the blade out in front of him with his right hand. He beamed broadly. He studied the man -- blowhard, salesman, fraud -- and his grip on the hilt tightened.

Jorgenson looked down disdainfully at the weapon. He shook his head and bared his teeth. He took a step closer to Arthur, then another. He was looming large now. His jaw was set, and his big teeth ground against themselves with a sound that made Arthur wince.

Arthur had to admit: the bastard was cool. Not that it would help him any.

“You think I’m afraid of *you*?!” Jorgenson asked.

The sash on his robe had loosened, revealing more of his athletic chest. Light reflected off a silver pendant shaped like a tooth, which hung from a heavy-looking chain, half-buried in his blonde chest hair. Jorgenson advanced further, his face florid.

“Do you really think that knife is going to be enough to stop me from kicking the crap out of you, Cage?”

Arthur planted his feet solidly on the oriental rug. He raised the knife. They were no more than five feet apart now.

“Nope,” he said good-naturedly.

With his free hand, he extracted the yellow card from his back pocket. He flashed it like a badge. Jorgenson stopped his advance to stare at it.

“This is,” said Arthur Cage.

And with that, he lunged.

The world shattered into a billion shards of white.

The pendant on Jorgenson’s chest flared, flashing like sun off of car chrome in summer. The card in Arthur’s hand smoldered red and steamed. He felt a sudden force building between the two objects, a magnetism, though whether it repelled them away from one another or pulled them together he could not exactly say.

The walls around him billowed like flags in a brisk wind, faded, disappeared. The ground beneath him shifted, turned, tilted, swung.

The air smelled like the tip of a hot, active light bulb.

A wave of vertiginous nausea swept over Arthur, then quickly ebbed. He felt something cold lock onto his left bicep. Something tugged at him, and he found his feet following.

He had the distinct sensation of being an actor pulled off stage, yanked away from the bright lights and taken behind the curtain, back to the real world...

Then he was sitting in a narrow wooden chair.

The whiteness dimmed.

Shadows emerged. A hulking shape to his left. Something growling, low and deep, nearby. The burnt electric smell dissipated, replaced with an odor more brackish than anything else.

Then Arthur blinked, and the rest came into focus.

He was seated in a dimly lit chamber that looked to be part cave, part courtroom. The walls reminded him of a mine tunnel's walls, charcoal and craggy, and the floor beneath him was uneven and rocky. He looked up for the ceiling, but it was either too high for him to see, or something dark and murky and thick above his head was obscuring the view.

At the front of the room stood a massive dais constructed of dark wood. Atop that dais, on a seat many feet high, an enormous, white-bearded man with an eye patch and a dark cloak sat, glowering.

In front of Arthur was a small wooden table, across which were scattered some documents written on what looked to be parchment.

He heard a noise close to his left ear and turned. The Emissary who had delivered his Notice of Special Dispensation the previous night, or a creature that looked very much like it, sat beside him. It was huge. Its head was vast and lupine — furry brown ears, slobbering wolf's mouth full of ochre teeth -- save for the single, enormous yellow snake's eye at its center. Its body was something else entirely: an unfinished, chaotic mass of gristle and bone and congealed blood.

The Emissary turned to him, regarded him warmly with its eye, and nodded in greeting. It leaned in close to his ear and whispered hurriedly in the Secret language. Arthur had to fight to avoid gagging at the rotten meat stench of its breath, and to keep pace with its rapid speech, but he was pretty sure he caught the gist of the message:

Don't worry. We'll get this straightened out.

Arthur was wondering what precisely needed straightening out when he noticed Jorgenson. The underwriter was sitting in a chair much like Arthur's, hunched over a table just like the one in front of Arthur. He looked absurd in his bright green robe and slippers. He appeared to be engaged in an animated but hushed conversation with a massive, mutant octopus. The creature regarded Jorgenson with baleful eyes, gesturing grandly with fleshy pink tentacles, and excitedly clicking the two black mandibles that emerged from either side of its grotesquely human mouth.

Arthur gulped.

Jorgenson looked like a plaintiff over there. Or perhaps a defendant. In either case, a man consulting with his attorney over a legal dispute.

Arthur turned slowly to look at the Emissary. With two of its many arms, the beast had picked up a loose pile of the parchments and seemed to be frowning over a particular passage. Without glancing up, one of its arms reached over and gently patted Arthur on the shoulder.

Arthur opened his mouth to ask a question, but a fourth hand emerged from somewhere in the beast's torso and touched a cold finger to his lips.

