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Learning to Adapt

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LEARNING TO ADAPT

By

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Bachelor of Science – English
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts – Creative Writing

Department of English
College of Liberal Arts
The Graduate College

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ABSTRACT

Learning to Adapt is a novel of slow-motion disaster. It tells the story of one-hit-wonder songwriter Sim Henrie, who has gone into hiding to gradually go broke, but then takes a job with a paint crew. It's a meditation on celebrity, paranoia, and surveillance, but it's also a gripping construction-worker drama.

If we were to analyze it the way one analyzes a dream, we would soon notice the whole thing fairly trembles with sexual undertones. Examples are too numerous to even begin to elucidate, but simply open the thing to any page and see if it isn't true.

In addition to the singing painter, in italicized mini-chapters which alternate with those of the main narrative, one finds a survey of personalities of a peculiar race of little people called contumbles, who live in a mirror realm—while Sim, the singer, lives in Provo, the contumbles live in Ovorp. These little people serve as embodiments of various forms of motive.

Learning to Adapt is a tragedy, its subject the decline of the blue-collar American male. It is at the same time, however, a love letter to Utah Valley. And most of all, it is an existential mystery whose philosophical resolution veers dangerously into the dimension of the True Random, with implications both unsettling and absurd.

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LEARNING TO ADAPT

Nolan Gorglebosh, Lord of Contumbles, gazed lovingly over the boundless silver-lined geometries of his lascivious realm. Ever since Chief Surgeon Hupperl had perfected the glitches in his Conversion Machine, the job of changing human babies into contumbles had become much safer, more effective, and, most importantly, downright speedier than those barbarous days of really quite recent memory. Now the main concern was getting babies, and most of the respectable contumbles had been out and about, on the lookout, at the public parks, the hospital parking lots, and so on. The female contumbles, some of them, didn't entirely understand why the babies must be kidnapped at a ratio of three girls to one boy; as is usual with females, they refused to see the big picture. Contumbles reach sexual maturity at age eight; Lord Gorglebosh would soon be spreading his genetically superior progeny all throughout the deepest reaches of the realm.

He chuckled knowingly to himself as he gazed: really, he's doing these human babies a great, invaluable service. Scientists have long known that contumbly sex is eleven times better than its more neurotic, human counterpart. His thoughts wheeled about the heavens, anticipating grand, ineffable labyrinths of supernatural eroticism.

Corporal Butt peeked out from the shadows. "The workers need to know," he said, with whiskers a-tremble, "are we preferencing any particular genotype? Hair color, eye color? Skin tone?"

"No preference!" Gorglebosh declared, with glee. "We are to become a mighty race once more—none of the sorry inbreeding which doomed the Harmatt Dynasty! Now let's go steal some kids!"

Butt obediently bowed himself out of the place. Gorglebosh caught a glance of himself in the bejeweled mirror which dangled breezily from a suspended femur. He hadn't meant to become so fervid, but it seemed like lately, every time the topic of human conversion arose, his hackles rose and he trumpeted like a toad.

Perhaps he was, like they say, going native. The dilapidated, decrepit old village of Ovorp had been written off as a hopeless lost cause by prior contumbly overlords, sitting bare as it does in the middle of the vast Hatu ocean. But Nolan Gorglebosh had always been determined to make a name for himself in the history books, and where his predecessors had seen a backwater garbage dump, a mere whistle stop, Gorglebosh saw a strategic outpost to the future of the contumbly race.

There was no denying that Ovorp produced babies. But there was something strange about the place. For instance: human showbiz type Sim Henrie lived there. This was the guy who had somehow written a song, which had in fact gone on to become a huge radio smash hit, which, though the words were in a different language and the meaning was altogether unrelated to the original, was in fact a note-for-note replication of that most sacred melody, the Contumbly National Anthem. Not some fuzzy approximation—the exact tune.

The Contumbly Nation had spent some time in panic mode then, worrying that Henrie's performances all over continental America would tip off the humans about their existence, but at the end of it all it had come to nothing. It was, incredible as it may seem, possible that Henrie himself was unaware. Gorglebosh had been studying Henrie closely since he'd settled on Ovorp as a base of operations, and it seemed a fair conclusion that the pathetic, one-hit-wonder songwriter managed to keep himself unaware of quite a bit.

(1)

The phone rings. Inside the room I awake to it's still dark; if pressed by the Judge I'd have to put it at somewhere around three-thirty. Fairly early in the morning, that is to say. It's her voice, of course, well a recording of it anyway, and like always it's one I think I've somehow heard before. Although I know pretty much what to expect from this call, I'm still filled with the cold dread, the euphoric anxiety, of the expectation of the one you love. I'm wholly alert instantaneously, though it takes a moment to figure out what room I'm in, and at that, as outlandish as it may seem, even which nation I'm in.

She's laughing, talking to her friends. The recording isn't so good. "Yeah, right, like, that's what I always wanted, a trapeze artist," she says. It's an inside joke that, as in so many aspects of my present existence, I'm not in on.

One of her friends says something, indecipherable.

"Tsip—" she says, and the phone clicks off.

I sit in bed, and try to breathe myself calm. It's good I suppose that whoever's making these calls isn't around to observe my reaction; I'm sure it would just boost whatever weird kick he/she gets out of it.

I get up, go to the hallway, notice by the porchlight downstairs that Lucy never made it back lastnight. She's funny. She must be at her boyfriend's place, but of course still feels obligated to make up some excuse. The disapproving maid: thank goodness she's been around to keep a woman's eye on things, to keep things from getting too out of control, although, on the

other hand, it's not like I've had help from the old crew of jolly and psychotic sailors, in our voyage south, like the old days. I've been, arguably, managing to keep it together more or less.

I drink some water from a hiker's bottle on the floor in the hallway. I won't be getting to sleep again this morning, but what the hell. Nobody's out at this hour. It's the perfect time to go for a walk.

My disguise for the last oh six months or so has been old clothes, something along the lines of nineteen thirties, down-on-his-luck, one step away from the trains hobo, or rather silent-film tavern patron: once I'd gotten hooked on the cane, I'd had to get the matching hat, of course, to practice tricks. Never shaven; the disguise has for the most part been effective, and anyone old enough to remember W.C. Fields must be by this point in the graveyard or the facility. I put on the coat, take hold of the cane. Though I don't necessarily need it anymore, I do love the weight of it in my palm, plus not to mention there's the hat tricks and various other vaudeville maneuvers. I put on some shoes, good-condition hikers but more or less concealed by the frayed cuffs of the oversize gray-wool slacks. I already know that I'm out of cigars, but it's better that way when you're out this early.

The cold air outside is nice. I remind myself that I should get out more often, and make my way down the driveway and into the street. The yellow, amber, blue-and-white twinkling lights of Provo below spread across the valley floor like the schematized heart of some vast, functioning mechanism. There is nobody around; no cars, definitely no other pedestrians. Every now and again a dog barks, but they're all behind fences. My cane clacks on the asphalt.

The woman behind the counter at the gas station looks wired, kind of purple under the eyes. She's too old to know who I am.

"How's it goin'," she says.

“Oh, not bad, not bad,” I say. “Woke up a little early this morning.”

“They’re still looking for that Mussberger,” she says, flapping the newspaper for emphasis.

“Let’s hope they catch him,” I say, marching past in the direction of warm-food, as, shamefully, it pains me to admit: hot nacho cheese from the pump, sweat-n-leather looking hot dogs and sausages on the roller, hot chili from the pump. The chopped onions are tempting; I take a plastic spoon and sample them, acting casual.

The woman glances up, deadpan: “Those hot-dog prices aren’t right.”

I’m looking at the prices. Seventeen fifty-nine, for a regular. Who knows what it means anymore. “You’re telling me they’ve gone down,” I venture, also deadpan.

“Ha!” the woman chirps, and leans back on her stool, rubbing her eyes. It takes her a minute. “Don’t you watch the news? Shit’s gone up thirteen times since yesterday afternoon.” She flashes her fingers, all ten, then just three, to illustrate. “Count ‘em. Thirteen. Since yesterday afternoon.” She tries to tell me something, significant, with her eyes. “Times that price by thirteen, whatever you’re getting...”

I’m only half-listening, she can’t be serious, what does she take me for, some newly-arrived rube, some empty-headed tourist? I’m eyeballing a gray and red and shiny-brown log which as far as I can tell looks as though it contains both olives and jalapeno peppers, and possibly cheese. I take another absent-minded nibble of onion.

“You think I’m shitting you?” the woman says, growing impatient. “Thirteen. Times it by thirteen.”

I look at her, see that she's in deadly earnest. The "breakfast pizza" sausage I've been examining, which as I check the price on I also notice by the fine print contains scrambled egg and olive bits, is listed at twenty-three twenty-two. Times thirteen? Let's see...

She's glaring at me, trying to make sure her message has sunk in. I don't know what to make of it; let's see, twenty-three times thirteen...

One thirty, two sixty, thirty-nine, two ninety-nine—could that be right? And then, proportion-wise? Factoring in the twenty-two cents? I'm looking at just over three hundred bucks for this breakfast pizza hot dog?

The woman behind the counter is reading my mind. She makes a motion like she's turning the monitor around, like I can feel free to check for myself whether she's shitting me or not. "We've got new price displays coming in the morning," she says. "But I'm just telling you now. The prices are different."

The hot dogs look wrinkly, old. I set my cane down against the condiment stand. "Lady, you drive a hard bargain," I say, "but, fortunately for you, I'm prepared to meet your demands."

She snorts immediately, disgusted. I take a bun from the drawer and begin to prepare my breakfast. If the sun was up I'd never be able to justify such a meal.

Another customer walks in; I glance up, then I'm back to the mustard. Then I look up again: it's Gary. I haven't seen him in years, Gary Preston, one of the gang from way back when, in the flesh, in all his married glory—looking just a shade older than the last time I'd seen him, we're talking years. I'd heard he'd married that girl and had a kid.

He looks right at me, doesn't recognize me. I keep quiet for a moment, put the finishing touches on this perverse foodstuff.

He's looking over the energy drinks. I mosey up behind him. "Gary," I say.

He turns around. It takes him a minute. “Sim?” he says.

I touch the cane to my hatbrim, and he starts laughing. It’s the usual business. He’d thought I was in California. Everyone had been stoked that I’d finally hit the big time, and happy to celebrate my wave of success, while it lasted. He’s on his way to work.

“Early,” I say. We’re making our way to the register. “How’s the paint business?” Though in the old days we’d never worked on the same crew, we are of course aware of each other as painters.

“Well, you know,” he says, “the shit hit the fan. After things went downhill, I mean I was still dealing with losing that first house to the mudslide, I told you about that, right?”

“I heard.”

“I had to go back to G.J.P. But, we got into a different place, and work’s been busy. We’re doing a big home-show out in Highland.”

The woman at the counter scowls at us.

“Shit’s thirteen times as expensive,” I say, nodding at her.

“What?” Gary thinks I’m joking.

“Prices are up again this morning,” I say, patting him on the shoulder. “Come on, it’s on me; I’m just putting it on the card anyway...”

He looks at me like I’m crazy, but sets the energy drink on the counter next to my hot dog. The register rings up to seven hundred something.

“Thanks, dog,” Gary says, out in the parking lot. We talk for a minute about the old days, and then swap numbers. I see him taking hits from a glass bubbler pipe as he backs out of the parking lot. I work on the gas station breakfast with my free hand, and swing the cane up and down as I make my way home.

I hope you'll pardon the language, Judge, and I mean no disrespect, but I have to say that getting back home again after my song hit it big was a bitch. I don't know, maybe that's just how these kind of things go. You read me out the charge, the code and the numbering of the specific statute and so on, but I never saw it, for all I know you and the Guard were just making it up as you went, I know you fellas gotta get your fun in too. The charge "Abuse of Liberty", more specifically, In-Context Gross Disregard to Law. In context because, whatever the offense, it had occurred in a foreign country?

Your coarse henchmen, your ugly goons, took me by surprise. Me minding my own business, standing in line like everyone else, all of us in our underwear, holding our re-entry documents. The dogs sniffing around, one of them, some kind of beagle or hound I guess it must've been but it looked just like the stray mutts I'd see digging through trash and rubble at the edge of the dirt roads in the nation I'd just left, had taken a liking to me, and was sniffing at my crotch. I gave him a dirty look, but, considering the situation, and that this dog himself probably legally qualified as a law enforcement officer, that was as far as I dared take it.

The Guard approached, mexican-american, a square pistol on his belt where his hand rested. He took my documents and looked them over. The dog whimpered once and then slinked off.

"You've got some blank spaces here," he said, smiling like a bastard. "Take off your underwear."

I looked around at the other travelers milling about, but they ignored me. "Look, come on," I said.

“What’s the problem?” he said, lifting a finger and beckoning to two other guards nearby, a man and a woman. The man was blue-eyed and baby-faced; the woman just looked tough. As they approached, the Guard said, “You heard me. Do it.” Then, to the other two, “No home address. No occupation.”

“What’s the name?” said Baby.

“Simmons Henrie,” said the Guard.

“Sim Henrie, oh, the singer,” said Baby, his blue eyes atwinkle. He looked over at the woman; somehow I got the feeling they’d been expecting me. For a moment I was nearly taken in by the irrational hope that my reputation would somehow save me; Baby’s tone of voice cured me of the illusion: “We just love your song.”

“Yeah,” said the woman, Tough. “We just *love* your song. Weren’t we just singing that one to each other?”

“That’s right,” said Baby.

The Guard unbuckled an aerosol can on his belt. “I’m not gonna tell you again.”

I slid my undies to the floor, then stood holding them in both hands, while Tough and Baby examined me. The Guard wandered off. The other two each took me by an arm, and began to steer me in the direction of your shoddy airport judicial installation.

“Right this way, sir,” said Tough.

“Gonna talk to the Judge,” said Baby.

A gunshot pealed, and rippled through the crowd of half-naked travellers. The Guard was grinning and gaping ecstatically at a target on the wall, a black and white silhouette of a human form, presumably male, as the marksman had in his exhibition conspicuously put a hole through the target’s crotch area. “Hot dog!” he cried. The crowd remained silent a moment. I hope you’ll

pardon the language, Judge, but that isn't exactly what I would characterize as a friendly homecoming.

By the time I get home again the sky has begun to pale against the dark, shadowed mountains. Lucy's beater car is parked at the top of the drive. She's in the kitchen, sipping coffee, chopping some veggies. She's in workout clothes, cotton. My stomach is stabbed suddenly by some kind of pang; she looks so healthy.

"You want some breakfast," she says.

"Maybe just a little," I say, "I've been out for a bite."

She watches as I remove the coat and hat, set them on a chair. She shakes her head, smiles.

"You may want to hang on to those hobo clothes," she says.

I sit down, nodding. "I know, I know." The newspaper is open on the table, Mussberger on the front page, with big photo and headline: "Possible Break for Police." The photo is split down the middle, two photos really: on the left, a disheveled and frightening mugshot of Mussberger from an old offense, and on the right, a civilian, vaguely glamorous shot of the criminal's ex-girlfriend, who has been telling disturbing stories about their time together, in a classic case of How did I not see this coming? I see by the caption that Mussberger cooked his ex-girlfriend's daughter's pet rabbit in a batch of spaghetti one night. I'm tempted to read the article, but I know it'll only get me talking, and I've learned the hard way that Lucy *really* doesn't want to talk about what's going on in the Mussberger case. I flip through the paper; go to the business page. "Recovery Slow but Progressing, Says President." Nothing about the spike in inflation.

I can tell by the way Lucy leans on the counter that she's already in the know. "I should probably get online," I say.

"Good luck getting on the bank site," she says. "Kinda crowded."

"I'd better try anyway; I can't even do the math anymore. You mind if I use your computer?"

"Sure, a little later, okay? After I'm out of the shower?" It's nothing, not a trust issue between us or anything, but just more a personality thing with her, in that *nobody* uses her computer without her being present in the room. We'd already discussed the inevitable, seemingly-innocuous idea of me getting my own computer; for some reason I just can't seem to get around to making it happen. Who knows these days if I could even afford it.

I hear her singing in the shower, pop stuff, dancey. Such energy. I wonder if she's planning on moving in with her boyfriend. As long as she's been here at the house, we've treated each other with the most eminent of politeness. It's funny the brand of friendship which can develop under such conditions.

The phone rings. It's another anonymous number: of course my heart races but no, it wouldn't be her (I mean, the stalker, the recording), not again so soon, not at such a convenient hour. I pick it up anyway, foolishly.

It's the mortgage company, some computer-voice reading a document that's been typed up somewhere, concerning the house, and the recent turn of events in the economic realm. Some kind of "ability to pay" legislation has opened up unique opportunities for troubled homeowners, this address might be due for a rethink, and so on: the language during the course of the call becomes increasingly baroque, bureaucratic, and though I'd like to hang up, I worry there might be legal ramifications.

Eventually I catch on that they're sending somebody over anyway, so I hang up. Don't worry, Judge, I'm doing what I can, you know. These creative ventures can be hit and miss, at times. It hasn't been like the old days.

I remember well, Judge, how you treated the topic of my meteoric rise to fame with a stern aloofness, the meaning of which was hard to discern. Facing you there in the airport, I was still unaware of the true significance of it, the incomprehensible magnitude of it. The months I'd spent holed up in a cheap, not bad hotel in a foreign country, wearing a black tee shirt with the word "TOURIST" embroidered on its front, I did my best to remain anonymous, sidelined, inconsequential—running out of money, passing the time, occasionally renting some cheap and shitty guitar and composing some drunk and woeful rip-off tune at midnight—hoping to somehow disappear.

But the hit song brought me home; I knew there would be no disappearing now. I wanted to tell you that it all meant nothing, that it wasn't even my best song, that there was no explanation for its becoming so huge, it was through none of my intentions. I wanted to explain what had happened, that I'd followed my dream intently, like a good dreamer should, all along the line, but success had just taken too long. The creature of pursuit had grown ragged and thin in the meantime, had grown numb and dull-eyed, unimaginative. Success that takes too long is cruel; all the sweetness gets drained out of it along the way. Facing you, I wanted to believe that you with your judicial power might somehow be able to sentence me off back into obscurity again. This was, however, not your intention.

The guy from the mortgage company shows up sometime in the afternoon. Lucy is gone, and I've been making myself whiskey sours and pacing the floor, talking to myself. It's the usual insane aggressive babble, let's kill everyone kinda stuff; I've got to work it out of my system while Lucy isn't around to be frightened by it.

The guy on the porch is a real go-getter looking type; upward-mobility business attire, flat-sheen gold tie, hair well clipped around neck and ears, styled. The punch of his cologne makes me hesitant to invite him in, but after a minute of goggling at each other, I realize that I had better. Still, I stop him in the entryway, and he looks around, up the stairs, then over my shoulder into the living-room area, making notes to himself.

"Place looks alright," he says. "Not counting the yard..."

"I've had someone here to help with the housekeeping," I say, making no effort to talk away from him; I can tell he's already scented the booze.

"Still got the maid," he says, slightly under his breath.

"Sure," I say, and fiddle with some bills on the little flower-stand beneath the welcome-mirror. In the mirror I can see what an unlikely pair we make. The image makes me want to growl at myself, "Get a job, you bum!" but I don't think this guy would recognize it as a joke, and it's too early in the afternoon for me to have abandoned all my social inhibitions to the point of making jokes, in company, that only I would get. "The feminine touch, you know. It's been a good arrangement for both of us."

"A lot of people these days finding out they've got to cut out some of their good arrangements," he says. He nods toward the living room, but I ignore it.

"That's what I hear," I say. "Hard times all over."

“You’ve been assigned a family,” he says, handing me some paperwork from a folder. I scan the text; see that it’s a bunch of contracts, legal language. The page on top looks like the print form of what I’d heard earlier on the phone. I set the bundle down next to the bills I’ve been arranging, and casually flip through it.

“A second family!” I say. “What I’ve always wanted.” In the middle of the bundle I come to a christmas card picture of the family, a mom, dad, three kids, plus an inset in the corner, of another kid out on his mission somewhere. LDS. In my mind I quickly run over the contents of my kitchen cupboards. “They seem nice,” I say. “I bet she’s a good cook.”

“Probably not any of your business,” the mortgage company guy says. “If I could just get your signature on those...”

“Well I think I’d like to look ’em over first,” I say, looking him in the eye, getting serious. Like I’m supposed to just sign my house away, sign away my privacy, in happy complacency, like the company is doing me some kind of favor. “What’s the matter?” I hear the voice of the Judge. “You got something to hide?”

“You do what you’ve gotta do, Sim,” says this guy. “But I’ll warn you, you put this off too long, you’re gonna run the risk of getting a less favorable deal. I’m just trying to help.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it; here, give me a minute.” I walk away, back into the kitchen, where I can take a pull off the bottle of whiskey on the counter, out of sight.

“So, like, this week?” he calls from the entryway.

“Sure, of course,” I say, returning, wiping my whiskers with a sleeve. “I’ll stop by the office.”

The man opens the door to leave, stops, darts me a dark look, just to make sure I’ve gotten the message. “Dude, rock on,” he says.

I make the two-horned heavy metal sign with my hand, and then finger-wave. I take another look at the family photo; the wife is actually kinda cute, but three kids? And little ones, at that. I look up to the hallway at the top of the stairs, where my own off-limits-even-to-the-maid private section of the house begins. I guess I could install a door, with a deadbolt. Haven't been to the lumber store for a while, wonder what it's going for these days.

I return to the kitchen, get some ice, squeeze some lime. There's no hurry; the ambitious man has gone. I fix another sour, and mosey out to the west balcony to see where the sun's at. Down the street some high-school girls are returning from soccer practice. One of them, brunette, a bit smaller than the others, and narrow-hipped, causes my glance to linger a bit too long, just like the pervert I'm sure they've already decided at their family dinner-tables I must certainly be. I sit down on the aluminum/vinyl picnic chair and avert my gaze toward the lake down in the bright, yellow-gray hazy distance. Something about the broad afternoon sun across the distant, opaque water makes me a little more comfortable with my own memories.

I awake still on the balcony, but lying down with my cheek on the old-leafy floor. I have to smile, bemused by my own general state of unawareness: I never did make it back inside to retrieve that guitar.

Lucy is on her computer at the dinner-table, designing an announcement for the baby shower of one of her friends. I see it over her shoulder as I go for some water.

"You're an artist," I say. "Looks good."

She says: "I saw those papers."

"Yep; looks like I'll be getting some new roommates."

“Sim,” she says, but doesn’t look up from her computer. It suddenly dawns on me what she is about to say; as usual it’s something that any intelligent person would have realized a long time ago. Once again, bemusement: tinged this time with the bitter shadow of desperation.

“Lucy?” I say. Her bare forearm, still now on the table, is smooth, brown, youthful.

She looks down, and I see that tears have formed. I go to her and touch her once on the shoulder.

“You’re hopeless,” she says. “You’re like a child.”

“I know,” I say, “it’s always been like that. I hate to lose you...”

“Oh I’ll be fine,” she says.

I go to the front room, take the guitar from its case, make my way back, sit down across the table from her, and start picking the strings. She messes around on her computer. My style of play at moments like these is aimless, wandering. Though this is essentially a selfish activity, I know she doesn’t mind it.

Jarom Fussellkitt was an angry young contumbly. Ever since Chief Surgeon Hupperl had diagnosed him as being hormonally “off-the-charts,” he had felt justified in his bitterness: toward his peers, for their unquestioning conformity, toward Corporal Butt for his snide and unrelenting motivational tortures, but most of all toward Lord Gorglebosh, for the outrageous, obscene extravagance of the harem he enjoyed.

“Just think about it!” Jarom said to his friend Stab Lumper, as they were on their way to work one morning. “It doesn’t even make sense biologically. I don’t care what Corporal Butt says. He’s a sniveling yesman, anyway! So he gets two or three table scraps tossed his way, every now and then, and for this he’s willing to keep us all in subjection...”

Stab looked about nervously, knowing by experience that the ears of Butt are everywhere.

“A happy slave,” Jarom continued. “I’ll never become like him.”

“All the Elders say that things were harder before the reign of Gorglebosh,” said Stab. “He’s brought great prosperity to our people.”

“Prosperity? For himself, maybe. I have to pass by his harem every morning on my way to the park, and don’t you think those girls notice me? It’s like they can smell my hormones. Do you think they keep quiet about it? Oh, sure, kidnap ten babies and you’ll get your name on the list, to eventually have the privilege to mate with whichever one Lord Gorglebosh deems fit...”

“Nothing in this life is free,” said Stab.

“Just listen to yourself. Ten babies? Just to get me on a list? The lord’s harem has gotten far bigger than any one contumbly with even an ounce of decency would dare to claim. It’s

wasteful. All of those females, with their female needs, going completely neglected. Some of them, they actually cry out to me as I pass. It's more than I can stand!"

"It's the way we've always done things," said Stab. "It's for the good of the species."

"For the good of Gorglebosh, maybe," Jarom sneered. "If you had the level of hormones in your veins that I have in mine, you'd understand."

"You're not the only one with hormones."

"Well, maybe. Sometimes it feels like maybe I am."

"Anyway, it's not like we're gonna change anything. Let's just do our job, kidnap some babies, and we'll be that much closer to the goal. You'll feel a lot better once your name's on the list."

Jarom looked up at the sky, clenching his teeth, and began to club his own forehead with his fists. "Agh!" he cried. "What idiocy! What servility! You have no idea what hormones are, Stab! Sometimes I wonder if you've got ovaries, yourself."

"Fuck you," said Stab, turning to leave, "I'm not listening to this."

"You mark my words, you spineless twerp," said Jarom. "One of these nights, I'm gonna break into that harem. When Gorglebosh isn't around. Or shit, even if he is. And I'm gonna squirt my semen all over those females. I'm not gonna stop until the whole place reeks of my scent!"

Stab was gone.

"And if Gorglebosh tries to stop me, I'll fucking kill him," Jarom Fussellkitt intoned to his own reflection in the mirror. "I'll kill Lord Gorglebosh. I'll tear out his esophagus and make sausage. I'll attach his ears to the tail of my kite."

Fussellkitt's eyes widened, filled with evil.

(2)

I help Lucy move out on a Saturday; Monday morning, the new family is on the porch, beaming at me, at five to eight. Kenneth and Shauna Boyd, nine-year-old Dayton, six-year-old Afton, and three-year-old Sutton. I shake hands with all of them, and blink in the sunlight. I learn that the missionary from the picture is actually Kenneth's little brother: their parents both passed away in a car accident not long ago, and so, as family, the younger Boyds included him on the card. They are of course far too young to have a missionary son, which I might have deduced from the picture, if I had any sense of time.

Kenneth is shaven, clean, talkative, friendly, optimistic: he's been to see the bishop in this new ward, who has had only glowing things to say about me. "I think it'll be fun," Kenneth says. "I haven't lived with roommates since college."

"Me neither!" I cry, and wince as I watch the five of them step over the threshold. We've already arranged the living quarters; basically I retain my "private" three rooms at the top of the stairs. The two older kids immediately race up the stairs and down this hallway out of sight, in the direction of my music room, as though they can with their kid instinct detect the off-limits area without even being warned. The little one scrambles up behind them, with a gleeful shriek.

Shauna is frowning at the furniture, the pictures on the wall, the chunky glass lamp, the dark-brown seventies-era carpet. "Kids!" she yells. Something crashes terribly, in the music room. "Kids!" she says.

The kids come running back down the stairs, one of them, Afton, the six-year-old, screaming. Something big has fallen on her. Shauna looks at me for a second, darkens her look, and then starts cooing flatly to her distressed child.

“I guess it’s gonna be a bit of an adjustment all around!” says Kenneth, patting my back, keeping his rosy outlook. “Sim, hey, could you help me for a minute? It’s the, uh, I can get most of the stuff, I mean, we, me and Shauna can get most of it, but, do you think you could just give me a hand for a minute, with the beds?”

But I can’t hear him; the screaming kid has me stunned. I’m looking at where she’s holding her arm, cradling it below her horrified, plum-wrinkled face; I stare in the dumb hope that nothing’s broken. Her mother wipes her nose but remains oddly stern, saying “hmm” as she looks about and tries to come to grips with the dark metallic trim of the wallpaper.

“I haven’t had time to install a door,” I offer, staring at the kid, who stops crying as she notices me.

Shauna sees the wall-mounted lamps in the front room and makes a face like *she’s* gonna start crying. “Oh, this carpet!” she says, and holds her stomach and leans slightly forward. The kids have started running around again. There’s a lot of stuff in this house to climb on.

“Kids!” she yells. They ignore her.

“Come on, Sim,” says Kenneth, grabbing my arm. “Come give me a hand with these beds; it’ll just take a minute, and then you can get back to, uh, whatever you were...”

I run a hand through my bedridden hair. “Sure, sure,” I say. “Just let me go brush my teeth first.”

We move their bed into the master, and assemble it. As soon as this is done, Shauna dresses it, while we continue with the other beds. By the time we get to the last one, she is resting safely in her new roost, surrounded by hopping, chattering kids.

“Sim, where do you keep the TV?” she says, with unexpected sweetness.

“Oh, Lucy took hers with her,” I say. “I’m sorry; I’ve got an old black-and-white—I stopped the cable when she left... it’s kinda small?”

“Honey, just... Dayton, enough! Honey just bring that in next, would you, the TV, and first that stand; we can set it over here...” She points.

Kenneth looks at me with eyebrows raised, an impotent glaze about his eyes.

“Sure, sure,” I say.

The moving job is an all-day thing; kinda grueling. A lot of furniture that Shauna, when asked, just calls at us, “Put it in the basement ’til we figure out where...” A lot of boxes: books, clothes. By late afternoon I feel like I know these people *way* too intimately. The kids have found my leftover coffee in the maker; the two girls are pointing and making yucky noises, but Dayton, the oldest, is clearly intrigued.

“Dayton!” Kenneth cries, rushing over to dump it down the sink. The boy, squatting monkeylike on the counter, has popped up the top of the coffee-maker, and is poking his finger into the damp grounds.

I sit at the table, flexing my elbows, exhausted. I can smell that Shauna has put a lasagna in the oven.

“We’ll feed you,” says Kenneth, sitting down across from me with his fists folded together on the table. “You’ve been of great help today.”

“Afton?!” cries Shauna from the bedroom, “where’s your little sister?”

I hear Sutton's toddler peeps, from somewhere in the house. I'm thinking about the upstairs-door installation job, but I'm spent, and starving.

"I could eat," I say.

The dinner is good, french bread, green beans, and everything, but it becomes apparent fairly early on that the meal wasn't calculated with an extra adult in mind. I try to be modest, and ration myself, but it seems that whatever portion I allow myself, the others take less. Plus not to mention, I'm so hungry...

"Sim," says Kenneth, after the food has begun to settle, "how do you plan on turning things around, here?"

"What do you mean, Kenneth?" I say.

"What I mean is, that, uh, from the sounds of it you haven't exactly been productive for the last little while, and... Well, what's your plan?"

Shauna fondles her napkin with gentle fingers as she gazes lovingly at her take-the-initiative, bottom-line kind of guy husband. Although I am quickly learning to dread her presence, I must admit that in the autumn-yellow glow of the chandelier, and bathed in untarnished endorsement of her husband's message, she does indeed look compelling, in a kind of homey and wholesome way.

I set down my fork, and look at the husband. "I've got something in the works," I say. "It's gonna be huge."

"Please pass the green beans?" says Dayton.

"Don't worry Judge," I said to myself in the bathroom mirror of the hotel. "I've got something in the works..."

“You talking to yourself in there?” Mars called from the bedroom; he’d come in without my hearing him.

“No,” I said; then, to the mirror, “it’s gonna be huge.”

Mars sat before a long, fancy plate on the short hotel dresser; who knows where he’d gotten it. Next to the plate was a wrinkled bit of plastic; on the plate was a respectable chunk of cocaine, which he was crumbling with a razor blade.

“Mars,” I said, “I told you not to come in here without the diapers.”

“I got ’em, don’t worry,” he said, not looking up. His hands were focused, mechanical, precise; the rock was quickly becoming a friendly mound of usable powder.

“You should be doing that in the bathroom,” I said, looking at the hotel-room’s door, worried about bandmates/groupies, and their impending entrance. “We can’t let Cam know we’ve got it til after the show; I don’t want to be dealing with another Portland-style shitstorm...”

“Sorry, you were in there. I don’t think he saw me coming in.” Mars kept putting his vile long-nailed middle finger in the coke, and then running it up under his lip, licking his finger and then his gums with a compulsive tongue.

“Stop that!” I said, “you’re grossing me out. That’s just fucking unsanitary.”

Mars took the plate in both hands and carefully stood, making his way to the bathroom. “Just chill the fuck out and let me cut you a line,” he said.

Looking over at his skinny, tattooed form stooped over the sink pecking away with the razor on the plate like some kind of wind-up toy, I was just the slightest bit unsettled at how my pulse raced at the sound of his really rather banal suggestion.

“Here,” said Mars, holding a rolled up bill between his thumb and forefinger, and stepping aside to let me take my turn. “You want to talk about fucking unsanitary...” He handed me the snorting money.

My skin got cold and my vision sharpened, became sparkly. The spectra around the bathroom lights, which I suddenly noticed, made me wonder if there was some other unknown ingredient in this batch—what city are we in?

Mars took another one. “Good shit,” he wheezed, then sat down on the toilet and got quiet.

“We gotta hide this shit,” I said, “before everybody and their dog comes in here. Cam saw you go out; you know he’s gonna be sniffing around the second he comes in. It may mean nothing to you, you fucking irresponsible grunt, roadie, but I’ve got a reputation to uphold, it’s my business, and I’d like to have a functioning, passable bass player on the stage tonight...”

“I can play bass,” Mars said, gazing up at the air-duct vent on the ceiling above the shower, “doesn’t matter how fucked up I get. It’s the bass, man; it’s not rocket science.”

I looked at the plate, panicking suddenly; for a second I thought I heard approaching footsteps from the hall. What if Mars is intentionally trying to feed Cam too much drugs, in the hopes that he’ll get so fucked up he cripples himself beyond immediate repair, and Mars gets to take his place in the band for the remainder of the tour? I might have thought such back-handed, soap-opera style scheming was beyond the scope of our desperate roadie, who if he didn’t have this gig would probably be doing horrible things in the trashy streets of some horrible inner city, but then I remembered how Mars had been watching a lot of daytime TV lately, I mean a *lot* of it, and closely. “Look, for now let’s just worry about hiding this shit.”

We commenced scrambling around the place, but we were trying to outwit Cam and his appetite, and nothing seemed sufficiently wily.

“Maybe in that vent?” Mars said, pointing to a large white metal panel on the wall.

“Naw, someone’ll probably turn on the A/C, and then we’re fucked,” I said. “Unless... Didn’t you say you bought those diapers?”

“Yeah, they’re here,” he said, producing a large retail plastic bag from under the bedspread.

“The box!” I said, tearing it open and pulling out adult-size diapers, throwing them on the bed. When it was empty, I looked at the big purple box, with its picture of a smiling, active elderly couple. “Sunshine Days brand?” I said. “Is this really something we want to go cheap on?”

“They were out of the other kind,” said Mars. “Plus, I mean, think about my position. Don’t you think people are wondering what I’m doing walking around the store with a jumbo-size box of adult diapers?”

I placed the “box of diapers” on the dresser, in plain sight. Then I gathered the diapers and put them in the plastic bag. I was busy looking for a place to stash this when Cam walked in, with five girls.

He introduced me to the girls while I stood there dumbfounded holding the bag of diapers. Nobody noticed. Cam started sniffing around the place.

“Sunshine Days,” said one of the girls, putting her finger on the box.

“Oh, that’s one of the new rules,” Cam said, “it’s totally ridiculous.” He glared at me as he made his way to the bathroom, just looking around. “I don’t think it’s really enforceable...”

Fortunately for everyone, we were in one of those landlocked states where the audience is basically teenage girls chauffeured to the arena by their nostalgic mothers, and the show was early. We got out of the hotel room, everybody on the same page, and the show was the usual business.

During the encore I morphed into that pathetic and sappy creature that searches for her face in the crowd. The lighting allowed me to see the people, in the front rows at least, pretty good (by this point I could've performed the song in my sleep). I scanned the rows, pausing every now and again. Once or twice I had to really stop and think about it a while. She wasn't there. But why *would* she be—what city are we in? The people below the stage swayed, screamed, giggled.

On the ride back to the hotel, Mars let on that he had some other treats beside what awaited us in the box back at the room. Cam's eyes lit up.

The girls were a delight, as always. Although the same, somehow different as well, as the ones in the previous city. I stood guard at the bathroom door, handing out diapers. "New rules!" I said. "This organization is cutting down on messes."

Cam acted really put out, but after I showed him my own pant-lines, and after a few of the girls returned from the next room showing a lot of leg, apparently unable to fit their clothes over this new and puffy form of undergarment, he broke down and complied.

"Wear the pants!" I decreed, with each new customer. "These are modern times! If we're gonna lose control, we're gonna do it with some control!" You see, Judge, I've always been very careful, very methodical. If at times I've found myself stymied by the whims and the proclivities of others around me, well, there's always a whole lot of factors to consider. You've got to look at the thing in context, like they say. There's only so much you can control.

I set out some plastic on the stairs and try to anchor it with duct tape; this proves less than effective as I drag the new door in its frame up from the top. It's a heavy load for one person, but Kenneth is off to work, and Shauna of course has her hands full with the kids and the new home. I've torn the old drywall away from the studs, and there's a mess on the floor, but it's old carpet anyway, and it'll vacuum up.

As I try to set the casing in place, I see that it's about a quarter-inch too wide. I measure both the distance between the studs, and the new door casing, trying to decide if it's my mistake, or the door-people's.

"Goddamn it," I say, under my breath. Is it worth calling them back, and trying to get one the right size? Who knows how long it'd take, these jokers. I notice the kids gathered down on the landing, watching me work. They are tempted by the mess, and the heavy tools. I'd better just get the thing hung.

But it's been a while since I was in the construction business; even then, I only carried painter tools. A power saw of some sort would be nice, but who can I call, to borrow one? I've been out of the loop. I find a good-sized chisel in the old toolbox, and start hammering away. The aggressive, noisy nature of the job delights the children, who stand below, mesmerized. I grunt and sweat, and turn around every now and then to make sure the kids are keeping away. The chisel isn't exactly sharp, and as I chip away at the two-by-four, it isn't pretty.

Down in the kitchen, Shauna's got the TV on. It's some local morning news supplement; the whole hour devoted to Mussberger. Very salacious, but as far as I can tell the kids don't even notice. "Families of some victims are wondering how he could have slipped through the cracks for so long," says the TV. "They're searching for answers in a case where answers are hard to

come by, and no one willing to step up and take responsibility for what ultimately might simply be a failure of the system. Mussberger's parents, deceased, were both completely deaf; and there is record of him 'acting out' as early as the second grade. Lindsey, what options do these victims' family members have in a case such as this? Oh well Darren the fact is there are still too many unknowns for a legitimate case to be mounted, and these will probably remain unknown until the perpetrator is captured. The victims understand that just because a family-member has gone missing does not necessarily mean it was Mussberger's work, especially considering the recent public unrest in the downtown areas. Even if a body is recovered, and we can through forensics deem that there was the violence and sexual violation typical of a Mussberger, we still need him incarcerated to with any certainty tie it to his name..."

Dayton has gathered his courage and made his way up the stairs to get a closer look. He stands quietly with a coy, mischievous grin, and tugs on his shirt. I put a line of tape down on the floor and tell him not to step over it. The wood chips are generally flying off in the other direction, but the noise is loud: I've stuffed some toilet paper in my ears but am hesitant to recommend the same to the kid, as Shauna would probably have something to say about it. Dayton stares at the rusty old toolbox, full of yearning but afraid to ask.

Shauna peeks out of the kitchen: "Hey Sim, I'm gonna jump in the shower for a few minutes," she says, "can you keep an eye on things? Dayton, come down from there this instant!" He ignores her.

"Sure, no worries," I say. "Sorry about the noise; another hour or so I think and I should have this thing ready. Do you know if Kenneth's got a power drill, or something like that?"

"You can check that toolbag; I think it's down in the basement." She lingers a moment, hanging on the corner, the front of her blouse drooping open.

Sutton, the three year old, gets nervous when her mother goes into the bathroom, and I am forced to stop working and play the babysitter for a while. I don't mind. I venture into the bedroom, and turn off the TV. We sit at the kitchen table making paper airplanes. Shauna comes out in her bathrobe, prancing about, humming a tune; the kids think nothing of it but I start to get a bad feeling about the whole arrangement.

Three days later I find myself sitting on a cot out in the shed, smoking some reefer and enjoying the silent company of the garden tools, the bookshelf, the pedal-steel guitar I have brought out here in the hopes that its fluid, occult weeping will somehow point me in the right direction. Yet every time I plug it in and start to play, I quickly narrow the thing from ten strings to five to two to one, and then find myself picking just one note, static and sustained, weird and defiant, and I wonder if deep down I even understand what music *is* anymore.

Gary calls, wondering if I can sell him a nugget. I tell him sure, come on over, I'm out in the back so no need to even knock on the door. I'll be here; in fact I'm sleeping out here. He wonders if I still have Chuck's phone number; GJP is facing a deadline at this home-show job, and could use a hand. It's like the Judge himself is talking for me when I suggest that I join the team. Gary hesitates at the idea for some reason, but he is after all hitting me up for some reefer, which I am of course not going to charge him for. He says he'll talk to the Boss about it.

Stab Lumper sat up in bed inside his lowly cottage, a deadened look on his face, and stared into space without expression for a while. Ever since Chief Surgeon Hupperl had increased the baby quota, and thus the amount of exertion required of a male contumbly to reach that number and earn that opportunity to mate, Stab had been forcing himself to arise earlier. He seemed to take the job a bit more seriously than his companions, and while this made him appear to his superiors a real go-getter and a solid asset to the team, the truth was that at heart he was perhaps more rebellious than any of the typical, lazy, griping other contumblies. Every morning was a moral crisis.

Although there was a mirror at his sitting desk, he hardly noticed it as he daubed the cold gray sludge all over his skin. He was thinking about human babies, one in particular, that he had spotted but for some reason become reluctant to kidnap. The thought, not so sudden, but rather building for days or even really months, that there was no way to know whether these babies were in fact better off as contumblies, had suddenly caused his mind to race at the crucial moment when all the adults have vacated the premises and the kidnapping must happen quick. He had of course arrived prepared, with the shapeless lump of splung to leave in place of the baby and fool the humans, but had found himself, as the baby gazed up at him and sputtered and gurgled, unwilling to pick the thing up and steal it, hoping instead that his hunting companions wouldn't know the difference. What if the science is wrong? It sure doesn't seem to square with observed experience.

You can always tell a human-conversion from a natural-born contumbly. There's just something not-quite-right about them. It's like they remember something, vague and

unspeakable, something they perhaps don't even understand too well themselves, except that it holds them back, impedes their progress somehow. They never are able to quite fit into their newer form; some figment of their previous biology holds them back. They seem to become confused somewhere along the way, and take to staring at the floor; in games of Haul and Squat they are always chosen after the others. At parties, they make the most awkward and disturbing toasts...

