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## The Escape Artists

Daniel Gene Hernandez  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

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Douglas Unger, M.F.A., Committee Chair

Maile Chapman, Ph.D., Committee Member

Richard Wiley, M.F.A., Committee Member

Gillian Pinchevsky, Ph.D., Committee Member

Patrick Clark, M.F.A., Graduate College Representative

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D., Interim Dean of the Graduate College

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THE ESCAPE ARTISTS

By

Daniel Gene Hernandez

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Colorado State University

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

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The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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## ABSTRACT

### **The Escape Artists**

By Daniel Gene Hernandez

Prof. Douglas Unger

Professor of English

University of Nevada Las Vegas

My thesis, “The Escape Artists”, is a collection of short fiction that represents most of the work I did as a creative writing master’s student. The title is taken from my longest story, a narrative about a young man’s struggle to avoid violence in a federal prison. As a title, “The Escape Artists” also captures major themes in my other stories; characters often pursue emotional escapism or literally seek to evade predators in my fiction. As a writer, I often explore breakdowns in social order, so my stories tend to be set in turbulent, oppressive political climates or else inside domestic struggles – a loss in a family or isolation between couples. The major concern of my writing is the way in which characters young and old, privileged and unprivileged, respond to challenges put upon them by contemporary circumstances outside their control. By setting my work in distinct locales, such as rural Egypt, urban New York, suburban Denver, or inside a South Dakota prison, I hope to offer a worldly reading. Through main characters that are children, young adults, and middle-aged men, I also wish to demonstrate the way priorities and insecurities evolve with age.

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### *Three Calls*

The second call came on a night when our parents left us alone – alone with our sister – and then she left us alone at night. It may have been the first time we were left at night, though I can't be sure. I just know we were home alone during the day before. I know that because there was a call from a man that came after school. He got Davy, my little brother, to do his nasty bidding and then he got me. And that was the first call. I put them together, because the first call is what made the second home alone call so frightening.

The second call coming at night was the key: I can't express that enough.

When this memory comes back, the pierce above my stomach, the uncontrollable quiver of my voice, Davy's eyes pleading and the sound of our clock hitting ticks – all that only emerges after I adjust my eyes to the dark, the flood of black that I'd invited in. It's like a hood over my face every time someone asks, "And you? Did you ever call 9-1-1?"

Sometimes I answer yes. Usually I'll say no. One night I unloaded the whole story from a barstool and even bullied the woman afterward like, "What about you? When you were a kid, did that ever happen to you?"

She wouldn't say that it had not.

"Did your parents blame you for it?" I asked. "Do *you* blame you?"

\*

My parents sent Davy and I and our sister Maria before us to a Catholic grammar school called Most Precious Blood. For high school, Maria attended St. Anne's, an all

girl's school in a wealthy suburb. There were uniforms to buy and tuition payments that got ever steeper. School lunches weren't free. Because they couldn't afford it, as penance, Mom and Dad worked odd jobs for the church, including one at a bingo hall somehow connected to the Catholic Archdiocese of Denver. This was detention for poor kids' parents – a supplement to prayers for Him to sort it all out. “He helps those who help themselves,” Mom would say. Dad might add, “He helps those who help the church rake a share of some *abuela*'s gambling losses.”

Dad never said that, but I can imagine it now.

Our father sold Pickles, little green cards with peel-away strips that hid sevens, bells, and cherries you wanted lined up like slot machine jackpots. Mom announced the bingo numbers. She was so sweet – my mother read them in a kind of melodic way. The woman couldn't sing, couldn't hold a note at all, but she tried. She tried every Sunday, on Christmas Eve, and on all those bingo hall nights by announcing “B, 9” and “G, 48” like soulful hymns for His holy congregation. Those elderly women daubing toward blackout, hunched over bingo cards as if they were soldering microchips in a Chinese sweatshop – they never noticed my mother's grace. But I did.

In the beginning, our parents brought Davy and me with them every time. We loved the bingo hall. I remember taking over the break room, rocking in dusty recliners and distracting kids whose parents made them do homework. We wandered around the bingo floor, a dimly-lit gymnasium with foldout tables, admiring the idols women set out to bless their cards: plastic troll dolls, Jade Buddhas, entire rainbows of rabbit's feet. We watched the rush to buy Pickles during the intermission and lusted to open the little slot machine cards ourselves. Players bought, ripped, and tossed loser upon loser to the floor



like petals and stems from love-me-not flowers. Davy and I raked through the litter afterward. On our hands and knees, we indulged the naïve hope that one of the thousands of ripped cards might, in fact, be worth something. And then one night, we took that enthusiasm further. While Dad was in the bathroom, we dipped into the sales bucket and stole two unopened Pickles. One, *mine*, was “7, 7, 7” – a \$300 dollar winner.

The urge to peel open a cardboard window to my luck was so strong that I never considered how we might cash in a winner. Nine years old, and the son of two staffers, how’d I not realize we could only lose?

Davy suggested showing the winner to our father. “He’ll belt us for sure,” I said. One idea was to recruit a friendly-looking bingo player to split the winnings with us. Even then, I plotted dumb schemes to rescue dumb schemes. Eventually, though, I settled on showing it to my mother. She was the person mostly likely to sympathize, most likely to help us collect, I thought. But I was wrong. Mom was devastated. Dad, meanwhile, seemed oddly proud and even excited to learn what happened. When he said “Little bastard!” it sounded like a compliment.

Mom insisted we tell the manager. Once Dad finished appraising me with his eyebrows, he suggested calling in a friend to cash the Pickle on our behalf, which of course meant *their* behalf.

In the end, Mom won. She pushed us into the bingo manager’s office and meekly announced that we had a confession. She closed the door – leaving us alone with the boss.

I raised my eyes from a gold, fish-shaped ashtray on the desk and noticed how pretty she was – a thin woman with straight black hair, large brown eyes. She had

enormous hoop earrings that set against her hair like eclipsed moons.

“I’m glad you told me,” was the first thing she said. Her eyes were both severe and confused. “And you’re sure your daddy had no idea?”

“He didn’t. I swear it was just us.”

On our way out, we heard the PA system spark to life, a blip of static and then our father’s name rang out as he was summoned to her office.

I guess that’s why, from then on, our parents left us home with Maria almost every time.

\*

Our sister wasn’t interested in the *looking* part of the whole “look after your brothers” thing. She came to check on us in the living room, which we called the family room, approximately zero times on most nights. Maria’s was a ghostly presence: footsteps in the upstairs hall, water running, doors opening with rock music flowing out and then back in as a door shut, phone calls picked up after only one ring. We would lie on the living room floor, rapt before the glow of our true babysitter. And with the kitchen right behind us, you would think we saw her fetch juice or something once or twice. But no. Maria wet her lips under the bathroom faucet, I suppose. And that’s why it startled us to suddenly hear her voice.

“Oh my God, what the heck are you guys watching?”

It was like a Taser on our backs, which made her laugh as we swiveled in fright. She put on a puffy jacket and zipped it to her chin so the collar hugged her throat.

“Where are you going?” Davy asked. Maria had black vinyl hair like our mother, and it was crimped and tussled up to look big. She wore mascara.

Since I was nine, I think my sister must have been seventeen, Davy hardly six. My little brother and I sat up at attention to grab our coats, assuming wrongly that we were leaving, too. Maria had rock-star cool friends who hosted gangs of teenagers in basements full of exotic things like beanbag chairs, lava lamps, Casio keyboards as wide as real pianos.

“You guys are home alone after school like practically everyday now, right? I’m sure you can handle forty-five minutes by yourselves. Just keep watching TV.”

It’s safe to assume that my brother and I were absorbed in one of those gritty true crime reenactments, so that was probably bad advice. With no patience for the courtroom dramas or slow detective shows that otherwise dominated primetime, we liked to watch retellings of kidnappings, alien abductions, and ghost sightings – ones that included vivid commentary from the victim or the victim’s family. There were a lot of evil men out there – bastard sons of the Son Of Sam and aspiring Charles Mansons. I insisted we educate ourselves on their crime patterns, aghast to know that each remained loose to pursue his wicked lust.

It was in this state of childish paranoia – that most severe kind of worry – that I answered the phone. As I said, it was night. And as I can’t help stressing again, and again, we were alone, as I am now. But I answered the call so nonchalantly! My focus was still sprawled across the living room floor.

The man said, “Is Arturo there?”

“He’s not home right now,” I answered. Then paused. Then I revised: “I mean, he is ... taking a bath.”

I immediately guessed that he knew. My quivering voice, the long pause before a

hilariously false correction all added up to, *No, my dad is not here. But you're not supposed to know that, because neither is my mom nor anyone else who can protect me.*

These are instincts of a nine-year-old boy left alone with his little brother at night.

The man halted long enough to confirm that he didn't believe me. In what seemed like an overly measured tone, he said, "Well, I guess I'll call back another time."

That was it.

I put the phone back in its cradle extra gently, so as not to show more panic. While staring at the countertop, I replayed our conversation – hated myself – and wondered if the front door was even locked.

"Davy," I said. "Hey, Davy, can you turn that off?" A request like this would normally go ignored, but something in my voice made him listen. My brother got down from the couch and killed the TV. The house seemed very quiet all of a sudden.

He joined me in the kitchen, where I cupped his ear to confess what I'd done in chocking whispers. When I finally finished, he asked if I thought the man was coming over.

We secured the deadbolt on the front door and made sure the back door was locked, too. We sat at the kitchen table, a place that summoned seriousness when used outside mealtime. The kitchen table was where our parents paid their bills. It was where they fought. I sat and tried to place myself in a murderer's mind. I put his Dodge on our street and his feet on our lawn and I got an idea that I thought might keep him out. "Let's turn off all the lights in the house," I said. "That way, when he gets here, he'll think no one's home to kill."

The problem with the dark was that the room's edges disappeared. All the walls guarding us from the outside seemed to dissolve as the house flooded with night. Shadows occupied furniture. Family photos and a portrait of Jesus on the mantel fell behind a curtain of black. We waited on the kitchen floor underneath the phone and facing a microwave clock that, through slits of digital light, gave Davy's face a greenish hue. The refrigerator belched, then purred. A heating vent breathed in the hall between us and the front door. "Do you hear that?" I asked.

"I think so."

Latching sounds came from a wall clock, tick, tock, tick – which suggested a countdown. It was too much for me when the roof seemed to grunt.

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes."

Strange how visceral it still feels now, two decades later, this dread that I invented out of nothing. I put the sickest intentions in that man's hands and saw him in the living room window, heard him turning the handle on the front door, listened as he descended the stairs that led to us in the kitchen, the heart of the house. We lost our heads to the dark because, at that point, it was *all* dark.

I would laugh at the situation now, if not for the way it ended. But I prefer to think ... no, I'm *certain* I would've handled things differently if not for the first call, the one a few weeks earlier when the real monster appeared.

\*

My sister's high school was more of a rich kid's college prep school than a Catholic one. Sports were big, academics were top-tier, and because St. Anne's was so

expensive, bingo night was never enough to keep us in the Catholic school system. Our parents took every weird job the archdiocese offered to make tuition, a fervor born out of Mom's personal piousness as well as knowledge that the neighborhood public schools were, as some in the community labeled them, "failure factories."

On many summer nights, Mom and Dad sold beer and hot dogs at Denver Zephyrs games. The church had connections with the minor league baseball team's concession company. They waited tables at fundraising galas, events which Maria helped at, too. My sister didn't mind working black-tie events; I imagine she was a fine hostess. But when they made her do after school work vacuuming classrooms, she took on an attitude that would never leave. I guess it embarrassed her – all the kids lingering after the bell seeing her do janitorial work. Anyway, the point is that's how Davy and I came home to an empty house.

I remember seeing the article on the kitchen table when I walked in. It was a big event for our family: when Maria started applying to colleges out of state, Mom called a cousin at *The Denver Post* to suggest a story about working-class students falling through the cracks of the financial aid system. My sister wouldn't qualify for poverty-level grants. Maria might earn some modest sum for being a smart Latina, but in truth, her options were starkly limited by the lack of sufficient aid for people in the lower middle-class. I understood none of this at time. Just that there were arguments about my sister even applying to expensive schools with large application fees. As a favor, my mom's cousin assigned a colleague to write the story. Its headline read "American Dream Deferred," and the article featured both Maria and a guy who represented her future, a twenty-something man burdened with crazy student loan debt.

But I didn't read it then. All I did was look at the picture and appreciate that it was a major event. A big day for the family with a big story on the front page of the Denver & The West section. The photo showed Maria posing sideways, propping her head up and looking at the camera with a flirty grin. It was an intimate close up, which I found a little weird at the time and still have questions about now. What does hamming it up on a couch have to do with middle-class aspirations? I can't help but wonder if that pose didn't start the whole thing.

A call came while Davy and I were watching cartoons. DuckTales, Tiny Toon Adventures, maybe. Unlike the call that came a few weeks later, Davy answered this one. I didn't notice that they were talking for a fairly long time, but I definitely recall Davy murmuring soft and whinny, and at some point, setting down the receiver to go upstairs. Eventually, he called to me like it was my turn or something. He held the receiver against his chest, muffling it. "I don't wanna do it what he's asking." He spoke through tears, and I slid off the couch to take the phone, which he handed off like it was a rank sponge.

"Hello?"

"And who are *you*?" the man said.

"I'm just ... I mean, can I help you?"

"But what happened to Davy? Is the little guy okay?"

I looked at Davy, not to check that he was all right but to shoot daggers at him because, obviously, he wasn't okay. And suddenly, nor was I. "Can I ask who you're calling for?"

"I'm calling for Maria. Oh Maria, Maria, where for art thou on this lonesome afternoon? The young woman needs to pay for school, and I'll be slapped by a Federale if

she isn't just the prettiest girl to need a ticket. *Muy linda*, you say. Isn't that right, little buddy?"

"I guess..." I said.

"You do, don't you." The man paused. "We can talk more about that later. In the meantime, I have a chore for you that requires going into Maria's room. Little Davy wasn't much help. He got a little scared-y, I think. In these moments, it's good that he has big brother there to handle the big tasks that are necessary to protect the Luna family. Right, Marcos? Are you ready to go into Maria's underwear drawer for us?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't.

He said, "I think you can do it. Maria is going to win a certain, how should I put this, *large* surprise. Something very rare and very special. I will explain further, believe me, after a series of descriptions from you. Do you know what 'descriptions' are, little guy? Marcos, your chore right now is to enter that mysterious big sister room and explain what's inside, inside her broad wooden dresser. I know that you've wanted to pry inside. Now an adult is telling you, instructing you."

I flinched when he quickly sucked in his breath.

"I want to hear about the colors. If you can, I want to know whether they smell like laundry detergent or something, well, something more *bodily*. You should feel them, too, right between your fingertips. The trim that holds the panties around her waist, is that still tight? Marcos, is there a pair with any sort of pattern, any lace or silk? I have to know right now, my boy. I'm working myself up. She must have a phone in her bedroom. I'd like you to grab a handful of your sister's panties and pick up the phone in her room. Is that clear?"



Davy stood next to me, though he looked down, then away, and slowly drifted off like he was pulled. His eyes angled back toward to the television until he totally turned his back on me.

“I can’t do it,” I said.

“I love you little latch key boys.” He gave himself a chuckle. “Davy went upstairs, you know he did, and are you telling me the baby boy is more brave than his older brother? He wants to help his sister win that ticket she needs so much. You want to deprive her? Maria, who works so hard?”

I wanted to tie the phone cord around my brother’s throat and jam the receiver in his mouth.

“I think you have a crush on her, too,” the man said. “It’s okay you’re jealous. It’s normal for brothers to be possessive.” He cleared his throat. “But it’s time for you to be brave, which means looking out for Davy and the whole house.”

“No, because it’s not the same Maria,” I said. “I think you have the wrong number.”

“No, I don’t. Nice try, but it’s too late for that. I found the right Luna. You’re standing inside 1421 East Uravan Street, in Arvada, Colorado. Must I share the zip code, too? It’s right here in the phone book—”

“What if I hang up and call the police?” I said.

“This is fun. So tell me, Marcos, what do you see when Maria bends over? Just tell me. When her thong peeks out of those tight jeans. It’s winking at you now, I think. What do you feel, boy? What are those yearns like every time it happens?”

“That is not how I am! I’m not talking about this!” I said.

“St. Anne’s – oh the Catholic school girl fantasies I’ve had! What is it about those plaid jumpers? You’re lucky, Marcos, lucky enough to see Maria cross her legs all the time. And then they uncross. What is it like? You’ve seen up there, I know you like girls, and your sister has the same body as the others in your class. But it’s better. It’s the best it’ll ever be *right now*, little boy.”

“I have to go.”

“Just wait. There’s an alternative you should consider.”

“I’m calling 9-1-1.”

“But if you do, then I’ll see the police car. Because if you can’t play along, then I have to drive over. And if the cops are there, oh, you brat, I’ll just visit another day. Maybe at night, perhaps tomorrow morning. Who knows? But it will happen. I’m getting to see Maria’s panties whether you draw a picture for me or if I’m forced to break in and poke around there myself. But which do you prefer, Marcos? Do you want to see my face? It’s very, very red.”

“I can get them,” I said. “Just stay on the phone and I’ll tell you what she has.”

“Hurry. On,” he said. “And remember, you’ll be rewarded for vividness—”

I put down the receiver to cover my ears and then, with both palms, cleaned my eyes. I waited for Davy to say something, but of course he didn’t. The TV was still on. Staring at the back of his head, I wanted to throw something, make him bawl again, but instead, before leaving the kitchen, I said, “I hate you, Davy.”

If I had known about things like Aztec pyramids, where virgins were flayed to calm an angry god, I might have compared myself to one of their so-called “offerings”. Climbing the steps to Maria’s room felt like it would cost both flesh and soul. Once on

the second floor, I faced her room at the end of the hall. Maria's door was always the tallest and heaviest in the house. It was also the only door which always remained shut.

The door opened with an awful screech and I sucked in my breath at the sight of her lying in bed. But that was just a few blankets tossed with pillows. Hairspray fumes lingered, mingled with an aroma of cheap perfume. In the corner was a poster of a man sulking with his back turned. He had busy black hair like a wild fern – the lead singer for The Cure.

I knelt down in front of her dresser and groaned in self-pity as I opened a drawer full of letters and photos and a sketch of a face that looked like Maria's. The second one had socks and nylons. The top drawer was stuffed with bras and panties. Peeling them apart, I wondered which, if described, would satisfy the man enough to leave us alone for good. I actually asked aloud, "What do you want me to say?" and finally settled on a pair which could be described as "soft," "shiny," and "made like a fancy tablecloth" – they were silk white panties with lace trim.

Just then the front door opened and slammed shut, a noise that reverberated through the walls and yanked me off the floor. He went straight for the staircase and plodded up steadily. I looked in vain for a place to hide but finally shut the door and waited there as he entered the hall. Through the carpet, I felt his feet approach. He grabbed the doorknob and tried to turn it open, but I held it back. "Get out of my house!" I shouted. What came back was like a growl. He cranked the knob then battered through, tossing me back onto the floor.

"What the fuck are you doing in my room!" Maria shouted.

I was already crying when she started smacking my head. Burying my face in the

carpet, I tried to hide. She punched my back and, eventually, yanked me up by my shirt, wrenching the collar at my throat like a noose.

“He made me do it,” I said. “There’s a call. He’s saying he’ll come over if I don’t—” Maria shoved me to the floor and grabbed the cordless phone on her nightstand.

“Hello? ... Who is this?”

She hung up. “It was just a guy laughing,” she said. “Some fucking asshole. Marcos, you little moron, don’t you know what a prank call is?”

Even though I was young, I knew about prank calls, and I knew there was more to that man’s voice than some perverted joke. After that, I became convinced our neighborhood was a forest prowled by adult beasts. I smelled a certain fauna, sensed predators lurking under canopies that brushed our windows on gusty afternoons. All of us were being hunted, tracked. And of course we were most vulnerable at night.

\*

Never mind that they were different men. After I told a caller that our father wasn’t home on the bingo night, immediately afterward, I panicked that the phone book stalker was on his way to our house. *They might come and enter from opposite sides* – that was a fear I couldn’t shake. Hours of watching America’s Most Wanted had taught me about “criminal accomplices” who help lure in potential victims. When your address leaves the lips of a feral beast, every conversation with a stranger is fraught after that, and I cursed myself for losing this sense of dread in the first place. Sitting in the dark, we waited. Davy asked, “Was he the same man who, the one that wanted ...”

My brother couldn’t finish the question. It was the first time we’d spoken about the incident, and Davy seemed afraid that if he asked “Was it that man?” the answer was

going to come directly from the dark in a wicked laugh.

“This was an older guy,” I said. The voice of the second call was dragged through dirt, a gravelly strain. “He might’ve been one of the men who helps Dad in the garage,” I realized.

Davy didn’t like that theory much better. Dad’s car buddies – they were never without a beer in hand, a cigarette in mouth, and Mom didn’t trust them. The car guys were always nervous around my mother, and around us, too. Remembering this, I wondered if a nasty motive lurked behind all that awkwardness. Not that motives matter at all when you’re sitting in a wilderness of black. I recognized that, too, because the wall clock kept hitting its tocks and ticks. The bass of a car stereo drifted into the house, seeping through the walls and rattling glass as someone drove by blaring loud rap music.

I asked Davy, “What do you think we should do?” Yet knowing that I didn’t have any answers only made him more afraid, and he began sobbing. Between gasps, he admitted, “I don’t know!” There were tear steaks under Davy’s eyes that caught the microwave clock green the way brake lights shine red on wet pavement. “Should we call the police?” I asked.

I said this story was about three calls, and the third was the one where I took control. I manipulated and deceived instead of the other way around.

A woman answered – “9-1-1 emergency” – and I summarized the conversation that began with a man asking, “Is Arturo there?”

She said, “That’s it?”

“No, that’s not it. Because then he said, ‘I’m coming to get you!’”

The dispatcher must have been a mother because she sent not one, not two, but

three patrolmen to our house. She stayed on the phone until they arrived, then softly assured me it was safe to open the door, which I did, hearing the garbled sound of multiple police radios squawking on other side. Opening the door revealed a tall, muscular black man, a young white guy with sleeve tattoos – something I’d never seen on a cop – and a female officer with sandy blond hair who looked older than the other two. All three officers wore uniforms. They looked bored, which made me feel like my brother and I were finally safe.

The woman stepped in first. “Why are all of your lights off?” she asked. Davy turned on the lamp in the foyer and I clicked on the light in the hall. We asked if we could play with their walkie talkies. They asked, “Where are your parents?”

It was decided that all three officers would stay until my sister arrived. About ten minutes later, Maria rushed through the door with her face pale and eyes like searchlights. “What happened?!” she asked.

Scanning for some sort of catastrophe, she looked me up and down and gave Davy a hug. My sister’s mascara was blotted, her hair a mess. The female officer asked where she’d been. “One of my friends needed help doing homework,” she answered.

I’m sure they didn’t believe her because the African American cop used a scolding tone to explain how “the young boys panicked when a stranger called.” Maria shot me a menacing look, and I readied to escape upstairs, but then our mother arrived. Totally mute, already in tears and oddly alone, she closed the door behind her and waited patiently for an explanation. Her look of raw gloom surprised even the police.

There was a lecture. But nothing would come of the obligatory threat to call Family Services or Save the Children or UNICEF or whoever if it happened again, which

was forgettable. It's Mom's glare that night, the way her eyes found me as if I were part of some sordid plot that still burdens me today. As soon as the police walked out, she collapsed into a chair, where she stayed for a long time. "Where's Dad?" I asked. The cops asked too – and she didn't answer them either. Mom rested her head in her arms. Over the next few days, I learned what had happened by eavesdropping on calls between her and our aunt.

Incredibly, Dad was convinced that the police were there to arrest *him*. We Luna men can be quite paranoid, I guess. My parents had argued in the car for ten minutes as he confessed to stealing cash from the bingo hall. Mom had to go in alone, expect a call in two hours, he said. Dad drove off to speak to the bingo hall manager in the wild hope that he might convince her to drop the charges. "This isn't right — she likes me," he said.