Arthur shook his head, knuckled his eyes, and rubbed at his temples. He licked his palms and flattened his hair against his pink scalp. He felt horribly disoriented. He tried going over what had happened, imposing some kind of sensible chronology on the events.

He and Jorgenson had faced off. He had revealed the knife. The man was coming towards him and Arthur had pulled out the card...

...the card...

The card!

With a sudden panic Arthur realized he no longer had it. He had been holding it in his hand as Jorgenson advanced. He had no recollection of dropping it, yet it was gone. He rifled through his pockets, checked the rocky ground at his feet. It was nowhere.

It was gone. The card, the notification of Special Dispensation, which guaranteed the holder in a language older than the oceans the right to commit any heinous act he or she deemed appropriate against a single human being of his or her choosing, without fear of consequence, in this life or any other, and with no chance of failure.

The card was gone.

This whole set up, this *trial*, could be about that fact.

He had lost the card and now he was going to pay.

Arthur started to mewl softly. The Emissary looked up from its reading to glower at him, its wolf's mouth frowning in disappointment.

...

The bearded man raised a gavel roughly the size of Arthur's refrigerator and slammed it onto the vast plane of dark wood in front of him. Arthur's bottom lifted off his seat from the impact.

“!” the man said.

The sound, the Word, the Command, echoed off the cave walls like a clap of thunder. The bearded, one-eyed man spoke (boomed! bellowed! roared!) some more. Arthur understood none of it, though he felt like he could almost have. The language was, he was sure, a Secret language, just not the one he knew. Despite his ignorance about what exactly was being said, however, Arthur was more convinced than ever of the nature of the proceedings; the man spoke with the unmistakable air of a presiding judge.

The judge’s introductory speech (for that was what it seemed to Arthur) was followed by a soliloquy from Jorgenson’s octopus. In a voice like sneakers stepping into and out of mud, it argued its point. Several times it gestured grandly at Jorgenson with most of its long pink arms. Once it delivered a guttural, monosyllabic cough, and jabbed the tip of a single arm at Arthur. Then it approached the judge, sliding wetly along the rough ground, holding out the silver necklace Jorgenson had been wearing in the apartment. The judge received it carefully, passing it through a pair of dark, massive hands. At one point he removed the eye patch and held the necklace up to a ragged, black, brumous hole in his face.

The judge took notes and nodded a few times.

The octopus delivered one more histrionic squelch, then took its seat.

Then the judge nodded at the Emissary.

Placing a supportive talon on Arthur’s shoulder, it stood slowly. It straightened itself, cleared its throat, and began to speak in what seemed to Arthur the same language employed by the judge and Jorgenson’s lawyer, though the various biologies involved were so disparate it was difficult for him to be sure.

After a few moments behind the table, it ventured out into the center of the courtroom, its many arms moving leisurely in sync with its speech. Arthur had the distinct impression of a slick Southern lawyer, snapping his suspenders and easing his way to conclusion. It gabbed and gabbed, gesticulating and dramatizing and chuckling amiably.

Then its demeanor changed. It wheeled on Jorgenson and roared. It gestured at Arthur and pleaded. It drooled and oozed, belching indignation from each of its tooth-filled pores.

At the end of its argument, it withdrew something from its pocket with a flourish.

Arthur couldn't help gasping.

It was the card. He saw its mustard-yellow surface, the single black eye at its center. He hadn't lost it after all.

Much like the octopus had with the necklace, the Emissary marched formally to the judge and handed the card over. The judge again removed the eye patch. His black empty eyehole looked over the back of the card, at the bloody lettering, and he grunted.

The Emissary sat, patting Arthur on the back.

The courtroom filled with anticipatory silence.

They waited.

"Mr. Cage."

Arthur stirred. He felt something hard poke him in the ribs. His eyes popped open.

The Judge was regarding him somberly from his lofty perch atop the platform. His patch had been restored to its place over his left eye, a fact for which Arthur was immensely grateful.

"Rise," said the Judge.

Arthur rose. His legs quivered. He leaned on the table for support.

"Mr. Cage, we meet here today to decide a matter most unusual. And most grave."

The judge's spoke in perfect English now, each syllable crisply enunciated. The big man remained perfectly still, even his mouth barely moving as he spoke.

"The facts of the case before me are these: on the evening before last, you were provided with a talisman by an Emissary of the Third Eye. This gift has been

explained to this Court as a token of appreciation for years of service, and a gesture of goodwill on the part of your Master.”

The Judge paused to inhale, which took a while. It was as if he were trying to suck all the air out of the courtroom. Arthur watched his robes inflate like a balloon.