(3)

The first morning I catch a ride with Gary; there's a gate with a code, even a security guy who keeps an eye on the vehicles that come and go, and it's just easier this way. Gary is listening to talk radio, which even now I find myself happily able to tune out into the background. He turns off onto a backstreet and starts taking hits off of his bubbler.

"You want one?" he says.

"Naw, I can't do that if I'm working," I say, "it just makes the day go by slower for me."

"Yeah, it does do that, doesn't it," he says, taking another while I touch my fingers to the steering wheel, just being safe. He exhales out the cracked window and there is a mysterious, thoughtful pause as we both wonder about the implications of being aware that a workday might *feel* longer, and finding this state of affairs somehow appealing.

"Now, Sim, you know," Gary says, touching the volume knob on the radio and looking serious, "these guys on this crew, they're pretty conservative guys, you have to..."

"I'm a pretty conservative guy!" I say.

"Yeah whatever but you have to, you know..."

"Are you worried I'm gonna say political stuff and make you look bad for bringing me on?" I look down at the best throwaway clothes I could muster on such short notice, but it's true that back in the heyday I was getting into some weird shit wardrobe-wise, and a lot of it hasn't aged well. If you factor in my showing up lacking some essential painter-tools, including a spring-tamping nail set, well, you can see why I'm a little worried about first impressions.

“No,” he snorts, “well, don’t do that either—but I’m saying *this* has to stay on the way downlow.” He tucks the bubbler down into its hiding place and then pulls some nylon thing over it, for cover.

“Really,” I say. “Don’t you have trouble with that thing spilling?”

“I’m careful,” he says; he’s still giving me that uncertain look. “We don’t talk about it. At all. Guys are gonna come asking, I mean Prime? The Boss’ kid. Prime’s a crazy bastard, just understand that. I guarantee one of the first things he does is try to hit you up for weed.”

“The Boss’ kid? His *name* is Prime, or that’s his nickname?”

“It’s real. My name doesn’t get mentioned, got that? I think he’s on some medication, like, he might be kinda crazy somehow, really crazy... You do what you feel comfortable doing, but my name doesn’t even get mentioned.”

“Right, sure,” I say, “I get it. How old is the kid?”

“I don’t know, mid-twenties. He’s kind of a punk...”

“And was Greg Johansen a painter already when he had him?”

“Well, yeah. He’s been doing it since at least the eighties... You know we do higher-end stuff.”

“So he was already a painter and he named his kid Prime?” I can’t believe it. Ahead of us, a garbage truck is stopped in the road, its machine-arm carrying out its jolty function.

“It’s not that weird,” Gary says.

“It’s a little weird.”

“I don’t like you smoking in my truck,” he says, “but if you have to do it, do it now—not at work. Greg Johansen doesn’t have any smokers on the crew.”

“Huh,” I say. For construction, it’s unusual. I am reminded of the first paint crew I worked on, with the Brothers Tenney. Rod and Chance: a couple of grouchy old bastards, total hard-asses when it came to painting. They had inherited the gig. They only worked for the super-wealthy. I once watched them take four months to paint a fence. Their father had died of cancer; their mother was in the process of dying of cancer. Smokers essentially all their lives, they had decided to quit together around the time I hired on. Eventually for them it came to smoking little cigars on the breaks, and rationing them. I don’t guess they were ever that soft and cuddly to begin with, these two, but while I was working for them, it was like being on a submarine with a couple of simmering, murderous psychopaths.

“I’ve worked for high-end painters,” I say. “I mean stuff you wouldn’t believe.”

“Oh yeah who’s that?”

“Tenney Brothers Painting.”

“Never heard of ’em. Who? From Salt Lake, maybe, not down here.”

“You wouldn’t believe the stuff they were doing—bondo, on everything.”

“Oh, like *that*,” says Gary, shaking his head. “Working for GJP, it’s kind of a delicate balance, you’ll find out; you’ve gotta find that sweet spot: we do it good, I mean we pimp it out, *good*, and also just as important we do it fast. This is the biggest thing, and probably will take you the longest to figure out, is how to find this balance—if you get stuck trying to make everything *too* perfect, it’ll slow you down, and then you won’t have the *speed*, you’ll get left behind. But it’s gotta be good—it’s a delicate balance. What Greg Johansen says is, perfection is impossible, there’s no such thing as perfection. It can’t ever be *perfect*. We do it good and we do it fast.”

“Perfection is good enough,” I say. It’s off the tee shirt of some other company, I don’t remember whose. “I’m telling you. Bondo. As in like what you use on your car.”

“That’s pretty intense—but no, it wouldn’t make that much of a difference... Spackle’s just as good.”

“Maybe, but that’s what they were doing, the Tenney Brothers. Couple a hard-asses.”

“Well *I’ve* never heard of ’em,” Gary says.

“And then they’d be putting like four, five coats on everything, sanding the shit out of it between coats...”

“Five coats!” Gary says, snorting again. “What? How does that even help? That doesn’t even make sense—how long ago was this?”

“Well four coats anyway; I thought it was five. Shit was like glass or, ceramic, when it was done. It was unreal. I’d be whole weeks, like, sanding balusters. Get ’em sanded and then Rod Tenney’d just spray ’em again, and I’d sand ’em again. Just sitting on a bucket, sanding balusters, for like, weeks. Patching stuff with bondo. Didn’t matter how long it took.”

Gary looks at me like he doesn’t know what to think, concerning these tall tales. “Well then GJP’s gonna be a bit of a change for you,” he says.

“Naw, I’ve worked for other painters too,” I say. “Done my share of blow-and-go jobs...”

We stop at the gate and Gary enters the code. He takes an extra peek back to make sure the secret bundle is well-hidden. The yard is bare dirt, lumpy and ruddy, recently mud but now dry. I see the Mexican finish carpenters out by their trucks, unloading some tools and hoses.

“Officially, Bert’s the guy in charge,” says Gary as we near the enormous house, “not for too much longer, he’s going off to be a dentist, and then it’s gonna be me, but for the next little

while it's Bert. But really, the policy at GJP is we all help out, you know, we hit the thing as a team."

We go in through the garage; it looks spacious enough to hold a small factory, but in comparison with the rest of the house, it's well proportioned. I follow Gary around the place, stopping to peek through this doorway or that, but then quickly hurrying on, not wanting to get lost. We come to an upstairs hallway that opens on one side onto the bird's eye view of, well, basically a domestic basketball arena. In the bedroom at the end of this hallway is another painter.

"Gary," this guy says, then looks at me. "You got here just in time." It's Prime Johansen. He's skinny, blonde, wears sweatpants and a white tee shirt. He speaks with a strangely personalized drawl, geographically ambiguous. He's working on an energy drink.

"Prime, this is Sim, that guy I was talking to your dad about," says Gary. "Hey, did Jason bring more of those? Where are they?"

Prime holds up the pink and black can and eyeballs it a second. "Better go get 'em quick," he says, "they're goin' fast these days."

Gary immediately turns and runs.

"You know how it is," Prime calls after him, "once those Mexicans see that case, they're gonna all be gone..." He laughs, and looks at me. "I'm not kidding, if you need one you'd better hurry up and grab one."

But Gary is already gone, and I'd only get lost in this house. Prime is mixing up some dark blue dye into a can of spackle, with his painter's knife. "Somebody famous on the crew," he says, "I have to say that's a first."

"Well, not exactly..."

“No man, I remember that song! I love that song.”

“So do I, so do I,” I say. “So... what are we doing this morning?”

Gary returns toting energy drinks in his arms and cargo-pants pockets. “You weren’t kidding, these are the last of ’em,” he is saying.

Prime smiles, and poses for a minute with his. “Pink flavor this time!” he says, then reads the label: “ForReal Squealberry. Hmm... I think I’m gonna like this kind!” Something about his manic joviality so early in the morning makes me suddenly want one. He stands there with one hand on his hip and his head back, chugging it down. Out the window, looking down, I see a couple more trucks arriving. Somewhere back in the house a nail-gun starts to pop, and a compressor kicks on.

Gary is fiddling with a yellow construction-radio. “I want to try the ForReal Squealberry,” I say to him.

He cradles the cans in his arm, and looks for his station. “Ugh, the FM sucks in some of these rooms!” he says, to Prime. Then, standing, “Sim, if these guys see you carrying around one of these energy drinks, it’ll just look bad, here it’s your first day and it’s first thing in the morning and you haven’t even done any work yet—Jason, the general, has been bringing cases by, but it’s as a reward, for those of us who are showing up early and staying late. The finish guys’ll get mad if they see you with one—it isn’t really fair.” He drops one of the cans on the floor, and chases it squatting as it rolls into the closet.

I’m trying to count how many of these energy drinks Gary is smuggling altogether. I can’t tell if he’s joking, and I look at Prime, who seems similarly mystified.

“I’m gonna go put these in the Place,” Gary says.

“You’re gonna drink all those?” I say, as he’s leaving.

“Come on, Gary,” says Prime. “There’s enough to go around...”

Gary stops and lets another one roll to the floor, which he kicks in my direction. He huffs, perturbed, as he exits. “Yeah I’m gonna drink ’em all,” he says.

“Spackling?” I say.

“You got tools?” says Prime.

“Sure, I got the old putty-knife,” I say, taking it from my back pocket, and running my thumb on its edge.

“Don’t you mean spackle-knife? Hey Gary, you hear that, he called it a putty-knife!”

“What?” Gary calls from somewhere, “putty? You better tell him what GJP thinks of putty...”

“Greasy putty,” says Prime. “Is what my dad calls it. It’s all getting dirty, getting all over your fingers til you can’t wash it off. Don’t be using that greasy putty!”

“Yeah but you don’t have to sand it,” I say.

“What?” says Gary, coming back in again, the energy drinks safely hidden somewhere. “You still have to sand it. Putty is dirty. And it shows through the paint.”

“It doesn’t show through the paint,” I say.

“It shows through the finish,” says Gary, “no matter what you do. Haloes. Maybe you can’t see them, but the well-trained eye...”

“Yeah putty haloes always show through the finish,” says Prime. “Greasy putty. It’s dirty. We never do it. I knew my dad to try it once, and then he said never again. Maybe other painters like putty.”

“You just put it on before the primer, and then sand the primer,” I say. “I think it’s faster.”

“No,” says Gary, “no way. Don’t let us catch you doing any puttying on this job; that’s not how we do things. It’s greasy. Spackle. Who cares about a little sanding, it’s spackle. Sands right up.”

“Spackle-knife, is the right word,” says Prime.

“Not putty-knife,” says Gary. “Don’t let the Boss hear you call it a putty-knife, or you’ll be making us all look bad.”

“All right, it’s a spackle-knife,” I say, going to the spackle can which Prime has set on the windowsill. The blue dye has made the stuff a little drippy, and I carve out a small dollop of it on my “spackle-knife.”

“No, Sim, wait,” says Gary. “I’m not sure... Where’s Bert?”

“Bert had an appointment with his wife,” says Prime. “Family pictures.”

“Well who else is here?”

A man comes in, looking slightly out of place, pale and lean, cropped light red hair topped by an odd, red and green African-looking hat. He doesn’t say anything, just stands there in the doorway with one hand on the casing, his other hand holding a five-gallon bucket with the painter-tool wraparound on the top.

“Who else is here?” Gary says again.

“Bert’s off to his appointment,” says Prime. “You, Sim, looks like Cody just got here—hi Cody...” The newcomer nods. “Haven’t seen Bo. Jarvis and Ammon just called, they’re running a little late. Must’ve heard that Bert was taking the morning off, and figured they’d sleep in. That Ammon, you know sometimes I wonder...”

“Your dad likes him,” says Gary.

“Leslie, his kid, and Luigi are all off on that other job in Spanish Fork. Haven’t seen the other Mexican, what was his name? I guess he has to drive his kid to school and always gets here late, he’s coming from West Jordan or something. What do you think of that guy, this new Mexican?”

“We’ll see, he seems alright,” says Gary. “What about Andy?”

“Big Andy, he was here when I got here. Said he’d been here an hour already.”

“Yeah right. Maybe.”

“Down in the theater, prepping that stain-grade.”

“I’ll just get to these windows,” says Cody, the newcomer, and then draws a masker from his bucket and tears off a quick sheet. He wanders off.

“So, no spackle?” I say, scraping it off back into the can. What’s left on the knife I rub off with my finger; it is cold and wet.

“I just, if you’re gonna be spackling, we need to train you,” Gary says, “and I don’t know if we really have time right now... It doesn’t look good, everybody showing up late.”

“It’s spackle,” I say.

“No, we should have you sanding. Is that ceiling downstairs dry enough to sand, you think?”

Prime shrugs his shoulders.

“Here, come on,” Gary says, taking a sheet of gray sandpaper from his toolbucket, and then a black sanding sponge, and handing them to me. We walk through the winding, labyrinthine house, and find our way downstairs. While we walk I fold the sheet of sandpaper in half and cut it with the knife. Gary sees this and stops.

“What are you doing?” he says. He’s clearly bothered by the way I’m cutting this sandpaper.

Who knows why. “Cut it in half, fold it in fourths,” I say, “get me a good sturdy piece to sand with. See, like this.” I demonstrate the Tenney Brothers approach.

“You’re just wasting sandpaper, doing it like that,” Gary says. “Here, look.” He takes an already folded segment from his toolbelt. “You cut it in thirds, and then like this.” The strip is narrower than mine, folded in thirds, with a little flap folded at the very end; I’ve never seen this style before and am unsure what advantage it offers over my method.

“Fourths, thirds,” I say. “I’m still gonna use it all up; it’s not like I’m wasting it.”

“You won’t have as many edges doing it like that.”

“If I need more edges, I can just fold it as I go,” I say, showing him.

He looks away, bugged. “This is how we do it here at GJP,” he says. “If you do it that way you’re just gonna end up burning through the sandpaper too fast. *This* is the right way.” We continue to walk toward wherever we’re going. “This is always kind of a problem when we get new guys who’ve been working for other painters: they always have some different way of doing things that they think is better. GJP has a certain way of doing things. It’s all about efficiency. If the Boss sees you walking around with your sandpaper folded like that, he isn’t gonna be happy. Shit ain’t cheap. Don’t waste sandpaper. Don’t do it that way.” His voice is a bit plaintive, disappointed.

We stop in a large room with great squares of wood trim decorative in the ceiling. Gary points upward. “You can start with this,” he says.

I look around. “Got a ladder?”

Gary is over in a broad, arched doorway into a somewhat dim, open room. I can see by the slight incline of the floor that this must be the theater. “Big Andy,” he says. I walk over to see.

Big Andy is a shapeless lump, lying on his side over against the wall, filling the stain-grade trim with wood filler. His back is silhouetted by the glare of the worklamps around him on the floor; he makes no effort to turn around as he responds: “Yeah it’s me. I got here at six.”

“How’s it coming in here?” says Gary.

“Just like always.”

“You gonna want somebody in here to help with the high stuff?”

“I can’t be monkeying around on a ladder...” Big Andy strains his neck to look at us, notices me, and frowns. He is old, and large; there’s something malevolent about his eyes, like somebody you’d be uncomfortable leaving your kids with. In the glaring beams of the worklights, he looks like a grey, de-tusked walrus. “Somebody who knows what they’re doing,” he says.

“Don’t worry,” Gary says, “Sim’s gonna be out here sanding this ceiling. Maybe you could keep an eye on things, make sure nobody’s messing up too bad?”

I shrug. “Sanding?” I say.

Big Andy guffaws in disgust. “Always some shithead,” he says, then turns back to his prepping.

“Maybe Jarvis or Ammon, when they get here?” Gary says.

“My ass!” says Big Andy. “That Jarvis is okay, I guess; Ammon’s a shithead. Totally worthless. I don’t know why the Boss... Those two come as a pair anyway; don’t have me cooped up with those two assclowns down here—it’s too early.”

I start nosing around this basement, peeking into closets, looking for a ladder.

“Well Bo should be here any minute,” says Gary.

Big Andy expels another, sarcastic, guffaw. Then: “Where’s Bert?”

“Family pictures. There’s that Mexican kid, Enrique... What do you think of him?”

“His English is shit,” says Big Andy, “but that’s kind of a bonus, really. Don’t have to listen to his bullshit all day, like Ammon... I do like his perfume...”

“Hey Gary, where’s the ladders?” I say.

Footsteps clomp on the stairs, and then another painter appears, tall, oafish, head shaven. His eyes are dark, his cheeks with the kind of whisker-shadow that never disappears, even with a clean shave. He’s got his phone out and is looking at the screen and tapping buttons with one finger as he approaches.

“Where we at this morning, Gary?” he says.

“Hey Bo, what’s up? What do you wanna do, help Andy with the high stuff down here, or come spackle upstairs with me and Prime?”

Bo, distracted by his phone, doesn’t answer. Big Andy remains angrily silent as well.

“Where’s the ladders?” I say.

“Probably gonna be Enrique,” Gary says to Big Andy.

Bo looks at me and points down a hallway.

“Oh, gracias, gracias, muchas gracias!” sneers Big Andy from the floor of the theater.

I find the stash of ladders in another room, and pick out a black-topped six footer. While Gary and Bo stand and run through their morning banter, I climb on the ladder and begin to sand.

Gary is turning to go back upstairs. “Remember,” he says, “it’s just a ceiling, nobody’s gonna be touching it, make it look good... It ain’t the Taj Mahal.”

“Sure, sure,” I say. After he’s gone I go find some masking tape and wrap the tops of my fingers, Tenney Brothers fashion. The feel of the sandpaper in my fingertips is a familiar one. I put the pressure against the primed trim, run the edge into the angled corners, hit the curves with the sanding sponge; occasionally I run my left, untaped hand across the surface, to feel that it is smooth. The white dust is dry on my palm; it hangs in the air and tickles my throat but I don’t want to go bother Gary about a dustmask just now, feeling like enough of a burden already by this point. First day on the job. I’ll mention it at lunch.

I was lucky the Tenney Brothers had taken me back on, but Rod, hardass that he was, still recognized the value of a worker who was patient and thorough. We were doing a cabin up Provo canyon, up on a ridge on the north side only accessible by a locked gate down by the highway.

It was summer and hot and sunny, and wasps became a serious concern at the top of the ladder, but this day I was inside, above a stairwell, sanding on some log-cabin style wood paneling. It was a long wall, days worth of sanding. The ladder plunged deep into the stairwell beneath me.

Every time I tried to get started something inside of me got weak, and I would lean forward, limp against the ladder, wanting to die somehow, wondering how. It wasn’t like I was bringing a bottle to the jobsite with me, as I had on other jobs; most mornings I’d wish that I had, but I knew the Tenney brothers were a couple of cagey dudes, and I needed the money.

I was thinking about her. I had a gig scheduled later that night, free beer, even the good, out-of-state stuff, but I knew that she wouldn’t be there. It would be just like all the others, meaningless, pointless, shameless entertainment for the patrons, the band getting gradually

sloppier as the hour got late, as if in reflection of the uproarious audience—we would pull out the numbers that everybody knew, people would begin to bounce around and howl, and sing along. Last call would arrive, a wet blanket dulling the merriment, the first warning alarm of the morning that would follow, and people would plead with us for one more song, something loud and fast.

But she wouldn't be there. We would get paid, talk about when to get together and practice again, talk about the next step, what's gonna carry us out of town, out of state, onto the bigger stage and the real money, the real significance. I would pass out alone in bed, and then keep waking up through the morning, feverish, shaky from the toxin-loaded nightmares. Would she have visited me in these poisoned dreams?

I gave it one last try, lifted my hand and ran the sandpaper up and down a few times but there was really nothing left, I was what you'd call worthless. I climbed down off the ladder, dropped the sandpaper onto the floor, walked around the cabin to see where the shadows of Rod and Chance's ladders fell outside: they were on the far side, in the shade. They wouldn't see me leave. I went out the front door.

Sorry Rod; sorry Chance. Sorry gang. I won't come back looking for forgiveness a second time; I don't mean to strain your patience like that. I know you'll get your usual bitter kicks, hissing my name. Take care.

Mussberger, the sex-criminal, the serial killer, has been in the public mind for some months now. They can't find him, and people keep disappearing. Though I'm not the type to admire serial killers and their so-called "genius," I do feel a certain kinship as object of public scorn. Not fame as we envision it, in dazzling lights, brimming with money, basking in the envy-

bred admiration of the people we meet, not this but rather infamy, sordid, jailhouse-bound, all-bets-are-off, despised infamy, to be borne by the shoulders of a villain we can all agree on. I wonder how he's managed to remain so well-hidden for so long—I'd be interested to learn the finer points of his technique of concealment. His face has been everywhere. Yet he somehow continues to evade capture. Shit, he could probably leave the country if it came to it.

But I can't. The Judge made that perfectly clear as he closed the folder of my file, telling me that the charges weren't going away, not by any means, but would only be prosecuted in the case of my attempting to leave the country again. And that for now I was to go play my song for people and make a lot of money.

Bert Swenson comes in a little before eleven. He is stocky, square-built; something about his gait makes me think of him as traipsing up the cobblestones, wanting to go plug that hole in the dike with his finger. He grins, looks the scene over with some satisfaction, then with a loud voice says, "Big Andy!"

"Yuh," Big Andy grunts, from the theater.

"Sim!" Bert says. "Our newest star! The singing sensation!" Bert's voice is loud, intended for all, and in fact it's hard to know exactly who he's talking to, as he speaks. "A shining star of painting!"

"That's right," I say, slapping the dust from my sandpaper.

"Yeah right," says Big Andy.

"How goes the sanding," Bert says. "Here, let me..." I get off the ladder and he steps up to run a hand over it, check my work. "Oh, that's magnificent!" he says. "Mag-nificent. You're doing it all like that. Good. This isn't the first time you've done this. Good. We've got a big deadline..."

“Riding a bike,” I say.

“I see,” Bert says. “This sanding is just fabulous. Remarkable. You’re doing a fine job. Keep up the good work.” He grins, and watches me get back to it. “Big Andy, don’t be giving the new guy a hard time; he does a remarkable job. This sanding is just fab-ulous.”

Big Andy doesn’t say anything, but we hear his breathing.

“So you’re the one in charge,” I say.

“Well, Greg Johansen is the one in charge,” he says. “But he can’t always be here, so... Really the way we do it, here at GJP, is, we all help out. Everybody does their part, and together we keep the whole thing afloat. It’s a team effort, like say a rowing team. We’re out there winning that race. We hit the thing as a team. You sanding that ceiling, back and forth, you could think of that like you’re helping row the boat along...”

“Of course,” I say. “So... When do I meet the Boss?”

“Oh, he’ll be around. But I talk to him pretty regularly, so, you know, he’ll know who you are...”

“On payday!” Big Andy barks in ridicule, unable to contain himself.

“Yes, he *will* be the one writing your check, that’s true,” says Bert. “Gary gave you a time-card? So, you’ll be the one keeping track of your hours, don’t be getting any ideas, be honest, I’m sure you’ll be getting plenty of hours for the next couple of months...”

Bert stands grinning, and watches me sand for a while. “Looks good!” he says. Then: “So, Sim, let me ask you something. Are you married? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Not married.”

“Divorced? Or...”

“Never been.”

“No kids?”

“Nope.”

“Huh, that’s funny.” Bert has his hand on his chin. He gazes at the ceiling, thoughtfully.

“You seem like a respectable enough guy. That’s funny.”

“Just how it happened,” I say.

“Huh, so... How old are you?”

“What about you, you married?”

“Yep, two kids,” he says. “I’ll have to introduce you to the family, one of these days.

We’ll have to have you over for dinner. It just strikes me as funny. That you’re not married.”

“Just never found the right one, I guess.”

“Yeah, I guess not. So... It isn’t that you like dudes...”

“Not that.”

“Are you sure?”

“It isn’t that.”

“Well it’s not like you have to keep it a secret; it’s okay if you like dudes.”

I stop sanding, and look at him. It’s clear he’s not in any hurry.

“I mean, I’ll understand,” he says, beaming. “I mean, I won’t understand, but, I, you know, I’ll be sympathetic. If you want to talk about it. You liking dudes.”

“I appreciate that, Bert,” I say. “I’ll let you know if I start to develop any new and unusual feelings.”

“So, Sim, I’ll be honest with you—being married, with kids, well, it changes you.”

“That’s what I hear.”

“I mean it’s a lot of responsibility. I’ve got people to provide for and protect, you know? I’ve got to keep them in mind.”

“Sure,” I say.

Bert lowers his voice, conspiratorially. “And when I show up to work and hear about the new guy, well, naturally I’ve got to investigate, you know, make sure that it’s somebody safe to bring my family around, make sure it isn’t Mussberger we’ve just hired on...”

“I’m not him,” I say.

“No you’re not!” Bert says, at full voice again. “Let’s see, I don’t even see any tattoos... No tattoos?”

“I guess I never—“

“Nothing under that shirt? Come on, lift up that shirt, let me see your back—nothing?”

I feel okay about ignoring this particular command.

“No tattoos?” he says.

“No.”

“None?”

Big Andy calls out, “Make him show you his dick... Probably says ‘Brad was here,’ some name like that. Jared.”

“Jared was here,” says Bert, and thinks it over. “That’s interesting, Big Andy. But Sim doesn’t have any tattoos—so, we know he isn’t Mussberger, at least...”

“That’s true, I’m not Mussberger,” I say.

“And you’re not some kind of pervy weirdo...”

“Well who knows,” I say.

“Interesting. You’ll have to let me tell you about Terrence, who used to work for us. You probably don’t know him. He was an interesting guy; probably about your age, now that I think about it. He had some interesting ideas... He wasn’t married.”

“Sounds interesting,” I say.

“He was. I wonder whatever became of old Terrence, haven’t seen him for a while... Hey Big Andy, you ever see Terrence anymore, you remember him?”

Big Andy calls out, “That shithead!”

“Come on, now,” Bert says, “Terrence wasn’t so bad, not such a bad guy.” He watches me sand for a while. “Excellent work, Sim,” he says. “Mag-nificent!”

“Good,” I say.

“So, let me ask you a question, Sim. If you don’t mind my asking, well, you grew up around here, right?”

“Sure,” I say. I know what’s coming next, and in my stomach is that old sinking feeling.

“So, let me ask you, are you a Mormon? Do you go to church?”

“I was raised in it.”

“You were baptized.”

“Sure.”

“And got the priesthood, and all that.”

“I think I only made it to Teacher. I never got to Priest.”

“Huh,” Bert says, “interesting. Never got to Priest. Did you get your Eagle Scout?”

“Everything but the project.”

“Oh, one of those, is it?” he says, amused. “I know some of those—I thought for sure you must be an Eagle Scout.”

“Well, you know,” I say, “everything but the project. It’s pretty close.”

“It is pretty close—everything but the actual medal itself. Interesting. Probably broke your poor mother’s heart...”

“Oh she’s been around long enough to’ve had bigger disappointments than that,” I say.

“New and unusual feelings,” says Bert, stroking his chin, “that’s a good one, I’ll have to remember that one. New and unusual—it’s so *suggestive*.”

“I *am* a songwriter.”

“A hit songwriter. Mega-hit. And a fabulous paintprepper!”

“That too,” I say.

“So... You don’t do the church thing anymore.”

“Not for a good long time.”

“So would you say you’re not Mormon?”

“Right.”

“So, is it, you just don’t like going to church, you just don’t like all those rules? Or is it, you don’t believe in it?”

“That’s it,” I say.

“So you don’t believe in it, you quit going, that makes sense, I can see that,” Bert says, examining the logic. “No reason to go if you don’t believe in it... Interesting. How people rationalize their behavior.”

“What day is it?” I say.

“So you’re not Mormon,” Bert says. “Huh. I always find it interesting, what people call themselves... Well, Sim, keep up the good work, and I’ll make sure the Boss hears about it. We’re making good and solid progress, right, Big Andy? Good and solid! New and unusual!”

He turns and leaves; I hear him clomping up the stairs. Big Andy's strained breathing is almost painful to listen to. I keep sanding.

Assistant Deputy Accountant Laban Huddlestorm was an early riser, which is not quite to say that he was what they call a morning contumbly. Rather, he had retained the habit after the days of his service, out of some diffuse but irresistible sense of duty. He wasn't one of those that buzzes around in the morning, opening windows and singing. He was one of those that, if you catch them at their morning skabaal, will stare back at you blankly as though they don't know who you are. But he always came alive enough to fulfill the day-to-day responsibilities at the office.

He generally felt better about things once he'd left the hut, his wife and children still snug asleep in their beds, and took his daily laps around the park. Nothing too strenuous, just something to keep the legs in good condition.

The only others out at this hour were younger contumblies on their way to their service. He spotted Jarom Fussellkitt and Stab Lumper behind their face paint.

"Ho, Fussellkitt," he called, "Easy does it. How's the family?"

"You'd know better than me," said Jarom, with no attempt to conceal his irritation.

"I suppose that's true," said Huddlestorm, more to himself.

He didn't envy the younger males; he remembered too well what that life was like. The impatience, the frustration. The sense of injustice.

Laban Huddlestorm was an accountant, and he'd had plenty of opportunity to observe the properties of money. This made him, as a contumbly, grave and unfrivolous. He did, however, on occasion, indulge one little pet fantasy, always in this hour before work. He wondered if he could run a betting operation, nothing so banal and unimaginative as Haul and

Squat, mind you, but an operation which took bets on the outcome of various contumblies in the service. Who would be the first to finish, for example? And regarding the harem, who would end up with whom? Those kinds of thing...

He knew it was a ridiculous idea, which is why he never told anyone about it. It was ridiculous because, for one thing, coming up with the capital would require putting up his savings, which his family's security absolutely prohibited. But also because, for example, no matter how much information he might gather in his quiet, observant way, eavesdropping on the youths during his morning stroll, or popping his head in on the kids at odd moments throughout the day, he knew that there were many, perhaps too many, factors involved in such outcomes.

Folks might try to game the system. But if he could get Chief Surgeon Hupperl on board, well, they just might have something.

He needed a scientist because, truth be told, he didn't entirely understand his own outcome. The wife he woke up next to every morning was not the youngster he'd married—he could only vaguely recall what that younger version had even looked like. Those early days came back to him now only as a chaotic hormonal frenzy, and he felt blessed. He felt lucky to have wound up with Shari, especially when he looked at some of the others her age, and saw what vultures they had become. Those others, he remembered their youthful beauty just fine, and was baffled. Had it really been so long ago?

Huddlestorm didn't understand his own outcome, and it could be this fact which was at the heart of his harmless fantasy. His daughter Sailija was seven and soon to be of age, his son Geebler not far behind. Geebler in matches of Haul and sSquat was becoming quite the force to be reckoned with, but the accountant knew all too well the stark difference between youthful Haul and Squat and grown-up scramble and claw. There was something about the boy's

enthusiasm which caused Huddlestorm some concern. What will happen when Geebler is old enough to see clearly what really goes on?

But he knew Sailija would be just fine.

Laban Huddlestorm left the park eventually, and headed in the direction of the office. He figured that Jarom Fussellkitt taking first pick was safe money, but it was Stab Lumper who looked to end up with the real beauty, he felt certain. But then, how would that be judged? You ask ten different contumblies, which is the true beauty, you'll get ten different answers. And, well, some guys just have no taste.

It's no sense betting if you can't even agree about the nature of the outcome. The accountant smiled, wistfully, and opted for a circuitous route, taking his time getting to the office—he would be the first one there.

(4)

The phone rings; I awake in the shed, and immediately know just where I am, by the moonlight through the small plastic window, and the insect noise in the long grass outside. It's her voice, of course—again, really early in the morning. Is the mysterious stalker calling from another country? Who is it? No way to know. She laughs, and makes the kind of sound a young woman makes when she is talking to her friends, describing her physical reaction to encountering a super-hot guy. My goodness, how the sound of her voice, in this mode, stirs me, deep. I am elated, stupidly so, and wish for a moment I could meet the stalker face-to-face, to thank him/her. There are other familiar voices in the racy conversation, and the integrity of the recording enables me to place it in a particular timeframe; the memory image comes spilling over me all at once—I can see it all, bathed in late-summer daylight.

We've both been working out in the yard; the Tenney brothers are down the hill, painting that fence. I've been cutting the grass; she's been picking the dead blossom-petals off of the day-lilies. Although her skin is fair, she always refuses the sunblock that I offer: by this point in the season, her shoulders have taken on a deeper color, that really, don't mean to get silly here, but really just kills me. She takes it easy, out in those flowerbeds, and where the people in charge are concerned, I cover for her.

Her friend is talking: "Yeah, I guess he's okay..." This is the friend that would surreptitiously, scheming soap-opera style seduce me, on a couple different occasions in fact, in a classic, double-header case of What the hell was I thinking. Who knows what difference it would've made.

The call clicks to an end. My old, reliable stalker. I've often wondered how, how does he/she do it? At first I would change phone numbers, but the stalker would be right back at it, and eventually, over time, like I said, I've come to sort of appreciate the occasional remembrances. Maybe if I had a computer I could track him/her down? Would it be someone in the government?

But as I sit up on the cot and take the guitar from its case at my toolshed bedside, I am wondering instead if she still looks that way, so youthful. It really has been, if you think about it, kind of a long while since I saw her last; don't know how long, really. I start to pick over the chords of a lonesome old honky-tonk song, a heartbroke ballad, and softly sound out the lilting, falling melody, in my middle-of-the-night singing voice.

I freeze halfway through the second line of the second chorus: for a moment, there is a wild-eyed pale bearded phantom watching through the window. Mussberger! I am paralyzed, then I catch my breath. Mussberger isn't there, nobody is there. No footsteps in the grass outside. I set the guitar on the bed, jump up in my long poly-pros, and grab a yard tool as I exit. This turns out to be a hard rake. I hold it with both hands like a scythe.

But nobody is out there. The moonlight is ample; I walk around the yard a bit, but there is no one. Perhaps I should call the cops. But, I didn't even get a good enough look at this "face," if that's even what I really saw, to know if it was Mussberger or not; that name was just a gut reaction. These Provo cops, you tell 'em you saw somebody and they don't find anybody, they see you out living in the shed and, well, you get the picture. I don't feel like calling the cops.

Maybe some random homeless guy. Downtown's been getting kinda crowded, I hear; maybe they're making their way up the hill. I guess I'm one to talk. I sit down in the shed and

take up the guitar again; I'm superstitious, and pick a different tune. Although it *is* another of the sad and tender, crying in your beer variety: I've got a lot of them.

Some new guys are sweeping the floor at the home-show house; getting the place cleaned up a bit, so the rest of us can just keep working. Pick-up work, I'd guess. They're bitching about the job, about the money, but I can't make heads or tails of their numbers; the new circus-like character of the recent national economy has caused me to see it more as colorful boardgame money than anything you can pin down, for certain. These guys look like tweakers.

One of them stops sweeping, cracks open a gas-station tallboy, and asks me what they're paying me.

"I don't know," I say, and it's the truth. "Guess we'll find out when I get paid."

"That's a hell of an approach, I mean *fuck*," this guy says. "We may not be getting a whole hell of a lot, but at least we know what we're getting..."

"Well?" I say.

Prime comes into the room, and the tweaker scurries off. "Hey, you gotta watch out for those guys," Prime says. "I don't know about these clean-up dudes; they seem kind of..."

"Yeah, I know."

He stays to sand trim with me for a while. Eventually he stands, looks at his phone, then says, "Hey come help me set up some scaffolding, in the basketball court."

The floor in there is already masked, and reinforced with big rectangles of cardboard. Prime's work uniform is light gray sweatpants and a white tee shirt. I don't know how he keeps track of his tools. He is thin and seems almost like an untalented gymnast as he tries to

manipulate a segment of scaffolding with one hand and carry an energy drink in the other. He is, incredibly, almost able to do it.

“Come on, put down the drink,” I say, holding the other side, trying to line things up.

Prime is monkeying around on this scaffold before it’s even close to sturdy enough. He doesn’t want to mess around with the broad aluminum planks; he’s after altitude. He seems to relish the slight sway of the unsecured bars, like some homesick sailor. I’m just trying to get my end secured; anchoring myself with both arms and a leg.

Prime is on the second story up; he’s left his energy drink on the first story. He swings down to grab it, knocks it over, loses his grip, and takes a dive. From my post on the scaffolding it looks to be a belly flop, but he somehow lands on his feet, takes a couple of steps and then hits the floor, hard. He rolls over, laughing, and cringing in pain. He’s holding one elbow, and rolling around.

“You crazy bastard,” I say, and climb down.

Bo is nearby; he peeks in, and looks up from his phone. “What’s going on here?” He’s tapping buttons on his phone.

“Help me get this up,” I say. “Prime’s out of commission...”

“What you looking at on your phone, Bo?” says Prime, still gasping and grimacing and rolling on the floor. “Met some new girls at the bar?”

Bo is tall, slightly hunched, and moseys over. “I did meet a couple, this weekend.”

“See Bo’s got the better job out being a bouncer at the bar,” Prime explains. “Not better money, huh Bo? But better perks of the job...”

Bo just smiles, one front tooth a bit darker than the others, yellow-gray.

“Oh yeah what bar is that?” I say.

“Job’s got its perks,” Bo says. He is standing over Prime, and looking at his phone. “One of these ladies—whoa, let me tell you...”

“Oh yeah, hand me that down and let me see,” says Prime, leaning himself up on one elbow, “I’ll tell you if she’s really all that...”

“Can’t show you that one, oh,” Bo says, dancing out of reach, still scrolling. “Here, what do you think of her?”

Prime sits up, takes the phone, gets excited. “I’d do her,” he says. Then, to me: “Bo’s a bouncer at Easy Street and he’s meetin’ chicks all the time, huh Bo! Some of ’em are pretty hot!” He cradles his elbow.

Bo reclaims his phone, continues looking at it and tapping buttons. His eyes are droopy, basset-hound, and his whisker-shadow thins out above his ears, onto a gleaming shaven scalp.

“You should help me with this scaffolding,” I say.

“Let Sim see that lady!” Prime says. “See what he thinks.”

Bo looks me over. Setting up scaffold is a two-person job. He holds the phone before me, and scoots over behind my shoulder. On the screen is a woman posing in her bra in a bathroom mirror.

“Not her,” Bo says, and scrolls. A different woman, topless, holding one arm across her breasts. They’re big. “That was the one from Saturday. And this one?” This one is older, skinny, on all fours on some carpet. He has multiple pictures of her; they progressively get more explicit.

Bo coos into my ear like an old trusted pal; he is flipping through the photos, eager to share.

“Look, she sent me this one a few minutes ago,” Bo says. It’s a picture of, well, basically, a vagina. “She just shaved.”

“She seems nice,” I say, and step away. “They all look like a lot of fun.”

“We gotta get down to the bar and get us some of those!” Prime cries with glee. “Come on, Sim. We should go. Bo’s just keeping ’em all to himself. If he can get ’em, we can. Goddamnit! I spilled my energy drink.”

“Those aren’t all from the bar,” I say.

Bo looks up for a second from his phone. Then he shakes his head, slowly. “I’ll tell you, since I started bouncing down there? There’s one thing I’ve learned... I mean, you can get ladies at the bar, lots, don’t get me wrong. But the one thing that’s better than the bar for getting ladies? The internet.”

“Oh yeah, you’ve been on that website; I got on that site,” says Prime. “After you told me about it, I got on; I wanted to see what was out there...”

“There’s some hot ones,” says Bo.

“Oh yeah, there’s some. There’s a lot that are, maybe, not so much...”

Bo makes a hurt face. “Don’t be too judgmental,” he says. “A lot of the time, you can’t really tell until you see ’em naked.”

Prime is laughing, still sitting on the floor. “Believe me,” he says, “sometimes you can tell. I mean, sometimes you can *really* tell...”

“Well you want to get ladies,” Bo says, “I mean, *really*, you gotta quit being so uptight.”

“What website is that?” I say.

“Oh, you gotta get on and check it out!” says Prime. “I was on the other day, just looking it over, getting a feel for it. I checked out Bo’s profile; know what it says? Where he has to describe himself? He says, ‘I’m really just a big teddy bear.’ Wasn’t that it, Bo?”

“Well,” says Bo, with a smirk, “isn’t it true?” He turns and wanders off.

Prime's laughter gradually subsides; it takes him a minute. He looks at me, then at the scaffolding. "Oh shit," he says. "We still have to get that put together, don't we? Fuck." He lays back down on the floor. "I'm hurt."

"Well can you do it?" I say. "I can, maybe, manage from here..."

"No," Prime says, sprawled on the floor, "I'll be fine, I just need a minute. I think I need another energy drink, I barely started that last one—you mind going and grab me another one?"

"That case was gone the minute it got here."

"Yeah, but Gary stashes 'em in the Place."

The Place is where Gary stashes things whose distribution he needs to monitor. Dust masks, sanding sponges. Energy drinks. I still haven't figured out just where it is. Prime explains. Back under some stairs, behind some tools that have been arranged to appear impassable. One long step toward the right, then another just beyond, then another long stretch to the left. Under a dropcloth. I find the cache, grab a sixteen ounce can, and am tempted to take a dust mask as well; I decide against it.

Wisely, as it turns out. Gary is waiting for me as I emerge from the closet. "What are you doing in there?" he says. His eyes are scary; I can't tell if it's weed, lack thereof, energy drink, or what. He keeps looking away, as though he's on the verge. "You didn't need any of the tools in there. You taking my energy drinks?"

"It's for Prime," I say. "He sent me."

"Why couldn't he come get it himself?" Gary takes a couple of steps in the direction of the basketball court, but of course can see nothing. "He fell off the ladder again, didn't he."

"The scaffolding, anyway."

"Were you guys fucking around?"

“No, he just fell; don’t look at me. Anyway, I need a dust mask.”

“What happened to the one I just gave you?”

“That was three days ago—I’ve been using it.”

“So?”

“So they get dirty after a while. It’s fucking gross.”

“Those dust masks aren’t free,” says Gary. “You can’t just be coming and grabbing them every time you feel like it. I can’t believe Prime told you... Do you have a dust mask in your pocket?”

“No.”

He folds his arms, and glares. “Go on; show me your pockets, turn ’em out.”

“No, man, I *need* a dust mask; that’s why I’m asking.”

He thinks about it for a moment. “Go find the one you’ve been using, and bring it to me, let *me* see if it’s dirty... Better yet, I’ll come with you...” He follows me out.

“I don’t know where that mask is; I threw it away,” I say. “It was fucking gross.”

“Well then that’s your own fault,” Gary says, and storms off.

Prime is sitting up and looking better. When he sees the energy drink, he gets to his feet.

“You fall off ladders a lot?” I say to him.

“Not that much,” he says.

“Gary just guessed it, just now,” I say. “He was pretty pissed; he caught me in the Place.”

“Gary,” says Prime. “He’ll spy on you. He probably just saw it happen. You gotta watch out for him. He’s been playing that ninja game a lot, online, with his kid. I think he might think he’s really a ninja.”

“Hmm,” I say. It’s probably true.

“I don’t really fall off the ladder that much,” says Prime. “I’ll tell you about one time, I fell off a scaffold? I was like four levels up; pretty much landed on my head. They were taking me to the hospital. My dad’s there, and he’s like, ‘Tell ’em you fell off the ladder. Tell them it was a ladder.’ Cause of like, insurance reasons...”

“Holy shit, man,” I say.

“Yep.” Prime is nodding, sipping his energy drink. I haven’t met the Boss in person yet, so the only image I have for the father in this story is that of my own. We don’t say anything, for a while. The scaffold looms over us, half-finished.

