

Entrekin

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A lot of people will think of this as vanity publishing, but it is not. This is not for me.

This is for you. They all are. Every last word is written, ultimately, for you to read.

I hope you enjoy them. I hope you love them, in fact. I hope they touch you, in however small a way.

And most of all, I hope they completely surprise you.

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For Cynthia

I think of her every time I get water from a refrigerator with an automatic filter. Oh, sure, her wavy blonde hair was stunning and her brown eyes could make you lose whatever thought you had, but it's the water that sticks out; her refrigerator tapped directly into a supply hundreds of feet underground, ancient caverns and crisp, clean minerals, and boy how, you could taste it. That water even smelled clear like water ought to.

I met Cynthia Barston in a bookstore. I was browsing the fiction section, and suddenly I smelled sunflowers. Not just one: thousands, a giant field golden straight to the horizon. The scent filled my whole head, and my nose took a deep breath just to get another whiff even as it turned my head, and there she stood.

"Hi," I said. It surprised me, snuck right up and jumped right out, which is probably good because I'm not sure I would have managed it otherwise. I had as much control over that greeting as over my own heartbeat.

She smiled at me, just the corners of her mouth, and her lovely eyes twinkled. "Hello," she said, and she reached by me to take a copy of *Dubliners* from the shelf.

"Good choice," I told her.

"Is it?"

"You've never read it?"

She shook her head. "I just started a creative writing class, and our professor assigned it. He said the best way to learn short stories was to read this book," she waved it, gently.

“A couple of them are really good, yeah. Tell you what, though. You want to read some good, entertaining short stories, read this,” I told her, and I pulled a copy of Stephen King’s *Night Shift* from the shelf.

“King?”

“I know, he’s got that horror-writer-reputation going for him, but I’m telling you, this is a really good collection.”

“You work here?”

“Nah. Just read a lot.”

“So you’re not trying to sell it to me?”

“What? Oh, no,” I said. “Just figured you might enjoy it. And King’s a little more accessible than Joyce. They’re easier stories.”

“Okay,” she said. “Sold me.”

“I don’t think you’ll regret it. And I’ll tell you what, if you do, I’ll buy you coffee,” I told her. The words were out of my mouth before I’d considered them, before I’d thought them; all I’d had the chance to do was feel them, but I did that as hard as I could.

She smiled at me, closed-mouthed but genuine, shy but knowing and appreciating. “Are you asking me out?”

I shrugged. “I’m just offering a cuppa Joe if you don’t like a book I apparently talked you into buying. Pay back, really.”

She laughed, a lovely lilting sound that seemed to come from her whole body, just beamed out of her, and the whole world relished feeling young for a moment, heard her laugh and remembered what it was like to be a child, and full of wonder. “A cup of Joe? Who says that?”

I probably blushed. “All right, well. Decaf mocha latte spritzer. Heck, I’ll buy you a cream soda if you want.”

“Oh, mister big spender now, huh?”

“Actually, the soda’s probably cheaper.”

She chuckled, and I smiled, and then we stood in silence a second, before she said, “Well, are you going to give me your number? Unless you want me to think I didn’t like this really, really hard. Is your telepathy good?”

I took the book from her, and I pulled the pen I always keep in my pocket out, wrote my name and number on the inside front cover.

“You always carry a pen in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me,” she said.

It’s not the first time I’ve heard that. “Always have it. You just never know when an idea’ll hit you, do you?”

She smiled. “Ah. You’re a writer.”

“I like telling stories.”

She scanned the inside cover of the book. “Dylan.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry,” I told her, offered my hand. “I’m Dylan.”

She took my hand, and I decided I was lucky I didn’t gasp at the electricity of her skin on mine. “Nice to meet you, Dylan. I’m Cynthia.”

“Well nice to meet you too, Cynthia. Give me a call, if you don’t like the book.”

“Oh, I’ll call you either way. Because if I do like the book, the coffee’s on me. Only fair, isn’t it?”

“Only.”

She nodded. “All right. Well, I’ll talk to you soon, then. Have a good night.”