“The talisman you received was this,” continued the Judge, holding up Arthur’s card in his vast, dark hand. “A Contract of Special Dispensation for Harm, crudely crafted no doubt – “with this he shot a disdainful glance at the Emissary seated beside Arthur; the Emissary seemed to bow its ponderous head in acknowledgement of the point - “but valid and complete nonetheless. As you know, this granted you, the bearer, certain privileges. Namely...”

The Judge removed his patch once more. He held the card up to the black hole where his eye should have been, looking like an old man with failing eyes trying to read small print. The side of the card with the eye on it faced out toward Arthur, almost looking like a replacement for the Judge’s missing one. He cleared his throat and read selectively from the scribble.

“Let’s see...the right and privilege to commit an injurious and/or fatal act on any single human being, with or without cause...includes both the arrangement of circumstance in such a way as to render the act successful...moral absolution from the event’s consequences...”

The Judge stopped. He fixed Arthur with what Arthur suddenly thought of as his Bad Eye. Arthur felt his bladder tighten and go cold, an electric shiver running the length of his spine.

“You have read the card?” the Judge asked.

“Yes,” said Arthur meekly.

“And you understand the terms.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Another long inhalation, the Judge sucking at the room’s air, his garments puffing up like a blowfish.

“Well, the problem is this, Mr. Cage. You selected Mr. Jorgenson here – “with a wave of his hand the Judge indicated Jorgenson, who was still seated in his robe and slippers at his own table; Arthur glanced in his direction and had to restrain himself

from leaping across the room when he saw the shit-eating grin on the man's face – “as your victim. There was nothing wrong with this choice, per se. But it has led us to a problem. The crux of the matter. Why we are here.”

The Judge put down Arthur's card and lifted Jorgenson's necklace.

“This,” he said. “Is a protective amulet. It has been in the possession of Mr. Jorgenson's family for centuries. Mr. Jorgenson's ancestors have long been devoted servants of the Many-Armed One -- “a nod in the direction of the lawyerly octopus, who responded with an odd, grotesque little pirouette -- “and they were granted this as a token of appreciation for earnest devotion, not entirely dissimilar from yours.”

Arthur groaned. He thumbed at his eyes. Jorgenson? Jorgenson *privy*? Jorgenson?! What were the odds...?

“This amulet,” the Judge was saying, “grants the bearer protection from all bodily harm until he or she reaches the age of eighty-seven years old. There are extreme circumstances under which this protection can be negated -- at the end of times, for instance -- but rest assured none of them apply to the current situation.”

Jorgenson was beaming now, almost chuckling. Arthur wanted to bite the nose from the man's face. He clamped his own jaw closed and dug his nails into his palms.

“So, you see the problem, Mr. Cage,” the Judge said. “We have a case whereby the terms of two legitimately acquired talismans stand in direct opposition to one another.”

“I do,” said Arthur meekly, through gritted teeth. He was still adjusting to the shock of the revelation that Jorgenson, of all people, had Connections. It was a travesty, a disgrace, an abomination...

“In matters such as this,” the judge boomed “We have two options: First, we can find a way to satisfy the rights of both parties, by contriving a circumstance under which the terms of both talismans can be duly and justly honored. Second, failing that, we give preference to the *older* of the two agreements.”

Arthur could see the writing on the wall now. His card had been delivered a mere three days ago. Not even three days. Jorgenson, meanwhile, Jorgenson's *family*, had been in possession of their amulet for centuries. The bastard had him.

Not only that, but now he would no doubt lose his position at work. Jorgenson would report all this (well, not *all* of it, but the part in the apartment at least), and that would be the end of him.

Arthur refused to look toward Jorgenson, he couldn't bear it, but it hardly mattered: the man's big white grin shone like a cheery, bright new moon in his peripheral vision. His palms had begun to bleed from the pressure and sharpness of the fingernails being pushed into them.

"I am sorry, Mr. Cage," the judge said, and reached for his gavel.

Suddenly, Arthur could smell Jorgenson's urine, vividly. He could feel it, smeared against his thighs by the friction of his skin against a cold toilet seat. He looked down with his mind's eye at a white surface speckled with yellow dollops like lemon juice.

"Wait," he said softly.

The Judge paused. He did not look pleased. He held the gavel over his head like a hammer about to be driven into the head of some particularly troublesome nail.

"Excuse me?"

"I meant, your honor. Wait, your honor," Arthur said. "I think I have an idea."

The attorneys and the Judge were huddled together in a sidebar. The octopus was literally hopping mad, jumping and down on his many tentacles and thrashing about. The Third Eye's Emissary seemed to be handling the circumstances more professionally, offering helpful-sounding observations when asked.