Meanwhile, Mom carried her shock up the driveway and through our front door, where nothing awaited but a tedious lecture on good parenting. She could have been relieved. They both should've been. Instead, my call was seen as having triggered a series of events that led to the breakdown of our household. At least that's how my mother sees it to this day. Our father wasn't coming home that night, but Mom still waited up for him at the kitchen table. I wanted to tell her, *tú cama te llama*, a phrase she would say to me if I stayed up past my bedtime, one her mother probably said to her when she was a kid. It means *your bed is calling you*. I was still awake when she finally climbed the stairs, after midnight. She answered her bed's call with a babble of prayers and sobs, both of which I heard until I fell asleep.

When Dad returned the next morning, he promised that the troubles had been resolved. Then on the following weekend, we watched the situation replay itself as he

claimed that the manager demanded something new. Once again, he left for the night.

Then finally, on a Sunday afternoon, he announced that he was moving in with the bingo hall manager, the woman I remembered for her straight dark hair, her large hoop earrings, her severe eyes.

Maria was the first to speculate that it had something to do with my dipping into the Pickle bucket. She said the stress of having two kids who couldn't be left alone without calling 9-1-1 didn't help our parents' marriage, either. I had those thoughts too. And though my mother would never make this accusation in my presence, I overheard her share the same theories with our aunt. That's what I mean about being haunted by a certain roaming for answers, a drift from the faces of the police that found me with a devastating glare. I recognized the look even before I stepped in front of a mirror, where I wore it myself.

After that, there wasn't enough money for Maria to attend out-of-state college when Mom and Dad got divorced, nor was there funding for Davy and I to stay enrolled at Most Precious Blood. Our mother's strong Catholic faith also left her. A lot changed, everything but our address, and with that breakdown, our vulnerability only grew.

I recall Dad putting his stuff into a friend's truck. How, when he finished, he squeezed my shoulder and said something like, "You'll get it someday. Till then, focus on being the man of the house." It sounded familiar, like something I'd seen on a made for TV movie. "Fine," I said, and I shrugged because I knew we didn't need a boy to be man of the house. We didn't need a man to be man of the house, either. It took our whole family to keep the beasts out. But we kept leaving each other alone.

I guess I'm roaming for answers, too. Because that cretin called back. I won't go



into details because that doesn't help. There was a fourth call, and then a fifth.

    Maria slammed down the receiver.

    Going into details won't help, except to confess that when he rang the doorbell, I answered. Me and Davy and Maria were home. Mom was at work and Dad had moved out months earlier. And he got in – the man forced his way through because I was too small and too weak to keep him from coming in to take everything he wanted. I was just a kid.

## *How To Quit Smoking Without Gaining Weight*

She starts by telling you to close your eyes, visualize a cigarette. You indulge her because that's what she loves about you: you always indulge her. Despite what they say about people in recovery dating, you've been together one year. She takes a sip of wine. You sink deep into the couch and notice a rust-colored ring on the ceiling, a stain from a recent leak. "I'm serious," she says. "Close your eyes."

"I'm ready."

"There's one little cigarette wrapped in soft white paper with a tan butt just waiting for your lips."

You smirk. She pokes her heel into your thigh as if to say, "Concentrate." Just a few minutes ago, she said. "I want one more chance to convince you to pick up smoking. I'm gonna hypnotize you first."

"Zoom in. Imagine it floating in the air in front of your face, dangling from a string. There are little juts and dimples in the paper, too, the same way in the suburbs, in fall, you know the trash bags filled with dried leaves. There is a leafy bulk that can't be fully shredded, or smoothed."

Occasionally, you wonder how you'd possibly get by if she died. The thought gives you so much dread you suck in your breath. And is that love? Something that controls you the way addiction does? Headlights veer across a highway and grow larger and brighter and suddenly scream in your face on nights when she's out with the people in Narcotics Anonymous who drink.

In N.A., you fall into two groups. Those who booze and constantly smoke – who

treat recovery like it's a social club instead of a commitment – and the rest of you who pursue a life of true sobriety, those who can't get drunk without relapsing into something harder, heavier. Maybe you got it all wrong. Maybe you're the weak one.

“Pick it up,” she says.

You shift on the couch to slip your hand into your pocket and clasp a steel medallion with the number “2” etched on both sides.

“Grab it off the table and feel these tiny wrinkles. Appreciate how perfectly cylindrical it is,” she says. “Hold it up to your eye and peek inside. It's a kaleidoscope of tobacco. A white canon ready to pop your head off to a better place.”

Jerome, your sponsor, wants you to earn a chip with a number “3” more than he wants to see you reach two years with Lynn. He sees your relationships – you with sobriety, her with you – competing, even though she never misses a meeting, either. He wants you to prioritize one anniversary over another. Asking which will you reach?

“She's thirteen-stepping you,” he's said. After the 12 steps, there is an unofficial thirteenth, it's the one where more settled and sure-footed addicts prey on newcomers who seem vulnerable.

She pauses to take another sip. “What next ... you know I'm just free-styling here, but that's okay. I'm good at this sort of thing.”

“Just free-styling here” – that's just Lynn. She doesn't think official or unofficial steps.

“Oh! Okay, now put it between your lips. Hold it between your two front teeth.” You hear her open her pack to demonstrate. “Feel da weight of it” – her words muffle — “then jet it dangle from your wips.” Her lighter flicks. You hear a drag pulled and

exhaled smoothly. She says, “You look jaunty.” She says, “You look cool. Isn't smoking fun?”

It is.

So why'd you quit? You used to smoke a pack a day, but only once a week. Every Friday, when Lynn got out of a “fishbowl” gig selling tickets for a community theater, the two of you attended an N.A. meeting – a coffee, cigarette, and chewing gum party – and afterwards, at gatherings fueled by hard drinks, you smoke cigarette after cig, grit after grit. Lynn insists you attend these parties with her. Oddly, it reminds you of attending church as a kid because you just want it to be over with. Watching them sip cocktails, hearing the *psssh* of another beer cap twist – it's not torture or anything, but if you joined them, by the end of the night, you'd be calling a man named Lionel instead of Jerome. Alcohol puts a pair of lips up to your ear and lightly blows, it coos. It's not that you don't want a drink; you just can't.

“Take it out of your mouth now and hold it between your ring finger and middle finger and notice how well it fits,” Lynn says. “It's meant to be right there, between the romance and *fuck you* fingers.”

Get healthy. It's your ruse. But what difference will it make if Lynn quits smoking and still drinks?

“It doesn't ask anything of your hands, and the cigarette is there when you need to emphasize a point. It's a conductor's baton with a smoking ember on the tip.”

Through the couch, you feel her shift as she leans forward to ash what's left. You can't help but worry what'll happen next. In Lynn's routine, cigarettes are grounding. Filler between empty bottles and subsequent rounds. They're footing. A tool to calm

yourself while listening or anxiously waiting for her turn to speak. On touch-deprived nights, for you, that plume has kissed your face as the gray feather drifts to the ceiling. You feel its warmth. You sometimes like it when the smoke burns your eyes.

"I want you to smell it now, babe."

"How can I smell an imaginary cigarette? All I smell is the one you've lit."

"Just try it! Put it under your nose like a little ciggy mustache and take a healthy whiff. The way you inhale the steam off a fresh bowl of vegetable soup or something. It smells good, doesn't it? Like toasted almonds. Like casual sex. It's a girl who you always wanted to be with who knocked on your door and is drunk and horny and fertile."

You open your eyes. "You can't sexualize the hypnosis, Lynn."

"Smoking is sexy," she says. "I have to use everything I got. You have to dance with the girl you showed up with. And don't tell me that's not how the phrase is meant."

On those nights, cigarettes also provide an excuse for private conversation outside, when the two of you walk to buy more.

You peek at her. She's exhaling rings, a trick she learned in high school. She's the only 27-year-old smoker who does this childish thing.

She's fond of quoting Mark Twain, who said, "Quitting smoking is the easiest thing in the world to do, I've done it hundreds of times." She knows she'll struggle, and it's impressive, to you, how long she's lasted in N.A.

"OK," she says, stubbing it out. "Focus."

For New Year's, you made a resolution to pick up smoking properly, seven days a week, for her. You didn't fail so much as give up on you doing the same things at the same time. That never worked with the drinks anyway.

This is her last chance to get you, then it's your turn to hypnotize her.

"So I can light this imaginary thing now?" you ask.

She touches your hand, then cups the back of your neck and pulls you towards her. Down you lay, in her lap. She's cupping your chin.

"First, feel how fragile it is. Bounce it around in your palm – careful not to break it! – because it's light. A Marlboro Light."

One time you indulged her by drinking all night, and it was an impossibly fun night, though terrifying how grateful she was. The relationship was stronger the next day for the fact that you were hungover together. It started with sharing a glass of water on the nightstand – passing it back and forth like a lifesaving casket in a desert. Staggering to The Greasy Spoon together was nice. She offered to pay for your steak and eggs. Then at the house, you baked together. A batch of cookies. She lit a joint, too, because that was her way.

"Now, my little cauliflower, I want you to light that light Marlboro Light. Gently close your teeth on its filter, again, lean forward and point it into a flame that's been sparked for you, just for you, by a buxom Latina woman with pink hair. She's wearing a strappy top that struggles to hold in those—"

"The bartender from 2A."

"That's right. She just introduced herself outside a bar. She has dimples, too – they show when she holds the flame low, provocatively low, in front of her cleavage, which, I must say, wow, in that flickering light? Why would you quit smoking? Why?"

You're so "pretentious," so "sanctimonious", so "pompous," she says. You're worse than a wet blanket, you're a popped waterbed, because you insist that people who

aren't sober, are not Sober. But now you can't help worrying. Quitting smoking – if she is serious about trying – (forget what's next when you announce that you want her to stop drinking as well) means so much anxiety and crankiness, you with your inevitable patronizing comments that she should just chew gum or something. Disappointment – yours, assuming she lights up anyway. Her guilt, and yours, at asking her to change. It might all be too much for you.

“Wait, we met the same way,” you say.

“Yes, we did,” she confirms. It was outside a meeting – your second or third – when she asked you for a light. Her bottoming out story, which she told earlier that night to a room of thirty, involved splashing a glass of wine in a guy's face when he said she owed him sex. They were on their third date. In her words, she “tramped on” to a comedy club afterward where she bought coke from the manager, who she woke up next to – he nudging her to grab her clothes and get going. You told her you sympathized as you lit her cigarette. With bright red hair and fair skin, she was so striking you felt uncomfortable making eye contact.

“Want to buy me a glass of wine?” she said. You thought she was joking, but no.

“Now suck in a hot drag till your tonsils burn from the heat. Inhale,” she says.

“Exhale.” She massages your temples. “It worked. You feel light. Ultra light. You are once again a social smoker. You smoke with your friends.” She combs her hands through your hair. “And you smoke with me, your girlfriend, and with the occasional stranger. I mean, what's the point of smoking if no one's watching, right?” She clears her throat.

“But then, subconsciously, you start connecting cigarettes with good times, and relaxed moments, with breaks for fresh air. You'll want to smoke even when you really don't, and

you'll become a serious smoker. Like me. That's how it'll happen." She holds your cheeks with her palms. "It's not your fault, it doesn't stem from some lack of discipline or will. Smoking is just an irreversible fate." She smooths out the laugh lines on your face. "You accept it," she says.

You open your eyes. "I don't feel any different, Lynn."

Upside-down, she pouts and reaches for her wine. "It's your turn now," you tell her. She takes a pensive swig and stares down at the floor and then toward the window.

The CD is called *How To Quit Smoking Without Gaining Weight*. That's her chief excuse for not quitting. At some point, cigarette makers convinced all women that smoking helps you lose weight, so quitting will bring it back.

"I need to lose weight right now. It's not the right time," she recently said.

"Maybe if you quit, you'll have more energy to go jogging again," you responded. That subtle acknowledgement of her weight gain was made passively, without eye contact, so it would be registered subconsciously, without incident.

She was still mad at you for it.

You push play. The two of you are now on the living room floor, side by side, and it begins. New Age organ music, a gentle lapping of waves. "This is how I want to be buried," Lynn says. "Right next to you." There is even a seagull bark that echoes. "Except, if this doesn't work, I'll probably be the first to go. You'll have to make the arrangements."

"Lynn," you say.

"I'm OK with that." She closes her eyes. "I won't ever have to be alone."

She pats the floor near you, searching for your hand, which you help her find.



Lacing fingers, you squeeze palms as the voice says, "I want you to start off by taking a deep breath. Breath in." He pauses. "Breath out."

You once threw a fist next to her head because she'd stormed out of the house, angry that you'd ignored her for the fifteen minutes she'd been home. It was 3 AM, about three hours later than she said to expect her there. "What does it matter? I know you don't love me," she told you. This on the street. You swung and landed knuckles on a metal grate that wobbled at her back. "In that case, what am I doing here chasing you around at three in the fucking morning?" you said. She hooked your arm and walked you home.

"I want you to pick a spot, any spot on the wall, and I want you to stare at that spot." She's not unfamiliar with self-help. On her bookshelf sits *The Antidepressant Survival Guide*, *Yoga - The Poetry of the Body*, *Bikini Bootcamp*, and *Narcissists Anonymous*.

You found *How to Quit Smoking Without Gaining Weight* at a thrift store where you also bought a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle, a waffle-maker, and a flannel shirt.

"Keep your eyes fixated on that spot," the author says. You turn your head to check on Lynn and notice her eyelids twitching. Another book on the shelf, *Why Men Love Bitches*, argues that, "A woman looks more secure in a man's eyes when he cannot pull her away from her life because she is content with her life." Out of curiosity, you pulled it down once, noting that this passage had been bookmarked.

She walked out because you were "being boring." You didn't want your orange juice to have champagne in it. So what? A cell phone photo came about 45 minutes after she left. Exotic orchids. Ferns. Strange flowers that weren't native to the northeast.

A peace offering. "I'm in the desert now," written with a photo of a cactus. You

drove to meet her at the botanical gardens, where you checked out the cherry blossom trees.

“Now I want you to slowly move your awareness to an imaginary spot halfway between you and the wall. And now bring your attention from that imaginary spot halfway between you and the wall, to a spot directly in front of your eyes.”

“Patience”, “hope”, “acceptance” — these are expensive words for a recovering addict, and yet you use them.

Two weeks ago, she crawled on top of you and said, “You can’t break up with me until I lose weight.”

“What?” The two of you broke out laughing. But was she saying this because she thought the relationship troubles were related to her looks? Or was she just ready to meet someone else?

That wouldn’t be hard.

The voice says to move your awareness from that spot in front of your eyes to the spot inside your mind where “awareness exists, where awareness is created.” He says, “Now I’m going to spend some time here speaking to your subconscious mind.”

You watch her listen. Her eyes are busy under her eyelids. You assume her thoughts are elsewhere, on the relationship maybe, maybe drifting away, but she’s still listening subconsciously. She’s still breathing heavily in and out.

It’s about the lamest idea yet to get her to stop drinking. What does smoking have to do with that anyway? It’s absurd and stupid to try to yank away her crutch. You’re amazed, too, that she’s taking the whole thing seriously. The hypnotist says, “Up to this point, you’ve coped with life by using nicotine as a source of energy, you’ve used nicotine

without a doubt as a way to kill time, to kill boredom, maybe even to drive a sense of identity. But to this point forward, in the future, all of the past is gone.”

She stifles a snort and allows herself a grin. You smile, too. “A new present exists,” the voice says.

Now you’re both laughing and shaking your heads.

“It’s so bad,” Lynn says.

You sit up, look at each other and smile with embarrassment. “If only it were that easy,” she says, then she reaches for the pack on the coffee table, but pauses. She pulls back not as a joke, or because the hypnosis worked, but out of respect for your effort to help her quit.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind,” you say.

She plucks one out and lights up. There’s still half a glass of wine left. You take it – she watches with curiosity – and you give the glass a twirl and a whiff. “It’s cheap stuff,” she says. “Wal-Mart wine.”

You put it back on the table. She hands you the cigarette and you take a drag off that instead.

“What do you want to do tonight?” you ask. “Go to a meeting?”

“Let’s make your jigsaw puzzle,” she says.

That’s what you love about her: she always indulges you, too.

“I haven’t made one of these since I was a kid.” She takes it out of the bag. “Oh my god.”

“I bought the cheesiest one they had.” A pair of wild mustangs galloping over a field of flowers so obviously patched together on a computer that it’s practically a

cartoon.

“There’s only three or four colors in this whole thing. It’ll be a tough one,” she says. One horse is Chesnutt colored, the other all white. The field is a kind of misty green dappled with wild lavender blossoms.

“We’ll be lucky if it still has all the pieces,” you say, handing her back the cigarette. The two of you sit on opposite sides of the coffee table, where she focuses on finding edge pieces to build the frame. You sort the inside pieces into groups of white, brown, blue, and green.

## *The Escape Artists*

“Prison is many things, after all, but mostly it is the gross simplification of life’s complexities.”

-- Peter Nathaniel Malae, *Teach The Free Man*

### **My Cheeseburger Nights**

I had sixteen cheeseburgers, or about four months with good time, on my sentence when this novelist, Clarence McCaffrey, came to Yankton to teach inmates to write real fiction. He was an author of thrillers, which thrilled my friend Condor something ecstatic. Like most of the incarcerated, and the free people, if those bestseller lists are to be believed, Condor had a devastating love for the potboiler. Baldacci, Patterson, the romances of Nora and Danielle, all those scribes of paper bricks were so in demand at Yankton that when a guy got his hands on one he had to rip it in half at the spine, sever away the first half once he reached the second, not to be greedy. McCaffrey wasn’t on a par with these icons, but he did look the part. He had an author photo. In it, he wore an old-fashioned dinosaur bone collector’s hat, a bushy white beard wrapped his face, webs of wrinkles etched around his eyes a long history of laughing too loud and crying quietly. Perhaps those lines marked long squints into his verbal ether? Even then, I knew writers had mysterious vaults of language that resided sometimes near, other times quite far. But what am I saying? When Condor slapped his flier on my bed, I gave it a two second read. All I wanted to do was go back to sleep.

“But every stupid, insipid class they offer here, you take. Fucking calligraphy,

you go. Now the one time I want to join you and have a healthy endeavor for us.” Condor didn’t finish sentences when he was angry. Mid huff and puff he’d literally stop talking, huff, make a gruff snort, then swallow dramatically. “It’ll be great!” he finally blurted. “The guy’s coming to research a novel about a prison break, so he wants to *us* to help *him*. We should do it!”

Bed springs wheezed under my bunk as two cellmates – the neighbor on the bottom shelf and the guy directly below me – got up and gestured to Condor that they wanted out, apparently annoyed at having to overhear his pitch. By standing in the alley between our bunks, his ass and crotch were sort of in their window spaces. Condor pressed his chest to my bed to let them out, then continued in an excited whisper. “McCaffrey gave an interview to the Yankton Record explaining how he attended college here, right here on this campus before it was a pen. Isn’t that amazing? We’ll be his teachers, at his alma mater.”

“Right,” I said. “Professors on the campus of FML, a nationally-recognized Fuck My Lifestitute.”

I did sometimes fantasize as I crossed one of our sprawling lawns that I carried a bulky backpack and passed girls in flip-flops and sunglasses. Because indeed: before it was named Yankton federal prison, this institution was a liberal arts college. My housing unit was a dorm where each room was designed to fit three or four students, not thirteen men. Our dusty classrooms and decrepit gym and racially-tense cafeteria were sunny, fresh, vibrant spaces filled with idealistic kids. All this during the time when South Dakota invested in things thought to be liberal, concepts considered arts.

I shut my eyes.

“Hey!” Condor said. He shook my bed. “You need be getting used to staying awake after work, at least on Thursdays.”

More of my cellmates were coming in. I heard lockers open and bed springs yawn under large asses.

“You sleep too much, Holly. We’ve only got so many cheeseburgers left before your graduation day, which is why I feel so strongly about this. We’ll make it a family night event for me, you, and Deacon.”

“Father, son, and Holy Spirit.”

“Step away from my Cadillac, buster!” Carlos was back, too, and apparently he’d caught someone hovering too close to his bed. We had four bunk beds, triple-stacked, and then a single one in the corner that was considered a luxury item, like a convertible. “Hi there, Condor,” he said. “What’s with the pillow talk?” We ignored him. Carlos was a professional gossipmonger who trafficked in rumors like other guys sell food, drugs, sex, or artwork depicting food, drugs, or sex. The pinstripes on the bottom of the mattress above me squeezed through a wire mesh as the guy upstairs shifted his weight. When I fuzzied my eyes, it looked like a bloated New York Yankee laid out on chicken wire.

“I’m dying, man!” someone shouted from the toilet. “Man, why is my shit so black? It’s like dead lookin’, man. Sean, come look.”

“Or perhaps you’d rather stay here and play toilet inspector,” said Condor.

Shoving the covers with my feet, I got him to finally back away, and I sat up and turned to the ledge of the bed. “It’s almost dinnertime,” I said before sliding down. From yoga, I’d learned to bounce to life through a pose called Rag Doll where you stand slack, limp head and heavy arms, and first erect your spine, then your shoulders and head

through a series of spasms and bone cracks. I perked to life like a rusty robot boots up in a cartoon.

Condor put his arm over my shoulder and hooked my neck as we walked out. He liked to use gestures like that to remind me how much taller he was. “The interview I mentioned was on the newspaper’s website, so it’ll appear in print tomorrow. Now, think about this, a whole army of cretins will want to inspire a crime novel, and that means I and Deacon will have harder time getting in, you know, since we’re not getting out anytime soon. I want you to get your friend at the circulation desk to throw away every copy in the library. I’ve got someone else pulling down the fliers in the rec rooms.”

We entered the hall, and passed the sounds and smells of other cellmates, and descended the stairs to a door that opened on the ground floor to unveil a sunset in the South Dakota evening sky. A brisk air hit us with a flavor of snow. “You’ll be surprised by what I turn in,” said Condor. “You think you know about nightmares, think you know about the world, my little pincushion, but I’ve got stuff that’ll teach you.”

I didn’t think of Condor as the kind of guy who imagined, let alone wrote. Knowing that he did, though, it made sense that he did so darkly. The perpetrator of a drunken accident that ended three lives, he’d been given a devastating amount of time to brood. So many cheeseburgers were left on his sentence Condor might’ve opened a Yankton franchise of In-N-Out.

It was on a Wednesday – national cheeseburger night in the federal prison system – that Condor, my boss and mentor and friend and so called “dad”, revealed to the group in a horribly aggrieved voice that he would eat two thousand, five hundred something more overcooked meat patties before becoming eligible for parole. We all laughed. It was



his way of taking back time, we thought. But then again, our burgers were nasty – so he may have been intentionally self-embittering. In any case, it was his anniversary, and from then on, “cheeseburgers” meant weeks. Even fifty-two of those made for easier swallowing than “twelve months” or “one year”.

Under an orange sky, we moseyed over the lawn and took a scenic route that went by the fences on the way to chow. “It should help prepare you,” Condor said, “this class, to deal with temptation on the outside. Take it as an occasion to process. All I’m saying is, you don’t want to be a fuckhead again.” Where the lawn ended, a set of three fences rose. Through them, you could see a convenience store, next to that a bail bonds, further down the road was a church, next to that a place that rented safe deposit boxes.

The grass was dew-pecked, each exhale visible. Breathing out dry air looks like you’re puffing crystal smoke, which doesn’t linger. It dissipates fast.

### **Escape Artists**

“Writing is just like pancake-making, and the first rule on the griddle is, never let the pancakes know you give a shit,” Clarence McCaffrey said. “That goes for your writing – don’t be afraid to fail.”

Class was held in a well-windowed space usually occupied by Friends of John. We called it the “serenity now” room because NA and Al-Anon met there, too.

This was a perfect venue for McCaffrey, who seemed like he might be high. Pacing and pausing often for dramatic effect, he continued with the breakfast theme.

“The second rule with pancakes making is, always throw out the first batch.”