I’m out in the porta-potty, doing my thing. It’s been cleaned as recently as this morning, so it’s still safe to use. Someone has already beaten me here, and stuffed up the gray-plastic urinal part with a lot of toilet paper. This weird prank causes urine to pool where it is visible as well as odiferous: above the repulsive reservoir someone has carved “Mexican swimming pool” with what was most likely a razor-knife. I’m guessing either Prime or Big Andy is responsible; somehow I don’t believe this is the handiwork of the Mexicans. I haven’t been keeping a close enough eye on proceedings to determine the true culprit with any certainty.

I go back into the house and help Cody mask some windows. Cody has some kind of deal worked out with the Boss where all he ever really does is mask windows. He stands there, in his red and green rasta hat, and takes his time, putting the little strips of tape in the corners and then shaving them straight with a razor. His technique is solid, and effortless.

I’ve been eavesdropping on the work conversations, wondering just what is up with this peculiar fellow. Everybody says he used to be normal. He had a car accident, suffered a

traumatic brain injury, and ever since then he's a little hard to follow. He can talk about astrology for hours.

"I hear you did a star chart for Gary," I say.

"Yeah," he says, "back in the day I was reading people's charts for them; I'd give them a deal. I've got a website now, and I don't read people's charts here at work anymore, you know some people come across as very friendly but after some time it comes out what's really going on. The thing with astrology is, I mean the fundamental thing is that, whatever happens to you, whatever you do, there was always a first time, the initial moment, and that's going to influence all the future occurrences of the event. Like driving a car. You remember the first time you drove a car; so that's the initial moment... It's going to influence the process of driving a car, for you, from then on: a lot of people don't realize the significance of these initial events. Being born. The first day of school. You know, the first date, the first time you kiss a girl. But you can't always trust a person, trust what they say, people will put up a façade, but think of that word, facetious, it just means fake. People will play like they're your friend, but when it comes down to it..." His voice is rambling, without direction; there are modulations but they are somehow devoid of emotion.

"You should do mine," I say.

"You could get on my website," he says. "I don't really do that stuff at work anymore; I've been in touch with a family in Zimbabwe, they have a daughter, so I'm thinking I might go to see them. People in those kind of places tend to understand things like that a little better. How the stars influence events. They're mostly forces, you know, I don't like to think of it as control exactly but more like influence. People act friendly, like they're genuinely interested in things like contumblies, but really people can be pretty close-minded, especially around here. This

family in Zimbabwe has a seventeen-year-old daughter, and so I'm going to go meet her, oh, I think this winter."

"You're robbing the cradle!" I say.

"No it's not like that; in that culture, it's a perfectly normal thing. And I don't know if it'll really work out, I've been keeping in contact with them, I've checked out her birthday, and her baptism and stuff... I think if I go in four months or so it should be the right time. But it's hard to say. I tried this once before, and it didn't work. I don't know how long I'll stick with this job, I mean I don't really have to. I spend less time doing charts on my website, and make better money. People respond if they can sense that you know what you're talking about. I might have had a couple of times, you know, when I first started, a couple of awkward reads, but that almost never happens now. But here, this job, people act all friendly but you can't really trust it—I pretty much watch what I say, with people like Bert..."

Gary walks in. "Did I hear you say contumblies?" he says.

Cody falls silent. The contumblies, as I have gathered from general construction-site mockery, are a race of little people with their own separate culture. They exist among us, but not everyone can see them: Cody can.

Gary snorts. "Are you guys masking windows, or are you talking about contumblies?" he says. Then, shaking his head, looking off to one side, with a laugh, "I mean, really, dude? I'm not sure they're even *real*, you know what I'm sayin'?"

Cody looks down, and tapes window-corners.

Gary claps his hands, conclusively: "Sim, come on. Put down that masker. Big Andy's getting ready to spray that theater; he needs you to finish the last of the sanding so he can get started."

I hang the masker from my pocket. “He’s spraying lacquer down there,” I say.

“So?” Gary’s smile becomes strained.

“So—I don’t have a respirator?”

“What are you even doing masking windows in the first place?” Gary says, becoming exasperated. “You’re not fast enough to be masking. You should be sanding—really, I hate to have to tell you, Sim, but, just being honest here, you’re really not fast enough to be doing that either.”

I’m taken aback. “Gary?” I say.

“And I can’t ask you to do one thing without you giving me shit, without you coming up with some excuse... Who told you to mask windows?”

“I finished that other thing; Cody looked like he could use a hand...”

“Cody doesn’t need your help. He knows what he’s doing—masking is all he does!”

I look at Cody, who is squatting at a lower windowsill, totally involved in the task. His red and green hat bounces about, carefree.

“Who told you you could be masking windows?” Gary demands.

“I, uh... It’s a team effort, right, here at GJP? Everybody does their part?”

Now *he’s* taken aback. “Are you mocking me? Why are you mocking me? Don’t you realize that as soon as Bert’s gone?..”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” I say, one hand up defensively.

“So I’ll tell you for a fact, I’m not comfortable letting you mask right now—maybe you’re good enough, and I mean that’s a *big* maybe, but I can guarantee you’re not fast enough—not even close. Judging from your sanding and spackling? How long did it take you to caulk that closet? I could’ve done it in forty minutes. Shit, twenty minutes if I was hustling. And

you're always carrying a bucket of water around with you? Who does that?" He snorts. "Not GJP. You've got to Learn to Adapt! It's like the Boss says. At GJP we Learn to Adapt."

"I know," I say, nodding, looking at the floor, trying to come across as supplicant but betrayed by my amusement.

"That's what you say," Gary continues, coming closer, getting into the spirit, "that's what you say now. But am I gonna see you an hour from now, folding the sandpaper wrong? Do you even know what Learn to Adapt means? Some of these guys, you show 'em what they're doing wrong, and they nod their head and say I'll do better, and then they go right on doing it the wrong way. It's like they don't even hear you!"

"Well, you know," I say, "sometimes it feels like I'm doing it wrong no matter what I'm doing—how could that be?"

"It's because you don't *listen!*" At this Gary softens, becomes the well-meaning instructor. "When we tell you not to be dragging that water bucket around with you all the time, to caulk? You don't even listen. Just use a rag like everybody else! Your way is just slowing you down."

"It isn't."

"See? That's exactly what I'm talking about. I'm trying to help you, help you Learn to Adapt. You're so entrenched in *your* way of doing things. You're never gonna be a fast enough caulker if you're always dragging that water bucket around. Trust me on that one. You've got to figure out there's *reasons* why we do things the way we do here at GJP. Guys who work for us, they eventually come to realize they've gotta catch up, or they don't. Does that make sense?"

I look at the floor.

"You got sandpaper," Gary says, even more gently.

I take my piece from my pocket. It's folded wrong.

Gary is at the end of his rope. He turns to storm off. "One thing!" he cries.

"Wait, hold on," I say, following. "If I'm going to help Big Andy..."

He stops, and glares. "What!"

"Spraying lacquer?" I say. "I don't want to be huffing those fumes; I'm gonna at least need *something*..."

He goes to the Place without a word, fuming. He reemerges with a dust-mask, which he throws at me, again without a word.

Big Andy is down in the theater, pulling on a used, stringy spray suit. He is for some reason less angry than usual. He also wants to check my sandpaper, but this to see that it isn't too new and abrasive. We don't want to scratch the wood. Sand *with* the grain.

And he's going to start spraying now and he *doesn't* want to have to stop. "So you'd better get your ass in gear!" he says.

But once he starts spraying, I see what all the cheerfulness is about. Big Andy takes his time. He flirtatiously pulls the respirator away, then snaps it against his cheeks. He actually prances about. He is enjoying the lacquer fumes!

I'm sanding for my life. As I look it over, my eyes burning in the misty lacquered light of the worklamps, I see that there is in fact quite a bit of prep work left to do. I instinctively keep away from the source of the fumes, which are strong, and seem to be coating my teeth.

Big Andy pauses to turn up the radio. "You know who this is?" he cries. "It's the Bailey Family!"

"Yeah, I saw their infomercial," I say, sanding away.

“Listen to this one,” Big Andy says. He’s got the spray-gun in his right hand; he hunches back, and starts playing air guitar with the music. This image causes me to gasp involuntarily; suddenly my limbs feel very cold. Did Big Andy just drop to his knees, throw back his head, and flail out a wicked air guitar solo? This is the guy who lays down to work, most of the time.

The lacquer fumes are strong. I feel a peculiar, ghostly tapping at the back of my skull. I keep sanding, desperately, not even stopping to check my work as I go. Big Andy’s right arm is windmilling.

“Wow-wow-wow!” he cries, falsetto, his fingers grasping. “That’s the kind of song that gets stuck in your head!”

My ears begin to buzz. My heart thumps away, nauseating.

“Whatever happened to the kind of song that gets stuck in your head?” Shelly said, on the phone. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Come on, Shel,” I said. “Me having that song is what’s at the heart of the whole issue... I mean, I got online...”

“So, yeah, uh, don’t mean to be too much of a realist here,” he said, “but that’s the whole thing. What’s happening online is the news that you read about tomorrow. The big question, really for everyone involved, is, Where’s the Follow-up?”

“Look man,” I said. “I’ve got something in the works. It’s gonna be huge.”

“I’m sure it is, Sim,” he said, “but...”

“Just fix whatever’s going on on the internet,” I said.

“What’s going on on the internet? As if I have any say in that, by this point? Where’s the Follow-up? I mean, have you forgotten your values?”

The agent was pretty pissed, I could tell. But it wasn't like it was *his* name out there, and plus not to mention *he* had other business. The Follow-up? What did I know about that? The first one had been a bit of a fluke.

“Look, Shelly,” I said, sitting up in bed, regretting having answered the phone, “I’ve got something in the works...”

“Yeah, alright man, whatever,” he said, and hung up.

I get home, knock on the door, let myself in. I take a shower upstairs. The kids are in bed. The steam of the shower doesn't exactly relieve but rather somehow seems to speed along the process of metabolism of whatever poisons I've absorbed on the job. I emerge from the bathroom still feeling defeated.

Shauna catches me as I scoot out to the shed. She wants me to know that she's been concerned.

“Don't worry!” I say. “As long as I can keep my mouth shut, I'll be fine.” And Learn to Adapt! says the Judge, his gavel echoing off the dead walls of my poisoned skull.

Zuzu Bantagrue, author of the true and original Contumbly National Anthem “Learning to Adapt,” rose to greet the dawn as he always did: trembling, unwilling. He peered distrustfully at the beams of his hut, and seemed to hear someone outside for some reason whistling his tune, at this hour of the morning of all things. “Learning to adapt, snap snap clap clap snap...” A much decorated, well-respected singer, and thus the envy of many a contumbly, Zuzu privately had no choice but to acknowledge just how few of his contemporaries would be inclined to believe him were he to let on that his job carried certain anxieties of its own.

“How can this be?” they would ask. “When you stroll the boardwalk with a different girl on each arm, every night?”

And Zuzu would have to smile right through it all, as if it was all just as it appeared. As if any one of them wasn’t working solely for Gorglebosh.

How the girls from the harem, if he got foolish and tried anything on them, glared at him with hatred and disgust. Zuzu examined his naked, spotty self in the ribbon-laden mirror, flexed his muscles, struck a pose. Even in the early, pale light, the web of veins, stained to a dull black by the poisons, were plainly visible across his limbs.

It is true enough that contumbles know what is implied by the phrase “to reach into the needflower,” that is, to produce a lovely song, or really, in modern usage, to perform any artistic act exceedingly well; however, how many of them actually have any idea about the real gritty details of the terrible physical act of reaching one’s fingers down into that slimy maw, so cool and coyly sweet-smelling at first, so devastating in its aftereffects? That eye-opening first time, which had resulted in Zuzu’s early masterpiece, the song that had brought him such fame

and prestige, that era-marking first time had changed the young contumbly just as profoundly on the inside as on the out. There was the old Zuzu Bantagrue, so ambitious yet unremarkable, who assumed that the “needle” part of the flower’s name simply meant that the fingers and wrist would get irritated, something like stinging nettle, but maybe a bit more intense—this Zuzu Bantagrue was surprised that all he noticed at first was a mild itching. Not so bad. What was all the fuss about?

But the new Zuzu Bantagrue, the famous composer of the National Anthem, awoke from a nightmare a couple days later to learn that the “needle” in fact refers to a brutal acid burn which occurs in the exact place where the pee comes out. His urethra felt like someone had jammed a needle up it, and the stream of urine, or what little of it could be coaxed, tore his soul apart. Baffled and unprepared for this, his knees buckled from the pain and he sat down in the dirt, while his urine trickled about his trousers and house slippers. For three weeks, he had to slink off somewhere sufficiently private for him to squat and pee. He needed something to hold on to just to keep from curling up into a ball. Welts formed on the head of his penis.

The new Zuzu Bantagrue, if not exactly wiser than the old, was in any case, at the very least, more suspicious. And the sudden celebrity which followed, with its ceremonies and its peculiar duplicities, offered very little to ease his worry. The other workers, the other contumbles, they at least had their schedule where they knew, say, just how many babies they still had to kidnap before they’d get their turn with a female contumbly. The singer doesn’t get anything like that.

And Corporal Butt had been by just the night before—his third visit in two weeks, in fact—and Zuzu knew that things were getting bad. Certain higher-ups were becoming annoyed

by the delay. Folks like Corporal Butt don't have the time to be dropping in on everyone all the time. He wanted to know what everyone wanted to know. Where's the new song?

Which meant, of course, yet another trip down to the marshes, yet another reaching into of yet another needleflower. There was no one around to talk to in the hut, and outside it was just as bad. He leaned in close to the mirror, but his face remained impassive, as he examined the web of shallow wrinkles which had begun to extend from the shadows of his eyes, down his cheek.

(5)

People from the newspaper show up one day, but not because of me, it's because of this upcoming home show. They roam around and take pictures, and I can hear them chatting up the other workers in different rooms down the hall.

I'm stuffing masking paper under unpainted MDF baseboards. I stand up for a moment to flex, and, you know, maybe scope out possible routes of escape from the press people, and I'm standing there with a fist against my lower back when Prime Johansen bustles in. He's got his thumbs hooked into the elastic waistband of his light grey sweatpants, and he is winded and excited.

"We're gonna be on the news!" he announces.

"The newspaper," I say, less enthusiastic.

"No, man, the real news. Kiaora Bohlool is out there, with like, a camera crew." Prime strokes his chin, squinting his eyes, assessing the doorway like some old west gunslinger. "TV," he says, with gravity. "This home show's a big deal."

It must have something to do with the economy. I of course don't really care to be caught on camera.

"Prime," I say, "I gotta lay low, wait this one out."

Prime looks a little dismayed, like why would I, the famous one, want to be hiding out at a time like this. For GJP this is an opportunity... and I *am* part of the crew.

In the next room over, they've finished with the white guys and they're speaking Spanish to the others. There's a translator. Kiaora Bohlool's TV news enunciation sounds funny in the environment, ringing out almost like part of the radio.

"Think they'll find me in this closet?" I say, but as I do, I realize that Prime will be sure to drag me out when the camera shows up.

"No, they won't find you in there," he draws.

"Yeah, they will for sure. Somewhere out in the house. Not much time. Where have they already been?"

"There's always the Place," he offers.

"Naw, I don't feel all that welcome in the Place. Where's Gary?"

Prime smiles. "Everywhere."

The news crew is already in the hall by the time I get there. I try to slink past, looking at the floor, but Kiaora Bohlool sharpens intently the second she sees me—though I can tell by her approach that she doesn't quite know who I am, something has registered, and she casually slips aside from her crew to block my passage.

"Are you a painter?" she says. Amazingly, her microphone is up, and her camera guy is on it. I had never realized, from her special reports on the evening news, so controlled, so unruffled, that her reporting style was so guerilla.

I want to perform the classic "No comment" and crouch away shielding my face, but I know this will tip her off for sure; she hasn't recognized me yet but she's got that look of slight puzzlement that tells me the moment is near. I try to keep cool: "Yeah, I'm a painter."

"And I understand this is sort of a special job?" she says.

I'm slow to answer, wondering for a moment just what the hell she's talking about. Special? So far it's been a lot of sanding, some spackle, some caulk. "Look, lady, we're working on a deadline here," I say, looking away, "and I've got things to do."

She puts her hand on my shoulder, with weird firmness. "Just one more question," she says, at which her cameraman for some reason snorts his amusement, and they glance at each other, sharing some TV fun that I'm not in on. But then, for a time, she doesn't seem to have this question, though her hand is locked onto my elbow and I can't wriggle out of it without causing a scene. Finally, she says, "Don't I know you from somewhere?" She looks again to the cameraman, for backup, but he just shrugs his shoulders.

"So have we found that Mussberger yet?" I say, at last allowing myself a quick peek at the black lens.

Which seems to work: she loosens her grip, decides I'm just another loser, not worth the screentime, and lets me go.

Out in the porta-potty there's a new message, in what looks to be sharpie, and the penmanship is surprisingly clean. "Corporal Butt is Watching."

Gary has a side job he wants me to come help him on over the weekend. Says it'll be some fast money. Fast being the operational term, which he demonstrates emphatically through sidelong glances and a sharply punctuated inhale as we talk the thing over on the drive down to Elk Ridge.

"I don't know, dog," he says, coyly. "I wasn't even sure I oughtta bring another guy on, on this job, but I've got to get it out of my hair. We can't do it quite like we do at GJP; I mean,

it's still gotta be good..." He gets deadly serious. "But really, this time, for this place, the big thing is it's gotta be fast."

I'm gazing out the window to watch the sun go down, out west in that no-man's-land beyond the lake. The freeway is its usual mournful twilight self, rolling purple in the overcast into the mountains ahead, the great green and eternal pyramids which somehow seem so impervious to the whims of the economy.

"I mean, we gotta work fast, get this thing busted out, if you know what I mean," Gary says, punching the steering wheel for effect, not convinced that I'm hearing his message clearly enough. "If this thing drags out too long, it's just gonna eat up all my profit."

I want to say something, but I'm thinking that by now he ought to have some idea of how fast I work, and the ensuing silence becomes altogether sinister for a moment.

But Gary's attention tends to flutter about and make stops at various places along the way, and the next thing he says is, "This guy totally smokes weed."

"The homeowner?" I say.

Gary is nodding, looking mischievous. "I didn't know at first, but, last time I was down here..." He's got his tongue in his cheek. "I guess I kinda knew. Do you ever know that about people, like you don't know really, but you can just kinda tell? Does that ever happen to you?"

"Are you asking me if I recognize the signs of marijuana abuse?" I say.

"Not the signs," he says, disgusted. "Not like when you see skater kids totally blazed at the mall, and it's like, stoners. I'm talking about the guys that aren't so busty. The guys that are, like, successful. But still chill dudes. Some of these guys in these nicer neighborhoods have got a pretty good set-up."

"So how did you meet *this* guy?" I ask, innocently enough, I think.

But here comes Gary, again with that look of disgust. “Why you gotta be all up in my business?” he says.

“So how did you figure out he’s a stoner?” I say. “Does he have Phish posters in the garage?”

“Bob Marley.” Gary wants to smile but it’s messing up his story. “Dude, Sim, why you gotta always be so down on Phish? Ask anyone, they’re like super-talented musicians. And their shit is tight, dog.”

“Hey, I’m just...”

“And I’ll bet you seventy-five, no, sixty-five, sixty-five percent of their fanbase doesn’t even smoke weed. Call it sixty-six percent. Two out of three.”

“That’s a bold statement. Two out of three? Meaning *most*. Phish fans don’t burn? If that’s the case, I’m going to have to rethink everything I thought I knew...”

I see that Gary is becoming frustrated. “At Orem High,” he says, “ninety-nine point nine percent of the Phish fans didn’t smoke weed.”

“Orem High has its own thing going,” I say.

“It’s not like some pre-requirement to appreciation.”

“Don’t I know it,” I say. “So, the Bob poster. On display, tucked away in the corner, what?”

“I didn’t even see the Bob poster until after I knew for sure...”

“You saw the poster when you smoked with him,” I deduce. “Fuckin’ Bob Marley...”

Gary tenses up. “Sim, don’t start that!”

“Alright, alright,” I say. “How did you know that this sleuth, successful guy with the nice house and the hot wife and the sharp dressed and well-behaved kids?..”

“Well that’s what I’m asking. Have you ever had that with a person, where you could just tell? But it wasn’t, like, screamingly obvious?”

I’m still having trouble understanding just what Gary is asking me. “You remember that kid, Joshua Hughes?” I say. “Played the drums? I never could tell when he was reefered. No way to detect it on him.”

“That’s like the opposite of what I’m talking about. Josh Hughes was the stoniest guy around and everybody knew it. He just didn’t giggle and shit. I’m talking about the guy that you’d just never suspect; he’s got some sweet job and, like, goes golfing. We’re gonna go golfing! I haven’t been golfing in forever.”

“Never been.”

“And this guy, I mean: he likes to smoke some weed. One of these Sundays,” Gary’s voice becomes pensive at the thought, “out there on the links. Sunshine, beers at the country club...”

“The hot wife?” I say.

He nods. “Yep, she is,” he says. “But that’s the beauty of it... She never comes around!”

When we get to the cabin the guy is already there, and he stands around and goofs off with Gary while we set up a sort of rope-and-ladder thing over the roof, then fiddle with the palm sanders to determine the proper grit of sandpaper to use—too coarse, and you get “swirlies.” I’ve got gloves, a dust mask, earplugs: I’m set.

Gary puts down the other sander and walks off with the guy. I get sanding. The drone of the electric sander, high-pitched and constant, becomes the musical backbone of primitive chants and melodies in my head.

I see Gary and the guy playing horseshoes out toward the woods. My sanding speed stays constant.

Heather was the worst groupie that I ever met. The girls who used to come out, they were always full of surprises, and those usually of the fun variety, but Heather was full of the other kind.

She wanted to know if I had any ex.

“I’m sure we could find some,” I said, trying to remain optimistic despite her sharpening eyes. I put on the Chinese banjo music I’d been getting into. She hated it.

“It reminds me of my grandmother’s house,” she said. “My ex-boyfriend had better taste in music.” She began to take off her clothes. “I’m not even going to enjoy this.”

I had some vodka in the fridge.

“Vodka?” she said, clacking her tongue in disbelief. She acted put out, but took some, leaning close and insisting that we take the shots together, our foreheads touching.

She hadn’t bathed. But there were her shoulders, under my chin.

“I don’t think you can give me what I really want,” she said, shrugging sullen as she undid her jeans. “My ex-boyfriend could, but these days I’m really only into girls...”

As she undid her bra, I wished she would just stop talking and let something normal and natural happen, but she would not. Her undraped beauty was heart-stopping and maddening, but she would not stop talking.

“You don’t know what you’re doing like a girl would,” she said, resigned, eye-rolling, bored. And she was right. Nothing I did had any beneficial result.

Eventually I gave up, and went for more vodka.

“Your song is big now,” she said, “but it’s gonna be the only thing. This time next year, you’re not gonna be around. Trust me on this. I follow the music scene.”

“Maybe you think you could do better?” I said, trying to determine from the way the evening had gone how long she intended to stay.

She showed no indication of moving any time soon, sprawled out naked on the bed, staring at the ceiling. “Ugh,” she said, “why would I even want to?”

I could think of nothing to say to this. Something about the girl disturbed me profoundly. I don’t know, maybe our differences were ideological...

It’s late when we get back into Provo, and I help Gary navigate the back roads so we can avoid downtown. He’s talking like he’s going to be up and at it again tomorrow as well. “I think just me, though,” he says. “I can do it by myself tomorrow. Thanks for the help, though, today.”

“It’s Sunday, tomorrow,” I say.

“So what’s that got to do with it?”

“Do it on Sunday, you’ll just have to do it again on Monday,” I say, like some oldtimer I heard somewhere.

“What?” Gary says. “Why? That doesn’t even make sense.”

I have him stop by the side of the road. The house is looking dark, but I’m just headed to the shed, anyway. “Guess I’ll be sleeping in,” I say, rolling up the window. “Um...”

“Yeah, I’ll catch up with you when we get paid,” Gary says. “I’ll see you Monday morning. Say, six?”

“It’s getting early.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve got a lot to do,” he says, and drives off.

The back porch light comes on as I lay back on the cot in the shed. The door of the house opens, shuts, and I hear approaching footsteps; thinking it must be Kenneth Boyd out to invite me to church in the morning, or some horrible thing like that, I don't sit up, but hope he'll reconsider his idea.

It's not Kenneth, though, but Shauna, and she politely taps on the shed, even though the doors are hanging open.

"Hey Shauna," I say.

She's in her pajamas—a tee shirt and shorts. It looks chilly, but she just kinda hovers there at the shed's entrance for a moment.

"What's going on?" I say.

"You should come in the house," she says. "It's your house. You should come in, get cleaned up. You've been out working all day. Don't go to bed like that."

"You're probably right," I agree. "I didn't want to wake anyone up."

"Don't worry about that. The kids'll sleep through anything. Kenneth is preparing his lesson..."

"You're right," I say. "I'll be in, here in a minute."

She's got a scrunchie in her teeth and is pulling back her hair; somehow this motion arches her back and I'm suddenly aware of how thin and gauzy is the fabric of her tee shirt. She looks like some young girl at a slumber party, rather than a mother of three. There's dogs on her shorts. As if to accentuate the effect, she comes into the shed and plops down on the cot, next to me, close enough that I smell the shampoo scent off her dry, brushed hair.

"You're probably looking for your nightcap?" she says.

"Um..."

“I was out here earlier looking for some clippers,” she says. “I know what you’ve got tucked back there.”

“Well,” I say, “now that you mention it...” It’s some cheap and horrible Canadian whiskey—I wonder if she’d know the difference. “I figured, with the kids...”

“Oh, they don’t know anything,” she says.

I look around the shed, but of course, there’s no shot glass. “Um,” I say.

“I’d better not,” she says, with a laugh that I can’t quite read. Then, even more mysterious, “Another time, maybe.”

At this, however, she slides even closer, puts her hand on my thigh, and looks away, back toward the house. Then, almost immediately, she removes her hand. “You shouldn’t be sleeping out here in the shed,” she says. “It’s weird.”

“Yes, uh, I’m just, you know, kinda easing into the adjustment...”

“Well it’s just weird.” She stands up, and turns to leave, but stops in the entrance.

“Anyway, at least next weekend? Ken’s gonna be out of town, and—I get nervous.”

Then she’s back to the house, and I’m still sitting on the cot, stunned, whiskey in hand. Heart beating out of my throat.

I awake from a dream of Mussberger. In the dream I’m at a concert, but seated out in the audience. Some of my friends, I can’t quite say just who, are scattered about in the seating nearby. There’s cute girls, too, in groups. Sometimes they keep their conversation amongst themselves; other times, one of them talks to me.

She’s talking about the band that’s about to come out on the stage. She’s excited to see them. So am I—they’re this notoriously bad-ass rock band (my waking self, trying out of a

strange introspective embarrassment to reconstitute the dream, can't quite retrieve the name of this band), and every time she leans in to whisper in my ear, though she is too close and to my side and I don't really see her face, the excitement in her voice elicits a sympathetic response in me.

The audience in the seats suddenly becomes aware that one of the players in the band can't make the show for some reason. And a few of them look my way when the news comes down—it's the pedal steel guy.

Sure, I know the guy (at least in the dream I did, I can't quite place the identity now), I'm familiar with his work. But really, do these people have any clue about the intricacies of the pedal steel guitar? Who knows if this guy's instrument would even be set up right?

But then there's that girl again, someone I've known for a while, we're weirdly intimate, and, well, I'd be a fool to back out of this deal. I stand up and step into the aisle, intending to volunteer to fill in for the gig.

I go to talk to the singer onstage, and it's Mussberger. My voice is frozen; I can't say anything. Mussberger leers at me, grinning in a manner that just gives me the cold paralysis.

He wants to know if I know the songs.

Who doesn't know the songs? (Plus not to mention, my waking self is quick to interject, smart-alecky, knowing full well that such a line of reasoning if followed would lose the dream forever, Just which songs are we talking about? The killing people and doing weird things with them songs? Because of course *those* songs, well, might have been memorable for the wrong reasons...)

Mussberger just grins and looks cosmic and sinister. He wants to make sure. That I really know the songs.

Someone has wheeled out the instrument and it gazes back at me, unrecognizable, three keys set into a large black box, a crank wheel on one of its sides. Strange dials and meters.

I try to formulate my disapproval. He should know that this wasn't the deal we made.

He clownishly plays at bafflement, but behind his twinkling eyes is a vast coldness—do I honestly believe he did all those things people are saying he did? Me, of all people. I ought to understand...

It's clear eventually that, as with so many dreams, we never are going to get around to playing that show. That movie we all came to see is going to be delayed somehow, indefinitely, until all of us have awakened, trying to remember just what that movie was, just who was sitting with us in that theater. Who did we leave behind, that we were supposed to notice? We never are going to be able to collect all that prize money we just won.

I find the can of lacquer thinner and gaze into its underside: the closest thing to a mirror I've found in the shed. Getting kinda scruffy; no wonder I'm dreaming about Mussberger. There is however something missing in my recollection, some crucial element I can't quite reach. Something secret.

Which just reminds me of Cody, from work, and his contumblies. And then of course I'm back to worrying about work.

Ah yes, but it's Sunday!

Dworelle Gorglebosh, primary wife of Nolan the Lord of Ovorp, and thus by title queen of this godforsaken outpost in the wilderness, this malarial island in the vast Hatu ocean, although originally charmed by her young and ambitious husband's promises for the future—she had recognized in young Gorglebosh a cruelty and ruthlessness which she thought she'd be able to harness and utilize—had over time grown tired of this place, its inefficiencies and its sorry attempts at luxury and glamour, such shoddy imitation of the grandeur she remembered from her youth in the capital. True, you could get a plate of "manga lekh" here, but the amber beet was replaced with dreadful bitter carrot, and the meat, not real gurgar, was pale and stringy and stuck in the teeth—really just a shameful and ridiculous approximation, something which would be laughable were a plate of real manga available, but which lacking such was just depressing. Indeed, Chief Surgeon Hupperl had been unable to concoct an effective medicinal remedy sufficient to the queen's emotional condition, and she spent the better part of the day alone in her quarters, lounging, making herself up in increasingly bizarre and extreme styles, and scheming malicious pranks great and small against various of her subjects.

Nolan's pounding on the door, jarring and unwelcome as ever, caused her jaw to clench. "My lady," he barked, "I'm off to see the marching of the regiment!"

Dworelle grimaced, and smeared a track of kohl across her cheek, all the way to the ear. Her image in the withered rose-petal lined mirror was pale and sinister. She hoped for a moment he would just go away, then moved on to a fantasy of slicing open his throat while he slept.

"Well?" he said, behind the door.

“You’ll want to check that their stockings are clean, my lord,” she sneered, cuttingly. Who can keep clean stockings in this swamp?

Lord Gorglebosh pounded one emphatic thump, rattling the beads of the chandelier. “You best concern yourself with your own laundry, you foul-smelling hag!” She heard him stomp away, muttering, “What a mistake, what an accursed mistake...”

Having tried unsuccessfully for a while to seduce Corporal Butt, a contumbly whose loyalties remained a complete mystery to her—she was certain he had no love for Lord Nolan and was probably anxious to usurp the Lord’s position—and having endured some rather embarrassing private scenes with Hupperl, Dworelle had eventually turned to the harem, and begun amusing herself in sport with these anxious females. She would promise bangles, freedom, a wealthy and prominent husband, would spend a night or two in wild lesbian carousing, and the next morning would have them tortured and burnt in a tub of acid. Lord Gorglebosh, if he noticed the absence, never mentioned it.

Perhaps she had been too reticent to select the true beauties of the harem, worried that there might be repercussions, but now her patience was wearing thin. She had her eyes on one female contumbly in particular, gentle, dark-eyed, and proud: Zuzeen Harmatt, descendant of the previous ruling Harmatts, apparently unaffected by the generations of inbreeding, and, it was rumored, mindful of her royal ancestry despite her present station. This Zuzeen carried a type of beauty which was uncommon, vaguely exotic, known to arouse intense fascination among the males, and thus a hostility among the rest of the harem which was pretty much universal.

Oh, she was a quiet one all right, but Dworelle had yet to find the nut which she could not crack. “Let down your hair, fair little one,” the queen intoned to the mirror, in a whisper,

“your bath awaits. We’ll soon see whether your smooth skin blisters and bleeds as readily as the rest of them.” The whites of her eyes glimmered jewel-like inside their smudged black shadow.

(6)

Sundays always get me thinking about that foreign book I “translated” while under the influence of the peculiar drug needleflower, whose psychotropic components I’ve never since been able to establish; perhaps its name has changed, in any case it never got famous enough to be on the internet. Or maybe I just got the name wrong. It was a dried plant of some sort, which you smoked. I tried it while out traipsing about the countryside from village to village in my exotic, lonely outpost, during my escapist phase. The old man giggled and stomped his sandals in the ashes from the cooking fire; I began to feel claustrophobic in the smoky hut and went out to roll around in the grass. I soon found some glowing stones, which I took home with me to the hotel.

At the hotel, fiddling around and being silly, my curiosity at childlike levels, so that I might stare for long minutes at the color-composition of a creeping mold stain in the corner, I suddenly felt compelled to examine the characters of the foreign alphabet of this nation. I found that if I set the glowing stones above the letters of the line, the stones became transparent and, oddly enough, the words beneath them showed through in perfect English.

Naturally, this discovery made me want to translate a book, but it couldn’t be just any book, it had to be the oldest, most mysterious book I could find. I set out for the bookseller’s.

Along the way, I passed by that laundry where the beautiful schoolgirl sometimes sat. Instead, her father was there. “Now you are in such a hurry!” he called.

“Not now!” I said. I was worried that these unexpected powers would wear off, as has been known to happen with drugs, and I needed to get that book.

The bookseller smiled when he saw me coming; it was I think the first time I'd seen him do this. He seemed to know instantly what I'd come for; very little explanation was required. He went into the back room, and emerged some minutes later with this leather and string bound, homemade-looking manuscript.

"This book you want," he said, patting my shoulder knowingly. His familiarity seemed out of character, but the book was just like I'd imagined it needed to be, it was the perfect combination of old and mysterious, and so I asked him the price. "This book not for sale, only rent," he said. "You pay me tomorrow."

Knowing somehow that it would be a mistake to pull out the glowing stones there in public, I rushed back to the hotel. The book was entitled *Trying to Fit In*, by the one-named author Eleven. The first few pages were an introduction which consisted mainly of a brief biography of this Eleven, who had been a poor blind orphan of the hills but had become a famous poet in his old age. All of this history was very ancient, however, I found as I methodically moved the glowing stones across the pages.

I began the work of translation, fell asleep along the way, awoke holding eight and a half pages of something very strange, and of course returned to the old man's hut right away to get my hands on some more of that needleflower—the stones had stopped glowing.

The bookseller charged me some outrageous sum.

The girl at the laundry smiled at me as I passed, and her smile sent such a warmth over me, I wished for a moment that I could arrange a marriage. Of course, at the time, even *I* knew such a thing was out of the question.

I sit in the shed and watch the water boil in the pan on the campstove, reminiscing about my mystical burst of "translation." The narrative had contained that magical race of little people,

I recalled, which even under the stones had borne a nonsensical title; I had somewhat arbitrarily called them “brownies,” always the prankster, but come to think of it, wasn’t the real word something like “contumbly”? The water boils. I can’t remember. I bumble around, looking for coffee.

It must have been. Contumbles! The same creatures Cody that weirdo from work has been seeing. Now whatever did I do with that *Trying to Fit In?*

It had seemed so silly and amateurish after my return to the States and my sudden, overwhelming success. What *would* I have done with it? Mailed it to *her*? As some crowning, ridiculous gesture?

That *is* what I would have done, but as the water begins to darken, I remember that Patrick the drummer had wanted to read it. Had read it. Had later used it as evidence against me of my unreliability and my unfitness to lead a professional band. Drugs, childish fantasies, delusions of grandeur, etc. Had that son of a bitch held onto it after all? Of course he had. He’d sensed that I wanted to give it to *her*.

Goddamnit. Now I have to call Patrick.

“Hello?”

“Hey Pat.”

“Who is this?” Anger immediate.

“It’s me.”

“What do *you* want?”

“I, uh...”

“Oh, let me guess. You’ve been talking to Shelly and he’s got you convinced that the timing might be right for a ‘comeback’...”

“No, I, uh...”

“He gave me that speech and I told him to stick it up his ass...”

“Pat, I, uh...”

“What is it, spit it out, you drunk piece of shit. Did the money finally run out?”

“So, Pat,” I say, “how’ve you been?”

“I’ve been fine,” he says, “working, you know, paying the bills. Work. Remember what that is? Is that songwriter credit not enough now, now that shit’s hit the fan? What a surprise...”

“I guess it *is* about work...”

“Then I don’t want to hear it. You know what your problem is, Sim?”

“That book I translated, you remember...”

“What book? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“When I was out of the country...”

“When you were out of the country, who the fuck knows? Don’t ask *me* what you were doing, realistic pursuits, I kinda doubt...”

“I brought back my translation of that book, remember? *Trying to Fit In.*”

“Hilarious. Perfect. Yes, you *would* translate that book. But no, sorry. Sim, get real. You’re memory’s fucked up. You’ve put so much shit through your system over the years... I don’t know, it’s sad I guess. Maybe I should care.”

“Pat, come off it. I know you’ve got it.”

“What the fuck *do* you know, asshole? The price of bottom-shelf liquor?”

“Just, come on, I’m wondering about the little people in the story, if they were called ‘brownies,’ or did they have some other name...”

“You know what? Fuck you.”

“I know you know what I’m talking about...”

“I’m done with your bullshit. I’ve got to get back to work. Don’t call me anymore. You’re a worthless piece of shit.”

“Okay Pat, you win,” I say. But, in my disappointment, I can’t resist: “Fag.”

He hangs up.

As the coffee takes its effects, and my brain turns on for the day, I begin to toy with the idea that the contumelies might be real. I pluck absently at the strings of the pedal steel, slide that bar back and forth, waltz-time. I’m trying to decide, scientifically, which is the simpler explanation for the mysterious phone calls, which have been playing back audio recordings of her voice, her girlish voice, so grave in my history: a stalker, possibly male or female, who knows, obsessed fan, frustrated lover, someone in the government, possibly tied up somehow with my airport-related court case, my travel ban—or would it be the contumelies?

I recall from my “translation” that one of Eleven’s major themes, despite what seemed an almost medieval setting, was surveillance: in the story, this was also related to town gossip. Although the drunken constable was always losing sleep, feverish with his suspicions concerning certain shady characters of the bazaar, his mechanism of surveillance was hopelessly faulty, and the “brownies” always had better information. They were, however, elusive...

I could call Cody, try to get him to talk. Have you spoken with any of them? Would they be able to make phone calls to humans? And play back memories which had been recorded?

Cody's probably just the kind of guy you might be able to ask such questions of, he's out there, but then again he's kinda distrustful; I'll have to warm him up with some small talk, something about astrology maybe, or the stock market. Ah, but I don't have his number. I'll have to call Gary and ask for Cody's number...

But no, Gary's gonna want to know why I need to call Cody. He's not gonna be okay with that. Sunday is a day off; it's the Sabbath. Even though I know he's out on his side job, maybe I'd better give him a day off from being angry with me...

Gary's number is the only one I've got from the paint crew. Hmm... just how deep might the influence of these contumelies penetrate, would you suppose, hypothetically speaking? Would they be in it enough to know that Gary's number is the only one I've got? Would they be the underlying reason for this?

No, of course not, I could've just as easily gotten Prime's number, or Bo's, suggesting that we go out to Easy Street and scope the babes. That could just as easily have happened, who knows why that didn't happen.

But Gary's anger with me, unexpected and persistent, which I can't make heads or tails of: *that* squares just perfectly with what I remember of the antics of the "brownies" of *Trying to Fit In*. That's *exactly* the type of method they would've used.

The traveler soon learns that in this tourist's playground, though the police may not be an overly intrusive presence, the neighbors do keep a pretty close eye on the goings-on, and they are talkative. My response to this was to make an effort to be as polite as possible whenever possible—at times, however, this approach seemed to cause just as much trouble. A simple question like "Is this water safe to drink?" might quickly devolve into an incomprehensible

cultural battle of wills, some of the onlookers barking their opinions at a volume all out of proportion to the question under discussion, others chuckling semi-covertly, knowingly, enjoying a joke which only works in their language. “Mineral water,” they would say with an ingenuous grin, leaving you less comfortable than ever.

It had become my custom to take the long walk down to the lakeside and have Sunday breakfast at that expensive place; I found it worth the extra money, at least on one day a week, to get that muffin with that apple-cinnamon jam, real butter, real bean coffee, corned-beef hash. Sit back and read the paper, use it to swat away the birds which dropped down from the trees to try to poach luxury breakfast goodies. Sure you still had to deal with the flies just like anywhere else, but the quality of the food, the lakeshore quiet, slow pace, the clean white tablecloths of this place were a distinct cut above any of the other local joints, and gave me that aristocratic feeling inside, that small taste of royal privilege, which I would never get in Provo.

I rolled past the cabdrivers on the streetcorner, nodded; I’d been in town long enough that they’d quit asking me if I wanted a sightseeing tour. The sun was out, I felt chipper, I was playfully mulling over the question of whether I had in fact translated some ancient text with the aid of enchanted pebbles, or whether the whole thing was just some hallucination, an embarrassing confession of my own interior self. I had awakened with a melody on my mind, hill-like, punctuated by a trilling flute, which I was developing into an operatic progression, a symphonic soundtrack for the film adaptation of *Trying to Fit In* I envisioned.

A couple of young, skinny boys in tanktops and shorts were playing carom on a board outside a shop in the dirt alley. One of them waved downward at me. “You,” he said. “You play carom.”

“Ka-ram?” I said.

They both smiled. “Carom, carom.”

“Not today.”

“Sir, you have time...”

“Yeah, but I, uh...”

“Come. Sit.” The boy pulled up a bamboo stool, patted it emphatically.

“Alright.” It only took a couple of turns for me to see the situation was hopeless: not only did I not understand the rules of the game, which these boys enthusiastically tried to demonstrate repeatedly, laughing, as though dealing with a small child, but my technique was pretty bad as well, I couldn’t get the finger-flick right, the skittles shuffled off in random directions at unpredictable velocity, that is, when they actually moved at all. The other boy laughed as he effortlessly finished me off, then demanded money.

I argued a bit, gave them a bill eventually, and then sat to watch them play. I thought that this game perhaps might serve to replace the game of Haul and Squat in the film adaptation: although so central to the plot, as Eleven masters it so skillfully at such a young age and this is what originally brings him to such heights of fame and prestige in the region, in fact the rules and nature of the game in the text are never discussed in any depth. This game of carom might be just the thing, I thought, but then, suggesting that fame and prestige are to be had through the game of carom would probably require a bit of fictionalization; plus not to mention, wasn’t he blind? Wouldn’t that cause a problem? Ah yes, but that’s movies, right?

“Do you know the story of Eleven?” I asked the boys.

The shooter ignored the question as he peered down the carom board; the other darkened with faint disapproval. “Story of Eleven?”