“You too,” I told her, and she headed out of the aisle, toward the cashiers, and I checked her out as she went, yes. I don’t think I would’ve been surprised if flowers had bloomed up in her wake, and I wondered, too, if they might have, had she only been outside.

I’ve always told people I hate musicals because no one just walks out of a library and bursts into spontaneous song, but I disproved my own theory that night. I left the bookstore singing Stevie Wonder, “Part-Time Lover,” if you care to know. I was very much looking forward to talking to Cynthia again, and it was the first time in a long while I’d been in so fine a mood.

I had just moved back home back then, you see, to a small suburb in southern New Jersey after having lived in Manhattan for six years. I was hoping to get my bearings again, sort out my life and figure out what I wanted from it.

Was it Wolfe who said you never can go home again? I can't remember, and it's obviously not true, because there I was, but I'll admit it wasn't easy. It didn't seem to fit right: a little short in the cuffs and tight across the chest and, even if it did fit well, I don't think it would be my style.

I almost didn't answer her call when my cell phone rang over a week later because I didn't recognize her number. I did, however, recognize her voice the moment I heard it, the moment she said, sorry I didn't call you, you were right, I got so wrapped up reading the stories, wow, they were great. I think I owe you coffee.

And so we made plans to meet in that very same bookstore, and we had a lovely time. She bought us two coffees, and we sipped them and talked about everything from our jobs to our childhoods in our own small towns, our lives and our diversions. We sat there from seven in the evening until the disembodied voice on the intercom told us we'd better decide on our final purchases; it was only then that we looked at our watches, then at each other, and we sheepishly smiled, amused that we had so thoroughly lost track of the time.

"I'd really like to do this again," I told her, when we'd arrived at her car. It was a crisp, clear night, and I've never seen so many stars anywhere as I did that evening, in her eyes. I wanted to stand there all night and wish on every one of them.

She hesitated when I said it, though, and looked away. "Look, I don't— I had a really good time with you, but I have to tell you I just got out of a pretty long relationship."

I nodded. Of course I'd heard it before. Hasn't everyone? Haven't you? "Oh, well, hey, I mean," I told her as I tried to fumble my way to what I meant, "I understand. But we could just hang out, couldn't we? Like we just did."

I could tell she was deliberating, considering, and then her mouth seemed to smile in spite of her, and she nodded. "Okay, yeah. I'd like that."

"Cool. I'll give you a call later this week."

I didn't call her later that week. Well, I did, yes, technically, but not before she'd called me both the day following our coffee

break and the next, and then the next. Each night we talked for hours, and all those hours seemed to pass like we always wish time might.

During one of those long talks, when we were digressing through her classes and her interests, she mentioned that her writing teacher had assigned several Poe stories.

“Ooh. Ouch.”

“Ouch?”

“Ouch,” I nodded, as if she could see it. “I’ve never been a fan of Poe’s stories. The poems, yeah, but not the stories.”

“What’s your favorite? ‘The Raven?’”

“Actually, I know a lot of people go with that one, but I like ‘Annabel Lee’ more. I went to the museum once with my sister, and—.”

“The museum?”

“The old Poe house? It’s on, um. I think it’s Seventh and Spring Garden.”

“In the city?”

“Well, in Philly, yep,” I told her. Because Philadelphia is Philadelphia, but the City is Manhattan. “He lived there for a year, and now they’ve got it all bare, and they do a little tour and everything. It’s pretty cool.”

“I never knew that. What’re you doing this weekend? Wanna go?” she asked, and when a girl like Cynthia Barston asks you to do something with her, you don’t say no. At least, I don’t. We decided to go to the museum, and then maybe get a bite to eat.

“Well, then, pick me up at one,” she told me, and gave me directions to her house, and I told her I’d be there. I’ll admit I was nervous when I hung up with her. Not just because I was going with one of the prettiest girls I’ve ever seen, but because I’d already realized how special she was and how interested I was in her.

I knew how I was feeling, and she’d already told me her situation. I didn’t want to invest in something one-sided, something doomed, because, having just moved home, still looking for a decent job, still hoping for a decent life, I had other things I needed to invest in.