I once attended Never Again, my nickname for Narcotics Anonymous, and a book

club for Eastern philosophy in this room, too. I wished the latter hadn't died so I might've been listening to someone discuss *The Art Of War* instead of *The Art of Writing Metaphors*. Condor took notes on the intimidating experience of flapjack flipping and its connection to writing thrillers, while in the back a few Natives looked skeptical. They gave McCaffrey severe eyes. Clustered front and center were old long-timers, while on the outskirts, me and a half-dozen other young folk looked slovenly and bored. Deacon sat next to Condor on the line of transition and wore his usual look of constipation and vague contempt.

Someone had a question. "What is the third rule?" Insecure young men starved for attention: we recognize each other. I saw me in him.

"I'm sorry?" McCaffrey said. "I mean, there isn't another rule."

"Nah, that's the thing," the man said, squirming and inspiring swivels, cocks of the head. "Like, rules are the same as troubles in that they always come in three. It's the magical number." Condor looked at Deacon then threw a scoff at me, meant for the guy. "I mean—if you have a first and a second, there's gotta be a third."

The Rule Of Three was indeed a thing.

McCaffrey thought for a moment before saying: "Strive to satisfy your reader's hunger while pleasuring their palate, try to awe them while you feed them," he said.

"Don't be a line cook. Be an artist."

The young questioner looked more than a bit proud of himself for drawing that chestnut out and McCaffrey then turned to scribble on the board. At this point, I realized he and Condor had shared similar tastes not only in cliff-hanging literature, but in ponytails. McCaffrey's bounced and swayed as he looped enthusiastically through a

quote. Was he the owner of a hairless crown? I wondered. “Business up top, party in the back – that would mean an ultimate mullet. It probably warranted a bet that should pay two-to-one for bald, based on the audacity that would give the ponytail.

“Why are you in here, exactly?” McCaffrey said to the board. He turned around. “You’re avid readers?”

It was rhetorical that we were.

“What is it about reading that you, as inmates, find rewarding? I’ll tell you. It allows you to escape.”

There are certain “hot words”, ones that give off steam. McCaffrey’s E-bomb made every inmate look to an officer sitting in the corner. He seemed nonplussed.

“I’ll teach you how to set yourselves free: give you a chance to get past those tall fences. But to do so, I need to hear your true stories first. Only then I can I help you realize and exploit what you have to say. Teach me who you are, where you’re from, what the world has done to you. Tell me down what the warden doesn’t want me to know, then we’ll escape this cage.”

Amazing. We glanced at the young officer again and caught him adjusting his crotch while giving McCaffrey a menacing look. A young officer will sometimes consider a man’s lust to be free, even in the form of a longer meal, an attempt to sleep in, a peeling off of you-know-whats in the shower, as a threat to the sense of order they enforce through barbed wire. I wanted not to worry about McCaffrey’s lesson getting bludgeoned out of me, but I could also imagine the words, “You’re one of those guys who wants to escape” preceding a bone-thwacking baton strike to my knees. Crushing the desire for a cheeseburgerless Wednesday night was just basic psy-ops.

“As an icebreaker, please write for ten minutes on the circumstances of your arrests.”

*A collective gasp.* Because what scavenging! Now he verged on turning us on each another. Never mind the rules of writing and pancake-making, we had our own do’s and don’ts that related to not metaphorically shiving or being shiv-ed – a set of ethics that I took it upon myself to educate McCaffrey on by penning a letter that began “Dear Sir”. But this didn’t sound right. “Hello Sir?” I’d heard butlers say that. “Excuse me, mister...” too orphan-like. Finally, I wrote:

*To You Who It Must Concern:*

*You may notice your assignment is making some of the men here uncomfortable. As I write this, five or so of guys in front of men are sweating fidgety, and I doubt they’ve even started looking into the dark hallways of their recent pasts. Thing is, some of us probably wonder how we can trust you with this potentially incriminating information. For while wreckless as some of us no doubt were (and are for that matter) almost every man had a transgression or two in his previous life that went un-penalized, often in connection with the one that finally nabbed him. ‘I robbed four banks – that they know about!’ is a phrase you might hear in a prison break TV show. But not so often in the real clink. That’s because: one, gentlemen don’t ask one another what they did, and definitely not what we really did, unless said inmates are like family or, on the opposite spectrum, uncivilized cretins—not gentlemen at all. Rookie mistake, that. Totally forgivable, but tread gently. I myself upon first arriving here eight months ago (my first time above county) tried to make a little conversation to that nature, and would you believe the man’s response? ‘Why you asking what I’m in for? You a fuckin’ snitch or somethin’?*

*Apparently, some unscrupulous louts use other felon's I-got-away-with-that-one stories and asides like confessions by association, this to buy time off, or even get out right then and there. So: will we be reading these aloud?*

*If farming source material for your next thrilling novel is indeed what brings you here, sir, I don't begrudge that. I mean, it sounds like a fair trade to me. In fact, I'm flattered. But do please use your uttermost discretion, especially with that most sensitive of subjects.*

*And while we're on the topic of do's and don'ts, here are a few more for your instructing purposes:*

*Don't: ask 'How much time you got left?' Some guys don't want to think about that stuff right now, or ever. It's quite rude.*

*Don't: fart. Out loud, that is, especially with the lights off in the room you share with so many men trying to sleep. That pisses a guy off. Don't poison the well by fouling their air with your rotten noise.*

*Don't: try to eat at the black tables when you're white, the Mexican if you're not Mexican, the Asian Pride tables if you're anything but Korean. Of course, right? Men still get that wrong somehow, including me my first time in chow. But how do you know whose tables are whose when the room is half empty because you're near the front of the line and it's your first day and you thought you were in low security prison, not a hyper masculine, baldy racist sequel to high school?*

*Definitely don't: be incarcerated for rape and especially not a pedophilia.*

*Also: never borrow pornography, then say it was confiscated when your buddy wants it back. Even if it's true, that's a fucking lie in his mind.*

*In general, live honestly, and hide your jitters and depressions as well as you can. Bad moods are contagious, and the uninfected don't like being around paranoia and sadness any more than the healthy like to keep company with the sick. That sort of thing is also, you know, a thing.*

When the free write ended, McCaffrey jumped into storyteller mode with tidbits on how the campus hadn't changed a bit. It was more diverse now, and he said he liked that. I'm not sure a diverse prison as opposed to a super white college campus was something we agreed was good thing, however. He mentioned that the biggest difference was the lack of cute girls. None of us laughed. However awkward, his dropping of the smart writer shtick helped him grow on me, fungal-like. He wanted to make friends and be liked, all I wanted, too. This parallel made me a tad lamentful about the somewhat threatening tone of my letter. In a terribly excited, utterly precious tone of joy, he also announced plans to dump piles of classic books on us the following week. At Goodwill and Savers, he'd buy everything worth saving – one man's trash, as they say – and I'm sure I speak for everyone in the seminar when I say we couldn't wait to rip every one in half, assuming they were decent.

Dinner hour arrived and class ended. On the way to the mess, Condor asked how it went. I said fine. "How'd it go for you?" I asked. Did he divulge the tragic story of his conviction?

He did not. Handing me a few pages of yellow legal paper, he said he copied out the opening to a novel he'd written for our instructor's review. "I'm not writing about crime, or prison," he said.

But wasn't he? What I read said:

*The cafes in Las Ramblas served patios full of tourists and locals alike that afternoon. Some of them were recovering from hangovers, others aspired to spend the entire day drunk. A longhaired flamenco guitarist plucked strings with long fingernails at the mouth of Port Vell harbor. A silver-painted robot stood on a milk crate in Placa Catalunya, where someone commented that he missed a spot on his nose, and was likely to get sunburned.*

*Shards of glass made mosaics on building facades that, in the powerful sun, glittered like flattened disco balls. The eyes don't relax on such days. Construction works outside Sagrada Família whistled at a gaggle of American tourists while their cement mixer churned. A female graffiti artist sketched the outline of bubble lettering on a wall facing a skate park. In short, it was a typical summer afternoon in Barcelona. Then the lights went out.*

*At 3:24 pm, the sun dimmed and simply clicked off like a lamp. Those who gazed upward at that moment saw nothing but the sun drain of color and a sky, which – like the final frame of an old film – faded to black.*

*Traffic stopped. Cyclists braked to a halt. Crooners, musicians, dancers and robot-impersonators paused. The city began to tremor, shake.*

*It started far, then was beneath and between and above. Hemorrhaging. A sudden, violent hammering noise rang out, breaking the stillness of a day that now resembled night.*

*The City of Counts suffered a dark opera – shrieking, crumbling of brick, breaking of glass.*

*Balance and touch were the last senses to fail as the great stir of matter caused*

*residents to lose footing, be lifted, then dropped. Men and women smacked and were lacerated, grasping for security, flailing and covering their heads.*

*Hearts burst. Minds shut down. Eyes, ears bled. Tongues were bitten through.*

*As soon as every single resident and visitor died, the light returned.*

“This is neat,” I said, somewhat disturbed. “I like how biblical it is,” I added.

“How did you know about all that stuff?”

“I’ve been escaping.”

### **Crabwalk**

I felt okay about writing those do’s and don’ts on the following afternoon, when I met a guy who proved at least one of them to be true. It happened in the cafeteria, during lunch. You never knew if it was going to be a recruitment day, when suddenly, there would be a bunch of new guys who would give a certain electricity to the air, a promise of sparks. That’s what happened: it became like a livestock auction. Because cheeseburgers eventually do get eaten, guys leave, transfers occur, men die of natural or violent causes, crews split up and gangs run thin, there is an ongoing need to keep human resources in mind. This kind of outreach (or reverse outreach: which I guess you’d call “out push”) tends to occur at lunch because that’s the first social hour for most of our new arrivals. The fateful moment happens when they carry their food to what they believe to be their new lunch spots. How much vigor does the brute have? That’s what we’ll ask. Because, like I said, it’s a meat market. Cliques, gangs, bachelor herds, and gregarious loners don’t want just any new friend; they’re always shopping for “new rivals” too – hence the scrutiny.



Condor noticed this kid first. “New boy strutting with a fake limp. Wow, is he lost.”

Face of a Greyhound – nose and mouth pointy as if he was born to sniff holes—the kid wore a smirk and had Okie pale skin. His jumpsuit was two sizes too big. He had ink running up from his wrists to his neck. Spider webs, Japanese lettering. One tattoo showed a hand making a gang sign on his bicep.

“Who gets a tattoo of a hand on their arm?” I asked. Deacon laughed, Condor didn’t. We watched the boy sit at a long row of tables belonging to an African American clique. He was a total buster: a white wannabe black.

“How many spoonfulls of that mac and cheese will he get through before the fight starts?” Deacon asked. “My fruit salad says under 3.5.”

The men nearest him weren’t quiet types, recovering drug addict burglars. I’d taken yoga classes with one of them. They desired, I estimate, zero to do with the new kid. Issuing a nod of respect their way, he tried to downplay differences. They scooted over two spaces to create a buffer. Someone cackled loudly in the crew that owned the table, which arrived then. The spider web on buster’s neck tingled as he was surrounded.

If you’re a malnourished Greyhound, it might not be your destiny to be Alpha or even Beta or Zeta in a pack of Bully Pits. This gang let their newest member handle enforcement, as was typical in our group. He put his tray down next to buster and whispered the opposite of sweet nothings – bitter everythings – in Okie’s ear. Their impatient boss sat down then opposite buster and lifted his tray, slammed it down, made a loud clap that sent buster backward off the bench. The room broke into a fit of hoots. On the floor, buster crabwalked to safe distance and then jumped up and spun around

scowling. It was the sort of display that can really set a man back, really haunt him, and that's what made what happened next so seemingly benevolent.

First, an officer ambled up to make sure Okie got his tray back without incident. Shame to miss out on ham-with-American-cheese-on-white-with-macaroni-salad day. The officer watched him get the tray, then left the kid standing there alone and pleading-eyed, searching for those who were the least rabid among us. It was a long search.

“Hey there!” Condor said, waving.

“What are you doing?” Deacon protested. “That boy's a lost cause.”

Condor didn't explain his logic, continuing the call – “you there! – and gesturing to come hither.

“Are we into missionary work? You want to convert the converted? Don't invite that twerp over here. The second I hear him speak phonybonics—”

“You need to get on board with what I'm doing,” Condor said. “He's a nice looking kid. You know, the youth of today, they all need some nurturing, and that's why we have you as our spiritual advisor. I'm confident you can set him straight.”

“I won't,” said Deacon.

I stiffened, as did my cohorts Osama, Noodles, Bobby B and Chris Gay. We didn't like seeing our dads fight; none of us knew how to intervene or whether it was safe to take sides. It didn't happen often. Condor was the shot caller, but he usually respected Deacon's vetoes. The Holy Spirit stood up and took his tray to the dishwasher just as Okie moseyed up.

The kid took Deacon's chair without waiting for the official offering of the seat. He stabbed his macaroni salad, shoveled it in his mouth and chewed emphatically as if it

were The Casserole of His Nemeses' Most Delicious Balls.

“What the fuck happened over there, son?” Condor said.

“Man, why’s everyone keep axin’ me that? Like, I’m just tryin’ to fuggin eat. Shit.”

“Well, if you want to eat shit in peace and maybe enjoy a modicum of respect in this building, then you better eat with us from now on. Get it?”

Putting his spork down, finally, the buster sat up straight. “Okay, mista. I can roll with that. But I gotta say, if any ya’lls faggots, well, you best speak up about it now.” He looked at me when he said this. “I ain’t no one’s bitch and I ain’t no *busta*, neither. My name is Zeek.”

We weren’t sure whether to laugh or punch him in the face. Condor gave a mixed indication.

“Sure, Ezekiel, sure. Okay. But don’t flatter yourself. Alright? We’re not pederasts, we don’t prey on anemic hillbilly kids with dirty white trash buttoles. Quite to the contrary: we like to jack off to pregnant women. Elegant soon-to-be mothers. I might even let you check out my collection of Parenthood ads if you settle down and admit that you’re a buster.”

“Ya’ll’s racist bigots, uh?”

“Not particularly.”

“I’m not,” I chimed. “I may not look like a José, but that is my name.”

“No it’s not. Your name is Holly,” Condor said. Our new rival joined him in mean-mugging me steadily, doing that most-annoying prison thing where you find the guy you think is most weakest and compensate by being hard just toward him, a cowardly

attempt at landing a couple rungs above said target.

Condor insisted, “We’re not so bad. Just a little bit anti-buster, especially our friend Deacon, who you missed.”

No comment in response.

“That was a nice little crabwalk you did. Maybe you’d like to go back the same way?”

“Aight, aight, I meant no disrespect. Ya’ll cool. Whatever you do, fuckin beat off to preggio chicks – I don’t give a fuck. I’m jus’ sayin: I ain’t no busta.”

“Then it’s settled. Mr Busta here will be our new, new guy. Holly has graduated. Congratulations, Holly. And welcome, Busta. Congrats to you as well.”

By the end of the week, Condor offered welcomes to three other new guys. The first two ignored him, and the third sat down only to say that he missed his friends in the medium-high prison he’d descended from. “Shit is petty down here in Cupcakeville.” Two separate guards had admonished him for not tucking in his shirt and this man was going to sucker punch the next officer he got the treatment from right in the eye, pay the fare to get home with a five rolled up.

It worked, too. He got his punches in. And through that, this man reunited with his posse over in Montana, or Idaho maybe it was. Violence came in odd packages at Yankton. Sometimes it was impromptu, other times planned. You could call it justice or vengeance, but really some guys just wanted to be with their friends.

### **Everyday Hustling**

Unsurprisingly, there were a lot of different faces in McCaffrey’s next seminar. Walking

in I immediately noticed Deacon's absence. He was no longer there wearing a desk like a tutu around his gut – some news anchor-looking guy stole his seat.

When I sat down next to him, I noticed Condor and McCaffrey comparing notes on Armageddon in the corner. My mentor's "dark opera", as he explained it, was about a doomsday device that governments used to trigger earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes and the like anywhere, anytime. The mystery was: who used it on Spain? Condor's subject was tribalism on a global scale, because he wanted to show diplomats running around hallways of world capitals trying to identify and stop the psychotic regimes behind for the attacks. It was a good excuse to describe the world thrashed apart and on fire.

While McCaffrey nodded enthusiastically, probably hoping Condor would return to his desk so we could start our lesson, I noticed the new rival occupying the seat next to me glancing with eagerness my way. By all appearances, he was a typical white-collar felon. "Greetings," he finally said. "I'm Bradley. Well, Brad, actually."

He could have been the weatherman from my mother's favorite 5-o-clock news show: expensive haircut, cheap smile. "Pleased to meet you, Brad Actually," I said.

McCaffrey handed back our first submissions. His only comments on my do's and don't were a "Thank" and a "you", which had the ironic effect of making the letter feel thankless.

Our next assignment was to examine was a job – legal or otherwise – that could vividly provide a setting or "milieu". I fancied myself sharp when it came to vocab, but McCaffrey taught me a new one there. He also recommended it be "mundane," assuring us everything was interesting and all writing would remain private. Sure, the author wanted to learn about DJing at strip clubs, or a fry cooking at Denny's, or drug dealing

on a corner (two of which I could have spoken to) my relevant experience was going to remain just that, *mine*. I wasn't interested in rehashing junk (or rather describing the growing of marijuana and selling of said plants I partook in to score junk (i.e. heroin)). There was a mercifully straightforward lesson on description writing – no pancakes or spatulas mentioned – and then we had another ten minutes to furiously scribble.

So I taught McCaffrey about everyday hustling.

*My first gig was in greeting cards. These were abstract expressionist ones with lines expanding off triangles, overlapping circles and squares, maze-like patterns meant for nothing else than pleasing the eyes. They were fun to draw, but didn't sell. Someone finally reminded me that greeting cards are supposed to greet. So I made phrases with fancy lettering. "I Love You," "Missing You," "Happy Birthday," "I'm Sorry," all with cursive flair. These sold better. Eventually, though, I accepted that there was a devastating amount of competition. For some reason, visual artists of great talent are incarnated in astonishing quantities. I couldn't beat the tattoo artists, who hired assistants to trace their designs onto the top halves of letter pages. Jesus bawling under a crown of thorns might seem like a miserable greeting card cover, but if you insert a caption like "Pray For Me," it'll find some buyers. So, since that market was saturated, I looked around and found something more in demand and less met by supply. I became a porn mogul.*

McCaffrey was walking the aisles and reading over men's shoulders. He wore a red button around his neck, a "panic button" the administration provided in lieu of that Officer Skulks sitting in the corner.

"The proof of a good pancake is in the tasting," he suddenly announced to the

room. “The same applies to writing—let your reader smell, see, and taste your story.”

*A friend who works in the library offers access to a copy machine. We call him Shouts because he suffers from the night terrors. His office smells like ink and hot plastic, and his face is smooth as someone’s who was dunked in a vat of syrup. He’s my partner in production, while this guy Osama is my supplier. (Most people born in New York might happily accept a name like “Liberty,” or “Ellis.” We even tried to christen him “Boogie Down”, because he’s from The Bronx, but Osama rejected all of the above. So we Bin-Ladened him.) Smuggling in pages of hardcore as well as Pregnancy ads: that’s his duty. I believe they get taped between the darkest pages of car magazines that his cousin mails in.*

*So many men are crafty. So many men are ambitious.*

*When not working for twenty-five cents an hour as the highest-ranking gardener, Deacon plucks flowers that are symbolic for special occasions. He dries them, flattens them between carefully selected bible passages, sells them as a pretty bookmarks or inserts for letters and cards men send home to loved ones on the daily.*

*Smart white-collar felons sell legal work: writing and editing letters for men to mail to lawyers, congressmen, journalists, activists.*

*Providing medical services like chiropractic adjustments – neck twists and back cracks – as one man does will earn a practitioner good money in the form of a commissary deposit. Those accounts can be converted into batteries for a radio, potato chips, copies of US Weekly or People. In a life like this, it’s all about diversions.*

*Diversions are the pleasure.*

*Though dangers lurk in the black market, because you can and will get caught.*

*Who knows that better than we?*

*Take Noodles – thus named because he was caught stealing spaghetti. Raw pasta makes a fine snack when you boil it in a microwave provided in every dorm for commissary grub (every one has a kitchen) but Noodles never got that far. After raiding the cafeteria cupboard, he was pulled aside for a random pat down and tried to shake the pasta out his leg. Guy looked like a scarecrow when the yellow strands bunched over his shoes.*

*It was Hanky – an officer as ugly as a snot rag – who gave Noodles his nickname. The guy received five days in solitaire and lost his kitchen gig – a risk you take when stealing from the workplace.*

*Selling medical supplies -- band aids, knee braces, cotton balls, tape – those are my other hustles, a fringe benefit of working in the clinic.*

*Condor – thus named for his bird of prey type face, all ruddy and red and with a beak -- knits hats and socks and gloves, these of great value when the South Dakota winter hits. We wear the same used, hole-in-heel gym socks during summer and winter.*

*Carlos, my cellmate, works laundry and competes with Condor by selling access to extra shirts, new socks, even a spare coat if you can hide it. He'll sell you a fresh sheets if an accident happens. And should you be lucky enough to expect a conjugal visitation, Carlos can be commissioned to iron your jumpsuit. Give those scrubs a nice crease on the leg, too, for an added sum.*

*Our new friend Busta is a janitor. He'll plunge your toilet or mop up your vomit. It's his job — he makes no extra money in doing so.*

*“Sensory details.” McCaffrey spoke right in my ear. He was scoping my work.*



“Describe it for the senses.”

*Busta will plunge the black waters of your can by putting a black rubber suction cup on the end of a wooden handle into the stinking foul hole that is the exit point of thirteen men’s human waste. He’ll pump that clog clean, and he’ll scrunch his face in pain while doing so, I wrote.*

Everyone else seemed to have finished. And even from the back of his head, I could tell Condor was terribly proud of what he’d done. McCaffrey let us out early, but not before warning that on the next occasion, some of us would read aloud.

In the hall, afterward, Condor said the Spanish prime minister was giving a speech to the United Nations General Assembly. He asked, “How does that famous part go? ‘If you prick us, don’t we bleed? If you wrong us, don’t we get revenge?’”

I didn’t know, but I was with him in the library when he finally looked it up. It’s about being isolated as a person discriminated against and how, if you tickle us – us the foreigner or outsider – don’t we laugh just like you all? If we’re poisoned, we die same as anyone because we’re human. I thought the speech was about equality – should be the same justice for all, Jew and Christian alike, as it says – but Condor focused on the wronged and the revenging part of the sermon.

### **Gossipmongering**

Saturdays we didn’t work. Weekends were filled with basketball and chess tournaments, cards games, crochet stitching, the drawing of portraits from photos of men’s wives and children. We pursued our talents for money and/or fun. We either bettered ourselves or intoxicated our bodies though drugs, alcohol, sex – all three of which I avoided. I liked to

go the gym to I bulge out my arms and chisel my abs. Each remained unswollen and undistinguished, but it felt good anyway. Routines don't just make the world go round, they make cheeseburgers disappear without the tedium of chewing and swallowing and tasting every bite. On sunny days, I practiced yoga on a stretch of grass secluded from the old guys who walked laps. Downward-dogging, warrior-posing. I might even try the crane. Every guy had his way: Carlos liked to waste time with pictures I sold him and, one morning, waited for me to wake up like a kid who couldn't believe Saturday morning cartoons started so late.

“Hey José, how'd you sleep last night?” he asked.

I knew he wanted something when I heard my real name. “Fine. How did you sleep?” I asked.

“With my eyes closed.”

I hopped down from my bunk to change clothes and Carlos followed me to my locker.

“Why don't you give me a look at the new shipment of mami pics?”

I showed him a laminated copy: a dark-haired mother-to-be tenderly cupping her hill-shaped miracle. “That's it,” he said. “I like that right there.” Her protruding belly button peeked from under by a cropped white T-shirt that contrasted well with her dark-skin. Carlos said, “I heard yall's politics is changed. You recruiting little buster boys now. Not sure if that'll help, but Condor, he's got to do what he can to help yall soldier on, news being what it is and all.”

I had zero clue what he was suggesting.

“Don't know nothing about that, huh? Look at you all dumb-faced. See, it ain't

just a big coincidence that Deacon left and you got a weird new buster, now. Condor don't talk, but I know."