“*Trying to Fit In?*” I said, shaking my head, bashful.

“Eleven is a number, sir!”

“Right, right...”

The shooter finished; they began to set out the skittles again.

“Doesn’t he pay?” I said.

“Sir!” said the loser, “I beat him last game. Keeping track.” He tapped his forehead. “You play again. Maybe you win money back.”

“Another time, maybe,” I said, and arose, glad to see that these two were evenly matched.

It’s such a nice day, I decide to take the old bicycle out, ride it down to Rock Canyon, go for a hike. I take the long way around. People in their church clothes drive by, big families, in mini-vans and SUVs. One of these, with tinted windows, seems to be following me; I can’t really tell, everybody on these roads is driving pretty slow, it’s Sunday and they’re moseying off to church, kids in the back wriggling and whining, bickering, Mom in the front seat licking her fingertips, smoothing down her little boy’s eyebrows, fixing his tie, Dad driving, taking his time, thinking over whatever it is old Mormon guys think over. This maroon Jeep somehow keeps popping up a little ways behind me. I take a sudden, clever turn, a detour through some kind of dirt parking lot and backyard, think I’ve lost it, then there it is again when I finally come out down by the university.

Past the Missionary Training Center, as usual bustling with grinning young people in suits and dresses, and on up by the temple to the turn, where the maroon Jeep finally leaves me and continues on its way down the hill.

I gaze at the temple grounds as I stand up in the pedals, thinking how lovely the place looks, how pleasant it must be to belong to something like that, to fit in. I’ve never been inside

this majestic structure, I've only seen pictures, and they've carried no meaning for me. Others, when I used to ask them, would get enthusiastic about things like "the light of Christ," another concept I never really grasped, or would otherwise turn enigmatic, and refuse to discuss the sacred, they'd taken some oaths, and so on.

The temple is situated awfully close to the university, here in Provo; it might be one of the reasons I never did get too far with the BYU girls. But how lovely they look, chirping, chattering in the grass, the midmorning sun beaming off of their bright flowing dresses and golden hair. Such pixies when they're young...

I park the bike at the trailhead and start to walk. The trail up the canyon is kinda quiet; it's Sunday and there aren't too many rock-climbers out. I'm well familiar with the trail, and as I climb past the barren opening section, with its cliffs, its boulders and slides of shale, and get up into the shadier and more forested parts, I begin to notice the traces of fresh little side trails which pepper the walk: little hidden campsites. Homeless people. I don't see them, I don't go investigate, but I know they're there—every once in a while I get the smell of someone's fire, or catch a glimpse of someone's clothesline off behind the shrubs.

My goodness, they're living like contumbles out here. I guess I'm one to talk. Mussberger might be up here! I'm suddenly certain that Mussberger *is* living up here—where else would he be?

I turn off the trail and scramble down some rocks to the dry streambed, find a large flat boulder, sit down, take the Bic and a little self-rolled cig, and have a few puffs. My mind lazily scrolls past the supposed dangers of this our western wilderness, rattlesnakes, cougars, bears, and so on, on through to the real hazards the lone hiker is likelier to encounter: the police. Zealous vigilantes of the local culture. Mussberger. Contumbles...

It was late morning, the band was all loaded into the bus, we had a gig to be to that night, and Mars was nowhere to be found. In addition to this, Cam the bass player, who had breezed in kinda late lastnight, babbling incoherent nonsense, was this morning acting fishy—mumbling, evasive.

“I don’t see why we don’t leave his ass,” said Patrick. “At some point we’ve all got to accept that we’re doing this as a profession. You know. With deadlines, shit like that?”

Not finding a clock or timepiece handy, I checked the position of the sun in the sky, just peeking out over the flat of the motel roof. “We’ll get there,” I said.

Our guitar player Brinton, in a fur coat despite the weather, his arm around his most recent tour girlfriend, offered, not entirely helpfully, “He might be in jail.”

“All the more reason to leave his ass,” said Patrick. He stood in the door of the bus, though Red the driver was across the street getting coffee.

I tried to bring some objectivity, even though Patrick’s recent tantrums of self-righteousness had begun to get on my nerves a bit, and he seemed to always be scaring away the girls I showed any interest in: “Although I have no doubt that, even if we did leave him,” I said, “Mars would have no trouble catching up again by tomorrow at the latest, actually I don’t think we’ve reached that state of emergency quite yet...”

Patrick dropped back down to the blacktop, and approached, staring me down. “Professionals,” he carefully enunciated, and I could see a confrontation coming; behind his eyes was that saturation-point determined aggression, but I knew by now that it had nothing to do with the tardiness of our roadie. “Do you grasp the concept?”

This coming from the guy who just last night had kept interrupting a lovely conversation I'd been having with this spaced-out little gypsy-looking girl, Ariana, great gold bracelets on her tiny wrists—every time something would start to happen, here Pat would come, peeking in the door, peeking through the window, “Hey, did you check her driver’s license? That shit’s against the law...” I wanted to ask him if he in fact “grasped the concept,” i.e., that the girls are part of the deal, so therefore fucking back off. But Patrick was somehow always managing the “higher ground” with his dirty shenanigans, and arguments with him tended to escalate. I usually just let it go.

“If we have to leave him, we leave him,” I said. “I’m just saying, we don’t have to quite yet. Look at Red.” I pointed to the driver, across the street, gobbling a donut. “Does he look worried?”

“I don’t think Mars is in jail,” mumbled Cam.

Patrick looked back and forth at me and Cam. He shook his head. “You guys,” he said, looking at the ground.

Brinton’s new girlfriend, now what was her name again?, spoke up: “Pat makes a good point.”

Patrick shot her a look of scorn, like her help is the last thing he needs, while Brinton just took her face in his hand and smooshed her cheeks, cutely: I’ve never understood the appeal, it must’ve been his fashion sense or something, he somehow always looked innocent, but the girls, where Brinton was concerned, just ate it up, and once he had them, he’d treat them as though they were newborn puppies. “Babe,” Brinton said.

Patrick was saying, “Just who do you think is really in charge here, Sim?” His arms folded, he stood there fuming. “The elves? Are we just supposed to put out the leather overnight, and hope that the elves show up?”

“I don’t know who’s really in charge,” I said, staring off, thinking about the Judge, but of course Patrick didn’t know anything about that. We were making more money now than any of us had ever dreamed of, before. Off of my song. Through no fault of mine...

“I’d feel a lot better about the whole thing if you at least made some small effort,” Patrick said, “some indication, for the rest of us to see that you’re, you know, committed...” He nodded at the others standing around, looking for support, but Brinton was busy nibbling on his girlfriend’s ear, and Cam was lost down some other train of thought, pulling on the back of his underwear.

I smiled, thinking about commitment, thinking about how Pat had taken to playfully bumping against me whenever he thought I was drunk enough, letting his hand linger a bit too long on the back of my arm. That outrageous moment, now what was the flimsy pretext for this one?, where he got down on all fours, threw back his head, arched his spine and stuck his ass up in the air, just shooting me this squirrely look, dead uncomfortable silence for way too long, till I had to shake my head, bemused, and quickly go somewhere else. “Come on,” he’d called after me, emergency clean-up, “don’t think that...”

I knew that now wasn’t the time to get into it, everybody hanging around, so I resorted to the same defense I’d always used: “You ever known me to miss a gig?”

And please allow me to submit, Judge, that I am still able to make use of this claim; if you perhaps find fault with my relatively brief stint on the national stage, please consider that I was never one to pull a no-show, not even once, and let me tell you there were some tempting

occasions. I'm thinking of that last gig, my last public appearance, way too late in my slipping fame to be of any relevance, simply filling in for a real act who *was* pulling a no-show, the opening act to some teenage girl with a couple of techno-dudes. Out of all the people not having fun in that auditorium during my set, I believe I was the winner that night—absolute detachment from the song. A grotesque, tired pointlessness to the proceedings.

These creative ventures, you must understand, there's only so much you can control. There's unforeseeable factors that come into play, and, well, the field is competitive. To even get out of bed and face the world, when the crowd has turned and made a sort of superfluous pest of you, requires the kind of brute, deluded egotism which folks like yourself might disapprove of. But please don't doubt my work ethic.

Maybe another album *would* finally pay back my debt to society. I hope you'll let me know. One of these years, sad songs and waltzes are bound to start selling again.

I start making my way back down the trail again; I spot a couple of rattlesnakes in the dirt on the way down, there they are after all, but they're moving slow, and don't seem to pay me any mind. One of the beautiful things about the Rock Canyon trail, what makes it ideal for a Sunday walk, is that it doesn't really ever get anywhere: its most compelling features, its caves, its cliffs, its great sleek table-top bare climbing surfaces, all occur at the very beginning. Before long you're wandering up a steep, forested path with no clearings, no views, nothing for days really, unless you're going all the way to the top, in which case, well, there's better places to start. I make my way over last year's rockslide, come around the bend, see a bit of sunbright suburban Provo through the cliffs of the canyon's mouth. There's a couple of rock climbers there at the gate, ropes and harnesses spread out on a tarp.

I come to the parking lot, unlock the bike, and start riding downhill, past the university, down to that diner that I know will be open. So my disguise isn't so complete—I'll take a chance.

Which, when I enter the diner and recognize the waitress who's standing right there, chatting with the hostess, as Taylor from way back, from the old days, turns out to be kind of a moot consideration. She takes one glance at me, all ragged and sweaty and stubble-bearded, and laughs, unfazed, "Well look who it is!", moving in for a hug.

"Taylor," I say.

"You know I thought I might be bumping into you?" she says. Her face is too close to mine for me to check for a ring, all I can see is that beaming and playful smile, the curve of her neck down to her shoulder, her tumbling dark blonde hair.

"Uh-oh," I say, looking left, right, then, conspiratorially, "Has word gotten out?"

"Oh, you're famous, Sim," she says, "don't worry about that. Come, have some coffee with me." She glances back at the hostess as she steers me toward a booth, communicates through some waitress signals that she's taking a break.

She'd gotten married to some return missionary whose name I don't recognize; they're separated now but still married. Taylor's always been almost menacingly flirtatious, and, as always, I'm not sure how to respond. Two little fair-haired daughters who, I see by her cellphone photos, look just like her.

"And how about you?" she says, gazing at me, her chin resting on her hands.

"Oh, I'm living here, just up the road..."

"Huh," she says. "You see much of the old gang?"

By this she might mean all kinds of people; I never knew Taylor that well, we ran in kind of different circles, and when I think of her and begin to associate faces from the past, I find that many of them I've simply lost track of; some of those I do remember got into pain pills, then heroin, some died while others disappeared to neighboring states. A lot of the girls got married in the temple, had kids, went down that road, and of course I'd know nothing about them after that. And well, then, there's *her*, she and Taylor were good pals back then, maybe one of the reasons I always found Taylor's forwardness so baffling, she must still be in close contact with *her*. Although her name is clearly the one we both know I wish to mention, I resist out of some sort of social obligation.

"Not really," I say, and think it over. "I talked to Pat on the phone this morning..."

"Oh, how's he?" she says. "I always loved old Patrick..."

"So did I, so did I," I say. "He's keeping busy, sounds like. And then I bumped into Gary, you know, Gary Preston the other day, and I've been working with him..."

"Painting houses."

"Yup."

She stirs her coffee slowly, her lips pursed, pensive. "You still doing your music?"

"I guess. I don't know. Could be I'm a lifer..."

"You know," she says, "back in the day, I remember this perfectly clear, understand, you promised me you'd come by and play some songs for me. Then you never did."

She's telling the truth; I remember it as well. But my focus had been elsewhere, my heart for someone else: had she known? Of course she must have known. Everybody knew.

"So maybe it's like everyone says," I say. "I'm unreliable."

“I don’t think so,” she says, then, gazing, “anyway, there’s still time...” Her laugh is a little chirp, a titter.

I play at seriousness: “What about your husband?”

“What about him? We’re a couple of old friends, singing some songs. What’s there to say?”

“What about the children?” I say, appalled.

And of course she’s right there. “Look, buddy, I don’t know what you *think* I was suggesting...”

I look her over; I never really knew how churchy Taylor was back in the day, and I’m afraid to ask now. The white dresses her little girls were wearing in the photos could mean anything. The flirting could mean anything.

She hangs around as I eat my breakfast, we talk, and toward the end run out of things to talk about. She’s doing the domestic thing, running her kids around to things, comparing them to other people’s kids. I’m living in the garden shed in the backyard.

“Are you always here on Sundays?” I say as I’m getting up to leave, at the moment when perhaps I’m supposed to be getting her phone number. She looks good; the years have been kind to her...

She nods. “Maybe not always. Usually.”

“I’ll pop back by.”

But as I unlock my bicycle and casually pedal away, I’m running the numbers back in my head; did I figure a big enough tip onto that, I mean let’s admit it, really astronomical bill? And if so, I just put it on the card: will the card even still be working next Sunday?

The maroon Jeep, with the tinted windows, rolls slowly past.

Zuzeen Harmatt, as usual the last to leave the dormitory, adjusted the straps of her sandals, smoothed her blouse, gently pushed up on the knot of her braid, in short endeavored to appear as neat and civilized as was possible in the dimness of the shared and smudgy mirror, and all this despite her confinement to the grim and smutty environs of the harem of Lord Gorglebosh. Most of her fellow inmates had long since abandoned such precautions, some in a melancholy, withdrawn manner, but others enthusiastically, as though they were only now in their true element. That which Zuzeen would call dignity was called by most of the others snobbishness, or prudery, and the unfortunate female contumely was generally unpopular among her community in the harem.

Eruptra Shumoong, not a friend exactly but more someone who kept an eye on her, perhaps for reasons of gossip, appeared in the doorway and made hurry-up gestures, rolling her fists and slapping her elbows. “Zuzeen, hasten, why do you not hasten?” She clapped her elbows together, and scowled. “The barrels of oil will soon be rolled away, and if our limbs are not oiled properly, the rest of the day’s preparations are for nothing. You’ll be punished if you don’t attend!”

“In such a hurry to please,” said Zuzeen, attaching her earrings as she left the dorm. “I wonder how drunk the regiment will be this year...”

“Plenty, I hope,” said Eruptra.

“Ugh.”

“But not so much that you can’t make an impression, you know.” Eruptra shook her hips, jingled the tinny bells of her skirt. “You need to make it point in your direction; you need to plump it up...”

“Uck, gross,” said Zuzeen.

“You need to make sure that they remember you...”

“There are other ways to be memorable.”

“True, but I think you know as well as I that around here it’s important to be remembered in a certain way...”

“There are other ways.”

“Not around here there aren’t.”

The two emerged into the cafeteria area, which was nearly deserted; only Bobba and Slipp, the harem’s most recalcitrant overeaters, remained: scavenging scraps from other plates.

“It’s time for the oiling!” Zuzeen called, with genuine concern, but Bobba just poked a disrespectful little finger in her ear, biting her lower lip, and Slipp, a human-conversion, gazed off as though she hadn’t heard.

“Oh just leave them!” snapped Eruptra. “If they need oil they can just wipe their filthy mitts on their thighs. Fat, slovenly creatures!” She elbowed her companion, suggestively: “But then, we know from experience that there’s a contumbly for every taste...” Again she grunted disapproval toward the cafeteria grazers. “But still, some more than others...”

They came out into the courtyard, and Zuzeen saw that it was true, the shadreens were just rolling the lids back over to the oil barrels to seal them up.

“Not yet!” Eruptra beckoned, officious. As she dragged Zuzeen across the courtyard, she did her best to encourage her odd protégé: “You know that Jarom Fussellkitt will be there, but

you'll have to be pushing them out of the way to get to him. He's nearly reached his quota. And such muscles...

"He's a buffoon." Zuzeen had noticed him, of course, but the thought of a marriage to such a strutting, trumpeting contumbly just made her nauseous. So what if he's already reached his quota? It would merely be a transfer from one prison to the next.

"And they say he's got his eye on you..." Eruptra sang, teasingly.

Zuzeen had noticed that, too: not really directly, but more from the increased hostilities expressed toward her recently from some of the other, crass and jealous, females of the harem. What did it matter that she was uninterested, that she in fact much preferred that slow-paced, pensive Stab Lumper, whom everyone else deemed a total loser? She thought she saw something in him...

But Fussellkitt would be able to make his selection any day now. And there was no telling how long Lumper would take. Had he noticed her?

"You need to plump it right up," sang Eruptra, with a jovial poke in the side.

Zuzeen nodded, with a grimace, as she hiked up her sleeves, then got down on her hands and knees in the gravel and, head down, prepared for her oiling.

(7)

I show up to work intending to talk to Cody, as much as such a thing is possible, anyway, and see if I can get him to open up about the contumelies. So maybe it's just a playful and fanciful speculation, something the rational side of me knows I shouldn't take too seriously; if I was so hung up on there being some spiritual other realm, I would surely have stuck it out with the Church and enjoyed at the least the acceptance of the community, I mean, any other behavior would've made no sense. It seems more likely that my memory has constructed associations from out of the confusion of my time outside the country, surely with a motive, wishfully, a response to the vague emptiness I always start to feel when my stalker has neglected me for too long. The construction worker soon learns the necessity of finding alternative ways to pass the time, mentally.

But it's early, Cody hasn't arrived yet; he keeps his own schedule but no one seems to give him any shit about it, they say the Boss likes him, he's worked for GJP for years, and although all he ever does is mask windows, apparently he *really* knows how to mask windows.

Instead it's only Gary I find lurching up, spotlighted in the worklamps, and in his eyes is that crazy look. I can tell that he's been stewing about me all weekend, which is to say, all of yesterday. He hands me a broom.

"Gary," I say.

"Don't say anything," he says, louder. "Sim, just, this morning I need you to sweep and vacuum."

"Okay," I say, "so..."

“Don’t!” He raises his palm immediately. “Don’t say anything. Don’t ask me any questions, don’t act like you don’t understand what I’m asking you to do, just do what I’m asking you to do... Sweep and vacuum. Got it?”

I look at him, and I’m thinking about what “sweep and vacuum” means in the context of my previous employers, the Tenney Brothers. Do one room only. Sweep it out first with this rough broom, then sweep it again with this finer-bristled broom. Then sweep it again. Leave the tiny amount of dust which won’t get over the lip of the dustpan in the center of the room to be vacuumed. Affix this head to the hose of the shop-vac, vacuum first underneath the baseboards, then repeat this, then work your way with the vacuum over the whole floorspace of the room, attentive to every blemish, every seam. Then work your way a few feet outside the door of the room, then find some plastic to drape over the outside of the doorway, tape it to the floor and up one side, leaving a complicated plastic gateway to be taped up during active spraying. Oh, and don’t forget to clean the vacuum before you start: take it apart, beat the filter. Somewhere outside.

But at GJP they stuff the gap under those baseboards with masking paper, using some technique I still haven’t mastered. And surely he’ll want me doing more than one room. But: which rooms?

“It’s not that tricky, man,” Gary says, with a nervous smile I can’t quite read. Is his attitude softening now that he senses that even the most compliant underling must have to be able to ask *some* questions, or is he relishing the old boss-prank of assigning tasks which are impossible and can only be botched, thus assuring the opportunity for future scolding? Or is he, rather, simply amazed by my ineptitude and gall?

I gather my courage. “Um, where?”

He clucks, appalled, and turns to go. “Are you telling me you don’t know where? You can’t tell where is ready? Hello! Are you a painter? Have you ever done this before?” He stomps off, and when he’s out of sight, calls back, “Figure it out!”

I clump the broom down on the floor of the hall and start sweeping. For some reason, I’m thinking about Shauna Boyd, and her condition; that is, the need for a man in the house. No matter who, apparently. I can’t help but think that it was some kind of offer, but oh, if that’s the case, such repercussions! Think of Kenneth! I stoop to gather some stray tubes of caulk and bits of masking paper, make a bundle, go looking for a garbage can. Who knows what it was. She’s so cute in her jammies. I probably need a second set of eyes on this question; I could bring it up with Bo... but then, Bo’s probably gonna want photographic evidence...

I get into the large room at the left of the hall, I don’t know, maybe a study or a sewing room or something, and find the closet a debris-filled dusty mess; I think about a dust mask for a minute, then let it go. Someone off in the house clomps around heavily, then drops something heavy on the concrete—must be Jason the general, with those energy drinks.

Just as I’m pushing the sloppily shifting pile of debris out of the closet’s entrance, Jarvis and Ammon come marching in, equipped to caulk, caulk-gun in their right hand and wet rag in their left. Jarvis Swenson is Bert the foreman’s younger brother; I actually went to high school with their older brother Daniel. The Swenson brothers are eerie interpretations of each other, stocky and belligerent variations on a box-faced theme. Different strains of smug, differing degrees of jovial cruelty. Jarvis strikes me as being a bit more mainstream in this regard, but it could just be that his sidekick Ammon, ever present, acting as a kind of buffer, somehow tones it down.

These two come as a pair. As with Cody's window-masking, it's some kind of unspoken agreement among the crew that these two, no matter the task, are doing it together. In conversation they are referred to as "Jarvis and Ammon," a discrete unit.

Ammon, I can tell, is one of these return missionaries who get home, immediately get married, and immediately begin to fatten: old tee shirt with a rainbow trout on the front, denim shorts with a belt, old puffy black shoes. From what I've observed, he does not in fact do very much work; his role on the crew, it seems, is cheerful company for Jarvis, though I don't understand yet how such an arrangement came about.

"Sim!" Jarvis says, taken aback. "What are you doing in here?"

I quickly steer the first of the pile to the center of the room, thus approaching the two. "Just getting ready to spray."

"You're sweeping and vacuuming in here," Jarvis says. "This room isn't ready for sweeping and vacuuming? Why are you in here?"

"I, uh..."

Ammon wanders into the closet, dragging an extension cord in his rag hand. "Mighty clean in here," he says, from the closet.

"Yeah, we know he's thorough," Jarvis says. "But why are you in here? Couldn't you tell that this room isn't ready?"

"Oh man, we've still got a *bit* of caulking to do in here," says Ammon.

"Did you think to look at that, when you started sweeping and vacuuming?" Jarvis says.

I ignore him and keep sweeping, stoop to get a makeshift cardboard dustpan while Jarvis follows his partner into the closet. I choose not to make the obvious, old painter joke. Jarvis says, "It pays to be a little attentive." The worklamp inside clicks on.

Jarvis and Ammon, while I clean up the pile, continue the conversation they were apparently having before I interrupted them. “If she’s so hurt,” Ammon says, “well, I understand, but, you can’t let that affect Basketball Night.”

“Ice cream,” Jarvis says, “all that over a half a bucket of ice cream.”

“Ice cream you scream,” says Ammon.

“Exactly. If we’re not careful *I’m* gonna scream...”

“Dude, did you see that guy from the fifth ward?”

“Brother Howard? What about him?”

“Dude makes his shots...”

“Easy to defend. One on one, I could take him...”

I’m dragging the garbage can out of the room; I turn to face the doorway, and there is Prime, in his standard white tee shirt and light gray sweatpants. Energy drink in hand.

“Leave that for a minute,” he whispers, motioning to keep quiet.

Which I do, and hurry down the hall after Prime, who is almost tiptoeing. “What’s up,” I whisper, but kinda exaggeratedly.

“I’ve got a mission for you this morning, Sim,” he says, still talking low. “A secret mission.”

“Gary’s got me sweeping and vacuuming,” I say.

“It’s not time for that yet.”

We round a corner.

“But, Gary...” I say.

“If he gives you any shit, just tell him I put you on a secret mission... He’ll understand. Did you get an energy drink?”

“Are they all in the Place?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t need one.”

The “secret mission” goes something like this: Prime is gonna be caulking in the kitchen and pantry area with Enrique, the new Mexican guy, and he wants me there to interpret, but surreptitiously, any Spanish Enrique speaks, especially on the phone, and report to him the details later. I’ve been around Enrique enough to know that when he’s on the phone it’s pretty much always his wife, and they talk about ordinary married people stuff, his mother-in-law’s coming to visit, the preschool teacher, that kinda stuff, but Prime is insistent, he seems to almost intimate that this secret order has come down from his father, the Boss. And, to tell the truth, as ridiculous as this directive is, as corporate and sinister, and as much as it on the level of principle rubs me the wrong way, spying on my coworkers and so on, I am pleased to at least ostensibly participate, for the opportunity it grants me to *not* do the one thing which Gary had been almost frantic to make me understand was the thing I *must* do, i.e., sweep and vacuum.

Even better, I’m going to be masking. “It’s a lot of cabinets,” says Prime, handing me a masker, then a screwdriver.

I don’t understand what the screwdriver is for.

“If you don’t tighten,” he says, “you’ll be fightin’...”

Ah yes, tighten the screw on the wheel of the masker. But not too tight. Keep it pretty close to the level of force it’d take to pull a strip off of a loose roll of masking tape. If it’s too loose, it comes off wrong, leaving those jagged creases along the tape’s edge, what the guys at GJP call “lightning bolts.” If it’s too tight, it stretches the tape, causing the tape edge to want to veer off in some long arc to the outer direction.

I don't recall either Rod or Chance Tenney ever making any suggestion to mess with the screw on the masker. The Tenney Brothers approach seemed to keep all of their tools in mint condition, whereas at GJP you've always got to be coming up with some ingenious, temporary fix on the fly for some shortcoming of the tool you've been assigned. You find the pokers on the caulk guns, if they're even still there at all, bent up into odd, unusable shapes, serving only to stab your palm as you reach for the gun on your belt. And it seems that any caulk gun you do come across must be scraped of the mounds of dried caulk with a razor knife before a fresh tube can be inserted. These little inefficiencies seem to me somewhat regressive, but I've found the practice of making suggestions to be a can of worms, and I'm trying to fit in. The Tenneys used to carry around a little one-gallon can of water with a rag inside it; they emptied these cans of the caulk-silt every so often, and always at the end of the day, and kept these water cans immaculately clean; they performed their caulking using tiny artist's paintbrushes on the corners. GJP keeps a half-filled fiver of old caulk-water sitting around rotting for days, carries a damp rag around everywhere, wipes the caulk on nearby masking paper or the gun itself... Does its corners with the edge of the rag.

It's caulk minimalism, nearly all of the bead removed, and though it is as a method apparently quite fast, something about it to me just feels wrong. Thus, as I am looking at the cabinets I'm about to mask, I'm not sure whether to leave a tape-line or not, or, if so, how much of a gap for the caulk. I run a dry rag over the edge I'm looking at, just watching out for any last residue of dust. Maybe an unnecessary step here, who knows.

Prime is back in the pantry with Enrique, who almost never speaks, though he can clearly understand enough to follow instructions. The two are working together in silence.

I walk around the kitchen, eyeing the gaps between the cabinet and the wall in various locations, devising a caulk strategy, asking myself what would Rod Tenney do, but finally give in and go to ask Prime.

He is squatting, doing the underside of a shelf.

“Hey, are we taping to caulk here?” I say.

Enrique is on a ladder hitting some crown; he turns to me, nods, smiles.

Prime doesn’t look up; he’s in the middle of a bead. “You mean caulking to tape?”

“I mean, how tight of a gap am I leaving here, for the caulk?”

“Tight,” Prime says, “keep it tight, like your mom...”

“Uh...”

“Bitch-tight, know what I’m sayin’? Barely there...”

“But still adjusting for the gap on the wall, right?”

Prime looks up, holding the rag, considering. “You wanna keep it straight, of course,” he says, “but on the cabinet, don’t leave much. Sixteenth of an inch, at most. Preferably less.”

Ok. I can do that.

I start at the left side, on the bottom set of cabinets. Squat down, pull off a strip, set the top, work my way down, about six inches at a time, finally pressing my thumb to run along the whole length of the tape. Use some tape to shape it to the baseboard at the bottom. Get underneath the lip of the counter, get around over the top. Are we caulking to these countertops?

Gary rolls up. Here it comes, I’m thinking, but I continue masking and he just stands and watches for a while, goes off to check on the goings-on in the pantry, then comes back and watches me again for a while.

I’m stooped over the countertop, by the space where the stove will be.

“Sim,” Gary says, “what are you doing?”

I don’t look up. “Am I allowed to talk?”

“Don’t start with me,” he sings, “not a good time to do that...”

“I’m masking cabinets. How’s it look?”

“Who said you could mask cabinets?”

“Prime,” I say; then, lower, “it’s a secret mission.”

“Then I’ll repeat my question—what are you doing?”

“Um...”

He’s got that look. “For one,” he says, “what are you doing starting at the bottom? We work top-down, pretty much as a rule, on everything. You dust the top now, you’re gonna get shit all over your masking. You’ll have to dust again before you hang plastic, and maybe even one more time after that. What the fuck are you doing?”

“I’m masking cabinets and I’m on a secret mission...”

This is clearly not the answer he wants to hear. He pulls a disgusted face and points to the baseboard. “What do you call that? Whoever caulks that, what are they supposed to do with it?”

“It’s a thirty-second fix. Here, look.” I pull a strip of tape, squat down to the floor.

“Thanks for pointing that out...” But as I look at the baseboard’s edge, done up perfectly according to the Tenney Brothers approach, I realize I don’t know what the problem is, and I just sit there, uncomfortably...

“And look at this tape line!” Gary says. “Why are you so worried about the gap if your line is all messed up?”

“I’m not sure I see it,” I say.

“I think the root of the issue is that you’re being too careful,” Gary says. “You take your time and try to make things perfect, but remember... Perfection is impossible. It can never be perfect.”

“We do it good and we do it fast.”

“But that’s the whole issue, that’s what I’m saying. You’re trying to make it so perfect, it slows you down, but it also messes up your tape line, if you’re masking. If you’re too careful when you’re masking, if you go *too* slow, you won’t get a good line. With masking, it’s all about the Zone. You’ve got to find that sweet spot, get in the Zone, then you’ll have this thing knocked out in no time.”

“I’m getting there,” I say, halfheartedly.

“I’m not sure that you are.” He’s turned compassionate, now. “But the thing is, is, we can’t always be around to hold your hand at this job... At some point you’ve got to start figuring things out for yourself... I mean, I know you’ve worked for some different painters before, but maybe that party lifestyle, you know, sex and drugs and all that, maybe you forgot how to Learn to Adapt...”

“Maybe,” I say.

“See?” he says. “How am I supposed to take that? Prime, come in here...”

He tells Prime to help me with the masking, to speed up the process and keep me from messing up, and to send me back to sweep and vacuum as soon as we’re done. Enrique can handle the pantry.

Just as Gary is leaving, we hear the horns and cymbals of Enrique’s ringtone, and Prime taps my shoulder to remind me to listen up. It’s his wife, of course, and from what I hear him say

to her, I'd guess that she's griping at him about the long hours he's been spending at work. I.e., usual construction-worker's wife stuff.

I tear off a strip of masking paper, standing on a ladder, replace the masker at my side. "You know I'm not all that crazy about spying..."

Prime sips his energy drink, alert, listening. "Come on, now," he says, "it's not really spying; it's more like, gossip..."

"Did you ever think about, like, enriching your horizons? Maybe learning a second language?"

Prime stands up straight, gulps that energy drink—Grape Spazz flavor. "Do you really think so?" he says. "Is *that* how it works? They come over here, to our country, and you think we should be learning *their* language?"

I notice the pause in Enrique's phone conversation, back in the pantry, last a bit too long; he's listening to us, now, maybe.

"Just a thought," I say. "I don't make the rules. So what's the plan for lunch?"

Prime grows wistful. "Lunch is still a long way from here..."

Enrique is back to his wife.

I lay down the strip of masking paper, reaching into the back of that awkward space above the top cabinets, hoping it secures against the particleboard. Run my finger slowly across. "I wonder where Cody's at..."

"He's not invited!" Prime insists, thinking I'm still thinking about lunch. "Anyway, Bo's got a deal worked out from a side job last year. They're paying in food. Free lunch for us, today. But not for Cody."

"Sooo... The lady that moved into my house? The mom of that family? The Boyds."

“I’m listening.”

“You know... The married woman, who lives in my house now?”

Prime is nodding. “Already got that part, yes... What about her?”

“So... She’s actually pretty cute?”

“I knew it!” He claps his palms. “Sim, have you been actin’ a fool?”

“I’ve been keeping it together,” I say. “But I think maybe she wants to...”

“You dirty dog! Better watch yourself...”

I move to the floor, move the ladder a bit further along, and mount it again. “You ever try that one?” I say.

“The married woman?”

“Sure, why not?”

Prime thinks it over. “It’s impossible to ever rule it out completely, cause, you know, sometimes they just lie about it, but no, I don’t really want to get involved with any of that... I’ve been the guy on the other end...”

“You were married?” I say. I can’t believe it; I had Prime pegged at like twenty-two. And divorced?

“Yup,” he says, “didn’t I tell you about my ex-wife? Half Korean. Total fucking bitch. Biggest mistake of my life...”

“I had no idea. How old were you?”

“Nineteen.”

“Holy shit, man.” The whole premise is beyond belief.

“Yeah,” says Prime. “Marriage is one non-stop shitshow...”

“So, you know,” I wonder, “maybe I’d be helping her out?”

He laughs, emphatically. “You probably are,” he says, “but you’re just yourself taking a dive right into the shitshow...” He gives the matter some further thought. “You wanna talk to Bo. He’s got a story along these lines. Educational. You should hear it; it’s a good story.”

I imagine it is.

I’d started drinking hard immediately after the gig; we’d been on the road a while, the set was tight but getting so repetitive, at least to me—there were certain points where the workmanlike semi-competence of Cam’s bass line, or Patrick’s woefully predictable drum builds and flares, would cause my jaw to clench in scorn and disgust—that it was becoming difficult for me to pretend enthusiasm night after night, and on this night I was hellbent on induced frivolity. Waiting backstage, watching from the wings, was this girl, Allison; though just a bit taller than me, and blonde, something about the shape of her dark eyes, the mild arch of the eyebrow, the slight pout, reminded me of *her*; even her tone of voice ran along similar lines. And she was so clean...

“I need to get out of these sweaty clothes,” I told her, and excused myself for a moment, but Patrick followed me back, under the pretext of some critique of the set.

“You’ve gotta realize that the show isn’t just about you, it isn’t just about us,” Patrick was saying. “Those people paid good money...”

I pulled the bottle from the little closet, some good gin, about half-a-bottle, took off the cap, and started chugging.

“God,” Patrick said, “damn, Sim. I see your priorities are in the right place...”

I bit my forearm, caught my breath, eyed the bottle, sloshed it around, and took another couple of gulps. Talking to me about priorities. Did you not see the girl out there? “If you’ve got issues with the set,” I said, “don’t be coming to me about it. I’m not the weak link...”

“Well, then, why don’t you tell me for once where your true loyalties are,” he said.

“Let’s kill everyone,” I said, nonsensically enough I thought, opened the door, and walked out, half-tempted to close it behind me, as some half-assed symbolic gesture. There was Allison, smiling, my goodness, in a tiny skirt and my own band’s tee shirt, and I saw Mars with some taxi driver.

The booze was just enough to enable me to fake that glow as I smiled back at her, took her by the hand, said, “Come with me!” and steered her toward Mars.

Patrick was right on my tail. “Don’t you walk away from me!” he was saying, getting dramatic, which thankfully Mars noticed.

“What’s up,” Mars said.

“Come on, get me out of here, man,” I said, low. I glanced back to Allison, to make sure she wasn’t getting weirded out by any of it, but she seemed ready for anything.

“Sure, let’s go,” Mars said, and put his hand on the cabdriver’s shoulder.

“Mars?” Patrick warned, but we were already on our way to the door. “Sim, stay and talk about this!” But his voice was deflated, feeble; he could see I was escaping once more.

Who knows what horrible consequences await, I thought, as payment for this insubordination, but then Mars had some cocktail he’d shaken up, which he produced from his jacket once we’d gotten to the cab and safely away, and we gleefully passed it around, laughing, watching the soaring orange streetlights overhead. Allison scooted up close, and I began to forget my troubles.

I spent a long time that night in internal debate over whether or not to tell this girl that she reminded me of someone, very dear; I couldn't decide whether this would be charming and romantic, or insulting. Somewhere along the way I began to lose track, and became convinced that it really *was* her, and the elation surged through me, confused but somehow vindicated, at last you are here, at last. How simple it all is, how straightforward; all I had to do was keep trying.

Allison glimmered in the moonlight; kept saying, "You're funny."

I awoke the next day in shattering pain, crashed out on some filthy cardboard in some alley, a bump on my skull, one rib broken. My wallet gone.

Perfect, I thought. This is just what Patrick wants.

At lunch, I order the Country Breakfast: eggs, hashbrowns, country-fried steak and biscuit in gravy, thinking it's just the thing for the lingering jitters of last night's whiskey, but when it arrives, the gravy is sort of yellow-gray and curdled, and tastes like it might be leftover alfredo sauce. Must be the economy...

I'm there at the restaurant on State Street in Orem with Gary, Prime, and Bo. Lunch today is on Bo, who is collecting on some work he'd done here over the winter, and it's far enough away from the jobsite for Prime to comfortably order up pitchers of beer without having somebody from work show up, in any case somebody who might pass the word on to the Boss. Prime is getting buzzed and talking about my domestic dilemma.

"You oughtta tell him that story, Bo," he says, "that's a good one!"

Bo's been flirting with the waitresses here, seems to know them more or less; they are of the classic school, older, a bit paunchy but probably fun, and willing to play along. He glances around to see that they don't overhear.

But then, at the last moment, he chooses not to share. "What good is wisdom?" he says, and taps on his phone, resigned, like a guru finally broken down by the ineptitude of his pupil; his shaven scalp and gray-toothed broken grin accentuate the effect. "Some things each of us has to learn for himself..." He takes a bite of his enormous guacamole bacon burger, then a couple of fries; it looks way better than what I'm eating.

"Damn, I sure ordered the wrong thing!" I say.

"Well that's what you get for ordering breakfast at lunchtime," Gary says.

"Place like this is breakfast all day," I say.

"We tried to tell you," Gary says. He is also eating a guacamole bacon burger.

"Aw, come on, Bo," says Prime, pouring himself another beer. "Don't be holding out on the goods..."

"I want to hear about this lady," says Bo. "A damsel in distress?"

"Who knows," I say.

"Is she hot?" Prime says.

"Why you gotta be thinking about a married woman?" Gary says, clearly bothered.

"What makes you think that that's an okay thing to be doing?"

"Now, now," Prime says, to Gary, "don't be bringing your own personal situation into it. Let's try to be objective about this..."

"You'll find a story very similar to mine," Bo says, his mouth full, "in the Bible."

"Truth," says Gary.

“I wanna hear about *your* ex-wife,” I say, to Prime.

Gary and Bo are pretending to choke. “Don’t even,” says Gary.

Prime just chugs his beer, right down to the bottom, slams down the glass, and says, “Fucking bitch.”

Instead, Bo starts talking about *his* ex-wives. Single at the moment, he’s been married three times. One kid, practically grown up, from the first, and three more from the third, not to mention assorted others from his wives’ prior husbands and boyfriends. It’s quite the saga. He doesn’t seem to hold the same bitterness about the whole thing as Prime, but is instead rather philosophical, and claims to be ready to try again, should the right candidate arrive.

“I can’t ever save money,” Bo says, “but you know, once you’ve been in it for a while you start to realize marriage is a beautiful thing. It’s crazy, but the sex is better: especially anal.”

“Goddamnit!” I say, trying to laugh around a mouthful of water, but barely able to keep from spilling. “Why?” More existential query than request for explanation.

But Bo continues: “You go anal with the wife, it’s a beautiful and endearing thing, you know, it brings you closer. You go anal with some one-night-stand you took home, and you just feel dirty after...”

“You guys need to get your minds out of the gutter,” Gary says.

“Don’t knock it,” says Bo.

“Speaking of buttocks,” I say, “I haven’t seen Bert today...”

“He’s gone back east,” says Gary, “a few days, maybe the week... Meaning I’m the one in charge. He’s looking at that dental school...”

“And the home show coming up,” I say.

We eat for a while.

“Haven’t seen Cody around, either,” I say.

Prime is becoming giddy. “Have you asked him about the contumbles?”

“Contumbles!” echoes Bo with disdain, busy with his phone.

“Cody can be a bit hard to follow,” I say. “What have you guys gathered? About the contumbles...”

Gary can’t contain himself. “Wow, that’s a tough one,” he says, “let’s think about that one a while.” He holds up his palms like a scale, lifts first one, then the other. “Hmm... Traumatic brain injury... contusion... contumbly... Yeah, that’s a really complicated question, I don’t know...”

“You should hear about their mating habits,” Prime says. “That’s some wild shit.”

“The human imagination is a dark and terrible thing,” Bo says, tapping away on his phone.

“I’m more interested in their relationships to humans,” I say. “Just for, like, the sake of science. Do they interact with humans? Does Cody, like, talk to them? Do they talk to him?”

“Enough about the contumbles!” Gary threatens.

Prime lowers his voice. “I’m not sure about that; you’ll have to see if you can get him to talk. He doesn’t always talk about them. They’re just kind of... there.”

Gary’s voice, also lower, is dire. “Sim, I don’t want to catch you working with Cody today.”

“Right,” I say.

Bo looks up. “You ever hear about that time? Well, you know that big blue lunch cooler Cody always brings to work? You ever hear about that time Prime took a big old grizzly shit in it?”

Prime laughs hysterically, gleeful.

“Cody comes back from somewhere, looking for his lunch; oh, I think Big Andy was there, and he opens up that big blue lunch cooler, and there’s this big old, grizzly shit in it.”

“It wasn’t me!” Prime cries, red-faced and teary.

“So maybe it was Big Andy,” says Bo.

“Come on, let’s get out of here, we gotta get back to work,” Gary says, rising.

“Maybe it was the contumbles,” I suggest ironically, but somehow this spoils the joke, and we shuffle out of the place slowly, in silence. Prime, though he’s had the lion’s share of the beer, insists on driving; I feel a bit uncertain about it as I get in the truck, even more so as we squeal out onto State, but to tell the truth I don’t exactly have my heart set on our destination, and thus am perhaps a bit too receptive to the possibility of mishap en route. The sight of the tweekers in their dirty wife-beaters, standing up on little bikes, hopping around, the sight of ragged old women hobbling along behind reclaimed shopping carts piled with shoddy junk, just kind of reinforces this sensation, this resignation to imminent calamity.

It’s eight after two when we get back. This presents a time-card question. At GJP, we keep track of our own time-cards.

“Hey Gary,” I say, “how long of a lunch break are we giving ourselves, today?”

“Forty-five minutes, isn’t it?” Prime says, but, I can tell, with mischief.

Gary puts his hand on my shoulder as we reach the garage. “You know what,” he says, “you just do whatever you feel right about doing. You’re the one keeping track of your hours. You just do what feels right...”

He's learned well from Bert, I see. And there's Cody, off in the library, masking windows with his headphones in, that rasta hat bobbing up and down, oblivious to our passing. Not even close to where I'm supposed to be working.

Chief Surgeon Hupperl, polish your buckles, press your trousers, trim your whiskers with profound care: what you've been up to amounts to nothing more than an elaborate con game, and you will eventually be found out. We all know that the development of your famous, so-called "Conversion Machine"—without even getting into the fuzzy details of the empirics of its output, its productive fidelity—was always just a front, and a shamefully flimsy one at that, for your more personal research ambitions.