I might have stuck with that mindset, too, if Cynthia hadn't called me the next two nights, as well. If we hadn't spoken more hours about more things than I'd realized you can talk about with someone. But we did, and so, by the time Saturday morning woke me up, I wasn't thinking about jobs or apartments or anything else, for that matter. I was just thinking about Cynthia.

I woke to birdsong that beautiful Saturday morning, and I sprang from bed, which doesn't usually happen. I'm not a big fan of getting out of bed on the weekends, but that day I did it with pizzazz. That day I leapt, hummed while I showered, put my contacts in, shaved, even while I dressed, a happy, if tuneless, humming. I'm completely tone deaf, but that didn't matter. The sunlight spangled in through my bedroom window, and I put on a light blue polo shirt to bring out my eyes, my khakis, and a black blazer. I looked in the mirror on the back of my bedroom door, adjusted my collar, winked at myself, and I was stepping out my door when I realized I wanted to buy Cynthia Barston flowers. Just to see her smile.

The world waiting for me was just waking up from winter, just stretching and rubbing the sleep of a bleak, dreary February out of its eyes. The air was still brisk, sure, I couldn't call it warm, but the sun was still out, even if the world was going to hit the snooze button one last time.

My father was out, pushing the mower across a lawn greener than it had any right to be, green like poets wish grass would be.

"Mornin', Pop," I waved, didn't think he'd be able to hear me over the mower anyway, but he let go of the handle. It grumbled to a stop.

"You're all dressed up. Where you headed?"

I smiled. "Ah, just out. You know."

I couldn't tell for sure how he looked at me, then; he has these huge, wraparound safety glasses with big, dark lenses that are all he ever wears. "She cute?"

I chuckled. "Oh, yeah. You'd be prouda me. I was thinking of getting her flowers, t—," I told him, even as my

brain registered that, just beyond him, the forsythias were in full, fine, golden bloom. “Hey, you mind if I take a few sprigs,” I nodded toward the flowers.

He looked back over his shoulder, shrugged. “Don’t see why not,” he said, pulled his multipurpose tool from his pocket as I stepped past him, and I grasped some branches, snipped here and there until I had a burst of flowers I knew I’d be happy to hand to Cynthia Barston. Those flowers were yellow like bees and convertibles with their tops down and that catchy summer song you can’t help turning up, and when I pulled them close and their scent filled my whole head, they smelt like the sweet hope for spring.

“They won’t last, you know.”

I turned back to my dad.

“They don’t bloom long,” he told me. His arms were on his hips, and he was looking at the hedges just to my left. “Oh, they’re pretty and all, but they won’t last more’n a few weeks.”

I considered that a moment. “Well, flowers don’t ever really last anyway, do they?”

My father looked at me, and after a moment smiled. “True enough,” he said. “True enough at that. They’ll be pretty while they last.”

“And it’ll be worth it just to see the smile on her face.”

My dad smiled at that, then, “Well, go on, get outta here, go have some fun.”

And so I did.

Cynthia smiled exactly like I’d wanted her to when I gave them to her, wide and with no reservation. I melted.

“They’re beautiful,” she said as she took them, smelled them. “Thank you.” Her smile lit up her whole voice, downright beamed on through it, and I was the happiest guy in the world for a minute there. Monks in the mountains meditate all their lives hoping for a moment of nirvana like I felt when Cynthia smiled.

“Come on in,” she told me, and so I did, met her parents, her brother, shook hands all around. Her father offered me something to drink, and when I asked for water, that was when

he gave me a glass of water finer than I've ever tasted. We all sat a few minutes, went through the usual small talk and the who-are-you-that-you're-dating-my-daughter, but everyone was great.

We left and went to the museum, joked and wondered about Poe's marrying his thirteen-year-old cousin, listened to Christopher Walken recite "The Raven," on a CD in the reading room on the lower level, and then we went around the corner and had some appetizers at a small bistro.

After that we drove to South Street and walked most of its length, enjoying that fine day until evening fell like intimacy. She put her hand through my arm as we walked, and it made my day; I'd always wanted to walk down a city street arm-in-arm with a beautiful girl. When I pointed out a twinkling star and told her to make a wish on it because it was the one I'd used, she looked up, closed her eyes as if in prayer, and then turned and kissed me.