He picked at a loose fiber of scotch tape peeling off the corner of the page, which he still clutched, clearly ready to be alone with it. "Carlos, what do you know? Just tell me what's going on. Okay? Every time, with this salesmanship, it's so, I don't know, *tedious*."

"You didn't know that one of your dad's gone rogue?" he said. "Shit, I bet you don't even know which one. Well, new policies bring new policies. Sad to see it affect stuff in the bedroom, though."

Every student of history knows about Carlos the Jackal, the most notorious South American ever to grip a Kalashnikov. Well, at Yankton, we had Carlos the Weasel, infamous gossipmonger. His actually sold rumors that had political value. People bought them too, because they often turned out to be good.

"Look," I said. "If you want one of these pics for free, you just have to ask. You don't need to be such a pitchman. We're friends. If you think you know something I should know, just share. Do we have to do this dance every time?"

I took the mami pic, tossed it on the top shelf of my locker, and handed him a Playboy photocopy: a former TV star with her legs crossed and mouth agape in false yearning.

"I want the Motherhood ad, too."

"This is my livelihood!" I said.

"It's mine, too, Holly! Gimme them both, I got good stuff today."

"You're greedy, man."

“Greedy? The fuck, kid. Don’t forgot about my generosity when your junky-ass was reekin’ up this room because of your withdrawals and shit – you *cagando* – but who bailed you out of that mess? You with no porn business, nothing to trade. Who helped? Because I don’t need to tell you what happens when you don’t replace those dirty sheets. There were twelve motherfuckers ready to kill you soon as you weren’t already dead.”

“I paid you back. I gave you all my best greeting cards.”

“*Pfff*. Those didn’t work. She still hasn’t written me back, my mom even said it was weird what you drew.”

“Enough. Just take them both.”

Even if his wife did write back, I don’t think Carlos would’ve held her letter with as much tenderness as he held that sheet of pregnancy porn.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “She is ... well, for one, it’s not a nude. But besides that, her spawn is like bulging out of her.”

It was clear he wasn’t listening. Eyes soft – the way all of my customers’ eyes went – he truly entered the ad. “Entered” being the right word because it was just that creepy.

“Que hermosa,” he said.

“Wait a minute,” you caught his sleeve as he started walking away, “what’s this intel you’re selling?” It appeared strenuous for him to stop, to turn around and speak, the way his loins dogged him so. Finally, he sighed and pivoted back. “Condor and Deacon are old partners. Like common law lovers, you know. But Deacon, he is separated now since Condor wants to open up your gang to be a much bigger family, no standards or nothing, this because there’s an army of pedophiles coming in. New laws with of all that

internet shit going on. So white chumos is bound to be comin' in here in giant packs, soon. It'll be your white boy gang's job to beat up all the white chesters. Talkin' about much more enforcement than you're used to. There's bound to be so many, I'm thinking they will organize. Condor expects they will at least. He's preparing for war, you know?

“Oh. Uh, I didn't know.”

“Prison guards expect you to do it. Holly, you ain't been here long, so you don't know shit, but Condor, his ass knows. It's the guards who'll say you better beat that chumo fuck, and if the white gang can't do it and then the Mexican or the black gang has to, we got cross race violence and on top of that, no respect for your crew. Right? You need all the honky fists you can get right now. It's a matter of survival, lil porn man.”

I had to admit: his theory had legs. Arms and a tail, too. Condor was indeed skitzo enough to worry about something so elaborate, so speculative, and it was indeed the rule that we beat every Anglo-Sax chumo, just as the blacks beat the black ones and the Mexicans assaulted the Latino chesters. That duty, in fact, fell to the new guy, which thankfully was no longer me. I felt suddenly glad for Busta. My tenure was long, but it passed without me having to lay a single lick.

My skill was diplomacy, anyway. If war came, I'd do my damndest to avoid scenarios which might extend my education at the University of Yankton Prison by talking to Condor about letting me out. Having learned all of this building's lessons, I was ready for civilized life again. In the grand scheme, there is more to being – the “being” of the Eastern thinkers – than just surviving or doing drugs. There was love, and wisdom, and neither of those were in stock on our campus. The only goal I had, beyond staying clean, was to get out with my good time, which amounted to eight cheeseburgers.

That afternoon, I saw Deacon watering the flowers in our central garden. I was en route to the gym and offered a “Hi, Holy Spirit!” through cupped hands.

When he waved me over, I cringed and pointed to my wrist as if I were time-pressed. Then at the gym, I officially met Bradley, the new student in McCaffrey’s class. He approached me on the bench to offer a spot and, uncooly, went on to ask what I was in prison for. Despite my insistence that I did not want to talk about it, nor hear what his situation was, he offered his sob story, his tale of woeful luck. Something about tax forms and signatures, a job as an accountant for an old-time oil magnate or some such junk. They had paid him to embezzle, evade.

In other words, he was a pederast. That should have been obvious, but I was too naïve and distracted to read through his litany of crap.

### **So Much Thunder Without Rain**

McCaffrey said, “I write to find out what I think,” a quote he wrote on the board next to the name Flannery O’Conner. It was my turn to read that night, and since I had finally accepted the challenge to share how I got to Yankton, I held those pages.

It was an event I had not thought about, and certainly not written about, before. “How I got here” was the title. Like Carlos might have, I also added a simple answer.

“How I got here: I drove.”

McCaffrey made me read this at the front of the class.

“When you get busted federal, the judge can send you anywhere within 500 miles and it’s up to you to commute there, to the prison, at the designated date and time. Right there in the courtroom after the verdict, I asked, ‘Where the heck is *Yankton*?’ Because I

was out on bail, I got to wear a suit and tie. It didn't help, though. My mom sat next to me weeping while the Colorado map unfolded in my head. I saw no Yanktons. Hope was that the prison was in the pine-scented Mountain West, an area of creeks and afternoon rain showers which might sooth my itchy, skag-deprived nerves. Or was it the dreaded east? Dusty, hot, and slaughter-house reeking? A landscape of vicious tornadoes and brutal droughts. Out there, you get lightning and thunder without rain.

“‘South Dakota,’ the public defender said. ‘That prison is in Yankton, South Dakota.’

“‘It might as well have been eastern Colorado, except that a Dakota was probably worse. My girlfriend wouldn't visit me. I wouldn't visit me if I was her and she me.

“‘That morning, my last, Mom picked me up at Misty's house. She drove severely, gripping the steering wheel high and tight with two hands like she was holding the reins of an impudent mule. We got out Denver and took the wide turns around the farms of the Front Range without drifting onto a single dot of the painted lines. The rare sharp curve she handled like rails, causing the tires to wine. We didn't talk much except for an occasional pained effort by her to counsel me to seek the Lord's grace, his light and all that.

“‘If Jesus is the son of God, then why do I pray to him instead of his dad?’ I said. ‘What doesn't make sense is the hierarchy. You can't have two men share the throne. Jesus should have to wait till God dies before he gets so much worship, and power,’

“‘She turned the radio off when I said that. Which was just fine, since I hated the Christian Broadcast Network. She knew I was trying to provoke her and so deemed me unworthy.

“I focused outside of the car then, reflected some. As we drove through eastern Colorado, I jumped between the very worst of what I did, or what I guessed was the stupidest, and what I should get ready for now, the now of being incarnated at Yankton. I wished I had taken the Greyhound. Although my brother rode with us, he slept in the backseat like an old Basset Hound the whole way. Mom was a silent tempest: a distant storm filling the sky. A lightning bolt, she cut the dark with a web of light that caught the ground and shocked the black, but remained too far for noise. I only felt a tremor through the floor.

“We hit Nebraska, a state I had never been to before. The way I’d imagined it from the cowboy image, Nebraska was a state full of reed-topped prairie – yellow, brown, and green grass in a sea. That, forever and ever. And then the occasional hill just to offer hope of change, though it never really comes. A real wasteland, in other words. And like that on and on, but striking! Suddenly alluring if you’re en route to the University of Yankton Prison. You suddenly see what they mean about all that beauty in the vast emptiness of the West. All those songs about so much freedom. Well, I got it then, finally, as we passed busted shacks on neglected farms, rusty silos and windmills with holes in the sails. There were scrawny cows and horses, tractors with peeling paint, no wheels. I thought about how there’s so much peace and all that peace can be yours if you’re willing to embrace its burden – quietness, hard work, and isolation. Not too many people are brave enough, but then I felt like giving it a go.

“You think of all the jobs you might of had. What if Mom dropped me off and I tried to make it as a wrangler or farmer? Life on a ranch, where I’d sleep in a bunkhouse instead of a cell? I thought it sounded great. I suffered a vicious spell of the ‘if onlys’.



“Like: if maybe I knew back then what I know now, et cetera, et cetera, I might have gotten away from the stuff that led to my mistakes. With a shake of the head, an exasperated sigh, I tried to shoo out the *if onlys*, send them back to the prairie. Because think about it, that’s one of the silliest, most brutal things you can do to yourself. Besides, it doesn’t make sense. I mean, how would you know what you know now, if you knew then to avoid its learning? One thing I get, in the now of having been sent to Yankton, is something I learned in yoga – a quote from the great Oriental scholar Confucius. ‘By three methods we may learn wisdom,’ he said. ‘First by reflection, which is noblest. Second by imitation, which is the easiest. And third, by experience, which is the bitterest.’

“Somewhere near the South Dakota border, we stopped for gas. My withdrawals were cracking so brutal, like I knew they would, I rushed from the car shouting ‘gotta go pee!’ with a kit in my pocket along with two caps of Dilaudid that I stole from my brother’s girlfriend. I got to work mixing a hit, flashing for a second back to the image of him sleeping on the couch when I walked in, that jar of pills sitting on the coffee table like an orange goodbye present. My brother’s girlfriend’s back problem was probably what kept them together. Hope I didn’t ruin things.

So I crushed the pills, then dribbled the powder into a spoon, then lit it to a boil, then thumbed a cotton ball into the mix to filter out the shit before sucking the mix from the wet cotton ball into my rig. Right before slapping the hit, I noticed something. A fucking sign on the sink warning about ‘Non-Potable Water.’

“*Well, fuck*, I thought.

“I’d just mixed my favorite, the most pure form of legal skag there is – ‘hospital

heroin” – with bacterial amoebas.

“But what could I do? I punched that syringe in, and it was fucking nyyyce.

“When I staggered back, I was confused to see Mom in the passenger seat instead of the driver’s. She rolled down the window and said, ‘Your turn to drive.’

So I did. Nearly nodding off every five minutes, I drove for two hours, high as the Hubble, all the way up to this campus right here. They were sleeping next to me, Mom and the brother. All of us sleeping, really. I’m not sure how we made it but we did, and that’s how I ended up here. I drove, and I drove high as the hubble.

“I arrived to Yankton a total pincushion, still feeling it while I squatted and coughed, and felt terribly yeeked-out by the end of my first night here. The hungry orangutan shoved my head in the toilet in the middle of the night. He wanted fed. My organs wrung out and treated the old anus like a sieve. Yet since then, finally, despite the offers you get in this building, I fully and proudly quit.”

Everyone looked at me like I was some award-winning fuckup.

“It would probably be more interesting if your mother walked in on you,” McCaffrey said.

I wasn’t really ready for writing advice just then. I guess I thought writing classes were at least one part group therapy. Naïve assumption.

“I was in a gas station men’s room,” I said. “How would my mom walk in?”

McCaffrey thought about this. “Right. Well, what if your brother walked in?”

“My brother? If my brother walked in, he would have asked for a hit!”

“Exactly,” McCaffrey said. He leaned back in his chair with his arms behind his head. “That’s great.”

I looked to Condor, who appeared, in receiving my eye contact then, a bit disgusted and sympathetic at the same time. His frown tugged at a wrinkle over his brow while a vein in his neck showed aversion.

It was the same expression Mom gave me when I entered the security checkpoint and waved back from custody like: *you can go now, Mom*. Like: *goodbye, Mom!* She looked sad just like that.

### **On Yo Knees**

They sheered us onto the central lawn to do renovations inside the cafeteria, rec rooms, and dorms. New security cameras were getting installed into “trouble spots.” The campus was also sprayed for roaches, rats, and bed bugs. It seemed the only area untreated for general decrepitude and violence-sheltering was the classroom hall. You couldn’t fit us all in there, though, so the general pop waited outside.

Sky was overcast, air electric with clouds dark and drifting.

“Smart of the warden to put us out right before a storm hits,” Condor said. And it didn’t take a Doppler system to recognize his prediction was sound.

Just then a booming snap.

All heads turned to the source, which could have been lightning, but sounded more like a gunshot. Everyone turned his gaze back to the rolling ceiling. Like a movie sequence where time moves forward through whipping and stirring gray clouds, it was an uproar that made even the tough guys small.

“They goin’ leave us out here durin’ a rain?” asked Busta.

“Look over there,” I said. Not too far away, a dirty charcoal cirrus smeared into

the ground. “Cats and dogs. Falling like house pets but they’re worried about bugs and mice.”

In a flicker-flash, the storm showed two blinding veins. Another booming snap, this one deeper, angrier than the gunshot a few minutes earlier. About three-Mississippi away.

“Nigger!” Busta shouted.

“You idiot,” I said. Condor smacked the back of his head, but plenty men in groups nearby still looked our way scornfully. “We’ve got enough problems as it is,” I said.

“It’s not even here yet,” Condor said.

“Is ‘bout to,” Busta complained.

“Perhaps.” Condor was smiling now, and the wind rose with his grin. “Or maybe we’ll just get a tornado to rip through here instead. Twisters don’t need rain. They do fine without it.”

Some groups sat on the lawn like there was about to be a fireworks display. I hoped Condor was right, that it wouldn’t rain, but more often than not, a tornado and thunderstorm work hand in glove. I could imagine, not far away, hail bouncing off asphalt and a kid crying in the backseat of his mom’s car, which had stopped on the side of the road. There is nothing but splash on the windshield, whimpers from the backseat, but Mom says, “We’ll be okay.”

Condor, our father, welcomed the storm with a kind of envy on his face.

Another shotgun peeled off, then another. The officers had converted a section of the lawn into a shooting range where senior guards worked through bullets in a show of

force, occasionally hooting and bragging about what a mess they'd made of some haystack, while the young officers circled our crowd in black golf carts.

When a circle of gangers next to us started a rap song, we tried to listen. *"This is a robbery, robbery. A robbery now. Get on the ground."* Busta nodded along. *"Gimme that wallet. Hush yo mouth."*

"Who is this guy?" Condor asked me.

I turned around to see Brad smiling, waiting for an introduction to the broader group. My friends closed in around him and Busta chest-bumped the poor creep. "He looks like a pedophile!" Busta said.

"Haha. *No*," Brad insisted. "No way."

"What do you mean, Busta. He looks normal," I said. "He looks like a person named Brad always looks." There were generous guffaws from the crew, the loudest of which came from Deacon. Big bald Deacon had snuck into the cluster of us there on the lawn.

*"Yo money, yo money. Yo keys, yo keys, get on yo fuckin knees."*

"If you think he's normal, then I'll consider him," Condor said. "What's your crime, Brad."

A wild gust that was like something uncanny caused every voice to pause, every man to glance about for help. It brought us the sound of a siren, a wail I recognized as belonging not to the prison, but the city. "Turn off that fucking radio!" someone shouted. One inmate had a pocket stereo with a tall antenna, and he found himself increasingly isolated as friends rushed away in every direction, leaving him alone in a growing circle of green grass – the human sacrifice for our lightning god.

One more shotgun blast. At least I think it was a gunshot. The echo lasted longer and was deeper than any before. Officers jumped into golf carts and drove off to seek shelter in the admin building while, up in the watchtower, riflemen left their posts.

“They got to let us back in!” Busta said, but all we could do was shield our faces and wait. The grass flattened in waves, and some guys had their shirts whipping up to their armpits, or flapping loose on backs like flags.

To Condor, this was research. He fantasized that we were soldiers in a North Korean military parade which was interrupted by a surprisingly strong clip of wind. Later, he'd write about an eerie whistle that caused spectators in Pyongyang's central square to glance in every direction for that odd sound's source. Just like the wind in our yard, it raised skirts and made every face in the plaza look down. Hands pressed hats. There was an ominous growl. The holiday called for soldiers to lead convoys of trucks hauling ballistic missiles in a rigidly choreographed procession. Just a line of ants, they hit headlong a train of dust and debris. A large a banner of Kim Il Song's smiling portrait was too heavy for a single flag bearer to keep steady, or even hold upright. It flipped backward and made men duck. Everyone leaned forward and bowed low, less the wind take them, too.

The music stopped. The thousands there in perfect formation groaned and stooped, bracing low to keep footing.

Like emperor penguins, the North Koreans in Condor's fantasy huddled tight. One, and two, and then five slipped away from the edges screaming. All that noise was drowned by the louder roar, though. Flags and rifles went air born and legs whipped up, arms groped as the cluster dragged across the plaza and finally floated and smacked

against buildings, breaking columns and cracking stone. It left stains of red, like grapes splattered on cinderblock.

But I'm getting ahead of what *really happened* for the sake of sharing what Condor wrote.

Our group stayed on its feet. When the wind calmed down, the men who cowered or knelt to pray stood up. Condor continued his interrogation of Brad.

"Everything I did for this man, I did as his lawyer. If you want, because I know this stuff, I can help you guys out with legal stuff. Take a look at your cases. Tell me what happened and if your trials were mishandled, I'll tell you. We can work together to find a new lawyer. Pursue an appeal."

"What else you got?" Condor said. "I already know I'm guilty. So sorry, Brad."

It was at that point that I interjected with a special passion to say, "Wait now. Hey, what about the rest of us?" I got angry — real bitter at not being consulted. I momentarily forgot hierarchy — like Jesus, if you will. "Condor, I could use him. Remember what I told you about how I got tooled by the Feds? That sketchy shit they pulled to raid my house which even my lawyer said was probably illegal." Blinking with confusion, Condor smirked like it was silly for me to expect him to remember. "The DEA, man. They said it smelled like pot from my porch. A fucking informant told them to follow me from a head shop, and I'm serving someone else's time. This sentence is going to haunt me forever unless I do smart shit from here. I bet this guy Brad can help. Why don't you think of us, huh?"

God, did Condor consider my plea funny! The rain never came, and the wind finally went away, but he still saw lightning, he still saw war and weapons and sneak

attacks under that gray sky. Helping me, or aiding in other men in their efforts to return to civilized life, that was silly junk. No diplomacy for the big, skinny guy. Deacon and Osama and even Busta showed expressions of sympathy. I thought maybe they had cases to make, too about being imprisoned for unwarranted means. None of those guys spoke, however, to offer expressly their support.

“Fine,” Condor said.

I still wonder if our fathers knew what I was up: if this was part of some chess-like gambit. We had a lawyer in our crew for all of one and a half days before that exploded.

The fact was, Condor and Deacon were like on another level of foresight when it came to playing new rivals. Going with the chessboard, they were like grandmasters and we the pieces. I wasn't just a pawn, though. I'm at least a knight, because unlike a pawn, a knight can skip over spaces and jump backward.

Soon as the news arrived to the library, I found it. I happened to be there picking up a new production of pregnancy porn and traditional soft-core when a slightly yellowed bundle of several days' old newspapers came in to be stacked at the entrance. His mug shot was on the front page above the fold.

“Teacher Arrested for Wedding License With Teen”

“Oh fuck,” I said. “Shit, no please, shit. Fuck!”

Like a total pulphead, I grabbed every single copy and took the whole ash-smelling bulk to the “X – Z” section, an empty aisle where sunbeams illuminated clouds of dust. If anyone saw me scurry there (and surely some of the men reading and writing at the front tables did) they must have known the news was bad. Indeed, I read that



“Bradley Davis taught social studies and coached track and field at Yankton high school, where he met Gabriel Carter, a 17-year-old minor who he planned to marry once the marriage license was approved.” I went on to say that, “According to court documents, Davis asked her to the movies around the first weekend in September and then took her back to his apartment where the two had sexual intercourse.”

My first thought, rather focused on my own self-preservation, was that he should have been in county. “Why the fuck are you in a federal prison?” I was speaking to Brad’s mug shot. Because he was a local, they must have locked Brad in the federal clink to scare him something rough. He needed serious storage, they’d decided, perhaps a violent inmate-on-inmate correction -- the kind the system encouraged us to dole out on pedophiles.

My only hope was that he’d be released soon on bail. After his trial, he’d likely get shipped somewhere else and I could avoid contributing to his corporal punishment, see the whole scandal swept away without ever having to take part or assume responsibility for him tainting our brand. So, to buy time, I destroyed evidence. I wasn’t protecting Bradley – I was protecting myself from guilt by association. I had vouched for a chumo, a chester, a motherfucking child molester. Even if the girl was 17, he’d be marked, as would I for lobbying for his welcome to our crew.

Before pushing the whole stack through the recycling feed, I took a last furious look at his mug shot. The man seemed graver, weepier than your typical man in booking. His chin frozen by the photographer mid-tremble, eyes glassed in fright. It was like he knew the swollen face and slashing cuts, the purple scabs that awaited him. Maybe it’s the same way a wartime paratrooper anticipates so much death below as he floats down

to a battlefield. Brad felt the “ground rush”, where the floor of the earth grows bigger and faster the closer you get. But I heard the booms, I saw their fire-spouting machine guns, too.

### **Pox On A House**

It must have rankled Condor something terrible to sit in the corner, which he did to avoid Brad, who sat front and center. McCaffrey was waxing egotistic again. He said, “Saigon Lily’s character was based on a brothel madam I met as a tourist in Vietnam. She was an assassin of sex work. Might have toppled empires in another day.” I walked into this scene and wondered: Did Condor have an informant in the library? Did he suspect Brad was a chumo the entire time and simply give his name a *goog*? Who knew how he knew. The important thing was that his choice of seat confirmed that I was in trouble.

Condor beckoned me to his side, where an empty desk awaited. Despite the fact that McCaffrey’s lesson had already started, it was obvious Condor wanted a quick tete-a-tete like something urgent. This wasn’t one of your hey-buddy-I-saved-you-a-seat waves, and I fell into the chair hesitantly.

“You’ve been avoiding the group,” he said. “I haven’t seen you at chow time, so where you been eating?” In truth, I had splurged on three days worth of commissary store chips and cup-o-noodles so that I could stay in my dorm.

“Homesickness, I guess. Because of the release coming up, not really hungry? You know?”

“Cut the shit,” he said. “I know you’re lying when you only speak in questions.” Then he lowered his voice and added with a whisper, “I suppose you’ve read the news

about your new attorney. Well, since he's not a lawyer"—Condor's breath was horrible, as if he'd actually been picking on a dead animal's bones—"he's just a wretched cretin who fucks high school students, what sort of punishment do you suggest?"

"Whatever you decide," I said. "Of course you know you have my blessing."

"I don't need anyone's blessing except for the guards, and I'm sure you know I'll get that," he responded. "But you seem to misunderstand the question, Holly. What I meant is, what should *your* punishment be? What do you suggest we do with *you* now?"

"Me?" I said. Voice raised, causing heads to swivel and McCaffrey to look annoyed at the front of the room. "My goal was to expand our ranks," said I, again in a whisper. "Just like you wanted, I was only—"

"Did you work in human resources before you became a junkie?" he asked. "I can't believe how naïve you are. And the fact is, I don't believe it." The gravel in his voice hardened into a pavement sound that everyone surely heard – listening in – including McCaffrey, who was no longer talking. "We will continue this conversation in the hall after class," Condor concluded.

In the corner, a poster hung which read, in Old English font, the classic plea:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*The courage to change the things I can,*

*And the wisdom to know the difference.*

I would add a few more requests, such as a security detail, half dozen less cheeseburgers on my sentence, a lightning bolt to strike my fathers, Condor and Deacon, dead as they engaged in make-up sex or whatever was going on.

McCaffrey said, "Rules are bullshit" in response to someone's question. To my

right, Condor was doodling a swirl of black ink that looked like a hurricane or a ninja star. “The only reason to know what the rules are is to know when you’re breaking them,” McCaffrey added.

Every prison gang has the same rule: new guy handles enforcement. So what did Condor have in mind? Was I to take a few slugs from Busta, or kick Brad’s ass for him? Since the chumo in the front row, currently writing notes, was such a shameless wretch he was sure to snitch at a volume so loud the guards could not ignore it.