You must realize that you don't have a monopoly on genetic science, and that Gorglebosh, as unenlightened as he may be, will be sure to see the usefulness to the Contumbly Nation of many of your objectives and will view your secrecy as a betrayal, when he finds out. Some other contumbly is bound to start asking questions—if not Corporal Butt, then somebody.

Why are only mediocre, brawny science graduates recruited by Hupperl, while the stellar transcripts are forced into Irrigation and Bridges? Because you yourself have brains enough, and your only real requirement is cruelty—cruelty appreciates the pain and misery of others; cruelty is better able to keep a secret. Thus cruelty, although not perhaps at the heart of the personal research dungeon under your house, is after all a necessary condition of its continued operation.

Why would you spurn the romantic advances of Madame Gorglebosh, the queen? Because you've just managed to get the bony nubs of wing structure started on Subject One; because the digestive enzyme samples from Subject Two are exhibiting unimaginable properties, not to mention the business of the reproductive organ of female Subject Three—it's the wrong time for political entanglements.

Why do you so assiduously avoid any contact with human conversions? Because you know, perhaps superstitiously, that the juxtaposition of rational science with, let's be honest, less than perfect genetic imitation, will only accentuate the discrepancy and point out the shortcomings of the famous process which brought you the prestige you now enjoy.

Of course you know that this problem will only worsen with the second generation, but by then you will be old, wealthy, will have attained who knows what position. There's no telling, with the potential innovations of your dungeon, you may even come to supplant Gorglebosh as the true leader of the race, you may even cross over and get to work on the enslavement of humans as well. Isn't that what you've been promising your small army of dimwitted henchmen?

Why has Corporal Butt allowed you such generous private space to operate in? It could be his attention is elsewhere; perhaps his resources have been stretched thin in trying to get that singer out of the way, perhaps his arrangement with Mussberger has proved less efficient than originally projected. It could even be that he doesn't understand the science. But doesn't it seem most likely that he hasn't in fact allowed you any privacy at all?, that rather he's got at least one and possibly more of your henchmen in his pocket as well?

Spying on you, coopting all your best ideas, only to shut you down when he feels the moment is right. Therefore, button up your labcoat, Hupperl, and don the violet goggles, keeping the inkpots full in all twenty-three colors. Throw him off the scent with some frivolous ballistics and ESP card tricks. Keep the real findings locked up in your head. No one will mind the rumblings and groanings from beneath the floorboards. The eyes of Butt, though everywhere, are unimaginative...

(8)

I'm rolling along the back roads of Lindon to Orem, on my way home from work, wondering how long I'll be able to hang on to this luxury sports car, whose special features I've never really learned to love, and which I do my best not to drive anymore, as it seems to draw attention to itself—this was, of course, the main reason I originally purchased it. But the gas in my truck is running kinda low, and I've opted today for the flashy racecar, with its automatic controls and its overkill digital radio—all this technology, and I can't even play my old cassettes. I've got the windows down, and I'm rolling slow; the breeze blows cool over the salt of my skin. The paint dust on my clothes is probably killing my resale value...

There's a big, happy dog loping along up ahead; suddenly the large, dark gray truck in front of me swerves to the left; I tentatively touch the brake wondering what's happening. There's no obstacle up ahead; the truck intentionally barrels into this dog, who cries out as it is knocked sideways. I pass the dog; it is hobbling and making frightened yelps, but I don't know whether to stop and help the dog, or gun it and get a license plate number from this asshole in the truck.

None of the other drivers seem to have noticed. The dog looks back at me, worried and confused. He is standing on three legs, hopping in place. The car behind me honks its horn. The gray truck is getting away.

“Son of a bitch,” I say, and gun it.

As my approach is conspicuously rapid, the asshole in the gray truck gets the picture and starts to speed away, blowing through a four-way stop and taking a left, burning off up the hill. It's a residential area; of course there's kids everywhere. I check my speed. Fifty. Fifty-five.

I start to get closer; I can't quite see the numbers. This psychotic truck is going over sixty up this hill. First letter H. Then a Z, and then is that a 4? I've got nothing to write with. Okay, HZ, um, 4?

The truck squeals around a corner; okay, I know this road, I can catch him on those curves, but goddamn, that blind four-way at the bottom? What is this guy on?

I whip around the curve; I see taillights. Then, from out of nowhere, a tiny form scurries out in front of me; I hit the brake; it must be a kid; the tires screech alarm, it's not a kid but a tiny man with his face all smudged, as though in camouflage; I pull the wheel to the right, begin to lose control of the skid, bump up conclusively on the sidewalk hearing some distressing sound from the bumper or axle, look back to the road, but the little man is gone. As is the gray truck.

Huh?

Yes, no question. A contumbly.

Some teenagers are approaching on their freestyle bikes, and I figure it best to evacuate the scene. It's not that I feel like I've done anything wrong, exactly, but the registration on this car expired some months back, and I didn't even get the read on that license plate. No need to get the police involved. I back out, and as the wheels get rolling I hear a horrible rhythmic thumping from the undercarriage. Something's off.

I drive back the way I came, slowly, don't run into any angry parents, thank goodness, get back to the site of the incident, but the dog is nowhere to be seen, and after a few unproductive detours, I give up and head home.

If you'd like further clarification, Judge, about just what it was that made that particular song a hit, while all the others, despite a not inconsequential marketing campaign, could never manage to reproduce the success, I would refer you to certain representatives of the music publishing industry; I believe they might be better prepared to produce for you the types of answer you would respect. It's possible, in fact at times I'm tempted to think quite likely, that I don't possess any real talent, and never did. And I know you need no reminding that when the whole thing did start to catch fire, I was on the other side of the world, in a distant land; in some ways, you could say I had nothing to do with it...

The melody came to me late one night, I don't remember when, long ago, I only seem to recall a certain state of reverie, thinking about *her*, fantasizing, remembering when she had sat close, her face turned away. The cosmic resonance of my longing swelled from deep inside, grew expansive, moved outside, continued to emanate, until it felt that my love could envelop the entire universe. I heard the whole thing all at once; it simply faded in from the aether, like a theremin that's just been plugged in, but it was a whole, marching symphony. The first version of the lyrics was a love song, but it was too specific, I knew that she would know, and so I wrote a second version, and it was this second version that popular America responded to, this more jaded, in my hindsight opinion woefully inferior, second version. I don't really understand any part of this history...

If I had been allowed to leave the country again, Sir, I imagine I could've made the money go a little further. And, well, you know, as limp as the pronouncement may appear, we shouldn't rule out the possibility of my having something in the works, after all. Maybe it'll be huge...

I'm working on some godawful booze—the sombrero on the label made me think it was tequila but it's turning out to be something closer to floor polish—out in the shed, when Kenneth Boyd appears, sweaty and in workout clothes, apparently just back from ward basketball. He rubs the back of his head with a little white towel, and unceremoniously barges in.

I set the bottle down on the floor, and straighten up.

For one horrible moment I'm convinced that he's come to talk about his wife, and his plopping down on the cot by my side, and palming my thigh in the same exact spot that Shauna had, only serves to reinforce the impression. But his hand stays put for a while.

“Sim, Sim, Sim,” he says, with a sigh.

“Kenneth,” I say, wriggling back, not trying to be impolite, but come on...

“I think we've got some things to talk about.”

“Okay?”

“It's just that...” He looks away, with a smile at his task. “Well, I look at you, and, you know, I know you're a talented guy... You've got abilities...”

“You're very kind,” I say, and reach for the bottle.

“But,” he says, “I wonder, you know, I look at you and I have to wonder. I mean, don't you ever stop and ask yourself? Where is this all going?”

I set the bottle in my lap and roll it pensively in my palms. “You know, I *do* sometimes ask myself that question,” I say.

“So? Do you ever get any answers?”

“It seems to me there's only so much we can control,” I say.

Kenneth nods; this is a response he can work with. “That’s so true, I know. That’s why I feel it’s so important to have goals. You make yourself some goals, you know, little steps, but with the bigger picture in mind. Eventually you get to where you’re headed, that once had seemed so *impossible*, and you ask yourself, ‘How’d I do that?’ It’s really all about setting manageable goals.”

Cue the soundtrack. Snap snap clap clap snap. Around here we Learn to Adapt.

I eye the bottle as Kenneth awaits my response. He wants me to agree to some “goals” he’s concocted, something which is sure to end for me in marriage in the temple to some fat and undesirable Mormon spinster; I’m unsure of the best approach to this conversation, one I’ve had many times, with all sorts of people, hell, not all of them Mormons: Do I play along and pretend that I want to do the things he says, confessing with relieved gratitude that the whole problem is indeed that I simply never had any direction? And then deal with the inevitable daily checkups on my “progress”? Do I get into some protracted philosophical inquiry, into the nature of our goals and what they should be? Guaranteed to devolve into the usual “Light of Christ” bullshit eventually, probably around three in the morning, but guys like Kenneth don’t need to sleep when there’s people around to be “helped”. Do I just tell him to fuck off? Or, in fact, give him the honest answer? Yes, Kenneth, I’ve got some goals. For example, find out more about the race of little people who may or may not be behind a series of mysterious phone calls which play back recordings of the voice of the girl, etc.

I take a pull of the horrible booze, and unfortunately can’t help pulling a face, and gasping, it’s so bad.

Kenneth just shakes his head and smiles. “Sim, Sim,” he says. “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

Just keep talking, dude. I'm formulating a new goal, right this very second.

"Where do you see yourself in *one* year? Just what is it, when all is said and done, you want out of life?"

This booze, brown-orange in color, is so bad that as I gulp down another retching mouthful, the whole scene suddenly becomes for me hysterically funny.

"Kenneth!" I say, slapping him on the shoulder jovially, "Have I ever told you about that one time I got famous overnight?"

He rolls his eyes, dismissively. "Yes, we've all heard about that one..."

"I know, right? Who wants to hear that old story. The thing is, that was my goal. And, I don't mean to be immodest, but that's achievement on a high level, you get what I'm saying?"

"Yes, but look around, look at this." He glances at my pedal-steel guitar, as though it's the perfect symbol of my utterly fallen state. "I mean, you've gotta ask yourself. Where am I now?"

"The thing is, Kenneth," I say, taking another gulp just for good measure and to hopefully convey to him my complete lack of enthusiasm for this conversation, "I never got famous overnight. It took a long fucking time." I cap the bottle and stare him down. "So what the fuck are we really talking about here?"

He gets the picture and stands up to leave. "You do what you want to do, Sim, go ahead; let me know how that works out for you. Let me know how you feel tomorrow morning..."

I stand up to close the shed door behind him, wanting to throw the bottle at the back of his head, which is bowed in disappointment. I playfully take aim, get into a pitcher's stance, but then see Shauna watching from the second-floor window. It's the window to my music room, technically off-limits, and she's in a white nightgown, which she begins to open as soon as she

sees I've noticed. Umm... I look away, but there's only Kenneth, smug and wholly unaware; I look back. She's pressed herself against the glass, I'm wondering how any of this is even possible; didn't I lock my section of the house, don't I always make sure to do that? For the kids, I thought. The bad alcohol burns like lamp oil in the back of my eyeballs, and I can't tell if the increasingly erotic performance I'm witnessing is really happening, or is actually a rather transparently selfish hallucination. After a while, she simply fades back into the darkness of the room.

I close up the shed, plop down on the cot, and keep plugging away at this godawful poison. I've got a lot of trim to sand tomorrow. I'll sweat it out.

As I may have mentioned previously, it is a fundamental necessity of the construction worker's existence that he find some alternative means of mentally passing the time. My preoccupation for the first part of this morning has been a sort of marvel at the magnitude of today's particular hangover; I'm like a pale and desiccated leaf trembling feebly over a chasm of sewage from which perpetually emanates the stench of dread and guilt; the voices of the other workers, and the noises of work which echo across the concrete, sound far away and irrelevant, and I'm glad to have such a repetitive task to mindlessly perform. Just press this folded sheet of sandpaper this way, then that way, back and forth. Curve it with your fingers to get inside that curve. Catch those corners with the sanding sponge. Occasionally run your left hand over it all, feel it with your fingertips, make sure it's smooth. Keep to yourself, ignore the others, keep a water bottle handy, stare at the floor as you go. As long as you don't start talking, nobody will know the true extent of your condition. Marvel at the true extent of your condition.

The headache is a good sign, and as I go the sweat starts to come, which is always promising. After a while I come back to the contumelies, in particular that little bastard I just about ran over. What was *that* all about?

In the room with me, also sanding but inside the closet, is Leslie's kid, Brennan, just out of high school and making some money for whatever it is he's trying to do—mission, probably. Leslie is sort of like the Boss's long distance branch; he goes out and oversees side jobs with a smaller satellite crew, his kid, Luigi, sometimes Jarvis and Ammon. He's got that kind of suave look you get in some older painters, tucked-in button-up white shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, top buttons undone and some chest exposed, feathered hair. He and the Boss go way back, to the early days.

His kid Brennan, though similar in build, is more rounded, with eyes which blink expressionless, like an infant's. Brennan's vocal utterances, almost always mere observation and reportage, things like "I got stuck in a traffic jam on the way" or "It's fun to take a girl to a haunted house," make him seem, somehow, unformed. For some reason he's here at the home show house today.

"Have you learned how to fold sandpaper yet?" he says.

I pause, take some water, examine the piece of sandpaper in my hand. It is folded into thirds. But then, it wasn't originally my piece of sandpaper; Gary when he gave the order told me to go around the house, pick up any stray used-sandpaper I find on the floor, check it for remaining usability, and use it up. "We're burning through too much sandpaper," he'd said. My back pockets are therefore full of squares of other people's sandpaper—I usually use mine up. They are all folded into thirds, with that ridiculous extra flap.

“I don’t know, what do you think?” I say, tossing the piece into the closet—it was about finished, anyway. I take another from my back pocket.

“That’s right,” Brennan says.

Thanks, kid. I stretch out one leg, then the other, straighten my spine, which pops in a couple places, and take some water. Then I continue sanding.

Maybe I should’ve gotten Taylor’s phone number, from the diner. The weekend’s coming up. Something to get me out of the house. It’s been a while since I heard from my stalker. “I guess we’ll be getting paid soon?” I say. I still haven’t met the Boss, am not really clear on what to expect moneywise, but what the hell. Better than nothing.

“We should be, yes,” Brennan says. “The Boss usually comes in on a Friday.”

I sand for a while.

“You got any plans for the weekend?” I say.

“Oh, I think I’ll take my girlfriend out...”

“A girlfriend!”

He becomes coy. “A girl I’ve been hanging out with...”

“How serious is it?”

“Uh...” He thinks it over. “I turn in my papers in the fall, so...”

“So maybe she’ll wait for you,” I say, mischievously.

Brennan laughs. The question of whether a girlfriend waits the full two years for her missionary, or instead gets poached in the meantime by some other return missionary, is a prominent theme in contemporary LDS folklore, the source of much comedy and pathos. “She might,” he says.

“Or maybe you’re secretly kinda hoping she doesn’t,” I say.

“No,” he says, “I think I’d rather she did...”

I open up the piece of sandpaper, refold it, make a new flap, and keep sanding. I’m at a corner that got some grit blown up on it, it’s kinda rough, I take out my putty, I mean spackle, knife, and start scraping.

“So, where you thinking you’ll take her?” I say.

“I don’t know; maybe the movie...”

I’m afraid to ask; I already know it’ll be some G-rated kid’s cartoon. Brennan is not bad looking, a mild, opinionless malleable lump of clay; his girlfriend is bound to be some striking beauty—this painful reality of life in Utah Valley never ceases to wound me a little bit, despite my age, or perhaps because of it.

“Well, remember your values,” I say, and he laughs.

We sand for a while. I finish off the piece of sandpaper, pull another from my pocket. Folded into thirds: I cannot reconcile myself to the method. The little extra flap adds nothing, and the folded piece is too small to be comfortable in the palm. But I’m stuck with everyone else’s leftovers.

“So I’ve got a question for you,” Brennan says.

“Sure.”

“What do you think is better? Hugging, or kissing?”

Jesus, kid. The question is so artlessly ingenuous, so distant from me in time, and my nerves are so toxin-laden from lastnight’s binge, that the process of answering becomes complicated, and I can’t bring myself to act the worldly smartass that any other construction worker on this site would surely take delight in becoming, faced with such a question. I never kissed her; it never happened. Or, there was that one time she wanted it to happen, she stood

looking at me and there was that awkward pause, and I got too nervous, I was too sober... Or maybe it happened, late at some party somewhere, maybe after a show, but I was too messed up on you-name-it to remember. That last time she'd hugged me, in front of her other boyfriend, her real boyfriend, she'd smiled, looked me in the eye, as though my secret personal explanation, that she really did love me after all, despite the mountains of external evidence, was indeed correct. She'd held me for far too long and all the while I felt so vindicated, so important...

The groupies, post-stardom, flicker through my mind like so many specimens.

Suddenly, the tears start to well up in my eyes. "Kissing or hugging," I say, hurriedly, "good question; I guess hugging..." Barely concealing the tremor in my voice.

But Brennan, in the closet, doesn't notice. "I think so too," he says, sounding relieved.

I get up to go visit the porta-potty. I see Cody off in the kitchen, headphones on, masking windows.

I'm making my way across the yard, the midday sun like a personal assault, when I almost bump into this longhaired fellow, incongruous to the jobsite, but also somehow familiar: ah yes, Tree, the weed-dealer from way back, I don't know his last name, and his real name couldn't actually be Tree, but that's always what everybody called him. Here selling some weed, of course, to Gary. I remember that I'm running a little low, myself.

He gingerly hops about the rutted dirt, ahead of me, in his flip-flops.

"Tree!" I say.

He stops, registers me with that kinda low-key stoner surprise, and we do the usual catching up. After a while I let on that I'd better be getting back to work.

"I should get your number," I say, "maybe you could help me out..."

“You got it, bro,” he says, but he’s already got his phone out. “You give me yours, and I’ll send a text.”

Which I do.

“Dude,” he says. “That song was sick! And it was everywhere; I mean, you had the shit on lockdown...”

“I know,” I say.

“I’ll tell you what we’re gonna do,” he says. “Have you been online lately, bro? Vegas! Vegas right now is absolutely fucking nuts. Since the shit’s goin’ down? Bro. We gotta go to Vegas... It’s absolutely fucking nuts!”

“Aw, man, I don’t know; last time I was there, shit got expensive...”

Tree puts his hands on my shoulders, looks me in the eyes, gives me that crooked stoner’s grin. “Dude. Sim. I’m looking at you; I’m feelin’ something. Your skin tone’s all wrong. Your eyes...”

What are my options? Spend the weekend worrying about Shauna Boyd...

Tree’s beard toggles about, rambunctious. “We need to get you down there, let one of these nice Vegas girls take care of you...”

“Well, we *are* supposed to get paid this Friday... I don’t really know how much...”

“You’re worried about the money?” Tree says. “No, no, don’t worry about the money! You gotta *see* it, it’s like some Wild West shit goin’ down, down there. I’m driving, I know some people down there...”

“All right, what the hell,” I say. “If we get paid, I’m in.”

“Don’t give me that. Dude. We’re going. We’ve got to get you the fuck out of Provo, I can tell. Friday afternoon, four o’clock. We’re going.”

“I’ll think it over,” I say. “I’ll call you Thursday...” I head to the porta-potty.

“Think it over, but don’t overthink it,” Tree calls from behind me. “Big old titties in your mouth, hom yom yom...”

But somehow the image does nothing for me as I pull open the plastic door, find that the cleaners still haven’t been by, am nearly knocked over by the stench, and don’t even want to look inside. Instead, I make my way behind a dumpster and try to make it quick.

The topic of today’s local radio news, as always lately, is Mussberger. People seem to emerge every day with some tidbit of information: Oh yeah, I had high school chemistry with that guy, kinda quiet but really solid with the math; oh yeah, he showed up to this party we threw up in the Avenues, he was drinking hard, quiet at first but then started ranting and raving all this bible business, religious stuff, and creeped everyone out, here, I’ve got a photo; oh yeah, I hired him to do some home repairs around my house, picked him up at the streetcorner, you know, just doing my part to help out the less fortunate. Not a bad worker, knew a lot about construction. He painted three bedrooms in my basement, have a look, I thought he did an alright job... But I had no idea...

Mussberger, you rascal! A fellow painter. Going solo, undercutting the licensed guys, keeping it small, keeping it all: I see your game.

It’s a sentiment often expressed among older painters that, once you’re in, it’s impossible to get away from painting houses: once a painter, always a painter, these old-timers say, with a fatalism too ingrained to carry much bitterness. I realize, as I finish another piece of sandpaper and find its replacement in my back pocket, keep going, and the sweat drips down off the tip of my nose, that my own peculiar career at present serves as perfect illustration of the axiom. Once

a painter, in my foolish, innocent youth, but never really believing it, I was instead something far nobler, I thought, an aspiring artist. Like the gifted Eleven of the ancient text, I had disregarded the cautions of my elders; I had thought one could fight the Law. But always a painter? I can't even wrap my head around it...

I wonder how old Mussberger was when he joined his first crew.

I've just about used up everyone else's old sandpaper when Gary shows up, acting friendly. "I want you to come take a look at something," he says, "I want to get your opinion..."

Ever the optimist, I wonder while we walk if he's going to ask for my thoughts on a particular color combination, or something like that, but then we end up in the closet that Jarvis and Ammon had kicked me out of the other day, when they were caulking.

Gary looks at me, smiling, benevolent. "Well?" he says. "What do you think?"

Is he asking my opinion of his spray technique?

"Oh," he says, slapping his forehead at his own thoughtlessness, "here, I'll go get a light so we can see it better..."

He exits, is gone for a while. I stand and look around at the closet, run my hand over the shelves, over the walls. If it's something I did wrong, it would be the baseboards, since I was the one to sweep and vacuum, but as I bend down to run my hands over them, I'm rather impressed by their smoothness; yes, I suppose GJP does a pretty fair job after all, this closet is pretty clean.

Gary returns with a light, makes a bit of a production about getting it plugged in, getting the extension cord out of the way, and placing it in just the right spot. "There," he says. "So, what do you think?"

"This closet was professionally painted," I say, "no question. Anyone who comes in here will know that a true paint professional sprayed this closet..."

“I’m not asking for your opinion on my spray job,” he says, but smiling still, “believe me, you’re the last person I’d go to for that...”

I sort of mosey around the closet for a bit, say things like “Hmm” and “Gee,” feel around in places. “The sweeping and vacuuming in this closet was definitely accomplished prior to spraying,” I finally pronounce.

But I see that Gary’s smile is becoming more of a leer. “So?” he says. “What do you think of this closet?”

I give up, stumped. “This closet looks good.”

“You think so?” he says, then stoops down, gets on his knees, looks up at the underside of some of the lower shelves. I follow suit, and find what he’s getting at: in places, nailheads are showing through the caulk bead, there’s even a few stray nails hanging out altogether. It’s stuff I would’ve fixed if I’d been caulking, it’s boneheaded caulking, the kind of thing that would get you canned from the Tenney Brothers. But then again, on other crews, they don’t even caulk these areas...

“You really think so?” Gary says. “You think *that* looks good?”

“You’ve got the wrong guy,” I say, standing up again, slapping the dust from my knees. “You know I didn’t caulk in here.”

“But you were the one who swept and vacuumed.”

“So sweeping and vacuuming includes fixing other people’s caulk?”

Gary stands as well, growing serious, the smile gone. He can’t believe I’m trying to plead my case. “Sweeping and vacuuming is a big responsibility,” he says. “The guy who sweeps and vacuums is the last line of defense, is the last guy to look things over before the sprayer comes in. I wonder if you realize the magnitude of the responsibility...”

“So maybe you should put me on caulk, and let Jarvis and Ammon sweep and vacuum,” I say.

“Except that I need to get this thing done sometime before Christmas! We’re on a deadline here, and, I hate to have to be the one to break it to you, Sim, but, you know, you caulk like a freaking snail... Carrying around a bucket of water with you everywhere you go? It’s painful to watch you caulk. Not even close to fast enough; it’s like, you’re not even trying...”

“I know, you’re right,” I say. “I’ve even been known to fix a few nails along the way...”

Gary is taken aback, doesn’t know what to say for a moment. “Are you mocking me?” he says.

“Maybe let’s look to the future,” I suggest. “You want me to fix these, or what?”

“What I want is for this kind of shit to stop happening. I mean, wake the fuck up!”

“Okay, but should I?...”

“No, I’ll do it, I let you do it and I’ll probably just end up touching it up again...” He glares at me.

I can’t tell if the conversation is over, so I make my move kinda sideways and step out into the daylight of the bedroom. Gary, thankfully, doesn’t follow. “Trim in *here* looks good,” I venture mildly, with a cheeriness perhaps a bit forced.

“Wake the fuck up, Sim,” Gary says.

As I go to rejoin Brennan, I find that he’s just wrapping up the trim in the room. Good, maybe I’ll get the chance to go talk to Cody, see if he’ll open up. “Are we there?” I say.

“Just about,” Brennan says, then, looking around, “you know where we go next?”

I shake my head.

“Guess we better ask Gary,” Brennan says. “Weren’t you just with him?”

“Maybe *you* go ask him,” I say. “I’ll finish here...”

Brennan, as he’s leaving, looks over the room, at all the bits of sandpaper I’ve left strewn about the floor. He musters a look of disapproval. “You’re burning through too much sandpaper,” he says.

I just get on my knees and keep sanding. Thanks, kid.

Slipp Squairne, a human-converted female contumbly in the harem of Lord Gorglebosh, from the very moment she opened her eyes upon awakening until the hour to retire came and she knew she must face another long night outside the presence of food, was always hungry. If the other females berated her for the inability to eat her fill, it was perhaps a fair criticism.

She stole a furtive glance at her own reflection in the cafeteria window, afraid to linger for fear of the malicious compliments, “Such a classic figure,” or “Too much beauty,” which would result. The festival of the regimental display, as usual, had been for Slipp merely another opportunity for bafflement. Were the fellows disappointed by her nonparticipation? She had watched the performances, watched the audience as it hooted, squealed, gnawed its gurgar from the bone; and she had wondered what it must be like to pair up with one of these loud-voiced male contumblies. Were there some out there who’d been hoping to see her moves? By the looks in their eyes, she thought some of these males must be able to sympathize with the creature of appetite...

Slipp had finished her own plate, was padding around from table to table, watching the others eat, watching what they left unfinished. They called her a creature of appetite, but to her it felt like she was herself, just an ordinary contumbly like everyone else, but inside of her she carried a creature of appetite, like a parasite, and this creature of appetite kept all of the nutrition she ingested to itself and left none for her, forcing her to keep on eating—an impossible situation, and impossible to explain to the jaded and clique-obsessed others.

Slipp took up a bit of potato from an abandoned plate in her fist and casually brought it to her mouth. Maybe it would be nice to have a male around to hug with, and kiss maybe, like

you sometimes see in the novel-illustrations. But then, the kitchen and pantry of the living quarters of such a contumbly would never compare with what one finds in the harem's cafeteria.

Slipp both wanted to escape, and didn't.

"You keep away, Slipp Squairne," said Eruptra Shumoong, pointing two fingers and pounding an elbow on the table, "I don't want you making off with my huzzlegreen..." The others sitting nearby laughed pointedly. "You fat cow!"

But Slipp had other compulsions she could not control, and one of them was that whenever faced with this particular insult, she would invade the personal space of the source of the remark and turn lunatic, act the stereotypical part of the human conversion. She leaned down close to Eruptra's pointed and fuzzy ear, took a deep breath, and bellowed, "Mooo!" from the pit of her lungs.

Eruptra, who must have known it was coming, leapt from her chair anyway and turned, stabbing at Slipp's round face with her fork. "You crazy whore!" she shrieked.

Slipp just slowly backed away, wearing the dazed smile everyone else always mistook for idiocy but was for her simply an effective defense. She'd been carrying around the creature of appetite inside of her for quite some time now, for as long as she could remember, in fact. It must've been different for her than it was for Bobba, she thought, because Bobba, although she loved to eat, eventually got full after a while. But Slipp Squairne, the human conversion, never got full. She was always so hungry...

(9)

It's Friday, and there's been no sign of the Boss. Certain people, most noticeably Big Andy, are becoming discontent.

"Sometimes it's like this," Big Andy says, from his post at the top of the stairs. He's rubbing stain into the balusters with a grimy rag, his hands in blue-green rubber gloves. "I mean, who cares about deadlines, right? I'll tell you who: bill collectors." He looks me over, frowning. "Are you here to help, or just stand there with your thumb up your ass?"

"Where'd you get the gloves?" I say.

"Where do you think?"

"Probably the Place?" I mutter, and wander off.

Big Andy waits until I'm a good way off before he finally yells, "Not the Place, dumbass!"

I stop, think it over, turn and wander back.

Big Andy is glaring.

"So, uh..."

"They're over in that closet with the rest of the shit," he says, pointing, in his voice the trace of a whine.

I find the gloves, take some fresh white old-tee-shirt rags, choose a paintbrush. But the can of stain is nearly full; Big Andy must've just poured himself a bit into a separate can. I'd better find myself a separate can. Don't want to be messing around with a full can. Let's see, what can I use?

No other empty cans. There's an empty roller tray—naw, better not. I don't want to go ask Big Andy, I can tell he's in a mood. Maybe that plastic gas-station soda cup?

I open my water, wet one of the rags a bit, and start to wipe out the sticky interior of the cup. It's probably taking too long.

I put on a pair of gloves, and carefully pour some stain into the clean cup, which wobbles dangerously for a moment, but I drop the can and save it; some drops of stain splatter up from the can as it hits the floor, I get a bit splashed as does the plywood, but nothing serious. This cup probably wasn't the best choice, but what the hell.

“Jesus Christ, did you get lost on the way?” Big Andy says.

“Just being careful,” I say, hoisting the cup to illustrate.

“Couldn't you find a can, fucknose?”

Which I ignore, make my way past him and down the stairs, and position myself to meet him in the middle. I sit down, take the brush, and dip a corner into the stain.

“You lose all your stability with a cup,” says Big Andy. “I hope nobody knocks it over, I really do...”

“Me too,” I say, and run the brush over the bare wood of the baluster. The stain has a smell to it, but I can't tell if it is particularly toxic.

Big Andy watches me from above. “Do you know what you're doing?” he says.

“Let's see,” I say, as I wipe. “You brush it on first, then you wipe it off.”

“You've got to be just as thorough with step two as you are with step one,” he says.

“Make sure you get everything covered, especially any knots...”

“Okay.”

“But you've got to get the shit wiped out again as well. Don't be leaving any puddles...”

“Okay.”

“But most of all, don’t be a dumbass,” he says, in complete earnest. “Some of you guys, man...” He grimaces as he has to shift his weight.

“So, bill collectors, huh?” I say, innocuously enough I think, figuring to work my way back to the question of whether or not we’ll get paid today. “Don’t get me started?”

“What do *you* know about it,” Big Andy says, “you corn-fed nipple-sucker?”

“What’s there to know?”

“Not married, no kids? Shit. You don’t know the half of it...”

“Well I hear good things about a second income...”

“Oh, you mean a wife?” Big Andy cries. “Spoken like a genuine dipshit...”

I have no response prepared.

“I’ll tell you what,” Big Andy continues, becoming suddenly as matey as an old pirate, “my kids? They won’t talk to me... Happy enough to take my money, though...”

Big Andy is old; his kids must be grown and married, with kids of their own. His tale is a sorry one, filled with the regrets of a booze-ridden, dissipated youth. At one time, he’d had a chance at something better, he’d been a baseball player, triple A for some years, even done a year in the bigs, but he just drank too much. These days the wife is long gone, the kids want nothing to do with him. He must always work laying down, he’s got crippling back pain but some other condition with his heart prevents him from using any ointment.

“Did you ever try that stuff, they make it from, like, chili peppers?” I say, remembering some chronic back pain episodes of my own. “That’s the only thing that works...”

“Is it a cream,” sneers Big Andy, “does it come in a tube?”

His heart condition nearly killed him two years ago. No one came to visit while he was in the hospital. Any kind of backpain ointment will seep into his veins, possibly killing him. He simply lays down on the floor and scoots along like a walrus, working through the pain.

Although I should probably be old enough to know better, I indulge myself in internal celebration of the poor bastard's misfortune; I want to tell him that I too would enjoy the opportunity to not visit him in the hospital, but somewhere along the way these kinds of remark have been bred out of me, I can't say how, maybe it was the fame. Also there's the question of who took a dump in Cody's lunch cooler—I'm starting to believe it could've been Big Andy, he's clearly reached a state of existence which would allow such things. I don't want to make an enemy of this guy. I ruffle the brush around the baluster, trying to be thorough.

"It's good to be working," I suggest.

"Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that," says Big Andy. "Go out to the bar, be the big man. Live it up! Till one day you wake up bleeding out your asshole, wondering how life managed to give you such a complete and utter buttfucking..."

I take a rag, wipe off some stain. The wood looks dark enough; a coat of lacquer and it'll be downright custom. I am finding that with Big Andy, it might be a case of the less conversation the better. I don't really care to think about this fateful day of which he speaks.

I'll tell you what, Judge, if they say that keeping a successful band together is a bit of a tightrope walk, well, believe it, it's true. Just imagine the contortions required to keep an *unsuccessful* band together.

Dorian Wolfe, Dory for short, was Provo's resident tastemaker and official music-venue booker: one year it might be a pizza joint, the next a comedy club, the next a sort of trendy café

with a stage in the room next door; Dory Wolfe was the guy to talk to, outside of the town's rather quaint bar scene. He cultivated artifacts, wore a beard and usually some kind of maroon dressing jacket, was pale, never flustered, always appearing to be more than anything a wax statue of himself—Dory carried the charm of the aristocratic vampire. If you read about a band in the local paper, his name would inevitably appear at some point in the text. Sometimes the articles were just about him—the progenitor of Provo's music scene.

We got along okay at first, when the kids I knew and their friends would come out for shows, and fork out the money, but over the years, when people started growing up and moving on, and my band was going nowhere, it got harder and harder to even book a night at Dory's shitty, under-ventilated joint. And as for any cut of the proceeds, well...

But the guys had been good about it; they knew I was leaving the country and that it might be our last gig together, though no one had mentioned it. I was the first to show up, at six-thirty like we'd all agreed, but even Dory wasn't there yet; I moseyed around by the dumpster in back, took a few quick glances around at my surroundings, and lit up the last bit of a reefer. The sun was going down across the city, white and cool, and I was feeling nostalgic.

Brinton would be late, of course; he'd been getting serious with that girl and moved into an apartment with her up in Salt Lake City. He was probably stuck in traffic on I-15; no, actually, knowing Brinton, he was probably waiting out the traffic, watching TV while his girlfriend fluttered about, figuring he'll let the rest of us set up the gear and soundcheck while he'll show up afterward and put a mic on his amplifier. Patrick would be late, as well: although it's his truck carrying most of the PA, he'll want some time to get out of his paint clothes and wash the dust out of his eyes and nostrils. Pat was the type of guy who always had his priorities straight—paycheck first, hobbies later—and painting houses was the family business: his father

was a painter, his grandfather was a painter, his little brother, they even had a brother-in-law on the crew. I'd never worked with them, however; with me and Patrick, the relationship was strictly musical.

But what was Cam's excuse? I needed someone to help me with this roach. Oh well, I thought, and tossed it into the dumpster. I figured I'd mosey over to Gab's Tavern, just around the block on Center, and peek in.

I found Melissa working behind the bar. Kind of tall, skinny, she used to work at the coffeeshop I'd done solo sets at in the very beginning—folksinger, Mormon-protest kinda stuff. All the guys thought she was hot for some reason, so I'd hooked up with her out of a kind of sense of duty, and then a time or two again when I was feeling spiteful about my hopeless situation regarding the one I *really* wanted. After a while I guess she'd started to sense something, and quit answering her phone.

But she *is* kinda cute, I was thinking as I approached, and she smiled and with one hand brushed her long, kinda hippie polygamist, straight hair behind an ear. Her eyes were big; she bobbed with that peculiar anxious gulp she always did, rolling her eyes to one side... Maybe I wasn't entirely fair to her.

And here she was mixing drinks at Gab's. I hunkered down on a stool in front of her. The place was practically empty, just a couple of regulars down the bar and some tattoo dudes over at a pool table. I put my arms on the bar and looked her over until she started to laugh.

"You asshole," she said.

I raised an eyebrow and fell into the W.C. Fields routine: "So what's a nice girl like you doing in a dive like this?"

She rolled her eyes. "What are you having?"

“Oh, nothing strong, dear, nothing strong... I’ve got work to do. Maybe just a little something, you know... Wet the whistle.”

“Oh I’ll wet your whistle all right,” she said, but then we were both a little mystified about just how to take this somewhat ambiguous threat, until finally she recovered with, “You singing tonight?”

“Yeah, around the corner at Dory’s joint. I think they make wraps or something...”

“I’ve been there,” she said, “they’re not that good. They’d benefit from a bit more focus on food, less on music...”

“And how am I supposed to take that?” I played hurt.

“Oh, not counting tonight, of course,” she said. “Yeah, tonight it’s all about the music... It’s all about *you*, Sim.”

I could of course see where this was going, so I peered at the bottles lined up behind her. “So, uh, what’s that one-fifty-one mean? Is that rum?”

She became mischievous. “Oh, you’ve never tried that? You have to.” She took a glass, poured the shot, and left it across the bar, like a challenge.

It burned my throat, my eyes started to water. My whole nervous system lit up like a fuse. “Goddamn!” I said.

She was laughing. “You want another?”

I blinked at her, but figured I’d earned the punishment. “Indeed I do, miss,” I said, “just... maybe a little something to chase it down with, first...”

Without a second’s thought, she obliged me with a bottle of some dark and bitter ale. I gulped it down while she poured another shot of this ridiculous firewater, which I took with eyes closed and whole families of internal muscles clenching in protest.

“Melissa,” I croaked, “you know sometimes you make me feel like a kid again...”

“You’re old news,” she said.

I stepped back out into downtown Provo; it was getting dark and the passing headlights slashed arcs across my vision as I bounded along, swinging my arms. I passed the government building peering into odd corners, trying to look suspicious.

Patrick was waiting at the venue, by his truck. “No sign of Dory,” he said, “he tells us six-thirty and here it is a quarter after seven... That girl’s here but she doesn’t want to let us set up.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Sim, you feeling all right?”

“Um...”

“I talked to her; she stopped me from hauling in the gear...”

“Doors open at nine,” I said, “how are we supposed to soundcheck? Here, give me your phone, I’ll call Dory...”

“Already tried that. Voice message.”

“That fucking guy,” I said, walking toward the back entrance, “he’s doing this shit on purpose...”

“Yeah, go see if you can work your magic,” Patrick was saying, but suddenly a white work van with its old logo kinda half-scratched out came grinding up the gravel of the alley, and sort of aggressively blocked my way, spinning its tires as it reversed toward the door. A group of clean-cut young fellows hopped out and did their best to ignore me as they began to unload rock band gear from the back of the van.

To my dismay, Dory's assistant girl was there to open the door from the inside. Drums and large speakers went marching on in.

"Hey!" I cried.

One of the guys smiled at me and shrugged.

I couldn't remember this new assistant girl's name, so I just tried to follow this strange, clearly BYU-based band inside, but as she saw me enter she quickly hurried back to shut down any big ideas I might be getting. "You can't be in here!" she said, shaking her head and waving her hands about, shooing me off.

I took a step back, but found Patrick at the back door, and decided to stand my ground. "We're booked to play here tonight," I said. "We've got our own opening act, I set it all up with Dory. Where's he?"

"Don't worry about him," she said, getting in my face, "right now you need to worry about exiting the venue and clearing a way for the band that's playing here tonight. Don't make me report you for trespassing."

"That's *us* playing here tonight, I *told* you." This would be easier if I could only remember her name. Dawnelle? Leticia? "We've already got an opener... I don't know *who* these guys are..."

"These guys," she said, "are the band that's playing here tonight. They're actually a real band... Don't you ever get online? Anyway, end of conversation. You get out." She again began to shoo me, but this time with phone in hand, as if to call for help in case of trouble.

I was back to the door, Patrick just looking on in silence, smug, like this developing fiasco would only serve to confirm something he'd already suspected, something about my professional validity... "Now hang on a second!" I cried, suddenly angry.

“If you’ve got a problem with this,” Dory’s assistant girl hissed, glaring, “you can take it up with Dory; for now, I need you to exit the venue immediately and make way for tonight’s band to unload.”

One of the members of tonight’s band, by his charismatic, bland Mormon grin I’d guess the singer, had returned from the stage and was assessing the scene coolly, utterly unconcerned. “Is there a problem here?” he said, like a cop, grinning.

Suddenly Patrick, seeing that there might indeed be, put an arm across my chest and pulled me away, saying, “No problem, no problem... Slight misunderstanding...”

“Dude, this is some fucking bullshit...” It was my farewell gig. I was to leave the country within the week, for who knows how long, at least till the money runs out, and this might be the last gasp of my admittedly local, but criminally underappreciated rock band; in fact yes, this would surely be our last performance together. Some people knew this was probably the case; people were talking about it. *She* would be there... “Dory’s doing this shit on purpose,” I said, “he’s *such* a mercenary fucking asshole!”

“Take it easy, you damn drunk,” Patrick said, letting me go when he thought we were far enough away.

“Fuck that! We booked the gig. Flyers all over town...”

“It’s Wednesday,” Patrick said. “How many people were you really expecting?”

Brinton showed up finally; he’d been on the phone with Dory—of course. Brinton had a side project. Dory had apparently, through some miscommunication with his staff, double-booked the evening, but was still willing to let us play after the headliner, who had brought their own opener.

“So we go on third?” I said, aghast that Brinton considered it even remotely acceptable. The flyers said nine o’clock.

Brinton just shrugged. “It’s not a big deal.”

“We’ll be playing at fucking midnight! On a Wednesday.”

Cam showed up finally, and thank god, he brought some booze. We huddled in the front seat of his car. Brinton’s girlfriend, this cute little college student from out of state, sat in the backseat, in silent observation of the proceedings.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” I said. “This is just Dory letting us know who’s boss, but fuck that guy...”

“These guys just put out a video on the internet,” Cam said, “and it’s, like, produced by a label... Shit happens fast these days. Dory’s just doing his job... Here, drink up.” He handed the bottle over.

It’s possible he was unaware of the headstart I’d gotten over at Gab’s. I began to feel righteously uplifted by my anger at the perceived injustice of the turn the gig had taken. “His job,” I said, “is to book different bands on different nights—and he can’t even keep track of that? Say, this tequila ain’t bad...”

“It oughtta be, it cost enough...” He watched me gulp. “Pace yourself, brother!”

“Even that one simple task is too much to ask? No—he’s doing this shit on purpose...”

“He probably is,” Cam said, taking out a breathmints tin from the console, and then producing a joint from it. “What do you think you might have done that pissed Dory off?”

“Shit, man,” I said, knowing there was plenty there; I’d never really gotten along that well with the guy. “Maybe not brought thirty people when I said I would... That fucking guy.”

Cam brandished the joint, said, somewhat boastfully, “This here is a primo,” and lit it up. I could smell the cocaine in it immediately, and wondered what Brinton’s girlfriend must be thinking, there in the backseat. She cracked a window.