Arthur watched them with a dropping sensation in his stomach, wondering about what he had just proposed.

"You don't mean it, do you?"

Jorgenson had bent forward in his seat and was leaning towards Arthur. His white chest was drenched in sweat and his attempt at a smile was woeful.

Arthur could not have answered the man if he wanted to. His mouth was dry and felt glued shut.

"Mr. Cage," said the Judge.

Arthur looked up.

The Emissaries were standing to either side of the Judge, looking somber.

“Mr. Cage, you have presented a convincing argument, and an option that allows for a consistent resolution of the matter before us, one which will preserve the intent and the letter of the various agreements reached among the involved parties.”

Everyone in an official capacity - Octopus, Emissary, Judge - paused to bow their widely divergent heads in acknowledgement of the point.

“However, I am duty-bound to do my best to ensure you understand the severe and wide-ranging implications of your proposal before it is accepted.”

Arthur took a deep breath.

“I understand, your Honor,” he said, barely loud enough to be heard.

The Judge took a few more moments to size Arthur up.

“Very well, then,” he finally said. “The Rule dictates that if, one, both parties continue to assert their rights to the powers offered by the talismans, and two, there is any way in which to satisfy completely the promises made by both artifacts, this must be the path selected. And because mister Jorgenson’s talisman has, how did you put it, Mr. Cage?”

“An out clause,” said Arthur.

“Yes. An out clause. Namely that, in the case of the end of times, the offer of protection is no longer considered binding, for obvious reasons. All of which is to say that, if the world ends now, the clauses of both talismans will never have been violated. And so, before I render the verdict, I ask you both, for the last time, do you insist on asserting the full extent of the privileges defined in the talismanic agreements?”

The Judge first turned his attention toward Jurgenson. Arthur watched him carefully. If the big J were to give up his privileges, he would be at Arthur’s mercy. It seemed very unlikely he would accept that. Arthur’s assessment turned out to be correct: Jorgenson turned toward his co-worker, his eyes spitting arrows of disdain.

“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 - “

The Vial

“Ragnarök’s just one way to go, you know.”

Tom's forearm muscles bulged as he tore a fistful of brown grass from the patch of earth in front of him, then tossed it aside. Leda opened her mouth but found herself unable to think of anything meaningful to say, so she closed it. Instead, she traced his spine with her palm, running it lightly up and down the center of his broad back through his t-shirt.

They were sitting in front of her old red pickup truck, parked at the top of a small hill in some place called Pemberton, Pennsylvania. The grounds of a large cemetery (*Mount Alvernia Resting Grounds*, the tilted sign at the entrance had announced when they had driven through a half hour earlier) sprawled beneath them like a dentist’s surrealist nightmare: uneven rows of crumbling white headstones and leaning black wrought-iron fences jutting up from the autumn-brown earth at all angles like jagged, irregular teeth.

Beyond the cemetery, a rose-colored sun was sinking, its bottom half already hidden by a distant row of blue hills.

Dusk was coming.

“So, what’s the point?” said Tom. He stared straight ahead, fixing on nothing Leda could identify.

“The point?” she asked.

Tom turned to glare at her. Pale pink light glittered off his dark, too-close eyes.

“You know dang well what I mean.”

Leda smiled.

“The point of the game *is* the game,” she offered.

The oft-repeated phrase came out flat and unconvincing, even to her.

“That makes no sense, Leda” Tom spat. “Every time we have this conversation it’s the same thing - ”

“Maybe we should stop having it, then.”

Tom turned his head to look at her, surprised. Leda ignored him. Instead, she stretched her legs, wriggling her bare brown toes and their vivid black nails in the pink light.

She noticed for the hundredth time how absurdly small and doll-like she seemed next to him, to this Tom. She was petite by virtually any standard, five foot one and small, and dark-skinned, and pixie slim. Tom was all Wisconsin farm boy: muss of light brown hair, white skin, and built like your average deluxe-sized refrigerator, only a good bit taller. He was vast, powerful. He was crazy of course, but so was she -- that was how they’d gotten here in the first place. The important thing was that he was a good man to have on her side, this Tom. Assuming she could keep him properly motivated, which was beginning to look like it might be a problem.

Someday, she thought. Someday this will all be over. Then, if he and I are still around, we’ll have a chance to treat each other like actual people.

Someday, she thought.

But not today.

“C’mon,” said Leda softly, standing and heading for the rear of the truck. “Let’s get ready.”

Tom grunted. A moment later, he followed wordlessly.

...

Like a sudden infestation of fireflies, the gnomes entered the world. Leda glanced at her watch and smiled grimly: the little bastards were right on schedule, as usual.