I've heard that your first kiss is the one by which all the rest in your life are measured, but my first kiss was the measure until I kissed Cynthia Barston and forgot all about it. I kept my eyes closed when she pulled back, because I wanted to hold, keep, and cherish that moment just another longer.

"Well, that's my wish, coming true," I said, but my voice was a long distance away.

She laughed, and I felt her voice in my heart. "Come on, silly," she told me.

That was the beginning, and that was when I started falling. I didn't mean to. I didn't plan to, and I didn't even want to. If anything, I tried not to, but we talked every day and saw each other almost as many, and before long I was looking at all those things that might've been working against us and thinking maybe they weren't all that much too worry about after all.

You'll have to forgive me; I was twenty-four and in love. Cynthia seemed to be everything I'd wanted in a girl and had been afraid to hope for, a girl who could hypnotize you by dancing. A girl who could quote Nietzsche as easily as she could quote *Calvin and Hobbes*. And, most of all, a beautiful girl who

was happy spending time with me, and what more could I ask for? I don't know about you, but I know when to stop.

It felt like what Cynthia and I had could be the healthy, wonderful relationship I'd so wanted. We made plans to go camping and even to go to Manhattan for a weekend, which would've been my first trip back, and she was the only person I ever told about my growing pains, moving back home from my life in the City. How I felt about it, that I was a little ashamed that September 11th had affected me so hard because I knew a lot of people a lot worse off; one of my colleagues had lost her two brothers and an uncle, all fire fighters, in the subsequent emergency efforts.

Cynthia listened to me, and really, that might have been all I needed. My chest felt lighter after I told her all of that, my breath like it had more room, and when my heart found it felt freer, it went to her.

Last Sunday, I realized something. We'd been dating for a few short weeks that had felt good and right and full of shared secret smiles. I had felt comfortable with other girls before, but there was something there, with Cynthia, that had never been there before; I was vulnerable. Cynthia could hurt me. No other girl had ever had that ability.

I told her that, because it surprised me and because, since she'd made me feel better about my feelings toward leaving Manhattan, I figured she could probably make me feel better about that, too.

She just raised her head from my chest, looked into my eyes and held them close, and she said, "That's not in the plan," and kissed me.

It was all I needed to hear. I'd been restraining myself before then, but I fell then, and hard.

I sensed something was wrong. I asked her about it, but she said she was just tired. I knew she'd worked that day, so I accepted her answer at face value even though I doubted it. We went out to a movie, and then I drove her home because she was tired. I walked her to her door. We hugged, kissed, and then, knowing that she was staying with friends for the weekend, I

told her to call me when she got back. She smiled, said okay, and kissed me again.

I walked back to my car, watched the door close and her form disappear into the darkness visible through the glass. I missed her.

I just got off the phone with her.

It's over now. She thought she was ready for a relationship, but she really wants to try the single thing for a while. She thought if a guy was special enough she'd want nothing more than to be with him, and it would make everything clear, but nothing had changed. She said each of those things, and each one hurt in a completely different way, and left my breath just a little farther away.

Is it my fault? She said no. It's not me. It's her.

Of course it is. Of course.

I know that. I shouldn't have expected anything more than exactly what I got.

She said she loves hanging out with me, and I make her happy, and she wants to stay friends. Of course she does. Of course.

I told her that, since she'd been honest with me, I'd be honest with her; I'd been falling for her, and I didn't think I could be just friends right away, not with the feelings I had.

She said she understood, and I'd know where to find her when I was ready, and I told her, you know, I don't think this is going to come out sounding right but don't know how else to say it, either, but the same goes for you. Once you're past your confusion, call me if you want, and maybe we can try, because I'd like that, and I think you're special.

She was dead silent.

"What?" I asked.

"I don't want you waiting for me."

I laughed. I won't wait for her. Of course I won't, but—

Was it Tennyson who said it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? I'm not certain, but I don't believe I would be hurting quite so badly if we'd just stayed friends and I hadn't found out how wonderful and beautiful she is.

I don't know anything, really, only that I'm stunned. I know I couldn't talk much after she told me, because there was really not much more to say.