Oddly enough, this dangerous medicine proved to be just the thing: my mind stopped wheeling, I started to make some rather cosmic connections, such as the fact that that one kinda pretty-boy sensitive folkie Dory’d been pushing, gotten him some media and so on, well that song of his I’d heard, wasn’t that riff the same or eerily similar to that one track off my unfinished third CD? And especially when you considered the second line of the chorus, poetic, and clearly lifted word for word from that same song of mine? It was no secret that Dory recorded all of the acts that passed through his venue, though he would deny it: some of the true inner circle would always have a recording of some certain night. It thus followed that he would have special access to unreleased songs of mine, and if he so desired could, vicariously, through a puppet music act of his design, which is just what I’ve always suspected this pretty-boy folksinger of being, *plagiarize my schtick!*

It was all so screamingly obvious, but the realization didn’t infuriate me further; instead I felt blissfully reassured. If the community at large, and even the guys in the band, couldn’t really see the value of what I was trying to do, at least the city’s official tastemaker could. Even if he *was* using this esoteric knowledge to his own underhanded benefit. And, possibly, actively sabotaging my band.

The implication was that I might have something which others did not.

“That’s beautiful, Cam,” I said, thinking these things over but talking about the weed, which was more up his alley. “That’s really quite nice.”

“Isn’t it, though,” he said, and we got quiet.

Finally Dory showed up; I hammed it up, throwing chairs around, yelling, carrying on. The first band won't share their PA, it's not fair to the fans to keep them up all night on account of *your* mistake, I've been on the scene a whole lot longer than these pathetic wannabes, and so on. If Dory was secretly enjoying the whole thing, he hid it well.

By the time we went on, I was pretty loaded. During soundcheck, which we performed in a hurry, as the other band was still tearing down, I invented a song on the spot, a funny kind of talker, where I thought up easy rhymes and mocked and insulted the other band, their fans, Dory Wolfe, BYU—it just kept going, and the soundguy was too game to cut the mic.

The show itself was the usual business, but *she* was there; I watched her in the back as I sang and cavorted, and was excited by the strength of my longing. Afterward I found her and asked if she was impressed. Like always, she responded with some criticism.

I've left Big Andy to spray some lacquer on the stairs, that is if he can get the lacquer pump unclogged, and am busy masking a stone fireplace in the big room: first, a line of duct tape around the edge where it meets the wall—the issue here isn't so much getting a good line as it is getting the duct tape to stick to the rough and sandy mortar, dusting with an old paintbrush only seems to scrape more grains from the grout—second, a strip of paper from the masker to tape to the initial, anchoring duct tape, and then finally, a bit of the thinnest plastic to stretch across the front, tape to the paper, bunch up at the bottom and anchor to the floor, making the whole thing bulletproof, like they say. I'm stuck in the duct-tape stage; it is of course the most time-consuming element of the process. But also, perhaps, the most important: you don't want to have to be scrubbing any paint off of that stonework if the tape fails and there's a blowout—that's just a can of worms.

The duct-tape stage is time consuming because of the masked surface's stony irregularity—you're always curving in and then out again, over the stones and the grout, and the tortuous route requires that you do the whole thing stringing together little bits of duct tape on the way, rather than getting after it with the long strips you would normally use on a flat, straight surface. The duct tape will do its damndest not to participate: will get too dusty, peel away limply, catch a loose corner from one piece with the dangling end of the one in your hand, sticking to itself rather than the stone, an impossible situation, remedied only by cutting your losses and crumpling the wasted tape in disgust. When you go to peel a new piece from the roll, it will inexplicably tear itself lengthwise down the middle, half coming off in your fingers, the other staying on the roll. Again, you will crumple the wasted tape, try to tear a more whole piece, and hope that it tears straight off the roll and doesn't curl through the air to stick to itself. And so on...

I'm fiddling around with the tape when I spot Cody down the hall in a room, I don't know, maybe video-game arcade or something, up one step on a stepladder, head bobbing, masking some long and narrow windows.

Hmm... Where's Gary? What pretense might I invent for leaving my post for a minute or two? Why, I could just "accidentally" drop this roll of duct tape on the floor, follow it as it rolls, surprisingly, quite a long way, knocking up right against that doorway...

"Looks good!" I say, loudly enough I hope to outdo Cody's headphones but not so loud as to draw unwanted attention from elsewhere in the house.

He turns on the stepladder, peers at me a while with that sort of amotive quizzicality which is his usual salutation, as if he is, without any particular enthusiasm or urgency, reminding himself of just who I am, the way one might greet a distant, forgotten acquaintance. With Cody

though, strangely, the air of non-recognition, of it could be me he's talking to or it could be any random stranger, persists throughout the conversation. Cody is kind of a hard one to read.

He pulls down the headphones, then glances back at his work. Rubs a thumb across the loose paper. "I think it looks good," he says.

"So," I say, "it's Friday. Think we'll get paid?"

"I keep a close eye on the market," he says, "but it's not the kind of thing you would be reading if you were just starting out. I only got on, oh, maybe eighteen months back. If you look at it, you know, the earth is one isolated planet; it's very large, but if you can train yourself to recognize patterns, it's really all about the recognition of patterns, I figured it all out, well there was this guy I met and he loaned me a couple of books—these days online you can find anything..."

"That's what I hear," I say, but he's going somewhere else with this...

"What it's really about is bandwidth, you know, everywhere you go you hear 'bandwidth, bandwidth.' And the regulator, I found out, well the word for it is Svengali, he's a sort of Svengali-figure, leading us into the future, steering the ship. But the idea, the concept of 'bandwidth,' is actually pretty old, you've got international bandwidth, national bandwidth, state bandwidth, community bandwidth. Family bandwidth. *Individual bandwidth*. And then, even underneath all of that, atomic bandwidth, quantum bandwidth. And where, all along that line, do you think personal responsibility is assigned?"

He looks about, as if he is referring to something related to the jobsite, and I am momentarily struck by the possibility that he might in fact be answering my original question.

"Las Vegas," I suggest, carefully.

He nods. “It’s no coincidence; there are certain frontiers which intersect. Geographically, there are two schools of thought: some think that such an arena will provide you a great deal of phenomena to study and interpret. I’ve never been able to maintain any accuracy in Las Vegas; magnetically, it’s going in too many directions. And there are forces, economic forces... It’s not really as random down there as people think...”

“So,” I say, being perhaps overly oblique, “do you think I should go to Vegas? A friend of mine is going, I’ve been invited.” I’m trying to phrase the thing in astrological terms. “Do you think that things from Provo will follow me down to Vegas?”

“If you think about the first time, say, the first time you went on a date. The environment will only be one small factor, well maybe not such a small factor, but one factor among many. It varies with individuals, and you want to know the date, month day and year, but also the time of day that certain things happened...”

“Right,” I say, “but what I mean is, will there be contumelies down there?” I try, with my earnestness, which is indeed sincere, to erase any suspicion of irony.

But Cody glances over my shoulder, immediately looks at the floor, raises his headphones to his ears, turns and steps back onto the stepladder. I turn; Gary is glaring from the doorway, as silent as a ninja.

On my way back to the fireplace, Gary seethes in my ear: “The homeowner is on his way over! We don’t want him freaking out about the deadline. Get this masked before he shows up. When he walks in, I want this fireplace masked, and I want you, I don’t know, somewhere down in the basement. You reek, Sim. I mean, are you even using deodorant? What’s the homeowner gonna think if the paint crew he’s paying this much money to is stinking up his new home? Are you even bathing?”

We stand and look at the fireplace. I'm hesitant to pull a strip from the roll of duct tape in my hands—I'll probably just do it wrong...

"I don't know, Gary," I say, "maybe there's too much red meat in my diet..."

"There's too much of *something*. I'm half tempted to send you home to take a shower..."

But I need this fireplace masked. This is all you've done?"

I pull the strip of tape, tear it off. "Grout's kinda rough," I say.

"Just get it taped! I would've had this thing in plastic by now! But you're too busy bugging Cody about the contumblies, I mean, what the freak, Sim..."

I stoop under the corner of the mantel, and mess with the tape.

"You know," says Gary, "I mean, you need to understand, with Cody? He's not one hundred percent stable; sometimes things can set him off. It's maybe best not to bring up certain topics with Cody. Especially things like the contumblies... There's too much history there... And we need him here, to mask windows."

"I'm not the one shitting in his lunchbox?"

"I've got some body spray in the truck," says Gary. "Do me a favor, put some on." He stomps off.

I've only heard bits and pieces about the homeowner, and he hasn't appeared on the site since I started. His is a classic Utah tale of success—upstanding Mormon fellow is one of the three original founders of a rapidly expanding multi-level marketing business, this one a line of products, mainly juice and syrup but also shampoo and skincare, based on an antioxidant-rich Amazonian yam. There are billboards all over I-15.

I continue masking. It takes a while. I'm just getting the plastic tacked down to the floor as the final step when the homeowner walks in with two other guys, all three dressed in business

casual, but I know the homeowner by his frown of assessment regarding the property. I glance up, take a quick whiff of my tee shirt's moist armpit, and get to my feet.

"The mantel is already finished," one guy says, looking at the masking. "The fireplace is locally-sourced stone..."

The homeowner just frowns back in silence, and makes a look like he's not sure he likes the sound of that.

The other guy looks at me and says, "We need to see the fireplace..."

"I, uh... okay." I peel back a corner from the mantel, so they can see the wood finish, and then take a bit of the duct tape back off the stone, figuring if I can keep the masking mostly intact, it'll be an easy fix, just a little bit of tape.

But the other guy becomes impatient, repeats, "We need to see *this* fireplace..."

"You want me to..."

"Yes, take it off," the homeowner snaps, but gently somehow, in a low voice, "take it all off." He even steps in to help when I apparently don't do it fast enough. The masking is unsalvageable, the homeowner tosses it aside with a look of contempt, and the fireplace is naked once more.

The homeowner looks it over, frowns, and says, "The stone looks good."

I pick up the roll of duct tape, but sense from the glares of the other two non-homeowners that to begin again immediately would be somehow disrespectful, and try to inconspicuously sidle away.

I find Bo out in the garage, sanding doors. "What are you doing?" he says.

"Well I *was* masking that fireplace..."

“Help me sand these.” He tosses me the sanding sponge he’s been using. “I’ve got something else I gotta do...”

“Which ones have you already done?”

“Start down there.”

As soon as I’ve started, Bo takes out his phone and wanders out into the yard.

The doors are arranged diagonally against the wall of the garage, with little wooden shims nailed to them at the top corner to keep them off the wall. The sanding goes fairly quick, involves a lot of stooping and standing, but, as the house is so immense, there’s a lot of doors to sand. If they’d been arranged end-to-end, accordion-style, like the Tenney Brothers used to do, they would surely fill this whole garage.

I’m sanding away, making them smooth, dusting them as I go. It’s actually kind of nice sometimes to be alone, doing this type of work. I’ve got a tune in my head, a recent teenage-girl radio hit, but I’m fixing construction-related verses to it, to, I feel, comic effect. I smile to myself.

Jarvis and Ammon stroll in, each carrying giant gas-station soda cups in their hand.

“Sanding doors,” says Jarvis.

“Does Gary have you sanding doors?” says Ammon, and pauses by me, clearly preferring to start a conversation rather than enter the house and return to work. He sips on the straw, looking ingenuous.

I stand up to stretch, knock some dust out of my jeans. I remember Ammon telling me one day about the band he’d played bass in after his mission and, of course, before marriage, a sort of clean-cut punk or ska outfit. I didn’t at the time feel I really needed to hear this group to

guess what they sounded like, standard BYU I'm sure. But now, in my musical mood, I feel like sharing. "I've composed a new song," I say.

"Oh yeah?" says Ammon. "The words and everything?"

"You're not going to abandon us for the arena tour," says Jarvis, "now, are you?"

"The words are the best part!" I say; the tune of course I've lifted, and so I clap my palm against my hip for a rhythm, and begin:

"The lacquer pump is clogged

the Boss is out of town

Andy wants his check

and he scoots across the floor..."

I'm particularly pleased by the little interior rhyme of "Andy" with "and he."

Ammon pats my shoulder, consolingly. "It's catchy, I'll give you that..." He sips his straw.

"Hmm," says Jarvis, exercising final judgment, "ordinarily I'd say keep your day job, but the way things have been going on around here, well..." He turns to enter the house, having seen enough nonsense, and Ammon obediently follows. "Anyways, it *is* tricky, isn't it? Bottling that lightning."

I sand for a while; eventually Bo's old sponge starts to crumble away at the corners and I go back toward the Place, to replace it. I find Big Andy on the floor before the fireplace, fiddling with the duct tape. He huffs bitterly when he notices me.

Gary approaches from across the big room. He wears a look of bafflement. "Where you been?" he says.

“I, uh...” I’m looking for the pile of old masking, but it’s been cleaned up. “The homeowner?”

“Has it gotten so that I have to get *Big Andy* to cover for you?” Gary says.

“No, it’s not that,” I say, “come on, Big Andy, I can get this...”

“You?” Big Andy bellows, startlingly. “You? You’re too slow! How long does it take to mask a fucking fireplace? Are you a retard?”

“Um, the homeowner showed up; Bo wanted some help?”

Gary shrugs, pantomimes helplessness or mental retardation. “What do me do?” he sings, falsetto.

“You’re too fucking slow!” Big Andy is nearly screaming.

“And I hear you’re writing songs about GJP now?” Gary says. “I have to wonder how seriously you take this whole thing...”

“So, we getting paid today, you reckon?” I say.

“You see? I ask about your commitment, and your first concern is the paycheck?”

I find a sanding sponge, make my way back to the garage, figuring I was happier there, but as I get out there, see the daylight, check my phone and find it’s ten to three, and I’ve been here since six, and Tree is leaving for Vegas at four, and Gary’s anger at my little protest song tells me we are in fact probably *not* getting paid today... Well, I can get home and get a shower in by four. I drop the sponge on the garage floor, close to my stopping point, and step out into the day. Bo is over by the dumpster, tapping on his phone. I mosey over to the truck.

Sorry Gary; don’t expect me tomorrow—it *is* Saturday. Sorry Shauna, I, uh...

And as for you, Big Andy: you think you've seen slow? No, that isn't slow. Just wait till that next heart attack comes, and I'm the one dialing 9-1-1. Then you'll see what slow *really* looks like...

The Sickness had come upon Corporal Butt once again; he stayed inside his compound, somehow hanging on to the crucial idea that he must let no one know. Back in the early stages, he had in his confusion made the mistake of visiting Chief Surgeon Hupperl, but fortunately had been able to rally before the second appointment, bluster vigorously and aggressively at the doctor, and salvage his ironclad reputation. There was simply too much at stake, for the whole Contumbly Nation, to allow himself to show a sign of infirmity to any of the nosy and gossiping clan. They could never understand the grave importance of matters of state.

It was a rhythmic and flowering Sickness: rash, an ache in the bones, sudden lumps in odd places, and then the elation would come, unbelievable hilarious glee, but always with the memory ever tapping at the back of the cupboard of his mind, even when the euphoria threatened to send him reeling off into the cosmos, ever tapping however faintly to remind him of the terror to follow. The Sickness talked to him, bellowed at him, whispered and scoffed. It would have its way.

Butt peered at his pet chimble, Wullup, and whirred. Wullup was attuned to these bouts with the Sickness; Butt however could not believe that the chimble was in on it. If it flared its ears, hopped about and hissed at moments of fevered crisis, and seemed to be expressing disgust, that was surely a figment of the delirium, nothing more: Butt had to believe it. This nastiness wasn't Wullup's fault; everyone knows a chimble is loyal. At this moment Wullup was on its hind legs in the shavings of its bejeweled cage, open-mouthed and baring its needle-like fangs, staring back at its owner defensively, its arms up to show the lighter fur underneath.

“What are you so nervous about?” Corporal Butt growled, and rattled a thumbnail across the side of the cage.

Wullup did a little dance to maintain balance, and mewled.

“You see them too, don’t you,” Butt said. “I bet you do! You’re small enough.” He left the cage and went to the stove, rifled through the spice cabinet for some powders. He would take his morning skabaal. “Little bastards. Think they own the place.”

Wullup went back down on all fours, then huddled in the corner of the cage, licking its shoulder, wide-eyed.

“You’ll let me know if they’re coming. They’re trying to infiltrate our colony, and they’re trying to do it through me. I got the report. They think they’re gonna crawl inside me through the skin.” It was true. Butt had read the report, late lastnight, and it had informed him of the intentions of this secret race of little people whom not everyone can see. He had gotten the report in an unmarked envelope on his porch yesterday, and, sensing it was bad, had tossed in bed until finally, grimly tearing it open to read by candlelight.

Butt held out his forearms before him. “I’d like to see them try!” he boasted. “This epidermis cedes its sovereignty to none!”

Just then the Sickness decided to assert its sovereignty, and Butt collapsed to his knees, cowering. He gaped at the ceiling for a while. He could hear the little people, skittering behind the plaster.

“Sim Henrie?” he cried at last. “A dead man. He’ll never get away with it.”

The tiny people in the wall seemed to giggle. Butt began to tremble.

“Mussberger!” he cried. “He’s got no choice. He needs his invisibility.” The puddle of spilled skabaal gradually soaked the cuffs of his trousers. “Mussberger is a known quantity.”

The giggles in the wall began to multiply, to amplify, to change their texture and shape and become chaotic: weird cackles and deep, angry barks. Corporal Butt realized then that the inevitable sexual hallucinations were due to begin, and looked helpless at Wullup in its cage, but the chimble was now leering back at him, lolling its tongue, its claws stroking the jewels of the cage's bars. Butt sat back against the stove and huddled, knowing at this stage of the Sickness the furniture was not to be trusted. His joints tightening, locking into a place beyond reach, he gazed at a brown square of tile on the floor and tried to focus, as he awaited the impending havoc.

Nine-year-old Dayton looks up at me as I come out of the house, freshly showered and dressed, only kinda half-hobo, and stand on the front porch. He's been drawing sharks on the sidewalk with brown chalk that pales on the sunbright concrete to a lighter purple; their jaws are huge and full of teeth, and then I see the arms and legs of little swimmers in the frame. Of course: the sharks are eating. "Your friend looks like Jesus," Dayton says with a smirk, and stands from his artwork.

"Sort of," I say, noticing Tree down the driveway with Afton and Sutton, who also scribble with colored chalk. "Maybe." He does, it's true, but not like anybody *I'd* care to be ending my prayers in the name of. "That's a pretty good shark there. Good teeth, I can tell. Healthy teeth."

Tree is flirting with the little girls, complimenting them. He looks like a pot-smoking rock-climber. The girls are giddy with the attention.

"Are you going somewhere?" Dayton says.

I realize that I haven't seen Shauna in the house, and here there's no sign of her in the frontyard either. Tree's little hatchback is rolled into the curb on the sloped street. He looks up and notices me. "Bro," he calls.

"I'm, uh," I say, but then realize it might be a bad idea to let on about my true destination: it might get back to Shauna, she might feel jilted, disrespected, she might retaliate, a woman scorned and so on. Dayton gazes up at me, still with the smirk, as though he knows I'm doing something bad and is unafraid to express his disapproval. Has Shauna put him up to this?

And where is she, anyway? The prudish grandmother in me tsks, wonders who's watching these kids. Not me, I hope. "I'm just, uh, going for a drive with my friend. We've gotta... run some errands."

I check for my wallet in its pocket, and leap from the porch across the flowerbed. "Good sharks," I say. Dayton has a hand on his hip, and frowns.

"Now I want to see a yellow flower!" Tree is telling the girls. Afton is down on a hand and knee by a plastic bagful of chalk stubs; Sutton is grinning and reaching in the direction of Tree's beard. The driveway is full of chalk scribbles, flowers and shapes and letters.

For some reason, the girls quiet down and become serious at my approach. Tree appraises my outfit. "Totally retro, dog," he says. "Sick. It's perfect."

Sutton has taken Tree by the hand and doesn't want to let him leave. Would she know the difference if he was Mussberger? But I don't want to go looking for Shauna, the kids are fine, I just want to get on the road. She wasn't in the house, from what I could tell—maybe the basement. Maybe the backyard. Of course perhaps in the garden shed in the backyard, but even if she is, I just want to get on the road. Some place where not so much is demanded of me...

"We're looking at what, six hours, something like that?" I say.

Tree looks at his car, then nods at me, eyebrows aviator confident. "Five and a half."

"We better get on it."

But as I hunker down in the passenger seat, and glance back up at the three little ones, who are just fine, the whole thing feels just slightly too choreographed, and I can't help but wonder whether I'm failing some kind of important test.

When Lucy showed up I knew I was gonna be just fine. I had plenty of money. I'd found the perfect hideout. Back in the old hometown, where anybody'd least expect, in some old doctor's house on the east bench. He'd probably had a big family. Nobody around had my phone number, and I didn't necessarily have to leave the house all that often. But it's a big house, I thought, why not hire a maid to help? And Lucy showed up, and even though she made sure pretty quick that I knew about her boyfriend, I just could tell everything was gonna be fine. The woman's touch.

"Up here is my private area," I said, pointing as we ascended the stairs on her first tour of the house. "It's just, like, a music room, a study, a room with statues in it, a bathroom. I'm kind of a private person, so, I need to have this particular area all to myself..."

"I understand," she nodded, a couple steps behind me, and I could see the top of her head; the line of the part in her hair radiated a reassuring aura of having it all together.

"It's kind of a long story, this need for privacy," I said. "I got kinda famous for a while..."

We came to the music room. Lucy looked me over for a moment, but I couldn't tell if she knew who I was. "It's good to be famous," she said.

"Oh, it is, yes it is," I said. "But anyway, I developed a taste for privacy. But I thought I'd better, like, show you through one time so you don't think it's anything weird..."

We gazed at the pedal steel guitar for a moment.

"Well, anything creepy, anyway. I like to, you know, be creative in here..."

"Nice pedal steel," she said, and touched it, just for a moment, just to remind me maybe that it looked a little dusty.

The room was littered with instruments: a trombone in its open case on the floor, a lone snare drum on a stand, an accordion and a flute and all kinds of things under the table, on the table a keyboard and a dulcimer and an obsolete eight-track mixer/recorder for song ideas, the song ideas contained in this recorder all numbered with a handwritten chart nearby of funny titles or brief descriptions in code of each of them. A theremin on the bottom half of a mic stand in the corner.

As Lucy casually poked around, and paused to glance over the chart of ideas, it suddenly dawned on me how increasingly disjointed and abstract these late-night compositions had been getting of late, interesting perhaps but not for public consumption, and I was glad she didn't read any of the in some cases rather outrageous song titles out loud if she saw them. If she thought the whole thing looked hopelessly amateurish, and wondered where the computer was, she didn't say anything. I decided to skip the room with the statues.

"I'd be interested to hear you play," Lucy said as we went back down the stairs to the more impersonal rest of the house. The kitchen was kind of a disaster. "This is a nice place. You need a maid."

"Yeah, well," I said, "I've got a couple other people stopping by, to interview..."

But she already knew the job was hers if she wanted it, and she could move in as soon as she wished. "I'm going to a few other appointments myself," she said with a smile. "I do like this neighborhood..."

"Oh, so do I, so do I," I said. "Pretty quiet, for the most part..."

I watched her leave, thinking, with Lucy in the house, everything will be okay.

The sun is getting low as we pass straight on through the rolling, bare hills around Fillmore and Beaver. Tree's got a bottle of expensive tequila that I've been just kind of occasionally sipping on. He doesn't seem to mind. I gaze out the window against the sun, squinting, looking for animals in the shadows.

"There's a lot of money in Vegas," Tree says, cryptic.

"You ever gambled much?" I say.

"Shit bro, life itself is a gamble. You see what I'm saying?" He's got a strip of beef jerky hanging out of his mouth, bouncing around as he talks. "I mean, you try to minimize it of course, you've gotta be smart about it." He takes a pull on his energy drink; it's Phat Redd Burst flavor. "But I'm gambling all the time. We're all gambling all the time."

"Tough to beat the house, though," I say. We've got a long, straight line of road ahead of us, not too much traffic, miles and miles of yellow-green.

"Now who do you think that would be?" Tree says, getting philosophical. "In this case? We're comparing life to a gamble, which it is, so maybe not comparing so much as pointing out. You know."

"Something inherent to life that's not always immediately obvious."

"Exactly. So, with this, not metaphor, say scenario. In this scenario, who would you say is the house?"

"I don't know, man," I say, "probably the devil."

"No, bro, I think you're on the way wrong track."

"Tree, this tequila is delicious."

“Try to be serious for five seconds. We’ve got all of tonight to frolic and forget everything in Vegas. My question is, if life is a gamble, as we’ve already established, and you claim it’s tough to beat the house, then just who do we mean by the house?”

“You can’t worry about that,” I say, “you just try to figure out ways to improve your chances.”

Tree is thinking it over. “I don’t think you’re getting my question,” he says.

“It probably depends on the nature of the game,” I say, “I mean, are we talking poker? Roulette? Slot machines? Sports betting?”

“Probably sports betting,” he says. “You do your research, you make informed decisions...”

“No, man. Slots. It’s like the slots.”

Tree doesn’t like that. “I don’t know, bro. I don’t know about that one.”

“The gamble of life resembles the slot machines *exactly*,” I say. “And how are you supposed to play the slots? Have you ever played the slots?”

“Not crazy about the slot machines,” he says. “I always lose.”

“You’re playin’ em wrong. Do you know the right way to play the slots?”

“Um, set myself a limit?”

“Bah! Max bet all the time. It’s the only way.”

“Max bet and keep your fingers crossed,” he says. “But I just always picture that poor bastard that you always see kinda haggard hangin’ over the machine, looking beat...”

“That guy is the sublime *expression* of life,” I say. “You know about beginner’s luck? It’s a real thing.”

“Probably some statistical relativity there, bro.” He crumples the long thin can of his energy drink and scuttles it under the seat.

“Naw, beginner’s luck is real, trust me. You’re not max betting all the time, you’re gonna be kicking yourself when your number comes up. Just kicking yourself.”

“Are we still talking about slot machines?”

I laugh, take a sip, purse my lips as I exhale. “Either way,” I say. “You’ve gotta get the most out of it when it happens.”

“Maybe,” Tree concedes. He offers me the beef jerky bag; I take a little piece. Then another sip. Tree watches for a moment, then is back to the road. “I’ll make you a bet,” he says. “A thousand bucks. I’ll bet you an even grand that you’re gonna get some big old titties in your mouth, tonight.” He sings. “Big old titties in your mouth!”

“You know I can’t take that bet,” I say. “If I win, I lose.”

We start the gradual incline up an approaching hill.

“You ever lived with a woman?” I say.

“Shit, bro. I’m livin’ with one now.”

“Wife, or girlfriend?”

“Are *you* living with a woman?” He looks me over. “Where is all this coming from?”

“I don’t know,” I say, “I’m just thinking it over, the concept of a woman in the house...”

“Shit, bro. It’s not a concept.” He becomes dire. “It’s a downright necessity. We are men.”

“So, who are *you* leaving at home?” I say.

“Oh, she’s not at home, no; the cat’s away, the mice will play, you get me?”

I’m not sure that I do.

“She’s up in Seattle visiting some friends,” Tree says. “Some, like, artist friends of hers, in Seattle.”

“Ah, yes, artist friends.”

“Some of these people, man, they weird me out. Give me the heebie-jeebies. Goggle-eyed, skinny. They’re like, Martians.” He fiddles with the music selection, pushes some buttons. It’s some reggae, non-Marley, possibly white. “So what gives, Sim? Is she a wife or a girlfriend?”

I think over the true answer, and laugh. “Two in like the last two months!” I say. “And neither one is either.”

“So what, you’re living with your grandma?”

“It’s a long story,” I say, wistful, and take a sip. “How far you think to Cedar City?”

Tree’s got his eyes on the road. “I don’t know, half hour maybe?”

“Man, I’ll tell you what, you want to know about painting houses?” I reach down to the side and angle the seat back a little, kinda get the setting sun out of my eyes. “I’ll tell you *all* about painting houses...”

“No, I want to hear about the two women you’re living with who aren’t your...”

“Ha, and there’s a third one,” I get conspiratorial, “that calls me every now and again, for some reason... But I’ll tell you all there is to know about painting houses. I mean, I’ll tell you all you *need* to know. It can be summed up quite succinctly, all you need to know about painting houses.” I remove my ridiculous sunglasses and set them up on the dash, where they commence to rattle around precariously. “Man, that work is some fucking bullshit.”

Tree just kinda taps the volume button on the radio, thoughtful. “All work is fucking bullshit,” he says, “but, you know, sometimes, your work takes you to places like Vegas...”

I look him over, but he's just driving, cool, a normal dude on a normal trip. I'm only now realizing that I'm tagging along on a business trip, that Tree is driving to Vegas for some kind of deal, I myself surely functioning as mere prop, to legitimize the vehicle. I gently loll my head around and smile, bemused as always. Anybody with an ounce of sense would've seen that one a little ways back.

Look, Judge, I'm not really sure what it is you think I did back there, who knows, those were dark times, I don't really care to think about it myself, and I would never presume to burden your time or attention with lengthy descriptions of the peculiar hopelessness inherent to the young artist's condition, as some misguided attempt at justification or play for your sympathy. I would, however, submit for consideration the idea that my real crime, the one true inexcusable offense, was that I was never able to succeed in my chosen vocation, or was perhaps my insistence that my vocation was something to be chosen. The hit song bought me a little time, but eventually, in fact it didn't take long at all, irrelevance caught up once again—I never did get that girl I liked—and I couldn't keep the old gang together.

Patrick was scowling as he drove me back to the hotel. I wasn't feeling so talkative myself, knowing that his buddy Fleming, the new bass player, would be there waiting, and it would be two against one. What is it this time, I wondered. Fleming played bass okay, but I was having a hard time warming up to the guy.

I cracked the window, lit up a cigarette.

Patrick rolled the window down all the way, leaned way over, tried to knock the thing out of my hand. "Put that shit out!" he said. "Don't fucking smoke in my vehicle."

I tossed it.

Patrick huffed. “You know, you’re a real dipshit,” he said. “I don’t think you’re ever gonna learn.”

“What am I supposed to learn?” I gazed at the road signs, didn’t recognize the street names. What city are we in?

“You can’t go around saying and doing whatever you feel like. There’s consequences to your actions.”

“Pat, alright. If we’re going down this road again, just out with it. Why can’t you ever just fucking spit it out?”

“What the fuck are you talking about, you drunk piece of shit?” He was well versed in the act.

“Okay. That’s not happening. So: how about that Fleming, huh?”

“What about Fleming? And what the fuck are you talking about? Man, I wonder what would happen if you looked in the mirror just one time.” He pulled off the street into a parking lot, but not the hotel’s parking lot. “I mean if you took a good long look.”

“I do it all the time,” I said, “I pull faces at myself.”

“Always so goddamn funny,” Patrick said. “Some of the shit you say isn’t that funny.”

“You know Fleming, you two are buddies. You know him better than I do, I don’t know, what do you think? I mean, I think he might be bi or something...”

“Oh, that’s it, Sim, everyone’s a fag, according to you.” He pulled into a parking space, along the side wall of a building that wasn’t anything open. “You say that about everyone. I hear you’ve been saying it about me.” His voice actually faltered at the end, softened. I’d been playing in bands with this drummer for years, from the very start.

“Well,” I said, not looking at him. “Are you?”

He didn't answer for a while, then finally, becoming angry again, said, "Where's your evidence?"

"My evidence is, *are* you?"

"You think that about everyone; you're a fucking egomaniac. Everyone's in love with you, right? Not just the girls, you need everyone. It's sick. You'd benefit from some serious introspection..."

"Look, Pat, I deep down don't give a shit if Fleming is gay or bi or what the fuck ever," I said, "to tell you the truth, I kind of miss Cam, but that's another story..."

"I'll tell you what Fleming is," Patrick said, "he's a professional musician. Do you see the difference? He's a professional. *I'm* a professional. Brinton, I don't always get the direction he's going but he's a *professional*. Open your eyes! Three of the members of this band are still going to be working in five years. One of them isn't. Can you guess which one isn't?"

I couldn't really figure why we had pulled off of the road and parked, other than that Patrick wanted to get mad, like, really mad, the kind you can't do and be driving a car at the same time. Lately his getting mad had taken kind of a sinister, physical turn, though—he'd punch his fist through the wall, break things—and I wasn't feeling all that enthusiastic about being trapped in a car with him, off in some unknown city. But, he was my ride...

"Have you ever known me to miss a gig?" I said, like always.

"You're missing your whole fucking adulthood," he said. "You've got your head up your ass so far you can't tell shit from shinola. It's like you're stuck in some dumbshit fantasy, like if you just ignore the real world it'll go away."

"You sound like a fucking World War II veteran," I said.

For some reason, this pissed him off. He squirmed in his seat a moment, undid his safety belt, and sat back against the window, methodically rolling up his sleeves. “I oughtta kick your ass,” he said.

“Don’t say that,” I said, but the alarm bells were really starting to go off, and I tapped the door unlocked.

“I know it might be hard for you to grasp, Sim, but other people exist in this world, beside yourself.” His clenched fists just sort of hung there by the steering wheel. “There’s consequences for your actions.”

“Well maybe let’s just let those consequences happen out there like they always do,” I said, trying to defuse the whole thing, not willing to undo my own seatbelt quite yet. “Let the cosmos handle it.”

“Someone needs to beat some sense into you,” he said, through his teeth.

“No,” I said, staring straight ahead. “I don’t think so. What do you need me to do, Pat?”

“I need you to produce!” he shrieked. “I need you to quit fucking around!”

“Man, I’m working on it,” I said, and it was true, I’d just that afternoon been ironing out the verses of a song I’d been kicking around in my head every now and again. But the song’s tagline was “Let’s kill everyone,” and I knew somehow Patrick wouldn’t really want to hear about that one.

Hear me out, Judge. It could be that I only wanted to impress that girl, and when that didn’t happen, all the other stuff just kinda stopped mattering. Not the music, of course, with me that’s more of a soul thing, it’s old and it’s deep, but all of the other stuff, the business end: pleasing the audience. Writing that next hit. It could be that *any* degree of success would have seemed as empty and without value. I know that, from your side of the bench, that’s the wrong

attitude to have—a fellow’s got to carry his own weight and all that. But a man without any kind of say in his own destiny is no kind of man at all. I’ve always felt that way.

The twinkling lights of Las Vegas welcome us from down in their dark desert bed, and I sit up and brace myself as we round that last bend. You never know quite what to expect from this town, you only know it’s gonna be a lot to absorb. The cold excitement in my veins is equal parts elation and dread.

“Thar she blows,” Tree growls.

“Yessirree,” I concur, “my little chickadee...”

We pass by a billboard that says “I brought my GAMEFACE!” Then another one that says “Don’t forget, BUTT!” Then another one that says “Your HEAD will EXPLODE...” But this last one looks like it’s been vandalized maybe, and I can’t really get a read on what sort of business it’s advertising.

We pull into the city and Tree starts navigating his way to a friend’s house, off the Strip in the suburban rest of town.

“These guys are cool,” Tree says, “they’re chill dudes. Might have some coke.”

“Lord knows I could use a pick-me-up,” I say, “been sitting in this car a while.” I feel around for the bottle.

“Well I can’t make any promises,” Tree says. “But these dudes are chill... You’ll get along with them.”

“Hey, if they’re cuttin’ lines...”

“Jesus, dude, would you look at the fucking dent you just put in my tequila!” He’s not angry, just, kinda, flabbergasted. “Holy shit.”

“Hey, I tried to tell you about painting houses...”

“How are you even talking right now? How are your eyes even open?”

“Don’t worry. They’ll have more tequila where we’re going.”

It turns out to be a condo in a gated community. Tree calls as we get close, and gets the code. It’s a couple of dudes, Tree’s age, and the place is weirdly barren, a couple of mismatched chairs at the little round kitchen table, a couple more square chairs in the front room. There’s a TV set up on, like, crates, mainly for video games it appears. Tree introduces me to the two dudes, who look like they could be anybody but have a weird sort of reticence about them, like they might be here just to play poker and could move on at any time. They look like they could be anybody, and I immediately forget both of their names, but fortunately find an acoustic guitar in the corner and am able to casually sit apart from the others and pluck at the strings. Nobody seems to mind.

The beautiful thing about playing music to people who ignore you is that they don’t feel obligated to make requests, and tonight I’m adhering strictly to George Jones. A fellow housepainter. I make it through quite a few songs actually, before Tree and the others show back up from whatever they were doing and we do some lines in the kitchen.

“That’s some good shit, brother,” Tree says.

“Only the best,” says the one dude.

“You guys ever paint houses?” I say, but then after the looks they all give me at what I feel is, really, a rather innocuous question, I settle back into a nervous silence. “Yeah, it’s good,” I mumble.

This dude is the guy showing us around, and we take his car down to the Strip, Tree riding passenger, me just kinda bouncing around in the back seat. The other guy stays home. The

car is small and fast, and the dude driving likes to screech around corners, his music bumping from ridiculous speakers. Even his dashboard seems like a neon show. As Tree's buddy pulls into a parking garage, my phone buzzes. I find a text from Gary: "We're working everyday now." I think it over for a moment, then pocket the phone.

The street is seething with people, people of all sorts, whom I can only manage to dodge as I keep up with Tree.

"What'd I tell ya!" he calls. "Would you just look at this."

But I seem to be bouncing from face to face in a crowd that's constantly onrushing; I can't focus on anything beyond the next approaching invader. All kinds of strange folks, some of them alarmingly ragged. Finally we are in an elevator, and then at the top of a tower, looking at the colorful lights below, and all around.

From up here everything below looks like a contumely wonderland. I'm pondering the implications of this when I get another text from Gary: "I know you're in Vegas with Tree." Again, I'm not sure how I'm supposed to respond, though these messages are beginning to seem a bit ominous; I give the matter some consideration before pocketing the phone once more.

Soon we're back in the casino, where I kind of collapse into the seat of a keno video game. I put in a bill, push "Bet One" a couple times, fifty cents, nothing serious, just getting a feel for the game, then I pick some numbers. First eleven, of course, for the hero of *Trying to Fit In*: somehow tonight I feel able to understand a bit better what it was he was trying to say with that work, I've got maybe a deeper appreciation or something. I'll give old Eleven a number, why not. Proportionally I want to pick something in the twenties, but for whatever reason I'm associating those numbers with my own twenties, and I can't seem to settle on a favorite, it's

more like the lesser of evils, and the evils are pretty dreadful. How old was I when I last saw her? And would I call *that* a good year?

“Cocktails, drinks,” a passing waitress calls behind me. She’s actually kinda cute, has this great uniform.

“Can you bring me a beer and a shot, kind miss,” I say.

She touches my shoulder and I’m back to the numbers. I finally settle on thirty-three; it feels right, after eleven, and I don’t know, maybe there’s some important referent in the life of Joseph Smith or something. Was he thirty-three when they finally caught up with him? Who knows. Anyway, I like thirty-three. I’ve always liked that number.

Okay, there’s two in the top half. I’ll need two in the bottom, as well. Keep it proportional. How many numbers, eighty numbers, let’s see, how many balls coming, is that them? How many, twenty? Better count them. Pick two numbers in the bottom half and give it a whirl, see how many balls come out.

It can’t just be fifty-five and sixty-six, that would be too obvious, the machine would see through that in a second. Can’t let the machine know what you’re up to. I like fifty-two, no reason, maybe there’s like fifty-two weeks in a year. About the duration of my stardom. If you’re set for a year, you’re in pretty good shape. Make it to your next birthday.

Let’s see, one more. I like seventy-four. No reason. Maybe you take the seven and the four, and it makes eleven. Back to good old Eleven, well, he made his fortune. Though it took him a while. More importantly, he was respected. Yeah, I like seventy-four. It’s respectable.

I push the button; on the screen twenty balls come rattling across the top of the number grid, while red squares ping and tatter the board. I hit one of my numbers. One of four pays nothing. But there’s twenty balls. Out of eighty, so any one number’s got a one in four chance.

So you pick two, you've got one in sixteen, pick three, that's, let's see, thirty-two, sixty-four. I wonder what's the pay on that. How do you see it? You pick four, let's see, sixty-four times four, two forty, sixteen—ah, but I've got the stats wrong, 'cause the second ball will be one out of seventy-*nine*, so, hmm... the odds are better...

I sit and push the button for a little while. I've got four numbers marked, and sometimes it misses altogether, but if I can get it to hit two, it covers my bet, and if I can get it to hit three, it pays two fifty.

Out of nowhere, it suddenly hits all four, and my credit on the game goes plus fifty dollars. Damn. That was easy. I should've listened to my own advice. Better up the bet. But do I change machines? And where's that waitress?

She shows up with the drinks, makes me chug the shot, and I tell her I'll get her a tip when I cash this ticket. But then I realize I don't have any idea what I'm supposed to be tipping her, the money lately doesn't seem to make any sense, and if I go looking for the place to cash my ticket in, I might miss Tree and his buddy whenever they come back.

So I settle back into the numbers. Let's see, what's two hundred fifty-six times four, although we've established that's bad statistics, just get a sort of estimate. I fiddle with the buttons on the screen. You hit five of the twenty, it pays eight hundred. It sure doesn't buy what it used to, eight hundred dollars, but hell, it's a start.

I hit "Bet One" four times, and go to add a number; it takes me a while, but eventually I settle on seventeen—her age when I met her.

I'm getting deep into it with keno, running the numbers, trying my hand at the four-card variety, figuring if I can hit that six of six it would sure be nice, sixteen hundred, maybe help out Tree with the gas money, hell, even the five of six paid out pretty good, I wonder what that six of

seven pays, but I'm just slowly losing. I get back to zero, put in another bill, run it down to nothing, put in another one. I've just about burned through this as well when Tree and his buddy roll up. It's clear they're not interested in keno.

"Cash it out, Sim," Tree says, "we're goin' to Spanky's."

"Here, just, I..."

"Naw, bro, our man knows some people at this place, it's gonna be a good time. Fully nude, this joint. Time to go." Tree takes me by the shoulder, kinda wrenches me off the seat.

"Alright," I say, and push "Cash Out." It's odd, but the video keno machine somehow pulls a face at me, taunting, smug at my departure. "You filthy bastard," I say to it.

In the casino hallway we walk past a couple of what can only be prostitutes going in the other direction: one of them, brunette, with kind of a bruiser's face, adjusting the top of her dress to keep from spilling out of it. The sheer volume of breast on display is almost an affront, it confounds, and I stop for a moment, unable to look away.

She smiles. "Where you goin'?"

I think about my wallet, about the economy, say, "Probably not the same place as you."

She coos, like it's the saddest thing in the world. I don't know; maybe it is.

"No sweat, bro," Tree says, with an arm on my shoulder, "plenty of those where we're going."

Spanky's is out on some side road, tucked away among other similar businesses.

"There's some skanky bitches in here," says Tree's buddy, as he finds a parking space. "Some fine skanks."

After we've made our way past the guy with the flashlight checking IDs, and given him our money, I see where the name comes from: one of the dancers is standing by the inner

entrance, sort of bent forward, wiggling her behind. She giggles, flirtatious and cold, her haunches glowing pale blue in the black lighting.

“You’ve got to *spank* her to get in,” Tree says, and shrugs.

I can’t believe it, and make a gesture like, you go first. But Tree and his buddy just kind of look mischievous at each other, and insist.