Each gnome manifested in midair with a silent green flash and hit the cemetery ground running, its six black, spidery legs twitching and bending and twisting. Each was about three feet tall, with a humanoid torso, a wizened brown face, and a wispy white beard. Each wore a bright red cap and a green coat. Each carried an empty wicker basket on its back, and a glittering, sharp shovel the size of a large spoon in one hand.

The gnomes sniffed and snorted and gargled. They snuffled and scurried over the shadow-speckled earth, tracing haphazard-looking spiral patterns in the dirt and grass. They bent over and pressed their knotty noses as near the earth as they could get them with their swollen, arachnid abdomens in the way.

Wherever they found the freshly dead, they began to dig.

...

"Hang on," said Leda, touching the barrel of the automatic machine gun that was mounted to the cab of her pickup. "Give them time."

Tom let the barrel dip slightly. Leda could smell the sweat coming off him. He kept grunting softly, as if something – breathing, maybe – was hurting him. She didn't worry too much about it, though. Tom always showed signs of stress just as things began to heat up.

Her truck was now parked beneath an enormous oak tree near the center of the graveyard. All around them, shadowy in the early evening light, gnomes were digging. Perhaps two dozen in all. The cemetery rang with the soft, furtive scraping of shovel metal on dirt, and the consumptive breathing of the diminutive abominations. Fistfuls of dark earth, flung high into the increasingly dark blue air by their tiny shovels, dazzled like some off-kilter fireworks display.

"Christ, Leda," whispered Tom. "Where do they *come* from?"

Leda didn't answer. She assumed the question to be rhetorical. No one knew where the gnomes had come from, or where they had acquired their spidery features, or why they had six legs, or who, if anyone, was driving them to their tasks.

All anyone knew, for sure – all Leda and Tom and the others (assuming there were others) had been told, in dreams and epileptic visions and other abrupt interruptions of the normal functioning of their minds - was what the gnomes wanted: an Apocalypse. And apparently, any Apocalypse would do.

There were plenty of options.

If the messages Leda and Tom received were to be trusted, there were gnomes just like these ones at work all over the world, working to affect their desired end through any and all means possible. Gnomes had been caught outside of Jerusalem, trying to corral the Four Horsemen mentioned in the Christian Book of Revelations. Pick a doomsday scenario, they were working towards the expedition of it.

Just recently, and rather frighteningly, the gnomes had gone modern in their tireless pursuit of an end to times: a whole tribe of them had been discovered in a vast labyrinthian warren in southern France, maintaining and running an enormous piece of throbbing machinery that was steadily pumping entropy into the guts of the universe like medicine into a vein.

They'd also made bids (all of them thwarted, so far) to take control of nuclear power plants, military bases, and the like.

And of course, there was Ragnarök. One of the more poetic and dramatic of the gnome's options. The Old Norse End of Times when the wolf Fenrir would swallow the sky.

Ragnarök. Which Leda and Tom Taylor were here tonight to prevent if they could.

Not prevent, Leda reminded herself. Forestall. This was all they had ever done. Perhaps all they could ever do. This was what had been bothering Tom earlier, what bothered Leda herself incessantly, when she let it. The gnomes kept coming and coming and Leda and Tom and others like them kept plugging holes in a dike that was now more porous than your average block of Swiss cheese, and...

Enough.

There was a task at hand, right now, one Leda knew they could accomplish. Others like them had done it before. They, or someone, would simply have to do it again. If not tonight, soon. It had been a while since the last time.

One of the gnomes stopped digging and tossed aside his shovel. He bent over and panted; gray-white tendrils of breath spewed from the olive-sized hole in his beard where his mouth must have been. Then he stood, hands gripping the sides of his still heaving belly, and examined his handiwork: a deep rectangular hole, roughly the dimensions of a coffin. He took the basket from his shoulders and leapt into the hole. A moment later Leda saw the lid of a coffin appear.

Leda stretched. She fingered the trigger on the harpoon gun in her own small hands. Beneath her windbreaker, she felt the weight of the explosives strapped to her chest. It was comforting, feeling them there. It made her feel prepared.

But she was not prepared.

“Soon,” she whispered.

Behind her, Tom moaned.

...

It seemed to take a long time, but finally, the gnome’s fingers appeared on the edge of the grave, like little spiders themselves. A moment later the white pompom tip of his cap appeared. A moment after that his ruddy face. After scrambling from the hole, he reached down and grabbed his shovel, gathering himself with a deep breath. He crossed his arms and made a soft sound like an aborted sneeze. A dim green glow began to form around him.