And if I led the assault, that would be a knock on my behavior and I was bound to lose my good time.

What a shit day that would be when I turned twenty-five in the clink. When I read *The Great Gatsby*, one of the classics McCaffrey dropped with us, the most devastating part was the narrator’s realization that it was his birthday, and the end of an era. “Thirty,” just the number gave me shivers. “The promise of a decade of loneliness,” he wrote, “a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair.”

*Twenty-five*, I wrote in my notebook. *The promise of another year wasted, the dwindling likelihood that my girlfriend will stay faithful, a decreased sperm count.*

Of course I could always recuse myself from enforcement duty. Condor would then banish me to the wilderness of General Pop, a move that might invite former allies to attack me, make an example out of me. I considered what other tribe might take me in. Adopt this orphan. Looking around the room at members of various groups did not inspire much hope. The Black Muslims preaching Prislam? The Natives who reject so many claims of one-eighth Cherokee? Mexicans who, because of my light skin and weak Spanish, called me José with a tone of pure sarcastic loathing? No. No. And probably not.

The scattered bands of bachelor herds who were terribly into drugs were my only chance at safety in numbers. Then again, they were decidedly un-tough. Plus the drug thing. One dramatic option would be to declare that I was gay. Announce how I felt in danger, had been harassed for my sexual orientation. Everyone knew that queers-only prisons were safer. But gayer men than I had tried the ploy only to be rejected by the administration and, when word got out, rejected by everyone else as well.

Condor raised his hand. McCaffrey's lecture on whatever I'd missed appeared to be finished. "So what you're saying is, there are rules to breaking rules," Condor said. "On the other hand, what if this breach of normal working decorum, the established senses of what is good and what is not right, happens to be truly vile, just incredibly disgusting and abhorrent, not only in respect to the standards of the sophisticated culture, what you would consider the ideal grouping of leaders and thinkers' beliefs in what should and should not be done, who don't like it the way it looks or sounds, and I also mean morally and ethically, something produced is of such questionable value, be this on accident or on purpose, I mean, like you said it's best to know when you're breaking the rules so that you break them well, the rules founded not only on aesthetic concerns, but social, so we who break them risk becoming guilty by association with our characters, our decisions as pertaining to what is said or done by these individuals, I'm talking perhaps, for example, of pedophilia or other crimes which are indefensible by any standard of civilized society, the sort of things that some of the louts in this very institution are in fact guilty of, we write about that act and we therefore accidentally endorse it, we aid and abet, if you will, these actions by encouraging protecting them from the black and white realm of right and wrong in which they actually belong, if you

will, by giving them voice or because we vouch for them in the choices we make, consciously or not, even if the work doesn't per se support pedophilia by merely colluding with these characters in any sort of ambiguous way, like maybe some in our very ranks may be guilty of, by then breaking the rules, the rules that are not meant to be broken, what then? Isn't that, I don't know, a terrible risk?

“I have this friend, I'll call him José, and hypothetically, if he created something, like a situation in which things could happen that he thought were very interesting and useful for a broad sector of audiences, but in fact his assumptions were wrong, and the work had dire consequences for the established order of the world, the rules if you will, of good standards, and so he would debase and try to destroy the rules by letting this stand, not condemning his own work, or destroying it, but nothing at all, no explanation, no effort to apologize for the imposition or embarrassment caused by this unconscionable, deplorable, morally bereft act to the friends and mentors he had, or anyone else exposed to the situation, so he merely let it ride, he hid from criticism and said, ‘Judge this as separate from me, this thing, this situation which I created.’ In such a case, what are we to do? How can that sort of rule breaking possibly be okay?”

Like most of the old heads, my mentor was a disciple of the codes and structures formed in prison. It was a system that thrived despite the lack of a law-abiding instinct within us men. People really do want order – especially if they couldn't find it on the outside. The system on the outside was flawed in Condor's mind. But our system? Our process was a thing most righteous to him.

McCaffrey answered my mentor's rant with, “I'm not sure what you're talking about, but I'm going to say, it depends.”

The instructor invited us to experiment then by writing a story that broke the rules, and knowingly so. But the rule I broke had nothing to do with prose, or pancakes or what have you. I won't bore you with the transcript, but basically, I outlined the nature of my quandary with Condor, and Brad, and an imminent beating that would be condoned by the unofficial criminal justice system, and I concluded by asking: *Mr McCaffrey – Clarence – please tell me what I should do.*

Of course, I didn't have time to wait for a response. In the hall, Condor jabbed me with his pointer finger, lowered his head and flared his nose. "Holly, you're a pox on our house. A damned plague. Don't think you're exempt from helping on this thing now. It should be Busta, but instead, it's you who I'm assigning to conduct the assault."

I knew it!

"Beat him, Holly," he said. "Wait for my instruction but be ready pounce hard. I wanna to see a gurney."

Apologetically as possible, I told him I wouldn't do it. "I support you but I can't risk extending my time here."

He didn't shake his head in disgust, didn't frown or say a word.

"I only have six cheeseburgers left," I said. "And, well, that's just not who I am. While I'm grateful for the education you've given me here, I'm done."

Our father bumped me as he walked off, stomped down the yellow-lit hall that led to a cool Dakota dusk in the yard. I heard the door close behind him on its own weight.

### **Shower Head**

The chumo that divided us, reunited them. Condor and Deacon showered next to each

other. Big gut Deacon was shaving his head where he'd let it grow out during his sojourn in the wilderness, and even from the back of his head, I could see his large, ape-like mouth move as he talked to the man showering next to him, a new rival from the gardening crew, about the benefits of churning topsoil. Condor was under a showerhead to Deacon's left. The whole gang was there, occupying all eight stalls.

"I'm waiting here, guys, just so you know."

When Condor turned around, I smiled. He ignored me, swiveling back to his shower. I retuned my gaze to the wide-angle sight of a half dozen butts while Deacon's voice boomed off the walls, dappling puddles that collected in low points on the concrete floor. Condor used the imminent assault as an excuse to renew their vows. The Holy Spirit was an odd case: in for killing a friend over a woman, which I could never see. Like Deacon – *really?* Deacon who had zero passion for anything but making his bed every morning, reading the bible, and sniffing "textured aromas" in handfuls of dirt? A jilted ex-lover who killed in a fit of bitter rage: *really?*

The man was a recovering skinhead whose life partner had branded himself a hippie. That didn't make sense either.

They took their time, double shampooing that long gray mane, in Condor's case, and scrubbing his cue-ball head a second time, in Deacon's. "Your fingertips will turn to raisins. You also risk getting a fungal infections between your toes if you stay much longer," I said. Since they were conveniently flanked by the rest of the crew, with no other inmates in line for showers but for me, I got the suspicion this was planned.

Noodles glanced at me apologetically.

"Mr Doomsday Device," I said to Condor's back, "will you please let me have a



shower?” Turning around and crossing his arms and grimacing severely, he showed that he would not. “Busta,” I pleaded, “Get out of there, man. I’ve got, like, four minutes now to scrub and dry off. Please.”

Busta appeared to be *gunning*, flapping his tiny, translucent cock in a misty fantasyland. None of them moved, and I only had three minutes left. Then two. Finally, Condor slapped off his faucet and the rest did, too. The squeaking of wet flip-flops as they plodded, the scattered dripping of leaky faucets were the only sounds as they walked out. When he passed, Busta mumbled something to me which ended in the N-word. Condor waited till it was just him and me. “You say a lot of stupid shit, Holly.” He held my chest as I tried to pass. “That’s why you need a strong family. You want to be funny? Make funny Hollywood jokes and flap your funny Hollywood tongue? Fine. Do your duty and you can get away with anything. If not.” He yanked on my penis and I yelped like a dog. I never learned what “if not” meant. He left me alone there, bent over and covering myself.

And since I felt no duty to anyone anymore and had no goals but to earn good time and get out – get out and stay clean – I made zero rebuttal. He grabbed snagged his towel off a wall hook and stepped off to the changing room. I only had one minute to shower so I dove into a stall and whacked the facet to full “H.” After thirty seconds of furious soaping and searing water on my face, a deep voice from behind yelled, “You!”

I swung around. “Huh?”

“What the hell you still doin’ in here?” the guard said. I thought the answer was obvious so I just stood there, soapy. “You high or something? If you want to take your time, fine, but my shift is over. You stuck in here till the next block come through.”

He turned around right as I yelled, “wait!” Slapping to kill the water, spinning and lunging—“wait!”—I slipped and skidded and, of course, fell flat on my ass and back. There was a rusty drain that caught me, leaving a “tramp stamp” of scratch marks on my skin. It felt like my elbow broke.

The sound of the door latch, the big lock cranking into place and burping secure echoed though the moldy crypt. “Bastards,” I said. It was hard to guess how long I’d be waiting. Could be hours, I figured.

The only thing that made sense then was to get up and turn the shower back on. To scrub every cell of skin on me clean was the healthiest, least-mental activity I could think of. I started by closing my eyes and enjoying a face rinse that was hot, hot. What felt good was pretending to be under some waterfall, a Shangri-La of parrots and green peaks, a place free of pederasts, creeps, punks, pricks, thugs – all the unhinged people that were supposedly my friends.

When my skin started to prune, I turned it off. Running the towel across every inch of skin was soothing. I dried off and then tightened the towel around my waist. It was a long open row of shower heads, pseudo-stalls, and a certain spot on the floor against the far wall seemed to be the least wet, most clean span of tile to sit down on.

A drip-drip-drip. So much steam that if you fantasized hard, it could be a sauna. A YMCA. Resting my head against the wall and resting my eyes felt okay. It felt nice.

*Drip, drip ... Drip.*

"What the fuck Mother Fuckers!" I screamed.

The thing about prison is, the place is designed not to leave you alone like that when you’re good. We got exercise, TV, bocce ball. There are books. But who decides

what it is to be good when the inmates are running the asylum? They give you a deck of cards at least when you're in solitary confinement. That's why we called it Solitaire.

"I want my deck of fucking cards!" I screamed.

In some dank corner, I heard mice crawling. I liked to reorganize my locker or tidy my bunk space when I got stressed, when I felt like I was losing control. As soon as my sister ran away from home, I tidied the bajesus out of her room so it would be nice if she came back. At the time, I was only eleven, but I remember thinking, or realizing, I had this organizing tendency, this desire to gloss or straighten the house, which I knew was a stand-in for my desire to fix a place that was spiritually stained, emotionally broken and cluttered. I even vacuumed my parents' closet. But what could I tidy in the prison shower? What now in this foul grotto: sop up puddles, puddles, and more stagnant puddles with my little bath towel? There were tiny beads of water everywhere, like the room itself was sweating.

These wet streaks combined with the stink of mold and sweat to remind me of the gunners, the men who jerked-off in the shower while gazing out at female guards. There was a screen that let officers see inside to monitor sex that might go on as we washed up. One notorious inmate was caught not once, not twice, nor thrice, but *four* times gunning while squinting at a female on duty. She was not flattered, and it landed him a nasty clubbing from a colleague of hers, plus one week Solitaire. I had my chance now. But who would she be?

The last time was inspired by two ebonies who visited me during a skag dream on my second night at Yankton. I hadn't cum since before I'd even finished my first cheeseburger, and that happened because I was very sick. After retching and shitting on

the clock for over ten hours every 45 min., I passed out and, who knows why, sort of awoke on my back with a pair of women crawling over me. She was upside-down, passing my face. Her knees touched my ears, her pussy inches over my eyes and lips, like pulsing. I felt her take my penis in her hand, then with her mouth work it up and down, north, south. I was like a cripple who lost the use of his limbs.

Finally, I dragged a hand up to pinch her bush between my knuckles. I twirled it, tugging the coarse hair. Then I slid a finger in and massaged her inner wall, causing her to moan over my dick. I slipped the finger out and massaged her clit, causing her to lower and rise, working with and against my fingerprint. She arched her back, poking her lips out. My dick got harder as she worked it faster. Then the other one joined in, lifting her friend's knee and pushing her way in. She crawled up and hung her breasts over my face, dangling them over my eyes and nose and mouth and finally low enough for me to catch a nipple with my teeth. I kneaded, she whimpering softly. The other woman still sucked, pumping her head, and then used her hand like a piston to explode me off.

I woke up back in prison land, where I'd not only come in my pants, but pissed and shit the bed. It was the warmest, wettest, worstest mess I'd ever made and I wanted to cry.

*Don't think about that!* I told myself. The shower was so quiet, it sounded like someone chewing over an intercom how I stroked. I tried to speed up. *Callie, Callie.*

Our last time together was the morning of the penis mold. I couldn't use that memory but I couldn't resist wallowing in it, either. She started kissing me only twenty minutes after I snuck to the bathroom to shoot skag—right when I'd got back to bed. There was no way I was getting hard. Somehow, though, she worked me in and when I

finally got a little life, when I started performing like myself, she grabbed a jar of white putty from the nightstand and said, “Shove your dick in here.” It was some sort of DIY dildo kit, the idea being to make a penis mold that she could take out when she thought we were growing *detached*, a word that made me wince given the context. I gave it a whirl. The clay was cold and grainy, and I started to shrink. It was pathetic. When she whipped it up, that’s when I was detached – I’d my habit from her the entire time. What a waste I was for her! We couldn’t even laugh about the pathetic impression she made of my member. It turned out to be an appropriate souvenir of our relationship. Small and flaccid. Neither of one of us wanted to try again or finish what we’d started.

Could I even consider that the last time we’d had sex? It didn’t matter, because the urge was gone. I was starting to chafe, literally and otherwise. What was the point of working so hard to graduate from Yankton with good time when so little inspired me, or, even worse, shamed me in the place from which I came and was soon to return? To suffer and be isolated here, in prison, just to leave early to get back where I was a fuck up, limp dick, drugaholic loser. *What’s the plan, Martinez?* I asked myself. *Once these cheeseburgers are gone, what then? Find a job unloading trucks? Find out that Callie has moved on?*

*Why ask why?* I thought. “Try Bud Dry!” I said, remembering the beer jingle. “Yes, Martinez, that’s smart. Go crazy. Get out of this place via the *psych* ward.”

I had five cheeseburgers left till my release, and there would be plenty of time to brood about being an impotent cuckold on the drive home. With Mom listening to Christian Broadcasting, the brother sleeping in the back seat and the brown, dusty prairie on all sides, that would be the perfect time for heady regrets because then I would no

longer be trapped by my mistakes. There would be the storms in the distance going around the car and finishing in our rearview mirror. A flash might blind me for a split second, leave my person a little wet and a lot more humble – that wasn't so bad.

Brooding wouldn't be so bad then. But till that day, nothing could be considered except survival. I'd leave my laments in a place subconscious.

Doing yoga, I passed one hour or so before a guard opened the door for a new block of men. "Whoa!" he said. "Is that ... wait. Did Officer Cook lock you in here when he left?"

I didn't answer—only fell from my crane pose.

After a long sigh, he added, "Don't worry. I'll say something to Cook."

"Please don't," I said, preferring to keep my head down.

It being the late afternoon, on a weekend, I was able then to visit the library, and went straight to the spirituality section.

### **Zen and the Art of Tsunami Surfing**

Although I don't hold interests in motorcycle maintenance, I figured this would be a good book because it's about Zen, too. The second half was amputated and missing, and there were a lot highlights as well. I lay in my bunk and just stared at the cover, just felt the creases where the paperback had bent. It showed a wrench growing out of the ground with leaves at its base. Reading the thing was hard, though, with my cellmates chattering. The way they were convinced of their intelligence and righteousness made me want a real wrench ASAP. I might throw it at them. By stirring in my bunk, I tried to catch different angles of light and see if somehow my ears could catch an ambient sound more pleasant.

“It takes a lot of years to fly to Mars,” one man said, “but I ain’t doing shit here, so why they don’t send me? Be like the new Australia. Start our own planet, you know what I’m saying? Get us the fuck off this rock.”

Someone had underlined, “The real University has no specific location. It owns no property, pays no salaries and receives no material dues. The real University is a state of mind.”

Like someone turning my brain with a wrench: that’s what that felt like. Already my perspective was twisting leftward, as if loosening.

I thought I’d been blessed with a bit of peace then when my cellmates stood up and filed out in unison. But it was the opposite of peace that I’d been blessed with.

Deacon was in the room. His first visit to my cell, he didn’t know which bunk was mine and I watched him poke his bulky head and thick neck around the wrong corner of beds. I held my breath until he spotted me. He didn’t speak and neither did I. Coming over and leaning against the ladder of my bed, he crossed his arms in anticipation of an apology or something. Finally, he said, “That’s an interesting book you have there.” I put it down at my side and sat up. We weren’t making eye contact.

“Someone is either reading the second half or it’s lost,” I said. I wondered if he could tell that I was clenching my back teeth. Probably, Deacon had destroyed the second half of *Zen* in opposition to its Eastern way, the same way he wanted to corrupt or quash me.

“About that shower scene: we thought you needed to remember what it’s like to carry on in here without a family,” he said. “Clearly, you took for granted how much easier it is to do time as part of a unit like Condor’s. What you didn’t realize, too, is that

the world's changing and in the new scheme of things, you're going to need us more than ever. Gosh, I mean, *really* need us, especially if you keep making friends with awful sinners." He turned to face me then, and put a hand on my bed. "Don't you agree?"

"It reminds me of your Trinity," I said. "If we're like Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Condor, me, and you. Then how come I can't simply be forgiven? Why are you asking me to do things, like be a goon, that Jesus never had to do? He was always told: Be nice."

"There were sacrifices, including the greatest sacrifice, because that was God's plan. He gave his only son, if you recall."

"Well, I'm not him."

"Well, no shit," Deacon said. He rarely cursed, and seemed to resent me more for inspiring him to do so. Pulling in my legs to hug my knees, I listened, sitting in a semi-fetal position, to his ultimatum. "Here's the deal. Right now our racially-confused friend Busta is staking out a certain chumo cretin in anticipation of the moment when he walks past your doorway. Once this happens, Busta will grab him, shove the bastard in here, guide him onto that Cadillac bunk in the corner, where you'll be waiting."

"Why?!"

"We'll hold him down, Busta and me. You'll do the main work. I want you to be very aggressive, focusing on his crotch, Holly. We need to make sure that man loses everything he's already used to ruin lives."

"No, what if he snitches? What if the guy dies of a heart attack and I get a twenty-years added to my sentence? How many cheeseburgers is that? I've got nine left now. Nine! Less than two months to go, so I'm sorry, but I want you to take this to someone else. Please just leave me alone."



Deacon asked, “Did Condor ever tell you what happened to him and his brother when they were kids? What his mother’s live-in boyfriend did? I guess not. It seems that he never shared his most traumatic secret with you, his favorite son. Understand, we’re doing this for him.” The bald man looked down at the bunk under mine. I heard laughter in the hallway. “It isn’t fair that they lock up young kids like you for silly junk while a middle-aged man like Brad gets the same treatment for preying on young girls. It ain’t right. Though this thing we do in response? That’s right. That’s your job today.”

He was trying everything – every parable in the book – but it wasn’t effective anymore.

“I respect what you guys intend to do,” I said, diplomatically, “and I’m sorry for Condor’s childhood – I really am. But it’s like, my whole life, I’ve had no major choice that were really all mine. I didn’t make my path, everything just sort of happened to me. Don’t get me wrong—I let it go that route. I take responsibility for being a passive coward who followed more than he led. But it ends now. I’m tired of reacting to things. I want to go my own way. No flock, you know what I’m saying? It hasn’t ended well for me, this being a soldier thing. Ever.”

“Whatever the fuck you’re talking about, I don’t care,” Condor said. “When that man lands on that bed, you better do the right thing or something will indeed ‘happen’ to you.” With that, and one last threatening glance, he walked out. In the hall echoed another cackling laugh as soon as he exited.

For the next five minutes, every time someone passed the door, I braced for a fight. Perhaps it would begin with a blow to his head, a scuffing of shoes as they dragged him into my cell. I considered pulling the covers over my head to pretend I was asleep.

Reading *Zen* offered comfort, but how could I concentrate? *Paranoia and the Art of Political Subterfuge*: that's the self-help book I was in need of. Like in Condor's manuscript, or McCaffrey's next thriller, I was one of those characters who exist only to made an example from. Too cowardly, or stupid, or stubborn, or naïve to live. The author devotes page after page to making their death foreboding for a bigger, better character who really matters. What can such a person do to change their ending?

Nothing. I might have run from my cell, but there was no point. Condor had a sandstorm sweeping into Yankton so anywhere I went would be brown fog, just wind and dirt flooding through. I was in a tornado touching down in Red Square, in Moscow, when the nukes are fueling for launch. Give me a chunk of heroin and a broad spoon in such a moment and I'll steal a lighter. I wanted to fall back on my bunk and dream in withdrawal time. Instead, I heard Busta shout, "Take that, bitch!" in the hall. He steamrolled Bradley through the door and into the center of the room, a makeshift fight ring. "Hey, wait, no please! Wait!" said Brad. Busta thrust the pedophile against the ladder of my bed like a battering ram and then pulled him back. He spun Bradley around and cracked him across the mouth with a fist.

Brad fell on the bunk under mine, hitting his head on my bunk as he fell. "My tooth, you broke my cap," he said. Condor, Osama, Deacon, and a few others who I didn't know came in single file.

That was a forest fire in the Rocky Mountains. Condor was both the arsonist and the weapon, the fire. He saw a category five hurricane swirling toward DC and his solution was a tsunami rolling toward Rio De Janeiro.

"Hit him, Holly!" On that big green peak, I was there. Under Christ the

Redeemer, who stood with his arms outstretched in a gesture of daring. I was witness to the wave slamming through.

“Hit him, son!”

Osama and Busta reached up and grabbed my legs, yanked me off my bunk and positioned me, on my feet, in front of the weeping, wheezing pedophile. I hemmed and hawed for excuses, yet couldn't find words. I realized the only way to escape certain disaster was to harness it, and in this case that meant surfing the wave. Brad was on his back in fear, bloody lips and pink stained teeth showing as he looked at me, mouth agape. He made his bed, as they say, and now he was shitting under mine. The motherfucker. Grabbing the bed frame to brace myself, I jumped and stomped him in the stomach.

He grunted.

“Again!”

I jumped and jumped, hammering my heel at his groin. When he tightened his knees and swiveled his hips, Busta and Osama grabbed his ankles to spread him for me. I bounced on that bed like I hadn't done on any since I was a kid, stomping to let no doubt remain as to whose side I was on in the great war that was arriving to Yankton.

### **Fatherhoodlessness**

The cell they put me in for Solitaire was miserably cruel. It had one fogged up window that was set so far in the wall, I had to lie on the floor to catch sunbeams. Crawling to chase my one square of light, I watched the sky all day. It was usually white, though sometimes on clear days I saw blue. Half asleep, my eyes half open, I lay on the floor in corpse pose when someone knocked. I didn't answer. The food hatch opened and Deacon

spoke through. “Well, Holly,” he said. “You know who snitched, don’t you?”

The guard must have supported chumo assaults because I was apparently being allowed visitors.

“I’m kind of out of the loop,” I said, as if speaking to the ceiling. “But I can assume it was a man whose name starts with ‘B’ and ends with ‘rad’.”

“Do you recall writing a letter about a certain dilemma you felt to a mercenary novelist who may have been inclined to share this dangerous information with his best friend, the education director?” he asked. “Yes, Holly. That’s right. That novelist, that letter. You who snitched on your damn self.” He paused, expecting some agonized regret on my end. Yet none came. “Oh, it’s okay. You were probably right. I think Brad would have snitched if you hadn’t of beat him to it. Because of your effort to save him and yourself, though, you got Condor in trouble, too. He’s implicated, and right now down the hall here, he’s playing Solitaire. You might say hi through the drain.”

“Yankton. It’s always yankin’ us around,” I said. Finally, I sat up and turned to look through the food hatch, a window on his angry eyes. “Deacon, I’m sorry.” I could hear him breathing. “Hey,” I added. “Got anything to read? You ever find that second half of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*?”

He harrumphed. “No, but I have something better, the same book I always have on me. After you get out of Solitaire, keep in mind you’ll be totally on your own. You, son, are Cain.” He pushed it through and left it on the metal ledge meant to hold my lunch. “Read up on what to expect when you’re in the wilderness.”