“You’re the special guest,” says Tree. “The man of the hour.”

“Don’t be shy,” says the girl, wiggling.

“Go on, you gotta spank that ass or they won’t let you in!” cries Tree’s buddy. “Go on, wind it up, spank that fine ass!”

I see there’s nothing for it but to participate, and I coyly give this girl a kind and loving tap—of course with the bolt of electricity that always comes with such contact—but what I don’t see is the enormous Polynesian bouncer who’s lurking in the shadows, only to jump out at me at the very instant and belt me a brutal spanking of my own with his huge paw, all the while howling “Pay that hustle!” directly into my eardrum.

“Thank you for that gentle reminder,” I am trying to say as I’m shoved on in, but the heavy beats of the sound system eliminate my voice altogether. I hobble over to a chair but then just kind of look at it, still smarting a bit.

“That’s some hardcore shit!” Tree yells.

I nod, humbly.

There’s girls up slinking around on various stages, there’s girls lolling about in the aisles, there’s girls seated with customers in booths, and all of them either naked or in their undies. For a guy as lonely as myself, it’s almost too much to bear, but fortunately the booze has taken the edge off my senses, and I am able to look around the place a little. A hookah area. A bill changer

that gives you the “ceiling” option. The curtained passage near the main stage to the back area. TVs around the place, playing the video to the music, which is aggressive and horrible.

We sit down in a round booth, me in the center, and then Tree and his buddy immediately disappear to go take care of something, and I’m left to my own devices once again. The girls start to hover around.

I’m thirsty, but when I catch a waitress she tells me five hundred for a bottled water. I don’t even know what to make of it. “I’m good for now,” I tell her. “Give me a little while...”

As I enjoy the stage show, and glance furtively at the girls who brush by, I begin to feel like an impostor. What do I have to offer these ladies, in this day and age? Surely they must sense the true, urgent calamity of my finances; it must emanate out through my eyeballs. Surely they can find a bigger fish than me; I’d thought my disguise rather effective in that regard. But they continue to hover around, figuring me out for themselves.

Inevitably one approaches: blonde, cute, acting kinda bashful, wearing this, like, silk teddy. “You mind if I sit with you?” she says.

“Oh, not at all!” I say, throwing out my arms as if to invite them all over.

She laughs and settles in, gets close. Her perfume is really something, and I start to mull over a trip to the ATM. “There’s too many girls here,” she says.

“I don’t think so,” I say, looking around the place, considering. “Variety is good.”

“You have a type?”

How could she not know; she’s so much my type it’s scary. Pale, blonde, she looks golden, the very image of affluent and wholesome Utah, but in bedtime attire; she’s the grown version of every girl I ever crushed on in school. Yes, it’s possible I might have a type. “I like friendly,” I say.

“Same here,” she sighs. “What’s your name?”

“Fields.”

She thinks it over, then offers me her hand. “I’m Tuesday. I should introduce you to my grandma.”

“You know, that’s what the girls are always telling me...”

She laughs. “Maybe that’s a good sign.”

“I’ve seen better.” I settle back, kind of throw an arm over the seat behind her shoulder.

“So what, Tuesday? How did you know?”

“What, that you looked like you wanted company?” She laughs. “No reason.”

“Of course, of course,” I nod, “I just... I didn’t expect...”

“Hey,” she says, “some girls are *every* guy’s type. You mind if I?..” and she scoots over, onto my lap. Her hair, wavy and scented, swooshes across my face.

“Yes, please, of course,” I say, and scan the room for the ATM.

She leans close in my ear, and I relax a bit, consign myself to the situation. “What do you do, Mr. Fields?” she says.

“Uh... I ply my trade in entertainment, miss.”

“Snake-oil salesman?”

I shrug, can’t help but beam: she’s too good to be true. “I’m with the carnival,” I say, looking down as if admitting something a bit shameful.

“I love the carnival,” she says, laying her head back against my shoulder. “The rides, the games... You ever win anything at the carnival, those games?”

“Shucks, darlin’, I went into debt for two years once just tryin’ to win a giant blue teddy bear. Something so simple, just toss that ring around the neck of one of them bottles. And there’s

so many bottles. Just toss the ring just right, so it catches around one of their necks, nothing to it. I ended up donating plasma...

She laughs, and her laughter doesn't sound fake. "Showing off, sounds like," she says.

I nod. "She wanted a giant blue teddy bear."

"Showing off is good," she says, "it's hot. But I would've made you get me one, and then another one for my little sister..."

"Little sister, eh?" I bat my eyes about. "Is she here too?"

"Don't be weird," she says.

And for one long and lovely moment we are still, and silent, enjoying the barren, choreographed spectacle of the whole set-up, she taking a breather, just sitting on my lap and thinking things over, me looking back at livelier, less predictable times. She's wise to me but likes me anyway, and I suppose the feeling's mutual, but even if getting her personal phone number was something that could possibly happen—which it isn't—even if I *could* somehow pull that one off, I probably wouldn't know what to do with it.

She's wise to me, and when she finally offers her suggestion, "So you wanna go have some fun?", it's clear she's just being courteous. But I'm still kinda looking around for that ATM, trying to run any recent expenditures through my mind, wondering what the old credit card balances look like. Hard to say.

My phone buzzes; I don't mean to be impolite but feel like I'd better look. "Show up to work on Sunday or you're fired." Hmm...

Tree and his buddy suddenly reappear and plop down across from us. Tree's buddy howls and then starts barking at Tuesday, barking like an excited dog. She gracefully flutters over onto

his lap, and strokes behind his ears, talking to him like a pet. I begin to feel like an impostor again.

“Bro, you gotta try this,” Tree says, and slides a red plastic party cup across the table.

I take a sip; it tastes like energy drink.

Tree’s buddy is whimpering now, rubbing his muzzle into the girl’s chemise.

“Chug it,” Tree says. “You gotta catch your second wind.”

“What is it?” I say, and then immediately realize I’m gonna be sick, and jump up to find the restroom. But for one vertiginous instant it feels like I’m going down again; I catch myself on the back of the booth, stand for a moment, get my bearings.

Tree sits up. “Are you good, bro?” he says.

“I’m good. Just... bathroom.”

He points, motions. I careen.

I notice near the restroom door, in a dim corner a girl, small, brunette, pixie-cut. Um... She sees she’s caught my eye, lolls a pink flicker of suggestive tongue.

“I’m just a poor broke bastard,” I croak, but staring.

And then what would I find in such a joint but of all things a bathroom attendant, there in shirt and vest and pulling paper towels from the dispenser, like it’s the goddamn Waldorf-Astoria. I barge past into a stall, wondering what the hell I’m supposed to tip him; I’d clearly rather he not be there at all to listen to me vomit. The porcelain is disgusting but I go ahead and grab hold anyway, and just kinda gag and shudder for a while, and wait it out.

Just as my throat starts to relax again, and the burning to fade, my phone rings. My first thought is, Fucking back off, Gary, but I unroll some paper, clean up a bit, and check the number: unknown. My stalker! How would he/she know. His/her timing is impeccable.

“You,” I say, answering the call.

I’m talking to a recording, of course. There’s music in the background of this one, loud music. “What would you do if I did that to you?” she is saying. Do I know this one? “What would you do if you found out that about me?”

Who is she talking to? I think I remember the setting: some barn or warehouse, some party. She’s wearing something white, and dancing. It’s all I can do to approach her.

“Who are you?” I plead, but I’ve already collapsed on the bathroom tile, tears dribbling, my face pulling strange involuntary contortions.

The recording stops, but my stalker doesn’t hang up. He/she just waits in silence, listening for my response.

“Who are you?” I repeat, a bit of a demand, now.

“Everything okay in there, Boss?” says the bathroom attendant, with a couple of friendly warning knocks on the stall.

By this point I’m actually lying on the floor, the phone to my ear, my knees up by the toilet. My stalker, as always, is silent. “Everything’s fine,” I say, to the ceiling.

My stalker, whoever he/she is, lingers a moment, then hangs up.

Sailija Huddlestorm, seven-year-old daughter of Assistant Deputy Accountant Huddlestorm, sat talking with her two best friends at their favorite spot by the side of the pond. Sailija, Raemie, and Azalea were tight, and often seen together, and it was generally agreed that nowhere was a happier, more empty-headed gang of contumblies to be found. Today, however, their conversation by the pond seemed to have taken on a new and uncharacteristic gravity.

Sometimes they wanted boys around, but this was not one of those times. Earlier in the day, Chief Surgeon Hupperl had paid his annual visit to the school, and the Festival of Responsibility had commenced: first a special lunch, filled with singing and dancing, the rumble of many drums, the gonging of bells. Then the division of all seven-year-old contumblies, boys to one hallway, girls to the other. And then, for the girls, some instruction concerning what to expect, and how to behave, when upon their eighth birthday they would move from the parental home into the famous and lavish harem of Lord Gorglebosh.

Of whatever went on over on the boys side, the three friends could only speculate.

“They teach them about their service,” said Raemie, as if it were obvious, but not without a note of hesitation in her voice. She was weaving yarn through her fingers. “They have to learn about the work they have to do.”

“But think of what they told us!” Azalea declared. “The work was only a small part of it. You remember. They spent a lot of time talking about other things...”

“Oh, you want to know about the other things they talk about to the boys!” cried Sailija, smiling back at her reflection in the pond. She could feel herself blushing, and tilted back her

head to get the sunlight right, her long curls falling around her eyes. “You want to know about the boys’ other things.”

“Uck!” said Raemie, and threw a friendly pebble, just a little warning.

“Think about it,” said Azalea, sharpening her eyes, getting serious. “How much of the instruction dealt with work, and how much of it dealt with... other things?”

“So maybe the other things are the work,” said Raemie.

“Anyway, they can’t throw everything at them all at once,” said Sailija, sitting back against the grasses of the shore. “The boys don’t mature as fast, you don’t need Chief Surgeon Hupperl to tell you that. They need that time during their service, to develop. To grow up.”

“I don’t know,” said Azalea, popping her tongue. “That Bonzo Uddergun is looking pretty grown up, to me.”

Raemie shrieked. “Your hormones are out of control!”

“Oh, Bonzo,” Sailija sighed, poking fun.

Raemie nodded, caught up in the reverie. “He is becoming awfully hairy...”

Sailija looked to the sky, listened to the cackle of the gulls. The sun felt lovely on her forehead. She felt older already, under the spell of Hupperl’s imperious proclamations. Responsibility to yourself. Responsibility to your family, to your neighborhood. Responsibility to the nation. She wasn’t nervous about the harem at all; she knew she’d be just fine.

“The boys can’t develop into true contumblies without their time of service,” she said.

“Just look at the ones you know—can you imagine ending up with any of them?”

“Um,” said Raemie. “No.”

“It’s because they’re still boys. Boys develop slower. If they told them everything all at once, it’d give them bad dreams.”

“Listen to Miss Knows-Everything,” said Azalea. “You probably had Nike Pungle telling you all about it last year!”

“Gross! I did not.”

“Can you imagine?” said Raemie. “Pungle kids. With that eyebrow. Sailija, you really shouldn’t be learning about these things from Nike Pungle...”

“Stop. You’re the one who wants Pungle kids.”

“No. You.”

“What if it was a human conversion?”

“I’d be okay with that. They’re contumblies too.”

“Uh, I don’t think I would be.”

“I don’t think they let them do their service. They do something else. The girls marry, but the boys do something else.”

“Are you gonna be at the match this weekend?”

“I’ll be there. Is your little brother playing?”

“He thinks. Who knows. My dad’s all Haul and Squat, but I’m not sure how much Feaney is...”

“It’s pretty boring, but it’s fun to look at the crowd... Did you see what Madame Glunt was wearing today? I mean, hello... Who do you think that was for?”

“Oh, I know... that poor woman...”

Sailija leaned back, gazed across the water, watching the ripples. The chirping of her two friends was like the whinnies of the gulls, or the buzz of the insects—pleasant, harmless. She only worried about her father—she knew, even if he never shed a tear, he would take it hard. It would be one less matter he had any say in. But herself, secretly, she looked forward to the day...

The heat of Las Vegas at midmorning awakens me from a dream about my head being lit on fire. I sit up against a concrete block retaining wall, somewhat behind a shrub, and assess the situation. It's alarmingly hot outside, and it's clear I've been outside for a while. There's a very real possibility that the roof of my mouth is sunburnt.

I'm in Las Vegas. I came down with Tree. Tree's buddies, the casino... um, a place called Spanky's? Oh, oh no... that girl by the bathroom, could this really have happened? That fucking bathroom attendant, why was he even there? Throwing me out...

I check for my wallet. It's there, but the cash is gone. The cards are still there.

That girl lurking by the restroom door, welcoming, caressing, offering some kind of deal, the "poor broke bastard special." Tiny, brunette, looking so much like her it was unnerving, like the whole moment had been designed just for me...

Oh, oh no. Shit got sloppy, way too sloppy, didn't I begin to have a dreadful creeping suspicion, there'd been some kind of giveaway gesture, some catch in her throat, her hair hadn't smelt right. Didn't I check for evidence, lift up her skirt, find evidence: a scrotum with testicles.

Goddamnit. How stupid do you have to be. But shit had already gotten sloppy—oh well. One less thing to worry about.

In any case, where the hell is Tree?

I dust myself off. I'm out on some side street somewhere; cars roll by. The sun overhead is like some mean-spirited military policeman—just unrelenting. I've still got my phone, but it's

absolutely dead, I don't know, maybe I slept on it wrong. The cars that roll by seem to do it at an angle, their sound seems to sneak up on me, and I can't raise my face to look at them head on.

I probably need water to stay alive. I'd probably better get to an ATM. I start walking.

I realize I'm in downtown, not fancy downtown, but kinda overgrown and ragged-looking downtown, and I'm clearly not the only one who spent the night outdoors. I left my sunglasses in Tree's car. Where the hell did *he* disappear to?

A liquor store, an adult store, a pawnshop, a taco joint. A laundromat.

I come to a gas station. Homeless-looking people sit at the video poker machines along the wall. I go to the back and look for the biggest jug of water in the place. I find a gallon, with a plastic strap for carrying, and I consider buying a second. No, unnecessary weight. I just need to get some water in me, I'm dehydrated, I just need to rehydrate and get my brain working again so I can weigh my options.

I hoist the jug to the counter, hand the clerk my card, show him my Utah driver's license.

He hands me back the card. "Go ahead."

The water sparkles back at me as I swipe the card.

The clerk raises his eyebrows. "It says declined."

"What, no."

"It says declined. You got any cash?"

"Naw, here, hold on, we'll try this one. See, same name..." I try again with the other card.

"It's the same thing, my friend. Maybe they got turned off."

"They turn 'em off for comin' to Vegas?"

The clerk looks sincere as he nods. "Sometimes they do."

I'm staring at the jug of sparkling and delicious-looking water on the counter. I need it badly, but I have no way to pay for it. "Look, man," I say, "I'm kinda thirsty; you got some kind of, like, cup for drinking water?"

"You can get a complimentary cup if you want to gamble," the clerk says, nodding at the machines and the homeless people. "But otherwise, it's full price. That's just store policy."

"Right," I say. "You got like a bathroom?"

He considers, then reluctantly hands me a key on the end of a rope attached to a carved, sort of eagle-themed totem pole.

Standing at the urinal, I find money in my underwear. Also, some peculiar discoloration.

I put the lonely and sad-looking hundred dollar bill atop the soap dispenser as I wash my hands. It's not enough for the jug of water; it's sure not enough for bus fare. I lean forward, cup my hands, drink from the faucet—I do this for a good long time. When I come up again, I splash some of it into my bleared eyeballs. The water is heavy in my gut.

Phone's dead, credit cards don't work, I'm stranded, and I'm supposed to be in Provo tomorrow morning. I wonder if they've got keno on those machines out there.

By the time I get to the open one on the end, and, seeing that indeed you can play keno for quarters here, sort of collapse into the seat, I'm feeling pretty bad about things all around. It's this demoralizing sense of impending doom; I'm gambling, praying to the gods of Vegas to cut me a break just this one time, get me that bus fare home.

I look at the numbers for a while. That bus fare's probably gonna be a lot. Do I bet up, and choose fewer numbers? Let's see, five pays seven-fifty... Didn't it pay eight hundred before? Play four quarters, a hundred shots to hit seven-fifty. Not enough. The six spot pays fifteen hundred—two bucks per? Fifty shots to get three thousand. Is it enough? Naw, more than

fifty shots, cause some of those'll hit a few numbers, cover the ante. Say closer to seventy shots. But is three thousand enough?

The other people around me are playing video poker. All of them look homeless except for one kindly old woman who is apparently handing out money to these guys when their balances get low.

"I haven't seen you for a while," she says to one of them. "Who was it that hit that royal? You weren't around for that..."

"No, the last time I saw a royal was back, last October maybe. That was a good one, it came right up."

"So where you been?"

"Oh, you know. *Around.*" The homeless guy laughs a bit too emphatically at his own joke, and I glance over. He gives me a look.

I turn back to the numbers. Keno's a slow game. You can play a while and see nothing. Seventy shots to get the three thousand, which who knows if that'd even cover it, I'd better up the number and drop the bet. The seven spot pays seven thousand. With fifty cents bet that'd give me thirty-five hundred.

"Oh, I remember that royal back in October," says the old lady who's handing out money. "That was a good one."

Fifty cents bet would get me maybe closer to three hundred tries. To catch the seven of seven. Yeah, it's a long shot.

Okay, you filthy bastard. I give it my money; the credits tinkle up. I push "Bet One" twice. I need seven numbers. Seven cosmic probabilities for the next little while.

My birthday, there's three. Then the year of make on my pedal steel guitar, which awaits me at home, in the garden shed. That's four.

And it's around the time I start considering the fifth ceremonial number in this final, perhaps futile but most definitely sincere offering to the Vegas gods that I realize the true source of my dread: the guy sitting next to me, who's been silent this whole time, is Mussberger. The wild hair and beard, the intense, leering eyes, this guy looks just like the pictures of Mussberger. It must be him, but what scares me even more is that I suddenly notice he's not playing video poker at all. He's playing keno. He might not even be part of this gang.

It can't be him; someone would've turned him in. That story's been all over the news. But did it make it to Vegas? It can't be him.

I need to pick a fifth number, and then a sixth and a seventh, but the presence at the machine next to me of a man who's a dead ringer for Mussberger, the infamous sex maniac and killer, chills and distracts me. I just want to tap three numbers at random and start the machine, but it's a long shot, I need to be careful with these numbers, they've got to be right. But if this guy is in fact Mussberger, then I'm probably supposed to turn him in.

I'm sure it's him, but people are strolling by, jabbering with the clerks: no one seems to notice. Maybe it's *me* who's not seeing things right.

There could be a reward, probably *way* more than thirty-five hundred. But I go to ask to use the phone, get the police over here, make a big scene, and the guy turns out to be just some dude? They're gonna be wondering just what *I'm* doing here.

I pick three numbers. At random, but what the hell. There's only so much you can do.

They're not hitting. Soon I'm at ninety bucks, way too soon. I wonder if these guys could tell me anything about hopping trains. But maybe I don't want to get too friendly or talkative.

Mussberger begins to hum a tune, I can't help but steal a glance, it's something unexpected, in the minor key, kinda hill-country stuff. He grins. "Kinda tune that gets stuck in your head," he says. "You think about it, it's a love song. But," his voice drops, becomes dire, "the old-fashioned kind."

"Don't think I know that one," I say, and stare at my numbers on the screen. They're not hitting. I'm down to eighty bucks. I know I need to slow down, concentrate, but I've got Mussberger sitting next to me, humming a tune, and my hands are starting to tremble.

He allows himself one more refrain, then pauses to look me over. His gaze is a cold alarm across my skin. "You play much keno?" he says.

"I don't know," I say. "Had a pretty good hit lastnight."

"I see." He pushes the button, watches them fall. "Beginner's luck. I'd roll with it."

I try to focus on the game, but my numbers keep missing. Do I stick with them? I'm down to sixty-six bucks. What else am I gonna do with it? Buy a jawbreaker maybe.

"Yeah, you got the right idea," Mussberger says. "Go for the seven, the jackpot. Keno's the right game."

I pause at the button. Does this guy actually know something?

"Keno's the only one you even stand a chance," he says. "It's all based on randomness, but you can't get true random from a computer. The technology isn't there; it's all based on a computer chip. They have yet to develop the technology more advanced than the human brain. You've got to watch the numbers coming out, and understand, *they're not really random...*"

This guy can't possibly be Mussberger. Such a resemblance. "Maybe," I say. "Sounds to me like you'd have to be watching this game for a while."

Mussberger chuckles. “Hell, I’ve been watching this game a while. It’s the only one. You just have to outwit the computer chip. All of these, it’s just a computer chip inside. Keno tries to be random, but it isn’t. You can catch it, you just gotta get with *the program*...”

“Yeah, I might’ve heard that one once or twice,” I say, “before, somewhere.”

Mussberger beams. “Yeah, just like Mom and Dad always said, get with the program. Those other machines? You get with their program, it’s a set deal: they’ll kiss you every three months, and the rest of the time fuck you in the ass!” He bellows laughter; the other homeless guys remain unperturbed. “Those machines, they’re like the worst wife in the world. You ever had that wife? Every three months she gives you a kiss, the rest of the time she’s strapping it on...” He wheezes laughter.

“I’d probably ask for a divorce,” I say.

“Oh, she’s tough, believe me. Watch out for that one.”

I glance over at his screen, check the balance. He’s in worse shape than I am, at least credit-wise. “So you can predict the numbers,” I say.

“You can too,” he assures me. “You’ve just got to, mentally, get with the program. Make your mind somehow more random than the computer chip. The computer chip is imperfectly designed. You must get beyond it into the realm of the true random, in order to look back at the false random and detect its imperfections.”

I’m down to forty bucks. “I’m not sure I enjoy the prospect of the true random,” I say.

“Oh, it can be scary. It can make you envy the machine, make you wish that your own biological hardware was less perfectly designed...” He murmurs laughter, knowingly. “The true random is fraught with uncertainty. But unless you can get there, you don’t stand a chance against these keno machines. Pause.”

I do.

“Look at what just came out.”

Twenty numbers, out of eighty. Some here, some there. “It’s a lot of numbers to keep track of...”

“Patterns. Flashing patterns. You’ve got to watch it with all of your eyes. There, once more.”

I push the button.

“See that? I’d switch that sixty-eight over to sixty-seven. Put that seventeen on twelve instead...”

I’m down under forty; it’s looking bad. Who knows, maybe this guy does see something. But no. “I know the second I do that, it’s gonna hit sixty-eight and seventeen,” I say, but without confidence.

“Maybe so,” Mussberger says, “but at the same time as the other five marked? It’s about patterns, bud, more than it’s about numbers. Suit yourself. I’m just trying to show you the patterns.”

I push the button; zero balls hit. What the hell. I change the sixty-eight to sixty-seven, and the seventeen to twelve. I’m down around twenty-eight bucks when the seven hits, pinging rapid fire, just about knocking me out of my chair. The credits tinkle up, way up; the machine tells me “See Attendant.” Three thousand five hundred! I feel tears coming.

Mussberger is unsurprised. “There it is,” he says, almost fatherly.

I’m tempted to ask him the way to the bus station, but think better of it. Still, I can’t help noticing he’s calmly run his way down to under ten bucks. “So how come yours aren’t hitting?” I say.

He grins, wry, not offended at all. “You can always tell what’s gonna happen to the other guy.”

I go up to the counter. It’s the same guy I tried to buy water from earlier. “I need to cash out on that machine,” I say.

The clerk looks at something behind the counter, raises his eyebrow. “Oh, a jackpot, wow. Okay.” He reaches up by the cigarettes overhead and takes down a card, which he hands to me with a pen. “You’ll just want to fill this out,” he says.

The card is asking for personal information, name, phone number, address, and so on, and then there’s more fine print on the back. “What’s this,” I say. “I just want the money.”

“You’ll get it,” the clerk assures me, “just fill that out.” He looks over my shoulder, motions to the next customer behind me.

“I’m not filling this out,” I say, holding the pen, reading the fine print. “What, they’re gonna *mail* it to me?”

He gives me that sincere look again, nods. “That’s what they’re gonna do.”

“No, man, look, I won thirty-five hundred on that machine...”

The clerk nods again, ringing up another guy for a long can of beer. “That’s just it,” he says, “you won thirty-five hundred. I can only pay out three thousand; if it’s any more than that, then you’ve gotta fill out the card and they’ll mail it to you.” He hands the other customer a credit card receipt, looms at me, becoming just slightly impatient. “They’ll mail you the money, don’t worry, you’ll get it.”

“I don’t need it in the mail,” I say, but beginning to feel myself becoming a nuisance. An old lady behind me steps to the counter with a banana.

“I can give you three thousand,” says the clerk with a shrug. “You need cash, it’s three thousand. You need the full thirty-five hundred and,” he checks it again, “twenty-six fifty, you’ve gotta fill out the card and get it mailed. Store policy.”

I grin, seethe, get into character. “Good man,” I say, through my teeth, “I accept your terms. Just count it out and lay it gently across my palm.”

He shakes his head, rolls his eyes. I collect the bills, thirty hundreds, and count them a second time.

“Just the thing, my lad!” I cry, saluting with a hat gesture, flapping the bills. “The very thing.”

The clerk smiles, perhaps charmed by his own cleverness. “You go get ’em, Boss.”

“Worry about yourself, friend,” I say, and I’m out the door and into the solar wasteland that is daytime Las Vegas, to see about my chances of catching a bus. I stay in character. Somehow, it’s just easier that way.

Provo is a magical place, a city of wonders. If you’re counting Orem too, it might be the most beautiful place in the world, but, like all beautiful things, not without its own peculiar neuroses. If things ever start to get too out of hand, however, you can just wander over to the mountains, they’re always close by. Take a walk up the train tracks, jump into the river. Just pick a trail and walk on up.

Bridal Veil Falls at night, in early autumn when the air has taken on the first edge of cold, breezes through your brain and makes you think of your first girlfriend, there at the edge of the pond, skinny in a puffy jacket. Cross under the overpass to the park on the other side, don’t

bother the campers, catch the scent of those first cigars with the old gang. I wonder whatever happened to those fellows.

Down to the dam, maybe catch a trout. That time you had to help a stray dog that was out of its mind, running down the highway. That time they drained that sucker and the stench actually made you physically ill, even the next day. That time your older brother's friend almost drowned.

Make your way past the power plant. That way to Orem, this way to Provo. It's here, at the crossroads, that you start to realize what a truly magical place this is. It's no wonder the contumblies have established themselves. Fossils in ancient rocks. Forbidding cliff faces, great towers of stone. Mysterious caves to crawl around in. All kinds of wildlife, wildlife that fairly regularly makes its way down into the streets and sometimes your own front yard. Deer, skunks, raccoons, the occasional porcupine.

That time you watched a giant old beaver waddle across the road by the bridge, like it didn't care, cars buzzing by. How did it ever manage to grow that big? With such an attitude...

Which way do you go? Take a right and go up the hill into Orem, or keep on through the riverbottoms? Oh, there's a mall there now: the old way's no good anymore. The girls in Orem are more beautiful than the Provo girls, anyway, I don't know why that is, I'm sorry Provo but it's just a simple fact.

Which home are you going to? Better stick close to the hills, in case you have to run. If you get into a situation where you have to run, you'll be better off in the hills. But weren't the old trees so lovely in the riverbottoms. Oh well, there's fruit orchards up the way. You take a shortcut through the orchard, and remember the first girl who let you touch her breast, but not under the bra, no, that was for someone else. What a beautiful thing, the orchard! Row upon row

of black and gnarled old cherry trees, surely planted there by a race of magical elves. You should learn their secrets, see how they manage to remain invisible.

Now on by the cemetery; nobody you know buried here. Maybe one or two people. You remember how deep was your longing for her, how it made you go insane. But surely you realize you'd been hexed, you were under the spell of the place, who can blame you for diving so heedless into a peril so rapturous?

Take the long bend west and make your way down the hill, eventually you'll get to the lake. The ruins of an old steel mill loom against the orange sky like a skeleton. Seagulls nibble on catfish heads. The lake is brown and murky, always has been. You can wade out in and feel your feet sink into the silty mud, but you'll want to take a shower afterward, and make sure you don't swallow any. You can walk on way out in the water, it doesn't ever get that deep, though it is broad and vast. If you were to keep going, on across to the other side, you'd just be out there in the desert, out in the sagebrush, running around with the jackrabbits. Catching ticks from the sheep.

It feels like a safe bet that whichever race of magical elves it was that first built the town, tilled the ground and channeled the river for irrigation, dug the tunnels and engineered the bridges, well, they must have deserted the place a while back, left it open for the contumelies to creep in. And those little bastards, who knows what they're after. Peeping in windows, jumping out in front of speeding cars—the big picture, there's just no telling.

If you dress carefully, and don't associate with good churchgoing folk, Provo will afford you a type of anonymity it's difficult to achieve in other places. Your acoustic guitar sits idle in its case by the side of your cot out in the garden shed. Behind the big, once empty doctor's

mansion, nestled in the quiet foothills. Provo awaits with its mysterious enchantment, to embrace you once more, and once more enforce your insignificance, your loneliness.

By the time we've gotten to Spanish Fork, and the bus attendant—this seedy buffoon in a tee shirt and vest—comes and reminds me I've got to get off, I can't decide whether I'm supposed to be angry or not. Yes, two hundred more would've gotten me all the way to Provo Center, but this bus ride has been one of the more hellacious experiences of recent life, for me. Hungover, guzzling water every chance I get, but with every trip to the bathroom a sort of unsettling reminder that things aren't looking quite right there—some kind of bruising, or chemical burn, who knows, infection maybe but this feels awfully quick for an infection. I remember when Mars was dealing with his thing, it was a good six or seven weeks after Portland. I keep seeing things out of the corner of my eye, like roaches, but when I look they're not there.

The bus stopping at random for cops with dogs, which, I don't know how they're supposed to smell anything in here, I can't even myself determine how much of what I'm smelling is coming off of me, and how much is the product of the horrible people who surround me. It would be one thing if it were possible to sleep on a bus, and I suppose it is, lord knows I got in my share of recovery naps between gigs on the tour bus in the old days, but on this kind of bus, forget it. The style of recovery on this ride is more of the toughlove variety—clench your teeth, power through. At one point on the ride, I changed seats to sit next to what I thought from a distance looked like a more normal person. Perhaps she was, and just today happened to stewing in her own feces.

But that's just the kind of bus ride it's been, and so, though perhaps I should get angry, try to appeal to this vested hooligan's sense of humanity, look, that's Provo right up the road, we're practically there, I can't quite muster the wherewithal. My joints ache, and it feels better to straighten out and stretch on the sidewalk. It seems it's been getting harder and harder lately, anyway, to make that appeal, however discreetly or deflectingly, to a person's sense of humanity, to any degree. Maybe I'm just out of practice.

It's late summer, the middle of the damn night. The breeze is cool, and after Vegas, downright pleasant. There's a payphone at the truckstop, but I can't turn on my phone to get anybody's number. I don't know who I'd call anyway, to come down to Spanish Fork and give me a ride home at one in the morning. Lucy, maybe? But no, she's got her boyfriend, she's living with him now, and I'm hoping she's happy. I'll call her some other, less critical time. Maybe send a text, something innocuous. Who knows what the phone cards are even going for, these days. Probably more than I've got.

I could call the house, collect. It'll be Shauna picking up. I go to refill the water bottle, compliments of the bus. It's going to be a long walk home.

I've probably got just enough time to get there, maybe fry up some eggs if Shauna's got any in the fridge—I can get her back when I hit the grocery store—maybe get a quick shower in, charge the phone a little, check for messages—I already know what they're gonna be, get back to work and so on—maybe brew up a cup of coffee, maybe Shauna's got some milk in the fridge, hmm, I wonder if she left me any messages... Brush my teeth, shave, maybe. Fire up the truck. Get back to work.

Shari Huddlestorm stood out in the grass of the yard, hanging the family's clothes on a line to dry. The clothes, as always, were lived in but clean, and perfumed by that soap which was her family's trademark recipe. Her apron billowed in the warm and gentle breeze, and she hummed a mournful tune, though it was obvious to any chance passerby that she was not really, herself, particularly mournful. She still wore her hair long like she had in her youth.

It was accepted wisdom among the contumblies of Ovorp that Shari Huddlestorm was one of those rarest of females, whose beauty seems only to deepen with age. That wisdom was, however, unspoken, nearly unconscious; it was difficult to speak of, and to revert to some shopworn aphorism concerning the Fountain of Youth would simply be to betray one's own coarseness. The magic of her case was a subtle magic, but potent.

Shari straightened a towel on the line.

Her daughter Sailija had recently participated in the preparatory Festival of Responsibility, and would soon be leaving her home. Sailija was clever, fearless, had been since she was a toddler. Still, Shari had been hearing some things about the harem of Lord Gorglebosh every now and again, through the neighborhood gossip. By the sound of it, Gorglebosh kept a quite different kind of harem than the one Shari had done her time in. Most of the friends she had from the harem were still living back in her home village. She didn't miss them all that much, she'd been glad to move on, when Laban had finally finagled his marriage to her.

Sailija was sharp, was in many ways already grown up. She was wise to things, unlike her little brother Geebler, who was to Shari's mind a bit of a question mark. Shari, as she

whipped a shirt to shake out the arms, was thinking about what kind of speech she might give her daughter, about harem things. Though she intended to convey a certain gravity, which might benefit the perhaps overconfident young girl, every way she tried to formulate the message it still came out sounding silly, and she could already hear her daughter's wisecrack responses.

Garnette Sooner came waddling up the lane, with an armload of twigs. Her eyes rolled about; she wanted to stop and talk. "Ho, Madam Huddlestorm!" she cried.

"What is it, Garnette?" Shari looked up from her laundry, one hand on the line and a clip in her teeth.

"I'm just out gathering twigs, you know, it's a good day for that..."

"It is."

"And how's the family? Is Laban around?" Garnette set the twigs against the fence rail to free a hand, and wiped her brow.

"I imagine he's in the office."

"And the little ones?"

"Not so little anymore. You must have seen them around."

"Ah yes, I guess your oldest is just about due to..." Garnette began to lean on the fence rail herself. "I remember when we sent Mingnam..."

"Mingnam did alright," said Shari, nodding, "and her little ones are just darling."

"So," said Garnette, lowering her voice a bit, conspiratorial, "has Sailija got a preference, that you know of?"

Shari strung up a bedsheet as she considered the question. She tried to remember if, at her daughter's age, she had herself had a preference. She only remembered that, at the time, the

whole thing had seemed a little silly. “I’m sure she’d never tell me if she did!” Shari assured her neighbor. “Did Mingnam have a preference?”

“Mingnam did alright,” said Garnette, cryptic.

“Yes, her little ones are just adorable...”

“I’ve been hearing good things about your Geebler,” said Garnette. “The kid’s a star. Setting records, at that Haul and Squat. He’s always been handsome. I always could tell he was gonna be a star...”

Again, Shari found herself uncertain how to respond. It was true that her youngest was performing at a remarkable level in the game of Haul and Squat, and to watch him play was almost frightening to her, she didn’t understand where it had come from. But Geebler had always been an unusual creature—perhaps pathologically unprepared for the real world, though no one else seemed to notice, only noticed the uncanny but inarguable statistics. Shari knew, was dead certain, that his service would change him, irrevocably, and she worried sometimes to herself what this change might look like. “He is a star,” she conceded.

Shari continued to hang the laundry while Garnette chattered away about the rest of the village. She wondered whether she would become like this contumbly with her children gone, suddenly interested in the lives of everyone else’s families. She wondered whether she might have another, it wouldn’t be a complete scandal, but then smiled to herself at the thought, and pretended to her neighbor that she was smiling at something that had been said.

After Garnette wore herself out, ran out of gossip, and moved along, Shari carried the laundry baskets to the house to keep them out of the wind. It was quiet in the house. She resumed her tune.

(12)

It's Wednesday morning, there's still been no sign of the Boss, and, well, the natives are getting restless. Gary stalks about the halls, huffing, doesn't want to even look at me. Bert's been back since Monday, and Gary's been demoted once more to second in command. Technically third in command, though when Leslie shows up at eight with his kid Brennan, and Luigi the other Mexican. Leslie and the Boss go way back, and it seems even Bert Swenson defers to his authority, which billows from his open collar. Leslie is reticent, however, there's something kinda squirrely about him, and he prefers to talk only with Bert and Gary, thus I am unaware at first, when I enter the long and majestic front room and find the rest of the crew mulling around doing nothing, that an official meeting has been called.

Cody is peeling masking from windows, and the sunlight comes spilling in.

"Oh, there he is!" Bert announces at me, and then claps his palms. "Have you been here the whole time? Okay boys, listen up. You know the drill. We've reached the phase of the job when we're staring right smack in the face of a deadline. A burly, impending, snaggle-toothed and scary kind of deadline." Bert glances to Leslie, who nods, sort of dusts his sleeve with his fingers, and looks away. "We've been here before. I think we know what to do. Do we know what to do?"

Bo is tapping away at his phone.

"Gary," says Bert, "what do we do?"

Gary's arms are folded; he answers with disdain, like it's a stupid question: "We make that deadline."

“Good answer!” Bert cries. “So simple, so elegant. We make that deadline.”

Jarvis is carving dried caulk off of a caulk-gun with his razor knife; Ammon is at his side, sipping on a thirty-two ounce gas station soda.

“But at GJP we don’t cut corners,” Bert reminds. “We’re gonna do it good. But, now, starting today, we’re gonna do it *extra* fast.”

Big Andy is sitting on a special stool with wheels he’s brought in to help him get around. “*We’re* not the ones you need to be talking to,” he points out. “Most of *us* are pretty solid. You want to be directing your message at fuckface number one,” he nods at me, “and fuckface number two,” he nods at Ammon. Ammon just sips away at that straw, acknowledges nothing.

“Big Andy,” Bert beams, “language! Sim, I know you’re still a bit new here, so maybe in the past you haven’t had to face the scary kind of deadline we’re staring right smack in the face of, right now. Maybe with those other painters, they could afford to take their time...”

“Well, see,” I say, “what you need to understand about the Tenney Brothers...”

“Is nothing!” Bert cries. “We’ll have none of that kind of talk. Who are *they*, anyway? The Tenney Brothers? Never heard of ’em. And neither have you.”

“Alright,” I sigh.

“Do you think this is fucking recess time at the playground?” Big Andy howls, from out of nowhere.

“No, I didn’t think that,” I say, looking down at my shoes, unable to stifle the smile which is almost a reflex: this kind of gravity, this kind of hostile motivation, always takes me by surprise; I always forget how people after a while come to think somehow that they are depending on me for something. How disappointed they always act.

Leslie frowns. “Is there a problem, Andy?”

And the two of them, both pretty much old-timers, have a tense moment of silence between them. Ah, I get it: the true source of Big Andy's rage is the ongoing delay in payment, but he doesn't seem able to say anything to Leslie; Leslie however knows Big Andy well enough, and thus is allowing him the opportunity to lodge a complaint if he must.

Big Andy quiets down.

Bert claps his palms once more. "This deadline," he says, "is gonna necessitate that we pick up the pace. And not just a little."

Cody, off in the corner, crumples a huge clump of masking; it's stiff with paint, and crumples loudly.

"Cody," says Bert, "you're gonna have to put on your special shoes. Bo, you're gonna have to put the phone somewhere where you can't get to it. This is straight from the Boss—the phone's gotta go. Enrique. Tenemos correr, como conejo."

Enrique nods; Bo looks hurt. Cody doesn't react.

"Brennan. You're gonna have to do everything your dad says. Prime. The same goes for you."

Prime's got his jaw in some tough-looking protein bar, bares his teeth, growls.

"Jarvis, you're gonna have to do everything *I* say. Ammon, my man. You're gonna have to work the same hours as the rest of us. This is straight from the Boss. We have a deadline."

Ammon's mouth falls open behind the straw.

"Luigi. Try to be more like Enrique."

Luigi's an older guy; he never talks. Ordinarily he works with Leslie on other jobs, and he's generally disliked. The story Prime tells is that the Boss has tried to get rid of Luigi but found it impossible: no matter how thoroughly well-kept a secret the location of the next job,

Luigi somehow always manages to show up at the site and start helping. Prime thinks he's got a confederate at the paint store. This is a strategy for not getting fired which has never occurred to me—simply keep showing up and doing work, and for whatever reason they have to keep paying you.

Luigi gazes at Bert, pours a handful of sunflower seeds and stuffs them in his mouth, a man clearly unconcerned about the prospect of a lay-off.

“Big Andy,” says Bert, “you're gonna have to ride that stool like it's a Ferrari. Sim, you're gonna have to figure out a way, here in the next little while, to Learn to Adapt. We hit this thing as a team, and as you know, a team is only as strong as its weakest link. You've been here long enough now. It's time to Learn to Adapt.”

“Asshole,” Big Andy mutters, but I can't tell who he means.

“Am I forgetting anybody? Gary? You just keep doing what you're doing. You're setting a good example. Leslie?” But of course Bert has no epigram for Leslie. “Does that just about cover it?”

Leslie fidgets, mumbles “Caulk-off.”

“Oh yeah!” Bert claps, “let's not forget, we're gonna start this new phase off with a caulk-off.”

“Caulk-off!” say Jarvis and Ammon, to each other.

“Something to put us in the right mindset for the new reality of today. Something to get our heartbeats racing. Yes indeed, a good old-fashioned caulk-off! Out in the garage, starting now...” Bert claps. “Who will be today's champion?”

Jarvis and Ammon keep repeating “Caulk-off!” as they face each other down and flex their muscles. The others start to mosey out to the garage. Bo is taking one last rueful glance at his phone’s screen.

“What the hell’s a caulk-off?” I say to him, following the others, but uncertainly.

“You’ve never been to a caulk-off?” says Bo.

Gary overhears. “What? You don’t know what a caulk-off is?” He approaches. “This’ll be a good thing for you, Sim, it’ll be a learning experience.” He pats my shoulder, suddenly jovial. “It’ll be a chance for you to prove yourself.”

“So what the hell’s a caulk-off?” I repeat, to Bo.

“What does it sound like?” says Gary. “Think about it, it’s not that hard. It’s a caulk-off.”

We come to the garage; it’s vast, and lined with loose doors in every direction.

“We’re caulking doors,” says Bo. “It’s a race.”

“We hit this thing as a team,” I say.

“That’s right!” says Gary. “And this will be your opportunity to prove to everyone else that you’ve earned your place on the team. It’s a caulk-off, Sim. You think you’ve got what it takes?”

“Caulking doors?”

“Haven’t you ever caulked doors before?”

“Uh oh,” says Bo. “You’ve got to have a method if you’re gonna be competitive in a caulk-off. You’ve got to know going in...”

“I guess I’m unfamiliar with the sport of competitive caulking,” I say.

“I tried to warn Leslie about your caulking,” Gary says, “but he said everybody at the caulk-off. No exceptions, even for amateurs.”

“By this point,” Bo says, “probably your best bet is just to stick with what you know. Keep it simple, you might be okay. Just don’t let Ammon beat you; if Ammon beats you, you’re nothing but a caulk pussy.”