I felt detached after I hung up with her, and I went driving. I had to, for the same reason I wanted to return home that autumn, just to see where I'm from again. Just to see familiar things and to try to find some comfort. I noticed, as I went, that the blossoms were gone from the forsythia bushes.

It may be telling that I got lost, driving that night, in the darkness of a town I'd lived in for eighteen years. Maybe home's just not as familiar as I thought it would be.

I found nothing out there, no answers, no questions even. I just drove, and I thought of Cynthia and the way she kissed, the feel of her softly solid body in my arms. I thought of her eyes, her smile, the sound of her voice and her laugh. I thought of how she lit up when I gave her those flowers, and I wondered how long, exactly, those flowers had bloomed, and why I hadn't noticed them all fall away until they were already gone.

This Ain't Wonderland

I was expecting
to chase a late, white rabbit
into its burrow
and through a wild adventure,
but didn't realize
I had to find my own.

I was expecting
a caterpillar with a bong
who mumbled cryptic sayings
fortune cookies would be envious of,
but didn't realize
I should listen better.

I was expecting
to eat myself small
and drink myself huge
but didn't realize
I was already just the right size.

I was expecting
to paint roses
but didn't realize
I had been for quite a while.

I was expecting
to lose spectacularly
in a passionate game of croquet
with hedgehogs as balls,
but didn't realize
my flamingo isn't so difficult to manage.

I was expecting
to worry about
keeping my head on,
but didn't realize
loosing it might behoove me.

I was expecting
To one day ponder
(though not in a very hopeful tone)
my future life as a Duke,
but didn't realize
Knives have much more fun.

I was expecting
to be oddly disconcerted
by the troubling grin
of a Cheshire cat,
but didn't realize
how many times I had already seen it.

I was expecting
to have to run
from a terribly frightening,
steam-billowing-from-the-ears,
furious-red-the-color-of-consuming-embers-eyed
Jabberwocky,
but didn't realize
I had already faced him.

I was expecting
Alice to be bold, brilliant, and beautiful,

but didn't realize
she doesn't care as much about adventure
as she's supposed to.

I was expecting a lot,
I guess,
but didn't realize
this ain't Wonderland.

Dear Author

Late at night, I wonder if she ever really had feelings for me. That's what's been most difficult: not her leaving, but rather wondering if she was honest.

What's most difficult is . . . did she really look at me, try to get to know me? Was she open to it? Does she really not have time, or did she look at me and realize, nah, not this one (and then there's the nagging, well, if I'd handled my feelings better, would it have changed anything, but no, that way lay madness)?

That's what counts, mostly.

I'd say that she was the first girl in a while I felt anything for, that she was the first girl since my ex- that I really wanted, but that'd be a lie. There were three years between my ex- and her, and those years weren't filled with girls, no, but they were filled with misplaced emotions.

Misplaced emotions. Not like I lost anything. Just kinda stopped thinkin' about where I was puttin' shit.

I fell for her. Girls will only play the games you let them, will only hurt you as hard as you let them, and she crushed me and hollowed me out because I let her. I let her get inside me, and why?

Because one day I saw her smile, and one day she kissed me back, and one day I let her in.

For many years, I've been the guy against the games. I called her the day after we first went out for coffee and drinks; I hadn't planned on its being a date; I was attracted to her, sure,

but you can't go in expecting that. I can't, anyway. But we stayed at that coffee shop till it closed, then went to a bar and stayed until they turned on the ugly lights, and we were both still smiling when I hugged her, wished her good night. I didn't try to kiss her, might not have minded kissing her, but didn't want to try. It was the effort I didn't want. The evening ended with a hug, and that was enough.

I called her the following day, told her what a great time I'd had. I just wanted to hear the sound she made when she smiled again.

She called it refreshing.

I like being refreshing. I've never been able to be casual. I'm not sure I'm wired in a way that allows for such casual relations, hooking up in bars, hummers in parking lots. Maybe I should try, just once, just to do it, just to understand, I guess, just for the experience.

No names? No faces? Just skin and sweat and bodies?

I've wondered, a few times, if I'm not bipolar. I get the days when I feel more charming than I have any right to be, and . . . well, there are just some days I wallow. I try not to, most of the time, and I hate whiny-bitch mode, but I know there are days I'm square in it.