There were boxfuls of the pocket edition New Testaments in our library. He waited for me to grab it, which I did to avoid offending him. “Thanks,” I said.

A guard told me it would be ten days before I went back to general pop. I played a lot of Solitaire and tried to build playing card homes a few times, but this was frustrating because the floor didn't allow much foundation with its slant. Eventually, things got so dull I read some chapter and verse on the real Jesus. Some of what he said wasn't so bad. So I could see how you'd follow him. I just couldn't get behind *them*.

There were occasional weird sounds. I couldn't tell if I was going crazy, because on occasion I heard neighbors talking to me, or to each other, or to themselves through the drain. But I couldn't be sure it wasn't imagined. Here is what happened. Every cell's floor doubled as a drain – the whole room sinking toward its center like some kind of sewer funnel – and I swear I heard, “Baby, baby, oh *sweetie*, I'm sorry,” and then someone crying.

Once I thought I heard my name in the echo-tone – an eerie call like, “Hawww-Leeee, Hawww-Leeee.” I told myself it wasn't Condor, couldn't be that he was still in. But then I wanted it to be him. I was safe, even though this voice reminded me that I'd been banished from Condor's brood. It was like a bitter and grateful moment at the same time, and using my real name, I called back with my face down on the drain. “Hoooooo-Zaayyyy, Hoooo-Zaayyyy. José!” I have to admit the name never fit me. It was another example of something unfortunate that just *happened* to me – but at least it came at my birth. I couldn't do much about this thing. Now was the time to embrace choice, I thought, and I could choose to reject nicknames, all new strictures of other men's making. You don't have to be a pawn, you can decide you don't want to play.

It's somehow easier to make idealizations in Solitaire. There are all certain things you just feel, too. When I got down on all fours, pointed my butt in the air and elongated

my spine for downward dog, the thighs started to burn, the shoulders ached. What's good about yoga is you hate it while it's happening but feel stronger immediately after. You feel grateful because you're then at peace.

If you compared me to my pre-prison self, I was also more wise, and sober, so I couldn't say that getting arrested was a bad thing. Just miserable the way the men made me a fool.

Late in the Solitaire stint, I got a visit from Carlos. He must have known I was going through something brutal, because by then I was. I didn't have to ask if he knew that I'd been ostracized from my gang. It was a given that he did. Somebody tipped him off, too, to the fact that the guard was allowing visiting hours. Carlos was an ideal cellmate – apolitical, fully of basic empathy, in touch with the rules for breaking the rules, which is to say that he'd learned how to exploit every opening that allowed one to carve out a decent un-tortured life in our school of viciousness.

“Live and let whack,” he whispered as he slid two sheets of paper under my door.

At first, I laughed. But then at second glance, what I saw was something I hadn't before – perhaps never thinking I would.

Where before I saw a woman who'd swallowed a watermelon seed, I now saw, like, unconditional love, raw beauty, and the transition from youthfulness to that adult yearning to nurture another, younger thing. It was everything I guessed I'd never have, so I wanted it then something carnal. I thought of her as someone to be with. Really be. Not just naked, not only straddling together with her warm womb between us, though that, too.

I bent the page from holding it so tight. More so than saying different words for

“weeks” or “years” or writing fiction, this was the way to escape and be somewhere an inmate truly could not go. I don’t mean to feel sorry for myself. Just to say that what I craved then was the thing I’d be deprived of for another fifty-two cheeseburgers, with good time. It’s normal to round your hands over her ball-like belly, to caress those thick, solid thighs. To lean over and kiss her chest. She cupped my neck with her palm. Carlos walked away as I spread my legs. Glaring deep into her smile and finally seeing the knowing pride she had for that miracle in her core, I got a pang of longing, a small bit of lift that I reached down to squeeze into something stronger.

After crinkling the page, I dropped it to the ground and took a deep breath. I didn’t get the phenomenon of pregnancy porn before. Then, in Solitaire, not only did I understand the appeal, I put my hand down my pants and grabbed it.

### *Hemingway Story On A Plane*

When she reached the end, Ema hummed the sad, affected hum of a reader who just took a walk where the ground split open between her feet and, like Indiana Jones with that Nazi woman in *Last Crusade*, the author dropped her into the dark abyss. So I guess she liked it. I asked, “Do you think that actually happened?”

“And he made it into a story? Maybe,” Ema said.

“Hemingway covered the Spanish Civil War for a newspaper, the Kansas City Star I think it was.” I closed the book and took out my phone. We taxied, and the flight attendant announced something I couldn’t understand because of her accent or because it wasn’t, in fact, in English. She probably said turn off your cell phones. But I liked writing that way: with my thumb, because it felt looser and freer than writing with ten fingers. Freehand was impossible. Ema tapped *The Short Stories* and said, “Where did you get that? It looks like a library book.”

“Online. You can buy books from dead libraries for pennies.”

She leaned back and sighed, crossed her arms and turned her eyes across the aisle. *It* – the order for every aid worker to leave – was digested through haughty snorts and exaggerated exhales. You could say that she was venting, though I wouldn’t make a comment like that yet. Across the aisle, the embattled president addressed an army of supporters – a frenzied sea of red – on the cover of a tabloid. The man holding the paper dug his head into the news like an ostrich. A young woman next to him frowned with her gaze locked on the tarmac. Down the aisle came a mother in hijab holding a toddler who held a die-cast airplane by its wing.



“How many foreigners are leaving right now?” Ema wondered.

“At least two.”

“Fucking ... *ugh*,” she said. Calling her back was indeed an overreaction – yet who knew how things might go? Secretly, I supported her employer’s decision, and if I had a job or some other incentive to stay, I would have supported it then too.

Ema was more invested than I, though I wouldn’t concede that point. Though of course she knew.

“Would you please turn it off?” a flight attendant said. I put the phone on airplane mode and put it in my pocket. Reopening the book, I flipped back to the title of the story Ema and I had just read, “Old Man At The Bridge.” It was a very Hemingway title in that it was what it was. The story opens in a group of displaced villagers who, through miserable descriptions of their sloping and plodding, the reader learns fled sure death and are migrating now with little hope and almost no life. There are fascists are in pursuit. These wayfarers ought to be safe in the next town, however one, an old man, stops, sits, and says he can’t go on. Why not? a soldier asks. It’s my goats and my cat, the four pairs of pigeons I looked after, he says. What will happen to them? The soldier – an American? – tries to coax the old man forward. There’s a truck to Barcelona ahead. Barcelona! The old man doesn’t know anyone in Barcelona or anywhere else for that matter. It’s one of those you-don’t-want-to-stop-here-old-man sort of moments. The American scans the horizon awaiting enemy fire. Finally, he moves on in a resigned sort of way. The old man is left repeating, “I was only taking care of animals.”

Ema played with her boarding pass, bending it. She studied the words between her thumbs with solemn consideration. My girlfriend learned the language for this – all

those hours, all for nothing.

“You know how English words can have like two or three meanings?” she said. “Well here a word can have like ten meanings. This one, *s—*, means hour, clock, time, watch.” She underlined it with her thumbnail. “It can mean date or history. It also means memory.”

For our last night out, we bought dust masks from a man who also sold swimming goggles to counter the effects of the tear gas. Ema put her mask on upside-down, which gave me a rare opportunity to correct her instead of the other way around. At a café a few blocks away – the only one open – we watched protesters run to and from the scene. When tear gas wafted in, I said, “I’m not going to lie, I’m kind of glad we got tear-gassed.” It was like pink eye with a squirt of lime, and as I kneaded the itch with my knuckles, Ema said, “This? It does not count.”

The voice of the God of Travel: the pilot came on overhead to introduce his flight crew, doing so in perfect English. Now it really felt like we were leaving because things were being translated, we were en route to the Western world both literally and linguistically, neither of which Ema liked.

That night we debated whether the protests were driven by the fact that it had basically become a police state, or rather by the sum of their disparate pet causes. We didn’t know. The café’s staff argued in intense tête-à-têtes where an old woman waved dismissively at a young man who plucked several offenses out of a balled fist – each affront another finger. “You don’t know,” I told Ema. “Shut up,” she said, “I’m trying to listen to them.” Speculation is irresistible – we could agree on that. As Ema strained to understand, I tried to follow the action on Twitter – my medium of understanding – but

their government blocked it out. All I got was the Fail Whale and so I was ready to leave.

The plane raced forward and we locked hands when it pulled into a steep climb that sent chortles back to the tail in a ripple.

Craning to see past the wing, I searched for evidence of the standoff in the square, some sign of the mass crossings over the bridges and highways. What did I expect to see? Shredded clothing? Tear gas canisters “Made In The USA”? Nothing was visible from my angle but a sleepy neighborhood with spotty traffic. Ema leaned over and said, “It’s so pretty.” Where she saw still a city and culture that attracted her from the opposite side of the globe, I saw destruction, a symbol of my failure to live abroad.

If it were 9 pm, we would see houses blinking as residents flicked their lights to show support for the revolution. Horns and whistles, the clanging of pots and pans, the chants, the whole chaotic anthem of change might rise to our plane’s height. I might say this is their fight, not ours.

Three rows ahead, a man who sounded British speculated that the men throwing Molotov cocktails for state TV cameras were *agent provocateurs* – actual police whose use of a Phalanx formation betrayed the T-shirt and jeans disguise. Thus the police invited their colleagues to storm the protest encampment. Armored vehicles pushed all the way through and eventually reached medical stations where people poured milk over their burning eyes. Even stray dogs were treated to the milk rinse.

On the way to Ema’s apartment, where we spent hours catching up on the news, we stopped into a hotel for a drink. It was on the periphery of downtown, yet close enough for a girl to be chased in by a pack of police. Her face was stained pink by the pepper-spray infused water cannons. Screaming, shattering the yuppie Zen mood, the girl

grabbed a man and spun him toward police who poured in around patrons and hugged the girl from behind, dragged and tossed her flailing to the floor. I took out my phone to record. Before it got nastier, though, one of the policemen pointed at me, yelling and gesturing that I should turn away. I focused my camera on another witness then, a woman who covered her mouth with her palms and whose eyes narrated the girl's screams.

Ema was still considering the language. "It's interesting the way their words stack up," she said. "For example, the word for *sun*, g—, is a compound of *daysky*. And another one, b—, which is the word for *today*, is literally *thisday*."

"I think their version, *thisday*, has more immediacy to it," I said. "*Thisday* sounds like it's actually here while *today* seems somehow distant."

Ema leaned toward the window to take one last glimpse. Like that, we left.

## *Guests In Our Country*

They were Americans. Before the revolution that meant something different in our country, too. All *huwelgas* were treated special because the U.S. was our dictator's banker. Tourism was king, too, so we welcomed the Americans gratefully, with gentle requests for tips if we provided directions, helped hail taxi, showed them around as volunteer guides. In Cairo and everywhere, this was common. Westerners were *pasha*, while to be Egyptian was to be some sort of dog. That was how Mubarak ran his country, which I was part of, because I was a tourist watcher. Jeffrey and Margret were the Americans' names.

Not rich – they did not come to smoke shisha, see pyramids and leave. I would say they were brave. Few Americans visited the Muslim world at this time, at the height of bad news from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine – the mess there – because few Westerners trusted we wanted to see them at all. I think in most of the Arab world, we were extra nice to *huwelgas* to counter this effect. There was the safety concern here in Egypt when Al Qaeda exploded that bomb in Khan el-Khalili market, a terrible day. In the case of Margret, she came as part of the famous Fulbright program to research the history of Jews in North Africa. Mubarak, that laughing cow, I would like to ask him why scholars come to know our recent pasts if Egyptian people are so low? Jeffrey was her boyfriend, and he studied Arabic in school and continued his language lessons at the oldest university in our land, the Al-Azhar mosque. They were good Americans. But then if you asked the state, all American were honored guests. At least before the revolution, that was the view. It was a different country, I guess, but really to this day that is the only

Egypt I know. You understand, this new nation is a mystery to me.

Back to Jeffrey and Margret. They walked down the middle of a dusty Siwa street, emerging from darkness with large backpacks, breathless and grateful to see the bus still idling in the town's main square. Siwa has only one street lamp. It lit a circle of chalky earth, white and barren as the moon. At a nearby café, Egyptian commuters waited with shisha and tea. The Americans dropped their packs and immediately Margret shed her top layer, a long sleeve t-shirt, while Jeffrey fanned himself by lifting his shirt up and down. A group of Bedouins looked on curiously – they were first in line to place bags under the bus and wore robes. The driver smoked a cigarette and picked at a fūl sandwich, leaning against the bus. Everyone appeared tired or melancholy, yet also intrigued by the Americans. It was going to be an overnight ride to Alexandria, and then to Cairo. No one looks forward to a ride such as this, so everyone welcomed the distraction, however commonplace a tourist in Siwa may be.

Jeffrey said, "This might be a mistake."

"Already?" said Margret.

With a pained squint, Jeffrey added, "I should never have risked it. A restaurant like that before a long bus ride is like playing Russian roulette with the bowels." He forced himself to burp and did not cover his mouth. The American was olive-skinned and he could pass as Arab, though his hairstyle and clothing were clearly not Egyptian.

"We could spend another night here," said Margret. "We could travel in the morning." She waved a fluttering moth away from Jeffrey's shoulder as the boyfriend hung his head with exhaustion. Margret's cheeks were rose tinted, but otherwise she had the fair skin so many women do envy. Her hair color was a mousy blend of blond and

brown, and she had it tied back in a ponytail.

Jeffrey lifted his head to show watery eyes. He said, “I have to get back for a meeting with Nabil tomorrow.” The girlfriend stroked his shoulders. She had a mousy nature too in the way she followed closely her boyfriend as he picked up their bags and waddled to the bus’ undercarriage, where he threw the packs. She stole quick glances at fellow travelers, preferring to look down when they caught eye contact. It was time to board, so every patron at the café stood up and tossed coins on their tea saucers, dropping their shisha pipe hoses. One man tried to suck what was left of his tobacco, puffing and puffing, while the rest of us joined the Americans in line.

Jeffrey was picking at the chest of shirt now. “You’re not hot?” Margret pressed her palm on his forehead. “What if you’re really, really sick, and we have to get a hotel in some town on the way? Or a hospital?”

Instead of answering her, he climbed the steps and greeted the driver, “Masaa el kheer.” His girlfriend smiled behind him. As they walked down the aisle, some passengers smiled at her like *welcome, hello, hi*, and she responded with a grin as well.

My intrigue with the Americans grew highest after they were settled in, when I heard Margret discuss “Great Satan”. “I haven’t heard any of that stuff. I mean, because I heard so many warnings from my parents and friends, people who didn’t know what they were talking about. The media coverage obviously is terrible. What I’m trying to say is, I absorbed the fear that I’d be treated badly for being American. If anything, it’s been the opposite. Although there was the one guy.”

“Who?”

“I told you. The guy who asked if I was Spanish outside the Citadel. When I told

him I was from *Nueva York*, after we had started talking to me in Spanish, he said in perfect English that ‘You don’t want to be American,’ As if – well, whatever, it was the one negative encounter out of hundreds.”

“You didn’t tell me about that. Did you?”

“Yes,” she said. “I did.”

“It helps that I speak Arabic,” Jeffrey said. “Sort of softens the blow of being from the same state as Bush.”

“You’re a great ambassador,” Margret said. “My dad is grateful too, by the way. He emailed me—I’m embarrassed to mention it—saying that he had another dream where the ‘unthinkable’ happened. He’s praying for us.”

Jeffrey glanced back at me without turning his head fully, just to check if other passengers paid them attention. Perhaps he worried that Margret took for granted how, especially on the tourist track, many in Egypt spoke English. “That stuff is very overblown,”—he said in a hushed tone—“We’re more likely to get in a wreck, eat bad pigeon or something.”

“Don’t say that!” she said, and she poked his stomach. The two of them two laughed.

I thought this was a good time to introduce myself. “You are American, correct?” I asked, leaning into the space between them. Clearly surprised, both whipped their heads in my direction fast. “I’m sorry,” Margret said, and Jeffrey answered: “*Aiwa, American.*”

“No, please, I apologize for my eavesdrop. What you say is simply too interesting for me. I’m Massoud from Alexandria. I work for the ministry of tourism, as a watcher in Siwa.”



“Hi!” Margret said. She gave me her name, and she gave me Jeffrey’s name, and that is how we met.

“We are quite conscious of this image you described,” I paused to craft my words carefully, “Foreigners like you both, we see as envoys to future tourists, so we hope you notice the good efforts to make you feel comfortable, and for you to spread this experience back in America. The media, you know, it paints a different picture—”

Touching her heart, Margret said, “We know, and I’m sorry if you thought—” But I raised my hand to cease further apology. I said, “What a fascinating region, yes? Tell me some of the places you were able to visit in the oasis town.”

“Yes! Very interesting, well”—she looked to Jeffrey, who once again seemed to feel sick—“I liked the fresh water springs, and the olive groves. We went swimming in a lagoon. Our favorite experience was probably renting a motorcycle, which was different. Neither of us had ever been on one before.”

“Now you’re real Egyptian,” I joked. And Jeffrey strained a smile, noticeably sweating. I hoped they knew I meant this as a compliment. It was because the bus was hot that he felt bad. There was air conditioning, but not as strongly as the Americans were used to. Thinking it polite to explain my interest in their trip further, I told Margret, “My job each day is to sit at the Oracle Café and watch the owner and his staff. Just sit—I don’t order anything, I don’t ask the owner to give me tobacco or tea. It is a low-level government job, but I like it because it allows me to use my English. I talk to tourists all day, make sure everything is fine, they are not taken advantage of. The thing is, in this small town of Siwa, I am not needed. Nothing like you see on the news. Rural Egypt is very safe. The only death we experienced in the past five years was of an Italian girl who

rode a motorcycle into the Great Sand Sea and became lost. We arrested that rental company's owner, so they are not in town anymore.

"Wow, is that what's going on?" said Margret. "I see, because we met you! Another you, I mean, when we went on a tour of the desert and the driver stopped to pick some guy, an Egyptian man, who just rode along in the backseat and said later on that he rides in the truck every day. He and the driver didn't speak a word."

"Exactly," I said. "Same thing." We all three nodded, so the Americans understood perfectly my English, and I think they appreciated my role.

"Anyone who speaks a language and trains at the tourism office can become a watcher, but one must earn the good post," I said. "My family live in Alexandria, which is quite far. That part I don't like, but for now I need to make this commute and live in Siwa during the week. It is what others on this bus do, too," I said.

Jeffrey was starting to sag in his seat. Margret was the more polite one. She asked questions, and I asked her the learned phrases – what brings you to Cairo, how did Jeffrey learn Arabic, all of the answers that led to what I've set you up with here. On the pyramids of Giza, Jeffrey was disappointed to see a Kentucky Fried Chicken across the street, though that is one of our favorite restaurants, I thought he should be happy to know. They made a trip to the Birqash camel market, which Margret was sad to learn was equal to a meat market. "Not all Egyptians eat camel," I assured. "Just Bedoins, Somalians, the Sudanese."

I complimented Jeffrey for learning our language, and that is when he said he hired a professor from Al-Azhar. This was humbling – that such an arrangement could be made with established Koranic scholars, yet also I was proud these resources were

available to foreigners. Not many in the West are familiar with our institutions.

“Hazz sa'eed,” I said, a phrase meaning *may God make you succeed*.

Jeffrey accepted my water—his stomach still bothering him. We talked about Cairo’s stray cats—how the Americans felt sorry for this so they adopted a kitten from the street. Back in their home, the trendy *huwelga* area of Zamalek, a woman who cleaned the apartment once a week said, “Do you know that you have a cat in your apartment?” It was funny to Westerners how foreign owning a cat was in Egypt.

There were more unpleasant things. Jeffrey memorized the cab fare to major points in Cairo so the drivers would not overcharge him. “I’ll pay a slight American tax, just because,” he said. “But I’m not okay with being completely exploited.” The road between Siwa and the next major town of Marsa Matruh is bumpy with fossils. Yes, in that part of the Western Desert, the land was once underwater, and so ancient seashells, corral and even bones pock the hard earth, and that includes the road. When we bounced, Margret laughed and Jeffrey winced. “I’m thankful you accept my curiosity. We love speaking with Americans who enjoy our country.”

Margret said, “Can I ask you something? I’m curious about the café owner you monitor, and the other ones I saw your colleagues watching in Siwa. All these people who cater to tourists, how do they feel about the government, well I mean, the arrangement that the government has?”

“I noticed tension,” Jeffrey said, “between the watcher on the safari trip and the guy we paid to take us out. He didn’t speak much English, the driver, so he resented the government guy for chatting with us the entire time.” Jeffrey shrugged, as if the roles and the way they played out seemed so trivial. “I don’t see why it had to be awkward,” he

said. “We tipped both men.”

“I’m sorry you caught this,” I said. “It’s true many locals don’t understand why we need to be in their stores. When we talk to their guests, and especially when we collect *baksheesh*”—Jeffrey translated this to Margret as “tips”—“it does not lower tension. Unfortunately, with Siwa being such a traditional town where radicalism might flourish, I don’t think the government will change its plan soon.”

I changed my mind then about “unfortunately”. “In truth, I’m glad,” I said. “No one should blame a simple watcher for the political climate of Egypt, nor for carrying out a decision by the Minister of Tourism. And besides, we have to make a living, too.”

“The driver picked him up every day and never even said hello,” Margret recalled. “That’s what I’d call an uncomfortable but necessary dynamic.”

Jeffrey called us “babysitters”. He announced that he and Margret ran away from handlers inside City Of The Dead, which I could accept. Some Westerners didn’t appreciate the *pasha* status they received in our country. But to be taken for granted is simply evidence that one is doing his job right. So well, in fact, the alternative is forgotten.

“I have some work to do,” Jeffrey said. “I plan to apply to this grant, and I have to write an essay for it. Last thing I want to do right now, let me tell you.”

I understood. Sitting back, I watched the young man pull a thin, silver computer from the overhead compartment. The lights of the bus were off and the night was dark, so the soft blue light of his screen brilliantly splashed a moonlight color overhead. It lit the middle of the bus ceiling and framed Jeffrey’s head in shine, an effect I found quite soothing to look at.

Sometime after that, the whine of the bus' brakes woke me as we rolled to a halt. The engine grumbled, and then sighed into silence, a deep quiet that signified our first stop at a gas station which doubled as a teahouse. The small, one room building was sculpted from clay on a stretch of desert with no name, hardly anything to name the town for as that stretch of desert is cracked and white as the corners of an old map. It was a tiny outpost built just for travelers. Lights came on. Passengers began descending to grab tea and shisha. Some grabbed their bags to transfer to the next bus. New riders waited outside the door.

"I don't know how you can sleep right now," Jeffrey told Margret. A vein on his temple showed and he was sweating again. His girlfriend said, "Still? I thought you'd gotten over it."

He frowned in self-pity. Now he was sweating worse than when we met. I would come to learn that the pair enjoyed a meal of pigeon and vegetable couscous from a restaurant run by young boys right before our ride. I knew the place—the kids made good food, but like most boys too young to grow a shadow of a mustache, they bothered not with hygiene. Margret visited the bathroom and discovered maggots wriggling in the black water in their toilet. Jeffrey told of cobwebs rounding out ceiling corners so there were like arches overhead.

"Step out and get fresh oxygen," I advised. "We have twenty minutes here. Look, you can get tea." I pointed to the mud-brick shisha station right outside Jeffrey's window.

He looked outside for a minute, then turned to Margret, "I'm going to find a bathroom." He had to bow as he walked out to clench what was fighting to escape his inside.

Very worried for her partner, Margret became shifty. When glancing at new passengers as they boarded, she did not smile this time. I stood up to go get myself a tea, not to mention stretch my arms and legs. We were four hours into the nine-hour drive.

Margret left the bus too, in order to check on Jeffrey. From my seat at the outdoor café, I saw her on a path to the outhouse, crossing gritty earth off toward distant black hills. It is a dark, rugged horizon there that walls you in, though the hills are carved by a bright galaxy of stars.

That's when the crime occurred.