“Now,” said Leda, squinting through the sight in her rifle. She waited one beat, then pulled the trigger.

In the same instant the machine gun behind her roared to life, splitting the quiet of the graveyard. Tom immediately began screaming, cursing and shrieking maniacally as he wheeled the gun to and fro across the yard. The other gnomes began scurrying about, panicked. One flew into the air, its small frame lifted from the earth by the force of the bullets spraying from the gun.

The gnome Leda had been focusing on looked up a half instant before a small metal hook attached to a thick cable passed him waist high on the left. Leda pressed a button, and the metal device at the end of the rope swung around the creature’s waist and fastened itself to the still feeding rope.

Got him!

Before she had the time to reflect on what she was about to do -- to regret, to question, to doubt -- Leda flipped an orange switch at the base of her rifle’s barrel. The gun began to rapidly swallow the rope on her end, yanking her harshly from the cab of the pickup and pulling her swiftly over the earth toward the gnome, who was surrounded now by a bright green cloud and was just beginning to fade from view.

...

Tom watched the cable line feeding into the hole in reality into which the gnome had just disappeared. He stopped shooting, crying out to Leda as she was yanked tumbling across the earth like some stuntman in an old Western being dragged behind an out-of-control horse-drawn wagon.

It was all part of the plan, but the usual panic seized him anyway.

“Don’t...!” he screamed just before she too disappeared into the fluorescent green cloud, and the hole inside it, a sudden desperation seizing him with the realization of what he might be about to lose.

Or what he had just lost.

...

Leda spun flew tumbled fell around down through a tunnel of bright green smoke. Thoughts set upon her, attacking like mad birds, pecking and squawking and flapping and swirling and slapping against the insides of her skull. At times it was her own voice they spoke in; at others it was a shrill, rapid voice like the munchkins in the Wizard of Oz. Then it was Porky Pig. Bill Bixby. Ronald Reagan.

It was the sheerest jabberwocky, a puzzling amalgamation of repetitive truisms and her own inadequate justifications for the mad struggle she had been engaged in for nearly three years:

the point of

the game

is

the game

is

the point of

the game

is

the end

is

the means

is

the end
is
the means
is
the point
was
the game
is
the ending
was
inevitable and one day
two day
one
day
the gnomes will
win
the gnomes will
win will
three day
win we will
one day
win win

Leda squeezed her eyes closed and clutched the cable line in her palms. It seemed the only real thing in the world.

But she was no longer in the world. She was somewhere else, somewhere liminal, on the way to yet another somewhere else.

And any way you sliced it, she would not be coming back.

...

When the sensation of movement finally passed, Leda opened her eyes. The vessel loomed above her like a skyscraper, set against a backdrop of sky that was no color she had ever seen before.

“Nfalgar,” she whispered.

The Ship of Dead Men’s Nails.

Looking up at it, she felt a profound sense of vertigo.

Nfalgar. The vessel which would set sail, steered by the giant Hrim, at the onset of Ragnarök. The boat without which, according to the *Eddas* (or at least implied by them), Ragnarök could not commence.

This Nfalgar appeared almost complete. It floated in water that seemed not so much black as simply *dark*. Its broad hull glistened, wet-looking and opalescent, its curved surface reminding Leda of a massive oyster shell.

Nfalgar teemed with spider gnomes. They scurried over it in the hundreds, perhaps the thousands, looking more insectile than ever, their tiny bodies scaled against the vastness of the ship, the very picture of malevolent industriousness. Many of the gnomes had baskets, from which they plucked items too tiny for Leda to see from her vantage point, pinching these items between their fingers, then placing them onto the ship, laboriously plugging what few holes were left one millimeter, one nail, at a time.

As she stood staring at Nfalgar, something suddenly tore the harpoon gun from Leda’s hands. She looked up to find the gnome she had latched onto at the cemetery, snarling at her ferally from a few feet away. At least two dozen gnomes were behind him, inching toward her. Behind them, more were coming. Many more.

The first of them were only a few steps away when Leda reached into her coat and brought out a small vial of aurora.

...

No one had ever explained to Leda or Tom why light from the borealis affected the gnomes so strongly. Like many things, it was something they took on faith, a message delivered to them in dreams and visions so convincingly they tended not to doubt it. Neither had they ever been told how auroral light could be trapped in a clear glass vial stoppered with what looked like a normal brown cork, like the vial Leda now held in her hand. Or who or what left them on the doorsteps of the hotel rooms Leda

and Tom and the others, whoever they were, occupied on the meandering, looping trips they took around the country, following their mutual visions. But auroral light it most certainly was: luminous green, red, blue tendrils, flashing and swirling behind the glass like gorgeous, languid eels in an aquarium tank. The flexuous light display looked, Leda had thought more than once, like music.