But, you know, if it turned out I was, if I went to some doctor, and he said, yeah, you're bipolar, we're going to put you on some medication?

I don't know if I'd take it.

It's not a pain like abrasion or laceration: it gets down into your soul and hurts existentially, in a way nothing physical ever could. It's not so much an ache as suffering, and it feels like pulling back. Shriveling. Withering. Naked, in the fetal position.

I'll never forget kissing her for the first time. Lips and tongues and fingers in hair, body against body, her and I connected as the neighborhood, the world, the sun and the entire rest of the universe revolved around us, two, for just a

moment. I still remember the amber play of the porchlights on her hair. My eyes were half-closed, or half-open, the same as my mouth, depending on your perspective. Her hair was soft, and her cheek was warm, and her lips were on mine, and when her tongue danced with mine, it was heaven . . .

I damned near skipped when I walked back to my car. I looked back, as I approached it, and, of course, saw her looking at me, being a dork.

I was happy. Just. Happy.

She told me, later, long after I'd driven away, long after that evening, in fact, that she'd closed the door, and she'd put her back up against it, and she'd swooned. Like in the movies, she'd said.

It was Thanksgiving. There was a lot to be thankful for, that day. I'm not much a one for most holidays, I'm the guy who'll do something right up until you tell me I need to do it, but that day, I was grateful. That day, I felt likelikelike the luckiest manmanman on the face of the earthearth.

For many, many years, I've been anticipating a letter. A single letter. It will arrive, one day, in my mailbox, in a plain, white, business envelope, and it will be addressed to me in my own writing.

I will open that envelope, that day, when it comes. I won't expect much from that envelope, because I've learned not to; I've gotten many false envelopes, all pretenders to the throne. I've gotten almost hundreds of envelopes, and all of them save a couple have been addressed to Author, whom I don't know, and have thanked Author for his work, which is, apparently, not so engaging enough to make the sender enthusiastic about whatever work they just received.

I don't know anyone named Author, nor why everyone sends me his letter.

The day my letter comes, I'll be expecting to open that envelope and find it addressed to Author.

But it won't be. It will say Dear Mr. Entrekin (that's me), and it will say that whomever wrote it is pleased to inform me

that they read my novel, and they would like, more than most things in the world, to publish it. They will offer me some small monetary offer for the rights, which I'll gladly accept, and I'll never, not in a million years, tell them fuck, you coulda had it for nothin' just as long as you got that story out there, but they'll probably know that, anyway.

I can picture that day. It'll be a day like any other. I'll be dressed like I am every other day, and I probably won't have shaved. If it's a Saturday, I'll probably be in a pair of shorts when I open it, and I'll probably be wearing my glasses.

Which I'll have to take off, because that letter, rest assured, will make me weep.

Those tears will be worth fifteen years of my life. They will be full of an awkward high school and college student who didn't quite fit either his body or his personality. They will be full of putting it all out there, everything, right on the line, and letting other people see it, and having them reject it.

Having them look over something I've put my best into, and look it up and down, *appraise* it, and ultimately tell me that, for whatever reason, my best wasn't good enough. Maybe they had a full client roster. Maybe there was a misplaced comma. Maybe they were interested in literary and I'm too rock-star.

Maybe a lot of things. Who knows? Maybe times a hundred, maybe times a thousand.

I've heard 'em all.

But one day, that letter will come, and it won't be a maybe. It will be a yes.

And seeing a book on the shelf with my name on it, that'll be worth it all. You just wait until the first time I see one of my books at Barnes & Noble. I'll be unintelligible for hours.

It hurts, yes. But given a choice between that letter, right now, and just the memory of that kiss, I'd say, you know, I can wait a little longer for that letter.

I will, of course.

I hate that I loved her. I hate that it hurts. I hate that I let it.

But I remember that kiss. I remember that other night, too, when I connected to her in a way I'd never connected with anyone else. I remember, the first time we were intimate, a glorious forever-image of her pulling back her hair (sorry, but the other details, well, those are mine. You understand).

Those memories mean something to me. Because I knew her. I knew her dog's name. I know where she went to school. I know what she's scared of, and I know the look on her face when she knows nothing besides pleasure I've brought into her life.