The bus driver climbed back on after his customary smoke, and in the gruff way of all bus drivers, asked without the tone of a question, "Is everyone on board." Though now time to proceed the journey, the Americans were not back. I stood to say, "Wait, there are two missing." I used the word *huwelgas* so everyone understood it was the foreigners.

In two minutes, the couple ran up to the door breathless. "*Shukran*," Jeffrey told the driver, and Margret thanked him, too.

"Do you feel better?" I asked. Using his very formal Arabic, Jeffrey declared he was "relieved". But when the bus lurched back onto the road, the American was far from comfortable. "What the fuck—hey! Where'd my cell phone go?" he asked Margret. "It was right here," he said, clutching at the pocket on back of the seat in front of him. "Did it fall through the netting?" He looked to the floor. "Did you not grab it?"

Margret said, "No. I wasn't thinking about your phone. Oh *shoot*."

"Dammit!" Swiveling in his seat, he dug his hands in the area between their chairs. Again, he dunked his head to check on the floor. So I leaned forward to offer my

assistance. “Is everything okay?”

“There are phone numbers I never wrote down. I can’t lose them,” he told Margret.

“Your mobile phone?” I asked. Looking to the row behind me, across the aisle there was a young man typing messages. “Jeffrey, is that it?” I pointed with my eyes. The bus tilted and bounced that that exact time. The American stood to look. “No, he’s using a smartphone. Mine was just a cheap Nokia.”

I got an idea. “Excuse me son,” I said the young smartphone user, “may we borrow your mobile phone?” He was a teenager, traveling alone, and he handed it over without asking why we needed his device. I passed it to Jeffrey. “Call your number so we can hear the ring.”

“Did you lose your phone?” the teenager asked. He looked down the aisle toward the back. “What does it look like?”

“Young man,” I said. “Can you walk to the back of the bus to listen for the American’s phone to ring?” He jumped out of his seat and shuffled to the back, not even pausing to say yes. As Jeffrey dialed, Margret and I scanned the faces of our fellow travelers. Most of them were Bedoin in traditional Muslim garb. The men wore robes and Keffiyehs scarves, a few women in burqa. Not as many dressed in Western attire like the urban teenager and me, which might have contributed to Margret’s new degree of fear, an anxiety she showed in the edges of her eyes. Jeffrey said, “Okay, I’m pressing send now.” We fixed our ears to sounds: the whir of the tires on the road, engine humming and a subtle whistling wind. Jeffrey handed the phone back to me with disgust. “Straight to voicemail. They turned it off to hide the sound, so whoever the thief is, I bet he’s still on

this bus.”

“Did you see anything suspicious before walking off?” I asked Margret.

“No! I mean, when the new riders came on, a few looked down at the seat, but—”

Jeffrey said, “Point them out.”

“I was wondering how to say the seat was taken,” she added. “What if they were just looking for a place to sit?”

“Who were they?” I asked. At this point, the young man rejoined us from the back of the bus. Margret looked at him, and she stood to analyze the faces of the other passengers. The interior lighting was still on from the gas stop. “I hate to say it,” Margret said, “but they all look alike to me.”

Speaking in Arabic, the young man said, “I think you should tell the driver. He is the authority here, and I believe he will do something.” Margret saw Jeffrey considering what the young man said—she didn’t know what it was, but seemed to suspect it was not good. They were not the type of Americans to cause trouble, yet bad fate was forcing them to make uncomfortable accusations. I could not blame Jeffrey for acting. There is an old Egyptian saying: “unattended money teaches thievery”. I planned to share this wisdom with him, but knew then it was too early for proverbs.

And what a shame when I had just preached how we were proud, gracious hosts.

“This is not normal,” I said. Jeffrey answered, “I know.” I told him, “You have to care for your things because some people here are very poor. They don’t even own their own air. Crime is not common in Egypt, but certainly if you—” Again he said, “I know,” this time speaking in Arabic.

Then he returned to English. “I figured we’re on a bus together, we’re like a



community. It's not like this in the U.S., with strangers talking and meeting each other. We don't really share our journeys. I'm shocked by this."

"Tell the driver," I said.

Margret protested, "I don't think you should do that. It was just a cheap cell phone. You can get a new one."

"I need my numbers," he responded. Craning to see down the dimly-lit aisle he asked his girlfriend one more time, "Are you sure you can't point to someone who looked down at this seat?"

"I'm not comfortable doing that."

With that, Jeffrey stood up, and without another word he walked to the front of the bus. I like to think about what happened next from Margret's perspective. How strange it must have been since her Arabic was nonexistent. Although upset for Jeffrey's loss, more so than the return of his material good, she wanted to remain a quiet, friendly tourist—not someone who stopped the bus to ask for a frisk. "Where can this possibly lead?" she asked me. Jeffrey was still up front when the bus pulled over, the engine cut. Every one heard the radiator give its cathartic sigh and, when the lights rose to full brightness, some passengers said, "Why?"

The driver led Jeffrey back to his seat, though they remained standing in the aisle. Other travelers seemed annoyed to be awake since by now it was very late. The driver spoke in a stern, punishing tone, talking for several minutes and occasionally gesturing to Jeffrey. The young American shared his view, too. Meanwhile, Margret stayed in her seat looking confused and disconcerted about the scene taking place, especially when we broke into a chorus of debate. An old mother waved dismissively. A young man stood to

point back down the road, and someone else stood to respond. Jeffrey continued, and the driver agreed with him. Hollers were thrown, palms tossed outward and upward, we shrugged or wagged fingers, and all the while Margret's eyes darted between Jeffrey and me, begging for translation.

“What are they saying? Jeff, we're holding everyone up,” she said.

He ignored her.

“Jeff?” She looked to me for help, but I focused on arguing my own recommendation. It was quickly rebuked.

The driver made a cutting motion with his hand over his head. He went back to the bus' front while speaking loudly, and Jeffrey sat down. “What's going on?” Margret said. We hushed when suddenly the lights went out. For five seconds, it was pitch dark and quiet as a crypt – the only sound our breathing.

When lights came back, the bus broke into a new feverish debate.

“What he said is we have problem,” Jeffrey told Margret as he sat down in defeat. “He said, ‘This man is a guest in our country, but he had something stolen from him. That makes all of us look bad, and we're not going any further until the American gets his mobile phone back.’”

“Oh, my gosh.”

Jeffrey maintained his disappointment. “Someone wondered if I dropped it outside. I said no. A woman suggested that the thief probably took it on his way off, at the last stop. But, you know, why would he turn the thing off? That's what's very suspicious. And we said that. We all agreed it's probably here on the bus.”

“What about the lights?”

“Mr. Massoud here”—he nodded to me—“suggested calling the police but I didn’t want an interrogation like that taking place because of me.” Margret agreed, as did I. Though it was my idea (the victim should know his choices) I knew this was not wise. Who knew how the police would proceed. It could be ugly, especially with a victim who was American. “So the driver said, ‘Whoever took the phone please listen, I’ll turn off all the lights and you throw it into the aisle. We’ll continue driving without any questions, and no police’.”

“Of course they didn’t do it,” Jeffrey added. “Then everyone would know we had a thief in our midst.”

Margret said she felt sorry about the phone, but was impressed by how everyone acted. Still, in her mind, there was community on the bus showing sincere concern by everyone onboard. “I mean, everyone but the thief,” she said. And we laughed because, yes, that was a real exception.

It was a few hours to Alexandria. The lights went off again, the desert whirred by outside my window, and I laid my head against the glass to sleep, as did the Americans in front of me, one upon the other’s shoulder.

Apart from this incident, they said it was an incredible trip. Siwa is a stunner. I’ve never visited its famous dunes or lakes myself (I know only the town) but they explained how the freshwater springs are rimed by grass, wild ferns, and palms. That verdant surprise welcomes you to a cool, wet retreat from North Africa’s sun. You can’t escape our heat in a better place, or so I’m told. The Americans also visited orchards rising from shallow springs. They photographed clay dwellings on the outskirts of town, and used a motorcycle to visit the Oracle of Ammon, which told Alexander the Great he would

conquer the world as one-half god. In fact, upon climbing the steps of this ancient Greek monument, I'm sure these Americans got whispered their own special destinies. They were young, smart, in good health, and from a rich country that offered much opportunity to succeed.

"We arrive to my hometown," I said when we arrived to Alexandria's cornice, that famous beachfront road. "I spent five days in Siwa, now I'll return to my wife and sons for the weekend."

"What a heroic commute," Margret said.

"Thank you."

Jeffrey went as far as to stand up to wish me well. He shook my hand with great smiling affection. To the young man across the aisle, who also rose to leave, Jeffrey said goodbye, too, and asked in Arabic to borrow the smartphone one last time. "I want to send a text message just in case," he explained. The man passed his mobile, Jeffrey quickly typed a message and hit send.

We opened wide our ears, ready to pounce on a sudden digital chirp that might come from a nearby pocket. When none came, we smiled at each other and said *al salam* again. I gave Margret an American goodbye wave as I went past her aisle. Finally, I descended to the street.

There would be one more bus for me to arrive to my neighborhood. Once I got to the station waiting area, a room full of loitering travelers, I removed Jeffrey's phone from my pocket. For curiosity, I turned it on. "Massoud, was it you?" the message read. "I swear I don't care. But please, please send me two phone numbers from the contacts list. I desperately need..." He wrote the names of an Egyptian man and an American woman,

and included his personal email address.

I did regret it immediately, though I never considered throwing it to the aisle of the bus. What a risk!

While buttoning through his contact list, because I did want to help the American get his numbers, I felt a presence next to me like a shadow. “*Baltaga.*” the young man said—and snatched the phone from my hand. A thug and a thief is what he called me. I leaped toward him. He backed up, “*Baltaga!*” Rich young Egyptians are just like rich young Americans—ignorant to what a worker and even a watcher must do to survive. Another person grabbed my wrist. I turned and felt a slap to my face – another young man.

“He is a thief! A thief!” they shouted. The squabble attracted a mob, and found me punched by I don’t know how, hit in the stomach. I felt a lot of people’s breath and a heard roaring, felt clawing fingernails pull my ear. They threw me down on my back, onto the gravel ground of the road outside the waiting room.

The young men held down my body. A police officer pushing them away palmed my face while his partner put handcuffs on my wrists. Wagging the phone at me, its screen blinking and body buzzing, the young man announced, “He stole this phone from the American on our bus.” The boy’s father, I found out later, was a *Mukhabarat*—the worst of the secret police.

“Get off!” I said. “Please. I gave it to you!”

Many commuters were gathered around me on the ground. Someone said, “He brings shame on this country.”

If you are going to steal, steal a camel. That’s the Egyptian saying. If you love,

love someone beautiful as the moon. Each means it's better to be aggressive and bold in everything, or else do nothing.

I lost my life for a mobile phone. What a waste.

On the walk to the police car, I asked which jail I was going to, praying it would not be this.

Before the torture, they will ask why you did it. Believe me, there is no right answer. The question is not to learn from you, but to help them get through what they must do to your body, your person. Take the opportunity the same way and say what you need to get by.

I tell them that I needed that phone more than the American did, because it's true. Mubarak was the same way. We steal because of what we need, and because we *can*. Even with this new regime, even despite your revolution, it's the same. The relationship with America is stronger than you or me or any radical ideas. I did nothing significant, but I knew my punishment would be harsh because of this. It had to be severe because they were Americans.

## *Perfect Beach Weather*

Colin buttoned his jacket, one of those green army surplus store coats with lots of pockets, and flung a messenger bag onto his shoulder. “I’m going to grab some air,” he said. It was the morning after his final round of treatment. Colin hadn’t left the RMH for days, unless you counted shuttle rides to Sloan Kettering, “Does grabbing air require a satchel full of supplies?” I asked. By the way he smiled, I could tell he wanted me to go with him. Colin wanted me to volunteer as scout, as the reconnaissance man for air, which he might then grab. I gave a throaty sigh. “I guess I’ll go too, but for a cigarette,” I said. There were a lot of smokers at the Ronald McDonald House.

As soon as we left the building, we found our friend Alex’s parents, puffing away quietly, on the fringe of a gang of smoker parents in a stale haze. I didn’t have to ask for Alex’s dad to bum me one. “Good morning,” Colin said. Alex’s dad strained a smile that was a forgery of his son’s. I used his lighter and said thanks. Then we found a spot in the sun away from them.

Colin bathed in it, combing the light over his scalp like a hot rinse. “Do they smoke so much because of like, their kids?” I asked. “Or were they always heavy smokers ... and so—” He wasn’t listening. Gazing up over the tenements and glass towers across the street, he nodded to a music I couldn’t hear, smiled at a joke I wasn’t in on. But I knew what he was thinking. For January, it wasn’t cold out. My brother turned to impose his green eyes on me. With no eyebrows or eyelashes, they looked naked and vulnerable, and to my dismay, showed a glint of optimism.

“It’s perfect beach weather,” Colin said.

“You can’t do that.”

“I know, I know, I know – I just want to see it,” he said. “I want to see you do it.”

“I’m not doing it.” I said. My words came out in dissolving puffs of smoke, with dissolving resolve. Colin tried to pinch the cigarette out of my lips. “Get off!” I said, shoving him back.

“Come on,” he insisted. “I want to see Coney Island.”

So we went.

My brother exploited the illness as much as he could. Somehow it won him a laptop from a caseworker at the hospital. He scored tickets to Yankee games and Broadway plays. His journal was full of ticket stubs, which he taped-over entries about our daily distractions.

My brother chronicled mundane stuff like smelling gyro meat when the doctor said he couldn’t eat fat. He wrote about the pain of injecting Neupogen with so little fat on his body.

He wrote scenes about playing soccer in Central Park (which we never did) and described attending a punk show wearing a Mohawk that wasn’t sprouting from his scalp anytime soon. My brother wanted to publish an inspirational memoir about beating the disease, but he wrote ahead, and the project looked increasingly like it should be classified as fiction.

When you’re twenty years old, any crazy feat seems possible. Physical, spiritual, artistic – whatever. Time is on your side, as they say, and achieving any grandiose thing is just a matter of showing up. It’s the age of laying groundwork. And even if the world does assert its limit, you can always pass your ideas onto someone else.



We took two trains through two boroughs, Manhattan and Brooklyn, thirty or forty stops on elevated and underground tracks. “Stand clear of the closing doors, please.” We rolled into the Poor People’s Paradise, as it’s called, after something like an hour and a half.

Right away, I had to admit that it was worth it just to see the open horizon at the edge of the city. You slog through it every day, Gotham, dwarfed by skyscrapers and bridges, edging past slower pedestrians and suffering the brush of quicker ones, tripping on dog leashes, chasing subway trains that roar in right as you buy your MetroCard. You focus on the next storefront, gauge the timing of stoplights, check each cross-street – *was that 74<sup>th</sup> or 75<sup>th</sup>?* – you barely register an exhaustion that is definitely there and generally forget that New York City ends. The state of mind of it. The Empire State and the “start spreading the news” of it – all that goes mercifully quiet and flat. I’d almost forgotten about beaches. How in certain corners of the country, you can hear the tide flip and the wind huff, the seagulls cackling uninterrupted.

In New York, you tend to focus on what’s right in front of you. Other than the occasional plane crossing the sky or the Empire State Building hulking above the rest, you can’t see what’s ahead of you at any sort of distance.

We found the crowd a couple hundred yards away on the beach. Some were already lined up in child-like giddiness. They were biker guys, and scattered cliques of hipster girls, a lot of aging hippies and some antsy college kids about our age. A few people were doing stretches. Choppy winds gave the bay small sets of waves. Someone

led a group through jumping jacks as if they were prepping for a track meet. Half wore bathing suits. I saw bottles of Old Crow, cans of beer, glass pipes and joints passing hands.

A man wearing a white fur vest turned on a megaphone. He said, "Welcome, Polar Bears, to the annual Coney Island swim!" Someone behind me roared, and everyone cheered. "Get warm because in two minutes we're all going in!"

"You ready?" Colin asked. Opening his messenger bag, he showed me a couple of rolled up bath towels. "At least one of us has to."

My brother never stopped plotting ideas to pass on to me. And all I could do about it, then and now, was shake my head in frustration.

A rocket sliced into the air and popped with a moist bloom. It left an asterisk of smoke in the air and acted like a starting gun. All at once, they hooted and ran, jogging into and skipping through the surf, cheers becoming screams as they hopped the first breaker, splashing, berserk as kids tossing themselves through sprinklers. They wailed, laughing and crying and losing themselves.

I've never been much for jumping in oceans, especially not dirt-brown freezing ones, but of course I had to say, "Fuck it." I bent down, yanked off one of my shoes and spiked it in the sand. "Really?" Colin said. I shed the coat, pulled off my sweater and t-shirt, peeled off my jeans and was down to my boxers. Straight ahead, I saw a woman bobbing up and down like a dolphin while holding a metal flask in the air. I hopped in place a few seconds and then said, "I guess I'm going in."

Colin yelled, "That's my fucking brother!" as I sprinted off, passing photographers and cheering spectators, fast and hard against the chill. I stomped in. Up to my knees in

what felt like needles of ice, I turned back to see him smiling. After I regained my breath, I yelled, "Happy fucking New Year!"

He made a diving motion with his hands.

I backed up, losing several inches of sand before a breaker splashed me at the waist and pushed me a half step forward. My jaw started chattering, my shoulders tingled. There was a twitch in my arms. But if I was going to indulge him at all, I knew I had to play the full martyr. So I stood straight, puffed my chest, opened my arms wide and finally fell back like a tree slapping a lake.

Underwater, I let out a bubbly moan and flinched with every limb. Jumping up, I gasped and wiped my eyes and spit saltwater, exhaling hard through my nose to expel the taste. Lurching sideways, looking around, I lost sight of Colin and only noticed the steam coming off my hands. Puffs of air left my lips as I stood, panting. I tried to suck the warmth back in. But then it got so cold I couldn't feel it. The water, I mean. The air was what bothered me more all of a sudden. So I stepped back, waded deeper, and as if there were a chair behind me, sank down. It was murky and quiet. All I could see were ripples laced with light as I sat for several seconds growing numb.

"How was it?" Colin asked. My arms trembled as I snatched the towel out of his hands and scrubbed my legs like I was putting out fire. "Was it cold?" I stepped into the jeans and yanked them up my shins. The denim clung to my thighs.

"Terrible," I answered. My hands were so numb, buttoning the fly was like tying a knot with a pair of pliers.

Colin handed me the sweater. "I wanted to join you. It looked fun."

“You should be glad you didn’t.”

“It’s a good story for you to tell,” he said.

I picked up my coat and I threw it over my back, “Yeah, well, you can tell it for me. That’s your thing.”

We watched the crowd meander in, drift back onto the beach, where news spread that a nearby bar was hosting a party for Polar Bears. The announcement was bounced around like a beach ball, hollered from group to group. Of course Colin wanted to check it out, but I said no.

Instead, we strolled along the boardwalk under a hovering seagull and past an aged Ferris wheel that barked its name in big square letters: “THE WONDER WHEEL”. The pink and blue paint looked faded. It stood frozen under a thin layer of dirt and, considering New York’s obsession with all things slick and new, it seemed fair to wonder if the vintage ride would ever rotate again. I took a picture with my cell phone.

We passed food stands, all of which were closed for the winter. Some of their metal security grates wheezed as a strong gust of wind swept the promenade. It had a real ghost-town feel. The groaning planks under our feet, the lapping tide, the seagulls scavenging bits of trash that roamed the shore. All of it was exotic to us, even after several months on the Upper East Side. Escaping the Ronald McDonald House was always a challenge, leaving our neighborhood a production, exiting Manhattan an all but impossible feat. We felt like urban adventurers. There was plenty to bring us back to reality, though.

“Look at that bully,” Colin said.

He pointed toward a fat pigeon guarding a chunk of bread. It ate in spurts while

rivals flew in and angled for a peck. One would get too close, and he'd fight it off while two more stole bites behind his back. He'd return to his loot, eat as much as he could, then fight off the next hungry competitor. The process repeated itself until what was left was so small and light a nimble sparrow was able to dive in and carry the crust away in its beak.

“That’s so New York,” I said.

Colin pointed his phone at a giant red antenna in the distance – a sort of vaudeville Eiffel Tower. It flowered at the top in a big metal bloom. “I believe that’s The Parachute Drop,” I said. “It’s a retired ride from the old days. Let me take your picture in front of it.”

“That’s a ride?”

“I think someone died on it. Or something. Anyway, it’s closed for good now.”

He stood with the Parachute Drop at his back, but didn’t smile. “I’ll get in, too,” I said. Our heads together on the screen, I grinned wide and he did the same. “Your newest Polar Bears,” I said. When his gums showed, I knew the smile was for real.

“Where to now?” I asked.

“Let’s go to see their bar.”

“I don’t think so.” The sun was receding behind a familiar white haze, the veil it wore all through December. “My underwear is still wet. It’s getting cold. I mean, shit, my ass is literally freezing.”

Scoffing at me, he blurted, “Come on!” With a snide grin he added, “Dude, you will live.” It was a lame joke he used often.

“What’s the point? You can’t even drink.”

The bartender demanded our IDs, which meant we weren't staying. Colin was barely 20. Once in a while, back home, he used my old driver's license to get into college bars where the majority of the people inside were underage. We looked enough alike, but that only worked because we weren't together.

I showed her my ID first. She moved her lips when she read the birthday and handed it back, then asked for Colin's.

"Can't you tell that we're twins?" he said.

She bounced her eyes between us. "Really? Are you fraternal, because I don't see a resemblance."

*Give it up*, I thought.

"Ever since I lost my hair, it's been harder to tell."

She took his ID and studied the photo – me at 21– then offered a pitying grin. "I wouldn't know you guys were brothers except for the eyes," she said. It was a funny comment since we had different eye colors. "What can I get you guys?"

"Two shots of Goldschlager please."

The bartender laughed as she turned around to fetch the bottle. "Why'd you order that junk?" I said. "And why two?"

"Both of them are for you," he said.

As she poured each shot, the novelty gold flakes floated toward the bottle's neck in a glittery bliss, like she was pouring from a snow globe. Each shot was generously tall, and when I reached for my wallet, Colin told me he'd pay.

"I ordered Goldschlager, that favorite of our friends back home and of high school

and college kids everywhere, because, as you may recall, one night this past summer Megan brought a bottle of this stuff over. It was our last night with the Aurora crew. Remember?”

I did.

“You fucking scolded that girl for offering me a drink.” He paused, smiled. “She was like, ‘I don’t know how this stuff works! I didn’t know he couldn’t have alcohol. This is new to me, too, Marcos.’” Colin twirled one of the glasses to perk up its flakes. “Then what happened? Remember when you told everyone to go home at midnight so I could sleep?”

“Look, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t,” he raised a hand to cut me off. “No, it’s okay,” he said. “Your concerns were appreciated. They still are. I’m just ... I guess I was thinking about that night randomly and it made me want to order you a couple Goldschlagers.”

I picked one up, reluctantly, and took a small sip. I’ve never liked Goldschlager. It’s cinnamon mouthwash, and the only reason to order one is to swish it around your mouth when you want to talk to a girl but have bad breath.

Colin stared off blankly. I finished my shot and tried to change the subject. “Have I told you there’s a game here in the summer called Shoot the Freak? I saw it on YouTube. On the boardwalk, right around here, you shoot paintballs at a kid who runs around wearing a mask. He’s got a shield, and he’s bobbing and weaving and shit. There’s a guy with a megaphone yelling, ‘Come and shoot da freak!’ He’s got a thick Brooklyn accent. ‘Go on. Shoot him in da freakin face,’ he says.”

Colin didn’t seem to care.

“The job situation what it is, I guess if I’m still looking this spring, maybe I’ll put an application in. You think they’d hire me?”

“Well,” he said, “I don’t know. You do have a temper. Being around all those paintball guns, I could see you shooting back. But with your education, you at least deserve an interview.”

“It may come to that,” I said.

“Then again, they may wait for someone with a math degree. A guy who can calculate how many shots are left, who knows how to measure angles, trajectory. Yeah, thinking about it, you should probably just put that energy toward finishing my manuscript.”

“Hah. Right. Or maybe you should finish it yourself.”

He picked up the other shot. “Don’t do it,” I said.