Judging from the reaction of the gnomes, her dreams had been right on. No sooner had Leda held it out in front of her than the gnomes began scrambling backward, literally tripping over one another to get out of her path, their small dark eyes wide with something like terror. They were frantic, jostling and pushing one another. A couple teetered off the edge of the pier, into the watery darkness below.

In doing so they left Leda a clear route to Nfalgar. Leda took several steps in that direction, then incredibly, she too stumbled. She watched in horror as the vial of aurora tumbled from her fingers, bouncing away in the opposite direction of the gnomes, out of sight.

The previously frightened gnomes took only a few seconds to adjust to the change in circumstances. Laughing to one another, with monstrosity in their eyes, they began to advance toward her.

Leda squeezed the beginnings of furious tears from her eyes. She reached for the device on her waist, which would cause the cable to retract, bringing her back to the world.

Then she saw the smiles on the advancing gnomes. Their dark eyes glittered with triumph, and a malicious glee.

“Someday,” the nearest one said, the others behind him said, they all said.

“Someday soon...we will win.”

Leda ran a finger over the box of explosives strapped to her chest. Without the aurora, the gnomes would be on her in moments. If she didn't leave now, she would not leave.

She thought of Tom, waiting for her on the truck. Big Tom. Her eyes filled with tears.

“Maybe someday,” Leda agreed, scanning the crowd of gnomes, finding and fixing as many pairs of eyes as she could and returning a look that she hoped held no fear.

She opened her windbreaker and took a deep breath. She positioned her finger over the red button, breathed again, and pushed.

“But not -”

Whatever Happened to Tinkerbell

Once a stuffed moose named Moose left the store it had lived in for almost its whole life to come to live with a young Boy.

Pretty much right away, the Moose and the Boy became the very best of friends. The Boy held Moose and hugged Moose and said nice things to him. They whispered secrets to each other and played games.

The Boy took Moose with him everywhere, even when he and his parents went out to places.

Because the Boy loved Moose.

And Moose loved the Boy.

One day, while the Boy's parents were shopping for a new house, the Boy and Moose both went along with them. It was an unfamiliar place. The Boy and Moose went exploring. Moose was holding the boy's hand, as always, but something caught his eye. In one of the bedrooms, there was a vase, and sprouting out of that vase was a collection of beautiful yellow lily flowers.

The lilies gave Moose an idea.

"I bet the Boy would really love one of those lilies," Moose thought to himself, remembering all the times he had seen the Boy smile and laugh while they played together in the yard or went pirating around with one another in the woods. "And I bet if I just took one, the people who put them there wouldn't even notice."

There were a lot of lilies.

"It'll just take a second," Moose thought.

And Moose let go of the Boy's hand, just to go fetch one of the flowers.

There are many things faster of foot than a stuffed Moose, so the task of flower fetching took Moose a while, longer than he expected. But eventually, he had fetched the Boy a perfect lily. He had climbed the bureau on which the vase stood, he had reached up and into it, and he had gingerly extracted a single lily. He had climbed back down the bureau and back into the hallway where he was sure the Boy would be waiting.

But the Boy was not there.

Moose looked up and down and left and right and the Boy was nowhere to be found.

Moose wasn't worried though. The Boy and he did not spend *every second* together, even though it felt that way to both of them, in the best of ways. But the Boy and Moose always got back together again.

The Boy must be somewhere close.

So, Moose went looking. In every room on the second floor, then down the stairs to check all the rooms on the first floor too. The Boy was not there, and neither were any of the adults who had been in the house, either.

Moose was alone.

"That's OK," thought Moose. "The Boy has taught me well. I know how to be strong and fair and to keep trying until I succeed because I have seen the Boy do that, over and over again. He makes it look easy. I can do that, too. I will find the Boy myself!"

So, with great effort, the Moose managed to find a way to open the door to the house and get outside. He made his way down the front steps and then the driveway and then into the street and he began walking.

He remembered watching a show on television with the Boy, where someone who needed a ride was walking down the road backwards with their thumb out.

"I'll do that!" thought Moose.

But then Moose realized something.

He didn't have thumbs.

So, Moose put down his head and he walked, and he walked. It started to get late, and his legs grew tired. But he kept walking and fought off the nagging sense that something was wrong.

"I must find the Boy," thought Moose. And he thought of the Boy and how strong and kind he was and it gave him strength between steps to take the next one.