So she left, and what now? Reevaluate my morals and hopes? Get over her by engaging in a string of random encounters with girls I'll only call the next day because I feel obligated to, and not because I only want to hear her voice in my ear?

Somewhere, somewhen, there is a letter, and it is addressed to me. I just worry that all the rest will be addressed to 'Author', and I'm tired of opening his mail.

Eventually the you

I write to
And about
Will be someone.
Eventually, my lady, you
Will have a
Name,
A personality,
A face.
Eventually I will know
Just who you are,
You, about whom I have
Wondered for years.
Eventually I will not
Have to settle for a
Good time.
Eventually I will
Find you,
Know you when I
See you,
Hear you,
When your soft, light
Footsteps
Finally echo from my
Dreams to my floor.
Thank God I'm
Patient.

Wandering

More stars than I could think of wishes for all my life speckle the deep, dark, desert night, and I try not to shiver as I walk but find I can't help it. When the breeze blows just right, I can smell the salt of a nearby ocean; I think, if I close my eyes and listen hard, I can hear its whisper, too, but that might just be my imagination.

I've been walking a long, long time.

It got old quick. I rationed the water as best I could, but it wasn't long before I'd drunk it and then sweated or pissed it all away, and by then the sun was low in the sky. I thought that would be good, because at least it would stop being so damned hot, but it sunk right out of the sky and night swelled in behind it, and it got colder than I realized deserts get. I'd heard they get cold, of course, but that was only in stories, and who believes them?

So now my sweat is evaporating off my body and leaving behind only goosebumps, and I'm thinking about why I'm out here. I hadn't been able to much, earlier, because the heat sapped my ability to do much of anything besides put one foot in front of the other, but the night is cold enough now to think in, and so I am.

And I'm thinking of you. I've grown rather used to it, I'll admit, because I've been doing it a lot lately.

Are you wondering what about you I'm thinking about? I'm thinking about your brown eyes I love to see grin, and your candy lips I wonder about the taste and feel of. I think about

your mile-wide smile and how you laugh with your whole damned body and how it just kills me, and about how you make me feel like Cary Grant even though I've never even seen a Cary Grant movie.

Boy, I've got it bad for you.

It's funny; I tried not to let it happen. Not because I wasn't attracted to you, of course, but rather because I'm just so tired lately.

I thought it was pretty out here at first. In the desert, I mean. All this sand and sage might well be possibilities stretching just as far as I can see, but I find I've exhausted them, or maybe I'm just tired of exploring them.

Truth is I know what I want, and it's just not here.

I found a tree out here earlier today. Not a great tree, no. It was a rather dead tree, in fact, and it was all bleached and gnarled and bent over itself. I don't know when this desert ever supported life, but it was at least that old. There wasn't much shade there but I sat down anyway because I needed to rest. I'm tired of walking, but I'm even more tired of not knowing where the hell my legs are taking me. I thought about you while I leant on that dead tree, of course, and I wondered if, wherever you were, whatever you were doing, you were thinking of me.

Because I know people get wrapped up in life and jobs and all the little things that always end up taking so much time, and I want to know if you're wondering about anything. Do you wonder if I'm attracted to you, if I like you, if I want to be with you like I wonder those things about you? Do you ever wonder how I kiss, how your lips would feel against mine? Do you wonder about what I feel, and what I want?

I do.

People have asked me about you, because that's people's job when a new romantic interest enters one's life, isn't it? People ask me if we're talking, or seeing each other, or going out.

I tell them we've hung out a couple of times, and we've talked when we have, because otherwise it would just be awkward. I tell them we're not invisible, so we see each other

when we go out, but I think, in each case, I'm answering a completely different question than they're asking.

I wonder if, when asked the same questions by different people, you would have better answers. I wonder if you would search for them, because if you are, I wonder if we both might be seeking the same answers, and maybe we could just meet here, under these stars.

I'm not sure we'd find answers here, together, under these stars, but I'll bet those questions would just go away.