“I’m not working by you,” Gary says, “don’t come around where I’m working. I don’t want to be around you when you work up a sweat, Sim. I mean, I don’t mean to be blunt, but, didn’t I tell you to put on some body spray?”

“And remember,” says Bo, “you don’t want to be the guy who gets in trouble because he forgot to wipe his caulk off. At the caulk-off.”

“You don’t forget to wipe your caulk off at the caulk-off,” Gary echoes, and the two share a forced chuckle.

It’s the oldest painter joke of all time, but, dealing as I am with the weird discoloration which has evolved in the last few days into a kind of urethral tenderness and intermittent but intense itching, I can’t quite get the joke, I don’t know, maybe I’ve got a newfound sympathy for the guy who forgot to wipe his caulk off. I see painters, among the doors, staking out their territory, and I realize I’m gonna need caulk gear: a gun, a bucket of water, a clean rag. An artist’s paintbrush for the corners, is how the Tenneys would handle it. I’ve also heard of cotton swabs.

Big Andy is standing, a look of horror across his face as he hefts one of the solid wood doors. He pauses at my passage. “Are you looking for something, shit for brains?” he says.

“Here’s a gun,” says Gary over my shoulder, and hands me an old one with a poky spring, caked with dried caulk.

“Perfect,” I say, “now, maybe a can of water?”

“Just use a rag,” Gary says, “how many times do I have to tell you? You get the rag wet, there’s that bucket in the front room, squeeze it out, just kind of damp, and you use that. You don’t need a can of water to drag around everywhere.”

“Naw, I do better if I’ve got some water handy. It’s better for the corners...”

Gary doesn’t like it. “You just use the rag for the corners!”

“I need the rag to wipe my fingers off,” I say. “Clean the rag out in the water.”

“You sound like a jackass,” says Big Andy.

“Sim,” says Gary, shaking his head, utterly disappointed, “I’ve got to tell you, your way is the slowest caulk method I’ve ever heard of. It makes no sense.”

I take out the razor knife, start digging into the buildup on my caulk gun.

“Who’d ever do it that way?” Gary says. “Why? That’s *way* too slow. Just use the rag, like everyone else. Wipe your fingers on the gun, like everyone else. What’s the *one* thing that Bert told you to do? Learn to Adapt. His exact words.”

“Look man, I’m just gonna bring that bucket in here. In case anybody wants to dip their rag in it.”

“Don’t bring that bucket in here!” Gary warns, dire, then, after an almost imperceptible hitch, “You’re just gonna make a mess. You make a puddle, with all these doors around?”

“I’m not gonna make a puddle,” I say, moving along, “if Bert’s got a problem with it, we’ll just have to see.” I go for the bucket, find a box of rags nearby. Gary looks on with scorn as I haul the bucket back across the garage to my own corner.

The race begins. Neither Cody nor Big Andy end up actually participating. Bert’s participation is mainly motivational, with some kinda primitive attempts at calling a play-by-play. Leslie has disappeared. There’s a lot of doors in here to caulk, and the race goes on for

quite a while. There's no prize for the winner, as far as I can tell, other than the honor, that majestic knowledge that you're the fastest caulker in a roomful of fast caulkers. It soon becomes clear that Gary will win.

Look, Judge, I don't know how it goes in *this* nation, but in a foreign country, if you're flirting with the girl at the laundry place, you'd better expect consequences. If you're lucky, it'll be her uncle coming out and politely distracting you with a long and digressive story about some marriageable, not-exactly-young woman from the hills who would be just the thing, if that's what you're after.

But on this particular occasion, it was a pair of strangers on motorcycles who suddenly approached, braking hard, closing me in against the ditch and the stone wall at the side of the road. It was dark out, but the town hadn't completely closed down yet. The guy on the first bike mumbled something, apparently quite urgent.

I didn't catch what he said. "I'm sorry?" I said.

"Oh, you're sorry," the guy said, and gunned his motorcycle. "Oh, okay. You're sorry." And they rode off.

No, I meant to say, I'm not sorry like that. I'm not sorry for anything I've done, I just didn't hear what you said. But he was already gone.

Was it a threat? I couldn't tell. I didn't have any respectable reason to be there, and it was generally recognized, I knew, that I wasn't spending a whole lot of money. So perhaps I had no business flirting with the girl at the laundry. But surely there was no need to send in thugs on motorbikes...

Or maybe it was something to do with the needleflower. Although I'd been hard at work, during the nights, on my translation of *Trying to Fit In*, it was slow going, and I'd had to go looking for more needleflower a few times. On the last occasion, I'd found myself in some apartment across town, with a group of sinister Russians who'd kept taking off their shirts. Maybe I pissed somebody off. In any case, I was glad that night to get back to my room, back to the glowing stones, and to work.

Eleven, who had given up on Haul and Squat, given up on everything, really, and devoted himself to epic poetry, had finally gotten his serendipitous, impromptu opportunity to perform for the king, and had as a result begun to achieve some renown throughout the land. While I at this point had only some vague inkling of what real fame might entail, my own dwindling notoriety the smallest of small-time, strictly local to Utah Valley, I yet found myself able to relate to some of what Eleven had to say on the subject.

The performer, he said, has a difficult relationship with his audience. For him, the ambivalence is downright existential: the reasoning goes that if the world loves you, it's proof of your talent or ability, but if they don't love you, you're nothing. How can the performer maintain any semblance of health, under such conditions? The validity of his very identity is bound up with these yokels, these rubes. *He* has no say in the matter; it's all up to *them*.

Yes, tell it, Eleven! I thought. Tell it.

The performer sets out to woo the whole world, and it's more than likely he'll be at it a good long while before anything material comes of it, if it ever does at all.

True! I thought. Epic poetry as a career is far from a sure thing...

The performer depends continually on the adulation of the spectators, who are notoriously fickle. They love you the first week, are tired of you the second week, and then a week later love you again. But you've still got to live through that second week.

Oh, I know about that second week! I thought.

It's a difficult relationship, a great deal of tension on either side, between the performer and his audience. It's only natural that he might come to nurse a kind of hatred, the way a beggar hates the guy who gives him money.

Jesus! I thought. I hope it doesn't come to that...

But Eleven just kept on and on about the temptations, the girls, the festivals, how he began to dry up inside. His poems increasingly tended to perverse detours, and he started entertaining the idea of suicide.

My goodness! I thought. And this is *after* the fame...

There was still a good bit of story left to tell of *Trying to Fit In*, I saw, and so it was perhaps a safe assumption that the blind orphan poet's condition was only a temporary phase. I stood from the desk and stepped out to the street to have a smoke. It was dark, there were no cars out, and only a few shadowy pedestrians. One of these stopped across the street; the camera's flash made me blink, and I couldn't see who it was as he quickly scurried away. I looked around; there was nothing around. He was taking my picture.

Who would need my picture, Judge, do you reckon? I don't guess it would be the people from the laundry. Was it you pulling the strings, setting me up with the hit song as a way of compelling me back to within the bounds of your jurisdiction? Or was it the hit song that put me on your radar in the first place? That photographer, I feel like I've met him dozens of times. I don't know who he is. You would know better than me.

I can't believe my good fortune. I've been given the job of unmasking the parts of the house which have recently been finished. This fact is surprising, as unmasking is usually considered a plum task, reserved for seniority—the paper comes peeling off to reveal the painted room's unexpected beauty, it is for the most part quite low-exertion—and the fact that I got this assignment after my performance in today's caulk-off makes it even more surprising. I prefer, however, not to overthink it. I'm working with Cody, who sticks only to windows, though in this giant house there's a lot of them, and in strange places, and Cody is messing with ladders such that I can't tell whether his not unmasking other things is coincidence, or intended.

I'm thinking about my trip to Vegas, and for whatever reason my mind is hung up on the question of luck. This seems like a subject that Cody, with his knowledge of astrology and his successful investing, might be able to shed some light on. Plus not to mention he knows about the contumblies, and by this point it feels fairly self-evident to me that, in some sense, you can't talk about luck without talking about the contumblies.

I'm rolling persistent little bits of tape from the edge of a cabinet. "That Las Vegas," I say, "that's a heck of a town."

Cody's at the top of a ladder, leaning deep into a window well. "I have to wear expensive shoes," he says. "They're a prescription, you have to special order them. You haven't seen a pair of shoes around."

"I've never noticed," I say.

"They're very expensive," says Cody. "I don't wear them all the time. But I have to wear them for a certain time. I've asked around but nobody says they saw them. Take someone like

Bert. He's the most personable guy around, he calls them my 'special shoes.' Like it's a funny thing. Do you know how much a pair of shoes like that costs."

"I don't know anything about it," I say.

"A guy like Bert is very charismatic, people will be inclined to go along with whatever he says. But then you go looking for your expensive shoes and where have they gone. Bert Swenson is the kind of guy who'll just smile at you. He doesn't care what you paid for those shoes."

"I don't know who'd want your shoes," I say. "I'm sure they'll turn up. What size are they?"

"No, you don't get it. They're not normal shoes. Somebody threw them away. These assholes."

"No," I say, "they'll turn up."

"That's what Prime said: 'I hope nobody threw them away.' A guy like Prime is not charismatic. No one will ever follow him or listen to a word he says. He's gonna be that same body weight his whole life."

"Yeah," I say, going for a stepladder, to get after the high stuff, "but he's the Boss' kid. I mean, that's still a type of luck..."

But thankfully Cody, as he descends the ladder, in no particular hurry, is one step ahead of me. "Even the slightest bit of knowledge," he says, "even one glimpse, you get some inkling of the true intentions of the contumelies, it'll cure you of any ideas you had about luck."

I can't believe my good fortune. "Cody," I say, but slowly, deliberate, "I need to ask you something and I need you to understand that I'm asking this, not to be funny, but strictly out of concern for my own personal situation. There's been some things happening lately which completely defy explanation."

Cody steps to the floor and stares up at me, his standard baffled frown this time perhaps signifying uncertainty.

“These contumblies,” I say. “I mean, what are their true intentions? I think I might’ve seen one once or twice.”

He continues to stare.

I reach up and peel off bits of tape, keeping that line straight. “Why would they be messing with me?”

Cody moves on to the next window. “The truth of the matter is, you never see them. You wouldn’t have seen them. You only see their handiwork. They’re like the light crew, they’re behind the scenes.”

There is an eerie silence in the room; it’s like time has suddenly stood still, and Cody for once is conversing in an orderly and linear fashion. I don’t want to break the spell, and I stay focused on peeling tape, as though the whole thing is normal, casual. “So then, what are they up to back there?” I say.

“You wouldn’t see them,” he says. “You only see their handiwork.”

Suddenly Gary strolls into the room, looks left, looks right, and continues past.

“But I mean,” I say, “I think they might be, like, pulling pranks on me.”

Cody glances over his shoulder, and the gesture, though as empty of affect as always, might mean that he’s ready to let go of the subject. “The best thing you can do if that’s the case,” he advises, “is to act like you don’t know anything about them. The one thing they get really nasty about is the threat of discovery. Didn’t you write a song.”

At this moment, Bert clomps into the room. He briefly takes in the scene, then declares, “Looks good in here! Another GJP success story. Sim, you’re doing a fine job. Remember, speed. But you’re doing a fine job.”

“Unmasking,” I say.

“Indeed!” Bert says. “The easiest job there is. So there’s no reason to slow down while unmasking, I think we can all agree about that.”

Cody sticks close to that window.

“Why would you slow down to unmask?” I say. “It’s the last step. Well, maybe not the *last* step, there might be some touch up and so on...”

“Exactly!” says Bert. “Why *would* you slow down at the last step. It would be like getting all the way to Life Scout and getting all the merit badges but then just giving up when it comes to the project. Like why would you give up when it’s right there within reach. It doesn’t make any sense to slow down when it comes time to unmask.”

I stop unmasking. “It doesn’t,” I say.

Bert is beaming. “But what’s all this talk of contumblies? Are you guys talking about contumblies in here?”

“Who said anything about contumblies?” I say.

Cody keeps to himself, his head bobbing.

“We’ve got more important things to concern ourselves with, right now,” says Bert. “A smart approach would be not to let ourselves get distracted.”

“Do you think there’s shark dentists?” I say.

“There’s dentist painters,” says Bert, without a hitch. “And there’s singer painters. There’s all kinds of painters. The important thing is that they play for the team.”

“Right,” I say, “but, the shark’s got rows and rows of teeth. I mean, they fall out but they just keep coming. So, what’s the underlying philosophy of the shark dentist?”

“Don’t you worry about *him*,” Bert says, “the shark dentist is blessed with a neverending supply. He’s doing just fine. What we should be worrying about is are we doing our part to help the team?”

I scratch my cheek. “Hmm,” I say.

“I’ll explain it to you in terms you’ll understand,” says Bert. “Cody there, he sometimes has this tendency to get distracted.”

Cody doesn’t react.

“It’s better for everyone if you don’t set him off,” says Bert. “It’s more efficient, on balance. A good way to set him off is to get talking about contumblies...” Bert glances over to Cody, who doesn’t react. “It’s better for everyone if you don’t. He’ll probably go getting strange ideas about somebody stealing his shoes...”

Cody peels masking.

“He has to wear special shoes,” says Bert. “He says they’re really expensive. I wonder what it’s like to wear special shoes. I don’t know, Sim, what do you think? Did anybody ever ask you to wear special shoes?”

“Naw, Bert,” I say, “my shoes have always been pretty tame. But you should see my underwear. Man, that shit’ll stop a bullet.”

“Hah!” Bert guffaws, but then is uncharacteristically silent for a moment.

Cody scoots up a ladder, and leans into a window.

“You truly are a unique specimen, Sim Henrie, shining star of painting,” says Bert. “I get the feeling that some of the things you do, you do just on principle.”

“No man,” I say. “Everything.”

“That’s good,” says Bert, “I can respect that.” It’s clear he’s in no particular hurry. “I wonder if one of your principles includes meeting this deadline. Cause that’s the GJP principle. I can see by your grooming that you’re a man of principle. But then I’m faced with the question of, deadline-wise, are your principles aligned with the principles of GJP?”

“Hey, let no one shirk,” I say.

“Indeed!” Bert cries, grinning. “We all have work. It’s so true. Put your shoulder to the wheel. Push along. I’ll tell you, that’s the kind of song that gets stuck in your head...”

“Oh, I know,” I say.

“Anyway,” says Bert, “this place is looking downright primo. Keep up the good work. But don’t be slowing us down with unnecessary distractions. You’ll probably be making Cody think the contumbles stole his special shoes.”

Cody is so deep into this window well, he’s invisible.

“It’s best not to get him worked up,” says Bert.

“Alright,” I say, “we’ll leave the contumbles out of it.”

“There you go!” Bert cries, and moves along, “it’s not so complicated if you just accept a few simple truths...” He clomps on out.

But in the silence that ensues, I am for whatever reason reluctant, out of some embarrassment, to continue my previous conversation with Cody. He is of course content to keep quiet, bobbing his head, his headphones in. I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve somehow betrayed him. I’ve never noticed his expensive shoes. I don’t even know if they’re a real thing. I keep peeling tape, and Cody does as well; whether he’s working slower than me or the same speed, I can’t really tell. We continue to unmask the painted rooms, in silence.

In retrospect, it's hard for me to say whether what finally brought me back home was the news of my fame, or was rather simply that I ran out of money. In my mind, the two events are simultaneous.

I was passing by a café one afternoon, noticed a pair of bearded European tourists who were new in town, and then, hearing their little portable radio which they'd cranked up to entertain the place, I stopped. On their radio was the uncanny sound of my own voice. Even worse, it was my voice from eight years ago. The recording, to me, was all too familiar.

I walked up the steps, found a chair at an adjoining table, and looked over a menu.

The Euros were smoking hand-rolled cigarettes and studying a map.

"Where you fellas headed?" I said.

The one with the better English said, "I think we are going to, hmm... Maybe this place? Do you know this place?" He pointed on the map.

"Oh, it's fine. You'll love it, a real small-town vibe..."

The two discussed this in their own language. I listened to myself singing.

"We think we go there," the Euro said.

My song came to an end; then, to my increasing amazement, the next song was the next track: these guys were listening to my album? But where would they have gotten it? Salt Lake City, somehow?

"This music is American," I said.

"Yes," said the one, then the other one said something and made impatient hand gestures.

The one nodded, and tapped the radio back to the previous track. He shrugged at me, said, "Popular American music."

The other one fumbled excitedly, “This song... good. Other song... no good. But this song, *this* song...” He squinted and wagged a finger of approval.

“But how did you find this song?” I said.

“Very popular in America, this song,” said the one.

How long had I been out here? “That’s my song,” I said. “But where did you find the album?”

The one Euro nodded, smiled. “This song very popular right now. You can find the album.”

“That’s my song,” I said.

“Yes,” said the Euro, “great song, great song.”

I realized I’d better get online and look into it, but then I thought no, let’s not dive headfirst into this new reality quite yet. I should be cautious, and deliberate in my approach. I took my time getting home, stopped by the laundry to see that girl and sort of hint that I’d always been kinda lucky, that maybe something auspicious awaited me. She laughed, played along, eyes twinkling. I peeked into a bottle shop, snuck it past the old lady in the lobby, and hunkered down in the hotel room. On the floor in the corner was that same old cockroach that I still hadn’t found the heart to stomp on.

If I’ve got a popular song, I thought, I could probably get some money out of it. That’s always been the idea, right?

I took the cap off the bottle, took a swig. I thought about the girl at the laundry. She’d thought I was joking, but I didn’t know if I was or not. In any case, it really was fortunate timing. I was nearly out of money.

At lunch, I take a drive over to the bank to replenish my wallet. It's not like the money means anything by this point, the carnival economy and so on, but it still somehow feels a bit comforting to have some cash in my pocket. I don't know, maybe I'm nostalgic.

I put my card in the ATM, and the machine immediately swallows it down in its gears: a feature I didn't know even existed. My fingers recoil in alarm. On the screen is the message "See Teller Inside."

I park the truck in the shade of a tree; it's true that the summertime is waning, but it's still kinda hot out in the midday sun. I take a swig of water, step out of the truck, dust myself off, check the mirror for paint splotches in my whiskers.

It's cool inside the air-conditioned bank. Respectable people stand in line, examining documents with vague worry. Every transaction seems to take an inordinate amount of time, and the line barely moves. I won't really have time to eat, under the newly rigid constraints of the workplace, but anyway I haven't brought anything from home, and I don't even want to think about what a drive-thru meal will set me back. Maybe I'll be able to poach an energy drink from the Place, when I get back.

By the time my turn comes, I'm in a hurry. The guy behind the counter is looking sharp in a sweater vest, with a CTR pin. I wonder for a moment what a guy like this, so clearly suited to his environment, could possibly find to worry about.

"How can I help you," he says.

I've got my wallet out, in case he wants to look at my drivers license. Wasn't it about to expire? I don't remember. "The machine outside ate my card."

"Hmm," he says, "that's odd. Do you have another card?"

I reach in the wallet, hand it over. He types some numbers on his keypad, takes one glance at the screen, and then inserts my card into a little box beside him on the counter. The little box makes a quick grinding noise, and my card comes out the other side in shreds. The man looks at me with a smile.

“Hey,” I say.

“It’s time to start thinking about paying down your balances,” he says. “Is there anything else I can do for you today?” Smiling.

I note this guy’s nametag, no last name of course, consider the idea of waiting outside, following him home, murdering his wife and family. But of course I can’t do that. I can’t do anything.

I clench my jaw, speak through my teeth. “Not today, young man,” I say, “It appears I must have a conversation with my accountant. Get this little snafu ironed out. I’ll be back momentarily...” And I wander out.

I fire up the truck, note the needle’s precarious position on the fuel gauge. It might get me to Friday. I ease the truck gently onto State. I should be thinking about food, I suppose, but instead I’m thinking about booze.

Head Coach Pluff Tibbins was in charge of the seven-year-old male contumbly Haul and Squat league of Ovorp Colony, and was therefore tasked with not only teaching the youngsters the finer points of the sport, but also in helping them prepare for the greater responsibilities of their service, and then adulthood beyond. Helping them Learn to Adapt, in the hallowed words of the National Anthem. He was enlightened enough to know this latter was the more important lesson to impart, but had many youths to train; he hoped that by focusing on Haul and Squat, in all its unexpected subtleties and strategic implications, he might keep things simple enough that the rest, to his protégés, would come naturally. There were, however, some occasions, such as today for instance, which caused him to reevaluate his pedagogical approach.

Head Coach Tibbins watched the boys out on the field, whistled at times, yelled good-natured suggestions at others. He kept a close eye on Shari Huddlestorm's son Geebler. The boy's ability was eerie, he reminded Tibbins of himself at that age, but with a glimmer of something otherworldly about him. It was like he was perfectly designed for the game of Haul and Squat, but imperfectly designed for all of the other things in life. The Head Coach had been keeping an eye on Geebler, really, ever since the boy's birth. The fact was that, for as long as he could remember, Pluff Tibbins had been in love with Shari Huddlestorm. Even after she married the accountant, for Tibbins nothing changed. He wanted to see her son Geebler succeed.

But, as he observed the youth in play, he increasingly noticed that Geebler, by the very dint of his abilities, was perhaps learning the wrong lessons from the game, was in fact perfecting an approach which might prove irreversibly maladaptive.

Head Coach Tibbins had no children of his own. He had, when his own turn came to choose, unexpectedly settled on the human conversion Petria Gulan, who had given him no complaints, and wasn't herself interested in children.

Gebler, out on the field, danced between the other contumblies effortlessly, laughing. The heartbreak will come, the Head Coach knew. But how the kid would handle it was beyond the sphere of Pluff's influence. All he could do was try to set a firm example of how the trouble, insurmountable actually, might be handled gracefully.

Pluff Tibbins had a home, a wife there who was at least as content as any of the neighbors, and had spent his post-service years training the younger contumblies in the finer points of Haul and Squat. He had trained a great many young contumblies. He felt he had done alright.

Friday morning, early, I come out of the upstairs shower pulling on a tee shirt, spraying on some old cologne I'd dug up. Maybe I'm finally catching on to Gary's message. It's still dark, but the light is on in the music room. I find Shauna deep in examination of my chart of song fragment titles. She's in a robe, still not bad looking though disheveled from sleep, and she's got a tired morning scowl. The room is littered with random, neglected musical equipment.

"You know you could really do something with this room," she says. "Do you even ever come in here?" She runs her fingers across the toy piano's dusty front, peers at the residue darkly.

"Good morning, Shauna," I say. "You're up early."

"Look, Sim," she says, with a step closer. "I hate to be the bringer of bad news? But, are you gonna come up with any money any time soon? Because, this place costs money..."

"It's Friday," I say, but unable to feign even a trace of optimism. "We'll be getting paid today."

"I hope so," she says, then takes a step closer still.

Her proximity, and the sort of hostility and defiance inherent to the situation, cause me some involuntary arousal, immediately followed by a shooting pain. My knees clench together, I shuffle my feet and grit my teeth. The fleeting thought glimmers, faint in the back of my mind, nearly unnoticed, my goodness, I might have to go see the doctor. But then Shauna's right up close, her hands in fists, tightening the knot of her robe.

"I really do," she says. "I'd hate to have to take some further action."

I don't know whether she sees how little fight I actually have left in me. It's five-thirty in the morning, my breakfast was a miracle out-of-state beer I'd forgotten about in a tool cabinet and then found, and I'm on my way to work for Greg Johansen Painting. "Shauna," I say, "what are you doing up here, really?"

"I'm trying to figure out if you're somebody with any potential of being anything or if you're just exactly what you appear to be, a total burnout loser. How old are you again? Have you ever tried thinking about, you know, being a man?"

It's too much information to process; I turn away. I feel like going to wake up Kenneth, to maybe explain to me what's going on, but then I realize he'd probably have some similar speech prepared, so instead I simply escape the house.

In the air is that crisp edge of early autumn. I turn up the music in the truck, some Moroccan drums and whining reeds, and roll down the windows. The gas gauge has begun its countdown, a system of yellow-orange-red warnings toward impending empty. Oh well, if I don't get there I don't get there. There's only so much you can do.

I've got a little time, so I skip the freeway and take the back roads instead, staying close to the hills. Provo, Orem, Lindon, Pleasant Grove. I've driven these roads a thousand times. I don't really understand why I came back here, there's nothing for me here, but it's like the place has me under its spell. The sky is pale and clear; the sun is about to appear.

I arrive at the mansion and notice the landscapers have been getting after it: decorative curbing winds tastefully around young trees, new flowerbeds, areas groomed with topsoil for sod, boulder walls up the gentle inclines. The mansion looms over the grounds like a castle, an aristocratic estate, and it is beautiful, any Utah girl's dream home.

I find a place to park, out of the way, and as I approach the garage I see Tree coming out of the house. Here for Gary, I assume, but wow: early. He spots me, makes a move as if to pretend he didn't, and then waves.

“Bro!” he calls, his crooked stoner's grin betraying nothing.

“So what, Tree,” I say as we meet, my hands in pocket, no high five, no fist bump, “did you slip me a mickey, or what the hell happened the other night?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he says. “Bro. Did I slip you a mickey. Are you for real? I saved a couple of your voice messages, just for the belligerence quotient. You should hear them. Here, I want you to listen to this.” He takes out his phone, starts tapping around, peers intent, eyebrows raised. “Shit. Maybe they're not there anymore. I get a lot of messages...”

“Kind of an adventure, me getting home,” I say.

“Dude. Your fucking drunk ass. This is your voice message.” He imitates my voice, but slowed down, like a malfunctioning record. “‘You... fucking... cunt...’ Like, thirty of those. Maybe more. I couldn't listen to them all. They just went on and on...”

“You might've picked up the phone.”

“We were at the titty bar, my friend! I'd even lined up a girl for you! But where the fuck was *your* drunk ass, is what I'm wondering. I tried to call you back, but your phone was turned off, maybe. Who the fuck knows. Even the next day. What am I supposed to do, spend the day driving around Vegas trying to find your drunk ass? Fuck that! I'm sorry bro, but fuck that. I had other shit to do...”

“Looks like I made it back, anyway,” I say.

But Tree's gotten himself worked up. “Slipped you a mickey. Of all things. I take you down to Vegas for a good time, let you drink all my liquor, introduce you to my friends, who by

the way were maybe *too* hospitable, and what do I get? ‘You... fucking... cunt... You... goddamn... pantywaist...’ For *days*, bro. What the fuck is that? Who does that? I slipped you a mickey, you think, you bellidge fuck. You know what, Sim? Don’t call me. Delete my number. I can’t help you, ever, with anything. I’m sorry, bro. You’re cut off. I’ve got enough stress in my life without worrying about disrespectful, drunk-ass bitches like you... Slipped you a mickey. You know what? Fuck you, bro.”

And he trudges off. I wonder if I’ve still got that jar of seeds I’d collected back when I bought that half-ounce of outdoor, just cause that’s all there was at the time. Maybe sneak a little garden in, back in that corner behind the shed, where Kenneth and Shauna wouldn’t notice. I wonder if the seeds are still any good, it has been a while. Maybe I ought to think about growing some food as well, the way things are going.

I enter the house to find Prime approaching me quickly with an energy drink in each hand. The white tee shirt, the gray sweatpants. I still haven’t determined whether he has multiple sets of the same uniform or is instead simply wearing the same articles of clothing and washing them every now and then. He hands me one of the energy drinks. Apricot Ignition flavor.

“This kind is good!” says Prime. “Maybe the best kind yet.”

I crack open mine, but the smell of it kinda makes my temples pulse. What did I do lastnight? I don’t remember going to bed, I only remember waking up. I take a sip, and feel a twinge in my gut.

“Not bad,” I say, but bleary I can tell.

He doesn’t seem to notice. “We’re on touch-up, upstairs,” he says. “Gary’s not gonna like it, but who cares. I made a deal with Bert, I said, the first guy here gets touch-up. And that’s you.”

“Dangerous bet,” I say. “It might’ve been Big Andy, Cody. You might’ve got stuck working with Enrique. With no one to translate...”

“Naw, Enrique drives his kid to school. And Big Andy doesn’t do touch-up. Too strenuous.”

“Touch-up?”

“A lot of bending and stretching.” Prime hops around, throws out his arms. “It’s good for fitness!” he says excitedly. “You’ll want a caulk gun, nail set, you got your spackle knife?”

I wield it, slap the flat blade across my palm.

“I’ve got brushes up there already,” says Prime. “What do you think Gary’s gonna say when he sees you with a brush in your hand?”

We enter the house and climb the stairs.

“What can he say?” I say. “Bert’s the guy in charge.”

“We hit it as a team,” says Prime.

“Yeah, well...”

I begin examining closely the trim in the long room with many windows, and I’m thinking about contumelies. Everything suddenly seems so uncertain to me, as I haul in the half-empty bucket of paint, and squat to inspect the underside of lower shelves in the closet. I feel a sharp pain in my back, but that could mean anything. My “translation”? Perhaps nothing more than a drug-induced long-term hallucination. Why do I require a supernatural explanation for the strange things that keep happening to me? Cody is my sturdiest accomplice in this pursuit, but who knows what’s going on in his damaged head. Yes, I might have seen them once or twice, but I see a lot of things. Yes, there was that eerie business with Mussberger, but was that even really him? Yes, there’s the whole thing with my stalker and the voice recordings—probably the

most incontrovertible evidence—but have I not been rendered by this point sufficiently inconsequential? Who is it that would need to see me so completely ruined, whose appetite for mockery would go that far? Why would the contumelies even be interested?

Prime is across the room, sanding gently at a windowsill. I peek at him from the closet.

“Prime?” I say. “Why do you think Gary’s had it in for me, all this time? It seems like since the moment I got here, he’s just been after me about every little thing, like nothing I do is ever right. And we’re friends, I mean, he’s the one that got me on...”

“Maybe that’s just it,” Prime says, without looking up. “He got you the job, he thinks you’re his responsibility. And you’ve got to understand about Gary. He’s a little OCD.”

“That’s what you call that,” I say. “OCD.”

“Painting houses is the thing that Gary does,” Prime says. “It’s the thing that he knows. Have you met his wife? Absolutely fucking batshit crazy.”

“I don’t care about that,” I say. “But what’s with all the uptight bullshit? Pointed in *my* direction, I mean.”

“You’ve maybe got other things,” Prime says. “It could be painting isn’t your number one thing, you know. With Gary, it’s the *only* thing. And if I were you, I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“It’s not like I’m *worried*, exactly...”

“Good,” says Prime. “And by the way, I know all about the Gary Preston rash of shit. It was *me* for a little while, if you can believe it. Few years back, my dad bought a new truck, and gave me the old one, as a kind of work truck. Well you know my truck. Hand-me-down from the old man. But Gary was hurt that *he* didn’t get a work truck. He thought he deserved it more.”

“He was jealous that your dad gave *you* the truck instead of him.”

Prime nods, lowers his voice. “Yep. That’s who he is. I think maybe it’s OCD. But he was giving me a *rash* of shit, there for a while.”

“I wonder what’s the reasoning with me,” I say.

“That’s just who he is,” says Prime, “I wouldn’t lose any sleep over it. He’s always been like that. Uptight, maybe, is the word for it. You know his mom, when he was younger, his mom was like a raging alcoholic. She’s good now, but you get the feeling that maybe...”

Someone comes clomping up the hall, we get quiet, but it’s only Bo, who does not appear his usual sluggish morning self but is instead grinning at me, mischievous, as though he holds some joyous secret.

“We were just talking about Gary,” Prime explains.

“Oh,” says Bo, “not the contumblies?”

Prime laughs. “New rule!” he says. “This one’s official, it’s from on high. You can ask Bert. New rule! We don’t say that word anymore.”

Bo glances up from his phone, perplexed. “Contumblies?” he says, then shoots me that same knowing leer.

Prime gets serious. “Shush! We don’t say *that* word.”

“Oh,” says Bo.

But now I’m intrigued. “Contumblies?” I say.

“Shush!” Prime emphasizes.

Bo’s at his phone, grinning. If GJP is outlawing the very utterance of the word “contumbly,” then any potential future information-gathering, however arduous it might once have proven in practice, is now completely out the window. Plus not to mention...

“Does Cody know about this new rule?” I say.

“Cody’s the *reason* for the rule,” Prime assures me.

“But, I mean,” I say, “you can’t just tell a guy that he can’t say his own, like, trademark word.”

Prime beams. “Don’t have to!”

“Cody doesn’t work here anymore,” says Bo. “He quit after lunch yesterday. Said someone threw away his expensive shoes.”

The news, to me, is dismaying indeed. “And now the word itself is banned,” I say. “I wonder whatever became of those shoes...”

“Those fucking shoes,” says Prime. “I got so tired of hearing about those. I know who did it, it must have been those... Oops! I can’t say it!” He laughs hysterically.

Prime is celebrating the departure of a coworker, which it appears he might actually have engineered, Bo keeps glancing up at me, suggestively, and I’m beginning to get a sort of prison vibe from this company. I shrink back into the closet.

But Bo follows me in. He stares at his phone’s screen, and his lips curl around his dead tooth. “Sim,” he says, “I’ve got something you need to see...”

I’m feeling kinda shaky, a bit dry on the inside and clammy on the outside, and even this early, I’m tired of shenanigans, this morning. “I don’t want to look at internet porn with you, Bo,” I say.

“I think you’re gonna want to see this one,” says Bo, with a forced chuckle. “Is it porn? I can’t tell. But I think that you, of all people, would want to see this one.”

I suddenly feel very cold, and the pulse in my temple becomes a hammer. “What is it, Bo?” I manage, but it seems that even my voice won’t function, my tongue is cumbersome. “Is it internet porn?”

Bo leers, evil and triumphant. “I can’t tell. I think you’d better look and tell me what you think.”

I stand up shaky, reluctant, and look at the screen. It’s internet porn, alright, but it’s *me* sprawled out across the garden shed cot, no other characters in this scene. Video footage, and I see by the pace of the timeline that it goes on for a while.

I note the title: “Sim Henrie Follow Up.”

It’s clearly me; I’d know it even without the garden tools, the steel guitar. But how did they get that lighting, how did they get that camera angle? And when was this? The guy on the screen, Sim Henrie the famous singer, looks like he’s in serious pain, looks like he’s not convinced the thing even still works.

I note the top of the comments: “This the saddest dude in the entire world.” After that, it looks like they’re mostly snippets of song lyrics.

I try not to look too close at the number of views. The guy on the screen, Sim Henrie the famous singer, actually has tears rolling down his cheeks. Oh lord...

“Now what made you think I’d want to see that, Bo?” I say through clenched teeth.

“I would want to know,” he says. “If it were me. But, if it were me, I don’t think it would look quite like this.” He slaps my shoulder, hard, jovial, shakes his head, tuts. “I think I would at least try to enlist some help!”

“You truly are a good friend,” I say. “Now I’ve got work to do. But do me a favor, would you? Make sure to go around today and show everyone on the GJP crew that video? I suspect it would be good for morale...”

Bo gives my shoulder a hearty shake, and turns away. “You got it, Boss,” he says, and his thumbs tap away at his phone.

I kneel down, feel pain, adjust my pants, and then settle in, running my fingers across the smooth, finished baseboard. It seems like as good a thing to do as any, by this point. The goddamn internet. Ah, well. One less thing to worry about.

Look, Judge, you know I never had any real talent, I know I never had any real talent. You spend enough time with a thing, you pick some things up. It could be the real charge you're bringing against me is that I never learned the things I was supposed to learn in time. There's things that people are just supposed to figure out for themselves, and usually the sooner the better. But in my defense, allow me to recount how I got myself into this music racket in the first place.

Her name was Catherine.

Patrick and Cam were fresh off their missions; I'd stayed home, teaching myself the guitar, and music. Cam's little brother had a band, Cam had bought a bass, and there was a backyard gig in three weeks that we could open for, if we had a set. Patrick had been playing the drums since junior high. I wrote eight songs in five days. A couple of them weren't bad.

We played the gig. Catherine sat in the grass right there in front of us, watching me sing, rocking her head with a hippie's dreamy smile. I thought she was cute, wondered how old she was.

The next day, she came strolling by me as I stood holding a gas pump at the corner. She hopped in the car.

We took a walk in the park, bumped into one of her friends, and the whole time Catherine kept making like she wanted to make out right there, with her friend present to see.

It was already dark. We went to the baseball tower, climbed up, started fooling around. I couldn't believe it. After one gig.

The parents at home, hounding me to get a job.

I thought to myself, you know, this music racket ain't bad. Catherine somehow found me again the next day, but the magic wasn't there. I was thinking, I want to play another gig.

I thought, Judge, that with music, I might make any woman love me. Meaning, the one I wanted. And so what does it matter whether I succeeded or not? I went to great lengths, Sir. I understand that, in the eyes of the Law, the whole situation is ridiculous, but I can't help it, Sir, I fell in love. I thought that, if only I could write that perfect song, that song that everyone would love, that she would love me. So maybe it was an abuse of liberty. The process of writing that perfect song sure didn't feel particularly liberating. I was in love, Sir, I hope you'll understand. I went to great lengths...

At some point in the afternoon, the Boss arrives on the jobsite. It takes me a long time to realize that painters are slowly disappearing. Then, late, when the sun is getting low, Prime comes and finds me and explains.

"It's payday," he says. "Everyone is getting paid, and taking the rest of the day to go take care of shit. We'll be back at it tomorrow. But it's payday. On payday, we go take care of shit for the last part of the day."

It's after seven. I don't know what shit I'm supposed to go take care of, by this point. "Think anybody's gonna go get loaded?" I say.

"Fuck yeah!" says Prime. "Me."

I find the Boss in a little side room down a hall. He is seated on a five-gallon paintbucket, and holds a pile of timecards atop a ledger on his lap. He is wearing paint clothes, but with that flourish of style you find in older painters—sleeves rolled up square, collar loose. His hair is feathered. He looks nothing like Prime.

“Sim Henrie,” he says, shaking my hand, firm, “Greg Johansen. I hear good things about you. I hear you’re a solid worker.”

“Good,” I say.

“Bert tells me good things,” the Boss says.

“Well, I, uh...”

“I know,” the Boss says, “I know. There’s some personalities on this crew. But this is a solid crew. I’ve been in the game a while, and I’ve come to understand that you’re always gonna have personalities. Heck,” he forces a laugh, slaps a knee, “I’m a personality myself.” Then he turns serious. “It could be you’re a personality too.”

“Um...”

“That’s why I find it helpful to standardize the approach, across the board,” the Boss says. “We all pitch in, we all do our part. We hit the thing as a team. But the important thing is that, in our approach, we’re all on the same page. Meaning that, if that’s the way that Bert does it, if that’s the way that Gary does it, if that’s the way that Big Andy does it, then that’s the way that we’ve *all* got to be doing it. Does that make sense?”

I’m not sure how to answer the question. I’ve always preferred my language to be meaningful. He peers at me thoughtfully; he’s not really asking. “Yes?” I say.

“The big idea,” says the Boss, “is that we Learn to Adapt. We do it good, and we do it fast. Those that can’t do it that way, that can’t Learn to Adapt, get left behind.”

I feel some discomfort, adjust my stance. Maybe I should ask if there's a medical plan. But I'm still kinda new here. "I think I'm getting the hang of it," I say.

The Boss looks over my timecards. "I think maybe you are," he says, then gets thoughtful, starts running some figures in his ledger with a pen. He muses distractedly, as he makes his mysterious calculations, "Good attendance, anyway, that's more than I can say for some... We'll see if Cody decides to come back again... Cody's been with us for years, but I think he might've really quit this time. Hasn't even come around to get paid."

"It sounds like he's got some other things going," I say, optimistic as ever.

The Boss reaches a sum. "Yeah, well," he says, then gets thoughtful again.

I suddenly realize there's no checkbook in sight. "So what's the damage?" I say, cheery as ever.

The Boss stands from the paintbucket, tucks the timecards and ledger in a folder at his side. "Walk with me," he says, and I follow him out and down the stairs. "You may have noticed the kind of monkey-business economy we've been dealing with lately."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"Money's no good anymore," says the Boss. "You don't want to know how much I've lost on this project already. It's a new era. We're entering a new age. But I've got something better than money..."

We exit the house. Outside, it's quiet, the shadows are long.

"What could possibly be better than money?" I say, as we cross the newly-finished driveway to a semi-trailer I never noticed before.

The Boss laughs, slowly shakes his head, bemused by my naivete. “Been out to buy anything in the last week or so?” he says. “What could possibly be better than money, right now? I’ll tell you what. Anything.”

He’s paying me in five-gallon buckets of sugar. White, granulated sugar, like you put in your coffee. He’s got them stacked toward the front end of the semi-trailer.

“It’s better than money,” he says.

“Sweet,” I say, then let him help me load ten of them into my truck bed. I’ve got seventeen more that I can return for on trips two and three. Of course I know the gas won’t hold out, but I keep quiet, not certain whether this is the point where I’m supposed to quit or not. I need some time to think the question over. The truckbed sits a little lower over its wheels.

“I guess I’ll go take care of some things,” I say.

“I’ll give you a point of advice?” says the Boss. “We’re entering a new age. It’s a good time to be a good neighbor.” He winks at me.

“I get it,” I say, and fire up the truck. Back out, roll up to the gate, nod at the security guard in his car. The gas gauge is on flashing red.

I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with all this sugar. Something tells me I’m not even going to make it home.

Things start to get dire around the mouth of Provo Canyon. I’ve got a decision to make: take a right, toward home, which I’m gonna run out of gas and die before I ever get to, or keep on straight up the canyon, to just pull off somewhere when the truck stalls out, and take a walk.

Of course I take a left. The motor starts to stutter just before Canyon Glen Park; I pull in, coast into a parking spot. I set the emergency brake, and a bottle rolls out from under the seat,

one I didn't even know I had, in fact don't even remember ever seeing before. It rolls into my ankle like a flirtatious teenage girl.

I dig up a jacket from the back, tuck the bottle in a pocket, and exit the truck. There's nothing I can do about the sugar; if someone wants to steal it, they're gonna steal it. I let it be, turn to walk toward the park's bridge, to get across the bike path and on the trail up the hill. It's just getting dark.

The trail feels good on my legs. The air is cool. I stop a minute, take a pull, then keep walking.

I come up over the rim, where it all opens up into a great, grassy bowl. There's a campfire up ahead, a lot of people standing around. I mosey on up.

"Hello there," I say, then take out the bottle to pass around. These people, I can't tell if they're homeless or not. A lot of them are young, but not all of them. Some of the girls are kinda cute.

One guy is hammering away on a guitar, but he's no good. When he sets the thing down to drink, I ask him if he'll let me play it. He kinda grudgingly accedes.

I figure, what the hell, go ahead and play the hit. By the third verse, half of the folks around the fire are singing along. I've played it a million times, never figured out why this particular one always works. I'm goofing off by the third chorus, singing in-between comebacks to the lines everyone else is singing from memory. Some people stare at me a moment too long, like they almost can remember that they know who I am. I just set my jaw and belt it out.

The moon comes out, the fire is reassuring, though I recognize no one here. I hand the guitar back to its owner, who lowers at me, a bit resentful.

"I know that one!" says this old guy. "I love that song!"

“So do I,” I say. “So do I.”

“Who wrote that one?” the old guy says. “Whose song is that?”

I think it over. The people around the fire are also interested. “I don’t know,” I say. “I don’t remember.” It doesn’t exactly feel like a lie.

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