Then a car pulled up on the side of the road. The passenger side window scrolled down, and Moose saw a lovely little girl's face looking back at him.

"Are you lost?" the girl asked.

Moose thought about not answering. This was not the Boy. He trusted the Boy. But he didn't know this one, this Girl. But he needed to find the Boy. He needed to be brave. Like the Boy was.

"Yes." Moose said. "I'm looking for the Boy."

"Which Boy?" the girl asked.

"You know, the good one," said Moose.

The girl turned to talk to the driver of the car. Then the door opened, and she leaned down to pick up Moose.

"I'm not sure I know him," the Girl said. "But if you come with me, I promise I will try to help you find him."

Moose looked into the Girl's eyes. He didn't even have a mouth, but his mouth dropped anyway.

The girl's eyes. The kindness there. The warmth.

She was like the Boy. Moose loved her already.

"Ok," he said. "Thank you."

The girl held Moose in her lap as they drove to a new place. Her hands were different than the Boy's. She held him not quite as tightly as the Boy did, and her fingers were slender in comparison to the Boy's. But Moose liked how it felt. Just as much as he liked the way the Boy held him. They both made him feel good, just different.

"It sure is nice," thought Moose. "To have TWO WHOLE FRIENDS."

He had never even imagined that was possible.

When they arrived at the Girl's house, she asked Moose about the Boy. What he looked like. What kinds of things he liked to do. The sound of his voice, where he went to school.

She giggled and asked Moose what color underwear the Boy wore.

Moose felt like he should say something about this being inappropriate, but he couldn't help laughing instead.

Despite long and sincere heartfelt effort, the Girl and Moose were not able to find the Boy. Not for a long, long time, anyway. Longer than we have time to talk

about today. But they became very good friends. Just like the Boy and Moose had been. But different.

Moose thought about the Boy every single day. All the time. And while he missed the Boy every day, all the time, Moose was never lonely.

And neither was the Girl.

How It Never Ends

See? It's very kind, how it all ends, and does not. Poignant, though.

"Carrie told me so herself. Didn't you, Car?"

"Sure did, Pops. Like a thousand times."

We both laugh at the stupid nickname.

"Would you mind telling them? It'll sound better coming from you. And I don't want to get anything upside down."

Seated on the opposite side of the couch from me, Carrie sighs and rolls her dark eyes in mock aggravation. As if she's shy about sharing her wisdom. Which, understatement of the century, she most distinctly is not. Then she stands up, takes a deep breath, and pauses, really milking the moment. She closes those lovely eyes of hers for good (for clarity, at no point in the monologue that follows, or ever again, or ever at all, will Carrie, my miscarried unborn daughter, open her own beautiful eyes, although she just might open yours) before calmly explaining, you know, everything.

"Ok, here's how it ends. It doesn't. We just forget. Because we gradually lose the capacity to remember. While the physical world tends toward disorder and complexity, the spiritual one moves the other way, in ever simpler directions.

We are complex, confused humans first. Us, you, and me, and maybe a few others. Planning and scheming and trying to control things. Scared and worried, judgmental, and frustrated and angry. We learn our lessons early, discovering that those approaches don't work, so that in later lives, we accept and allow and embrace instead.

And once the final, simplest human life has been lived, we transition into animal lives, moving like a spiral, ever dwindling into simplicity.

I become, say, a squirrel, you a crested tit and we spend a lovely afternoon together glancing occasionally at one another across a wintry meadow in less than half-remembrance of a vague familiarity while we both dig through fresh snow for seeds from a Scottish pine tree. Really. It happens. Just wait.

Down and down.

To trees themselves. Uncountable billions of years of tree lives, our roots stretching out in search of contact with something, someone we can no longer picture and besides, by this point, which of the trillion trillion pictures would we choose? But we form an understory anyway, weaving a web beneath the soil, seeking that connection renewed anew, over and over and over again.

So much time, so many lives, so many forms. You and me and us and them. More and more history, fewer and fewer details remembered, until only the feeling between us remains. Plants and simpler things, fewer and fewer cells, less and less ability to recall, less and less ability to resist.

Pure existence.

Just connection. Only love.

It ends longer after the point where we would notice it ending."

Having said all that, Carrie Keane extends her arms languidly out to either side of herself like a ballerina feigning swan wings, takes a mock dramatic bow in the direction of me, her audience of one, and sits back down on her end of the couch, nimbly wrapping her left leg under her butt as she does.

That's my daughter, bitches.

Sightless? Perhaps. Immaterial? Sure. But well-informed, nonetheless.

And that's how it is.

If it wasn't that way before, it is now.

Any questions?