Lifting it to his nose, he took a loud whiff. “I can’t smell anything anymore.” Flashing a smirk, he added, “I can’t taste much anymore, either – everything tastes like metal.” He tapped the side of the glass, agitating the gold flakes settled on the bottom. “It’s just like Cisplatin, the stuff they put in my chemo. Platinum in that, gold in this, each a rare metal that extends lives.”

I watched him take a small sip, about half the glass. He looked like he wanted to spit it out but finally gulped it down. A few minutes later, he rushed into the bathroom. I tried to go in behind him but he’d locked the door. After about five minutes, he came out looking even more pale and glassy-eyed than before. “Let’s go,” I said. After letting him take a few steps on his own, I gave him a shoulder and tried to guide him by the waist. We leaned forward, but I was the only one ready to walk. Hanging his head, he strained



to control whatever was happening in his stomach. He stared at the floor and breathed in and out heavily through his nose. The bartender was watching, so I smiled at her. "You ready?" I asked. He squeezed my shoulder. "You okay to take the train?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You're alright then," I said – a lie that I used often.

On the way out, the bartender said, "Be careful getting home, fellas."

Colin felt better on the sidewalk. We took our time, and he pointed out that the name of the street leading back to the subway was Stillwell Avenue. "We should move here," he said.

The train waited with one door open on each car. It was the end of the line, so an MTA worker mopped the floors with bleach, a smell that reminded me of the hospital.

I closed my eyes. We were slumped together on a two-person bench seat in the corner. Colin stayed awake the whole time – occasionally, I checked – and about halfway home, he caught me looking at him and asked, "What are you going to write?"

"What?" I said. "I don't know." I tried to offer a reassuring grin. "Something nice. Something you would like."

"You'll have to put Coney Island in there."

I said, "It's not too late for you to do that."

"No. I guess it's not," he admitted. An orange sky poured in as the train squealed onto the Manhattan Bridge. Through the window, the much prettier Brooklyn Bridge wore its string of lights and the sun began to dip into New York Harbor. "It may be too late for the good ending. For me to write it," he said.

I didn't argue.

"The different ending," he clarified. It was the first time he mentioned an ending to the story that wasn't *his* ending. "And that's what I want," he said. "Make it end nice. You know? Hollywood happy." He nodded with sureness as the whole East River came into view. "Everyone loves a survivor story."

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I showed these pages to Laura one night while we lay in bed. All I expected was a bit of false praise, a kiss on the cheek followed by a request to turn out the light. She prided herself on being this serious media professional, but seeing as how we were sleeping together, I figured she'd spare me her bite. What I expected, and maybe what I wanted, were generic compliments: *Great job! I like the tone.*

"I thought you edited Colin's journal. What happened to the story he'd written?"

I grabbed a beer on the nightstand.

"It's nice, but I expected to read a piece of his memoir. This whole thing is from your perspective."

"Obviously, I went in a different direction."

"I guess I can't blame you," she said. "But then, what is your goal with this?"

"My *goal*?" I picked at the wet beer label. "That's a funny word. I'm not drafting a sales pitch."

"I mean—."

"Colin's journal and the memoir idea was just a therapy exercise. One of the books he had suggested visualizing alternate memories, fantasizing about a future where

you've gotten better. The goal was to record what was happening, but also to work toward an escape. He passed it on to me thinking I might benefit, I guess."

"Doesn't seem like you agree."

I took sip of the warm beer. "I don't feel like being psychoanalyzed about this," I said.

Laura sighed. "Everyone has their process." Looking back over the pages, she scanned each one and let them fall to her chest as she moved back through the story.

"I can't write some big, fake inspirational memoir," I said. "I don't know what I'm doing. Maybe I still want to convince him there was no shame in the truth."

"Right," she said. "None at all."

She cleared her throat.

"Either way," she paused, "I'd say it still needs more from Colin. The swim at Coney Island. How did it feel to be forced to watch? Right now, it's just about you going numb."

I didn't have a response to that.

"Is that what this about? Numbness?"

"No," I said.

"Well, whether it is or isn't, whatever your intention is, take out all this stuff about pigeons and seagulls and dig into your brother's head."

She wanted me to do an autopsy.

When I got out of bed and grabbed my jeans, she asked what was wrong. "You're right. That's something for me to consider," I said.

"I was gonna ask you to turn out the light."

“I’m going out to grab some air.”

“Sorry if—.”

“Really,” I said. “I want a cigarette, but I’ll be back.” She sat up. When the comforter slipped off her chest, she yanked it back up in embarrassment. We still weren’t used to seeing one another naked.

“Just go on the fire escape,” she said.

I buckled my belt and grabbed my wallet from her dresser. “I have to buy them.”

Laura fell back on her pillow, turned to her side and said, “The keys are by the door.”

I killed the light on my way out, then closed the door as quietly as possible.

Before they’re plucked from the earth, flowers like cigarette smoke. A friend once told me it fertilizes them. So rather than grow breathless on the walk back, I burned one there, outside the bodega, taking in the scents of roses and lilies. I pinched their soft petals, exhaled over the buds. What smoker doesn’t prefer the aroma of fresh flowers to cigarettes?

I thought to buy some for Laura. She was admittedly “judge-y” though – often searching for bad omens – and those that caught my eye would probably have made her cringe. “Daisies! Well, how quaint!” she might say. Yet how striking! That bouquet had a flower as hot as magma, the green of a Brazilian parrot, pink and blue like a flamingo wading through a lagoon. It was a miracle, too, such delicate flowers hadn’t shriveled in the night’s cold.

I supposed, then, that the cool air preserved them. They’d been plucked after all:

were withering from the inside out. When you thought about it, fresh-cut flowers were a morbid indulgence. We factory-farm these plants to die on kitchen tables. Looking back at my favorites, the notion that they were naturally so brilliant also reeked of some cynical trick. *Impossibly bright*, indeed. My magma, parrot and flamingo flowers were likely nothing but synthetic fakes, neon frauds dyed and processed to fool people inclined to believe. People are often grateful to be deceived, though not me. I flicked my cigarette in the gutter and started back.

There were a lot of fake beauties in Soho that night. I walked behind a couple of model-types, women with impossibly skinny legs and puffy coats. They gave haughty snorts to a pack of NYU students blocking the sidewalk outside Firefly Lounge. The models detoured, but I tried to push through. Two girls wore pencil skirts, despite the cold. One of their friends pawed the chest of a guy with orange skin and manicured eyebrows, and a couple of goonish men in black leather jackets talked about the basketball season.

“It sucks that the Pistons aren’t in it now.” “Ah, dude, they suck now.” “I know, what I’m saying is, the fact that they suck, sucks.”

Something about their banter made me stop. Firefly was one of those bars where you practically had to show a fake ID to get in. It catered mostly to NYU students.

I went in, handed the bouncer my old driver’s license. The one I’d given to Colin.

The music was distortion-heavy Noise Pop so loud it seemed oppressive, which was nice. I shoulder-tapped, nudged, and squeezed my way to the bartender. She took my order and passed me a beer then turned to the booze. The liquor sat on ascending platforms. Backlit by yellow lights, each bottle glowed like a votive candle.

I met a punky little cancer patient one night on the terrace of the Ronald McDonald House. This shortly after everything was over, when I moved back to New York. A friend at the front desk lent me our old room. I was searching for an apartment, a job, any sort of righteous excuse to avoid being in Colorado. I asked the staff for leads on some sort of life. All they could offer was free lodging for a week, which I graciously and reluctantly took. It was impossible to say no, much as I didn't want to be in that room. The bloodstain on the carpet that predated our time still provided an ironic welcome mat. The flower-patterned bedspread from the 1970s caught my luggage. A painting of a smiling apple walking through Times Square reminded me that Colin and I always felt too old to be there, though he was a couple of years under the cutoff age. I went to the terrace sometime after dark. The door opened behind me and out came a girl rubbing her arms, hunching her shoulders like a timid cat. She had short black hair in a bob cut. It must have been a wig because her eyebrows looked painted on.

“Hi there,” she said.

I answered, “Howdy.”

She pulled the hood up on her sweatshirt, plunged her hands into her armpits.

“May I have one of those?” she asked. The cigarette wasn't lit yet. I plucked it from my mouth and asked, “Aren't you sick?”

She wiped her nose with the wrist of her sleeve. “I'm not dealing with lung cancer if that's what you wanna know. I have a prescription for marijuana, my dad and I smoke weed every day, so do you really think one cigarette will end me?”

I had to chuckle at her effort. “No, I don't think it will *end you*, but it's probably

worse than your pot habit. These so-called ‘cancer sticks’ have additives, chemicals.”

“So what! I’ve got the Periodic Table flowing through my veins. What’s another few doses of poison?”

“How old are you, anyway? You know the legal smoking age is 18.”

“Never mind.” She went to lean against the wall on the edge of the terrace, which offered a clear line of sight into a hotel across the street. Colin and I had the same view from our room, and we treated it like a human aquarium: watching tourists pose behind dresses and sweaters, businessmen packing suitcases, kids trying on hats, women latching the backs of necklaces in front of mirrors.

“Did you see that?” the girl asked. She pointed to the Empire State Building hulking over the skyline forty blocks down. “Wait for a second,” she said. I saw a flicker of light on the observation deck. “There! Don’t you love it?”

“There should be a warning sign: ‘you cannot illuminate an entire skyline with a camera flash.’ All they’re getting are photos of dust – black screens with floating white dots. No handsome buildings or colorful avenues are showing up, I assure you.”

“Oh,” she said, “Well, *actually*, what I mean is that I like seeing their flashes go off because it reminds me how a tourist sees the city. Like we’re living in a postcard.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay.”

When I finally lit my cigarette, she looked my way and smiled.

“Fuck it,” I said. “If you’re old enough to get a potentially fatal disease, you should be allowed to drink, vote, rent cars, see R-rated movies without your parents and, yes, buy and smoke cigarettes. I’m done saying no to people in your condition.”

“How enlightened,” she said. I opened the pack for her. She plucked one out.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t tell your parents.”

“You don’t tell my parents.”

“Let’s not tell anyone’s parents,” I said as I sparked a match for her. “And don’t feel like you have to finish the whole thing.”

Clenching it between her teeth, she cupped the match in both hands and sucked its flame to the tip of her cigarette. A feather of smoke escaped her lips when she opened her mouth and inhaled the cloud. She was showing off her expertise: smoking with the kind of ceremony a pothead devotes to a joint. I considered how my friend downstairs would want to throw me off the terrace if he knew what I was doing. The thought gave me a grin.

“My name’s Angie,” she said. “Who are you, how much time you got, and what’re you in for?”

“What am in for? What are we, in Rikers here?”

“Kinda.”

“And do I look sick?”

“You look *something*,” she said. “Maybe you’re just tired. You probably have one of those faces.”

“I’ll be checking out soon,” I said. “My brother was the sick one – he’s back home now – but he had testicular.”

“Ouch,” she said.

“Everyone said that. ‘Ouch.’ He fucking hated that.”

“Sorry.” She leaned her head back and stared at me from under her sweatshirt



hood's shadow. Her nose ring caught a light, but her eyes were dark. The sweatshirt was loose on her body. She pulled a drag and exhaled slowly.

“He went in for a P..E.T. scan once. One of those creepy, tunnel x-rays with the camera that spins around you. He called them high-tech coffins. Anyway, the technician asked a few questions through an intercom system, One thing he asked was, ‘Are you a smoker?’ My brother hit the button to speak and said, ‘No. I got my cancer for free.’”

“That’s funny,” she said.

“Well, the tech didn’t think so. My brother didn’t hear any response on the other end. I swear, if the catheters and nonfat-meals and two patient rooms don’t wreck your spirits, a humorless staffer will. Be careful over there, you with your tourist goggles, seeing everything like a postcard. ” I flicked my cigarette off the terrace, and she did the same. We were guests of the Ronald McDonald House. We weren’t going to litter on *their* property. I asked the girl, Angie, “How about you? I mean, are you okay?”

“I’m better. I will leave soon too I hope.”

“And then?”

“I was a biology major at UC Santa Cruz, but after this experience, I might change my degree to nursing.”

“Really? No way. My brother wanted to do that.”

“He doesn’t anymore?”

“Well,” I said, stalling. “Actually, he wants to be a writer now.”

There was nothing but foam left in the beer. It was 12:35 am. Angie was probably asleep. What if she were back on the West Coast? I could call the front desk at the House

and track down her down now. If I did feel like using Colin's notes and pages, the journals and stacks of scenes, I could borrow Angie's life for the ending. A warrior, a hero, an inspiration – all those cheap, cliché's labels. She was exactly who he aspired to be. A nurse, too, and a total sweetheart.

I finished the whiskey.

She gave me her number in New York and I'd never called.

I poked a dent into the beer can.

If she were still in New York, then she wasn't done with her treatment. She may have lied to me, fabricated a happy story, same as I did with her.

The more I wondered if she were okay, the more I didn't want to know.

I went to the bathroom, where walls were covered in permanent marker. Scratch graffiti. A scrawl furious as Pollock's. You could almost feel the rabid energy steaming off of the gritty canvas. And in the urinal even, a sticker read, "Fucking Hipsters."

*Exactly*, I thought... Colin was a hipster.

While I washed my hands, where once there was a mirror, on the tile it read: "God is dead. – Joe, 12/23/13."

"Joe," I said. "I think you stole that from Nietzsche."

Under Joe's line, someone with cleaner handwriting penciled an update: "Joe is dead. – God, 12/24/13."

"God, you are dead to me," I said.

"No, Joe. *You're* dead," I answered. "Merry Christmas. Happy *fucking* New Year."

Jarring the door handle, jerking it and rattling the hinges, someone tried to get in.

As if the door was jammed, they kept trying to get through. "It's still locked!" I yelled. Two girls laughed on the other side. I opened the door and they hid conspiratorial grins. I stepped out, and they walked past me into the stall together.

"Wait," I said. I stopped the door with my foot. "The two of you are gonna snort yip, aren't you?" The brunette, who was out of sight, laughed. "Yip!" she said. The redhead looked out at me, unsure how to answer. "Can I have some?" I asked. Red looked to her friend for a verdict and I guess the answer was no because she shook her head. "Sorry." She closed the door and locked the handle.

The next cigarette tasted like cat dander. I wanted to flick it to the curb, but kept pulling drags anyway. It was time to go back to Laura's, obviously, but she was sleeping for sure. Going back now would mean laying awake, listening to her dream. I couldn't sleep to anything but bar noise. Those girls rejected me, but so what? I didn't need friends, just distractions.

I could have another drink by myself. Maybe I'd order a Goldschlager to recall that awful taste.

Just then I heard a croaking British accent from a group of tourists – one of them was singing a soccer chant. All five lined up to show passports to the bouncer, who stood next to me, by the doorway. One of them ambled up to me. He peeked over my shoulder, squinting through the window.

"How many of them are shaggable then?"

"Two, maybe two and a half. A few more ain't shabs, though."

"Put a Union Jack over their heads and fuck 'em for queen and country." This

one's voice was American.

"Keep calm and fuck on," the ambassador said. Then he turned to me. "Have an extra cigarette?"

"I do."

"Great of you. Cheers."

"Yeah, I'm very proud."

We exchanged blank stares. He seemed to be expecting me to hand him one. I didn't recall that being part of the exchange. "You're chintzy then, aren't ya? I'll give you a whole dollar." He opened his wallet. "You're actually going to take my money, just for a fucking cigarette?"

"Sure."

"All I have is a five."

"Unfortunately, I don't have any change." I was smiling.

"You want five for a damn fag?" He yanked the cash from his wallet and poked it at my chest. "Take the greenback. I don't give a shit. Take it."

"I'm not a vending machine."

He crumbled the bill and tossed in my chest. "Give me the whole pack."

I had one burning between my fingers, so I flicked it into his chest. Embers splashed over his shirt, hitting his chin and sleeves. "Fucking cunt!" He pounced and shoved me back against the window. I bounced off. Someone yelled, "Oh shit!" as he palmed my face then wedged a forearm under my chin. In gaps between his fingers, I saw the bouncer wrestling with two of his friends. "Get da fuck outta here, all ya."

He pulled his arm from my neck only to twirl me into the sidewalk. I saw a blur

of lights and suddenly smacked into the side of a taxi. It caught my back. The driver blared his horn. A punch found my cheek. I sank to the asphalt, holding my face as someone screamed in shock. Another person yelled, “Smack that fuck!”

A pain crawled over my face like water spreading over cloth. He grabbed me by the shoulders and pressed me flat against the ground, knelt on my chest. I lost my breath. A driver blared his horn. We grappled hands until he pinned one of my wrists to the street. I shielded my face with the other arm when he cocked a fist. My head bounced against the street. The driver pounded his horn. I felt the guy’s weight lift off and heard his friend call, footsteps fleeing away down the street. The taxi blared its horn.

I opened the door as quietly as possible. The place was dark as I left it, and it figured best to leave it that way still. Patting my way along the wall, I found the counter, which guided me to the refrigerator, every step a creak in the floor. The door was pleasantly cool. I opened it to find a Corona and, when I did, shut the fridge with a soft push that gave me just enough time with its light to find the table and a chair. That light eclipsed as I took a seat.

Using my lighter, I opened the beer and heard its cap *tink* against the floor. A long, deep slug dribbled down my chin and onto my shirt. Pressing the bottle against my cheek and lips was even better than drinking from it. I took another pull, then pressed it high, against my right eye.

I adjusted to the moonlight leaking in from a ventilation shaft beyond the window. Incredibly, I could actually see how my nose was swelling. Of course I felt it too.

Going to the bathroom required turning on a light, but I didn’t have to look in the

mirror. I washed my hands and face, focusing on the Corona bottle, on the sink. A sliver of blood floated in the neck like Tabasco sauce.

Laura was fast asleep. Crawling into her bed didn't wake her. Or if it did, she didn't say anything. I lay awake with my eyes closed.

As a trick to fall asleep, I liked to imagine vivid scenes. It helped quiet the voices that were like a radio announcer asking me to do better, do more, as I shifted and stirred and writhed.

This was Colin's idea. See Colorado. One of his books recommended visions of flowery meadows, lakes reflecting peaks, a bubbly mountain river. To hear dry leaves crunching under the hooves of a large moose, which you walk upon you in Estes Park – Colin told me to try this. But the mountains were too distant. I couldn't make it real. Those visions were never loud enough, vivid enough, to last. Instead, I went to Brooklyn. Two trains, two boroughs, thirty or forty stops.

For the past week, I'd prepped for writing about Coney Island by revisiting its shore as I laid in bed, starting with the sound of the tide. I spread across the sand in a calm flush. Those small waves don't really exist in in the tepid bay, but I saw them anyway. The horizon, too, was beautifully flat. Not a single oil tanker on it. Just a floor of blue, under a New York sky that turned from the familiar white haze of January to a swath of orange, pink, and blue, a watercolor sunset. The ocean was a clear teal now, not the dirt brown I remembered. Stepping into the surf was easy, because it wasn't cold. A small breaker passed my ankles and kissed my shins and knees. I didn't stomp in. There was no one screaming or splashing, no one else in the water but me. In the distance, a swell was rolling forward. I waded in deeper. It was still shallow when the wave crashed

with a frothy rush at me, high as my chest. I dove down and let it flow over me.

I stood up and wiped my eyes. As I raked my hair back, I heard scattered hooting and clapping from the shore. It's always foolish to turn your back to the ocean, but I looked to see who was there. On the beach were the pot-bellied bikers, the aging hippies, bikinied hipster girls and young adults, about my age. I scanned the beach for Colin, but I didn't see him. The boardwalk and the rides stood beyond the sand. I heard a seagull caw. The tide receded and tugged at my ankles.

## **Daniel Hernandez**

University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
Department of English  
4505 Maryland Parkway, box 5011  
Las Vegas, NV 89154-5011 (917) 733-4863  
dghernandez@gmail.com  
Website: <http://hernandezwrote.tumblr.com>

### **Education**

MFA, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Spring 2015  
Major: Creative Writing – Fiction emphasis  
Dissertation Title: *Escape Artists*

BA, Colorado State University, 2004  
Major: English Literature  
Minor: Spanish Language and Literature  
Certificate: Latin American Studies

### **Employment**

Freelance Contributor, *The Guardian* newspaper, 2012 - present  
New York Correspondent, *The Tokyo Shimbun* newspaper, 2007 - 2012  
Editor, *PR Newswire*, 2005 - 2007

### **Fellowships and Awards**

Black Mountain Institute International Travel Award, 2014  
UNLV Graduate & Professional Student Association Travel Award, 2014  
UNLV International Programs Scholarship Award, 2014  
Fiction Fellow, The Writers' Institute at the CUNY Graduate Center, 2012

### **Professional Development Activities**

"AWP Annual Conference," Association of Writers and Writing Programs,  
Minneapolis, MN. (April 2015)  
"The 11<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Comparative Literature," Argentinian  
Association of Comparative Literature, Buenos Aires, Argentina (July  
2014)  
"AWP Annual Conference," Association of Writers and Writing Programs,  
Seattle, WA (February 2014)



"AWP Annual Conference," Association of Writers and Writing Programs,  
Boston, MA (2013)

## TEACHING

### University of Nevada, Las Vegas

ENG 205, Introduction to Creative Writing (Spring 2015)  
ENG 407A, Business Writing (Spring 2014, Fall 2014, Spring 2015)  
ENG 102, Composition II (Spring 2013, Fall 2013, Spring 2014)  
ENG 101, Composition I (Fall 2012)

## RESEARCH

### Non-fiction Publications

#### Selected Essays

"Viva Las Vegas: On Getting An MFA In Sin City" *The Millions* (March 2015)

"Mark Twain Would Likely Be Ticked at the Library of Congress Right Now." *The Atlantic* (Nov 2014)

"Call if You're Feeling Lonely." *The New York Times* (Feb 2014)

"A New Theory on 'Mark Twain.'" *The Los Angeles Review of Books* (2013)

"A Tragic Day for New York and the World" *Rheinische Post* (Germany) (2011)

"The Night Obama Got Osama" *Rheinische Post* (Germany) (2011)

#### Selected Journalism

"True grit: how wild horses are turning Nevada inmates into cowboys," *The Guardian* (Feb. 2015)

"Las Vegas protest shows divide over Obama's immigration plans" *The Guardian* (Nov 2014)

“Beleaguered Las Vegas wedding industry pins its hopes on gay marriage,” *The Guardian* (Oct. 2014)

“The life of the Vegas 'porn slapper': 'I don't care if they punch or hit me,’” *The Guardian* (Sept 2014)

“Federal rangers face off against armed protesters in Nevada 'range war,’” *The Guardian* (April 2014)

“The Superheroes Who Helped Aurora,” *The Daily Beast* (2013)

“Children prepare for their day in court: 'They're being shown they have a voice,’” *The Guardian* (2013)

“Obama's dreamers: 'The president owes it to my family. He owes us respect,’” *The Guardian* (2013)

“Vegas gun ranges target thrill-seeking tourists with ever bigger weapons,” *The Guardian* (2012)

“Mexican drug war's innocent victims: 'They tried to kill me with my kids’” *The Guardian* (2012)

“All we could see were his eyes’: Crash victim leaves burn center” *The Daily Mail* (2011)

“The 'Inevitable' Year of Very Deadly Tornadoes,” *The Huffington Post* (2011)

“Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bronx Is Hurting,” *The Huffington Post* (2011)

“Unhappy With International News Coverage, China Exports Its Own,” *The Huffington Post* (2011)

“Can Women and Technology Save the UN Development Goals?” *The Huffington Post* (2011)

## **Media Contributions**

### **Radio**

KNPR's State of Nevada (Sept 22, 2014)

### **Television**

Al Jazeera English (Feb 24, 2010)

**Conference Papers**

“Comparative Liberties: The Merging Genres of Criticism and Memoir.”  
The Argentine Association of Comparative Literature, Buenos Aires,  
Argentina (2014)

**SERVICE**

**Departmental Service**

Committee Member, Emerging Writers Series (August 2012 – May 2014)

**Professional Service**

Tutor, UNLV Writing Center (August 2012 – December 2012)

Reader, *Witness Magazine*. (August 2012 – May 2014)