I come to a big, rocky hill, and I start climbing. It's not easy, but that just means I need to make some effort, and that warms me a little. I suppose I could stop and rest, but the sound of waves I thought might've been my imagination wasn't, and now I can smell the salt in the air; it smells like the world is sweating. I climb slowly. There's no rush; I've been out here long enough to know that there are no shortcuts to anywhere worth going and that, most of the time, the places you want to be take a while to get to. When I reach the crest of the hill I see the moon over a soft ocean.

The slope's not steep on the other side there, and I trek down onto that beach and I wonder, again, about you.

I wonder if you're making your way here, and I wonder if I should do anything. Should I just wait here, on this beach and watching the ocean, waiting for a pair of headlights to find me here? Should I keep moving?

The sand is cool and feels wet even though it isn't, and I decide to build a fire. I collect some dry driftwood and get something started, and the flames, when I start them, warm my body. I watch their tongues dance along the log and let the thoughts of dancing with you warm my heart. I wonder how you'd feel in my arms, how you'd move with me.

I look out at the ocean, those white-caps crashing, that moon sinking lower and lower, and I wonder about all those things, and other things, too. I wonder about where I'm going, where the world is going to take me, about why I'm here. I wonder if I'll ever get to give you flowers. I wonder if I'll get to hold your hand. I wonder if I'll ever hear you whisper my name in my ear in the way only someone intimate can, tracing off into

a sweet nothing full of everything I've ever wanted. I wonder if I'll have to cross that desert again, or even if I'll end up in another one.

I don't know where I'll end up. I don't know where life will take me, and if the ride will be good or not. All I know, sitting here looking out at the ocean and thinking and wondering and dreaming of you, is that where you go is where I want to be.

A New Drink

It's noisy here, slurred thoughts, staggering speech;
A glass flows past me with the surest head in the place,
Leaving a trail of tears behind it, like the wood's crying.
There is no tear in my beer; it's a dry martini,
Shaken-not-stirred because I had to order that just once.
But it didn't make me feel like a super-gentleman,
And the mirror didn't change at all.

Maybe I need a new drink.
A cup of tears, a glass of fears,
To weep one by one,
Because my old ones are almost done.

The jukebox is so loud no one in the place can understand it,
And no one pays attention to the muted television.
Conversations are rampant, though there aren't any topics;
Just stray words spilled, god forbid on someone's pants.
Laughs last so long their owners forget what was so funny,
Giving way to easier smiles;
Big, semi-coherent grins like Alice found so disturbing;
Maybe she just needed to loosen up.

The bartender is a big guy with arms as big around as my legs,
He's quick when he has to show someone the door.
It's big and solid and the only entrance around;
I'm not sure how anyone could miss it in the first place.

They rumble and stumble against each other;
Inevitably some asshole decides no, that wasn't an accident.
You got a death wish, man, me and my guys, you know,
We can take you out,
Unless, of course, you want to order me a new drink.

They just want to escape the hard stuff and the mixed,
Something safe to take their minds off it all.
Sometimes they find it, but everyone come back for more,
Because it's too hard to face it sober and clean and rational.

I hope we get out of here, but we all need one for the road,
Because it's long and winding and badly paved and we have
enough trouble walking as it is.

Deluded

My crummy little Jersey City apartment. Baldwin Avenue. Near Journal Square. Mohammed Atta, one of the 9/11 hijackers, lived less than a mile from me. It wasn't the greatest section of town (Jersey City isn't the greatest section of town), but for six years, give or take, it was home. And by home, I mean: it was where I slept and wrote (and sometimes I ate). I worked and lived in Manhattan.

That one word up there is the important one: I wrote. I was a double major in college while completing a novel twice over. Saint Peter's, all 2,000 students of it, wasn't a party school. 80% of everyone left during the weekends.

I didn't. I wrote.

Back then, my goal was to be published straight out of college. Sell the book before I graduated. Best-seller by 25. (I'm 27 now. We see how well all that worked out. "Life is what happens when you're making other plans.")

Writing was all I'd ever done or wanted. Captain Doctor Brian, my best friend then, once told me that if I lived like I wrote, life'd be made in the shade for me (he told me that because I was shy and awkward and . . . well. Twenty, really. It happens, at that age. Or it happened to me at that age, anyway). I cast my novels in my head. I wrote my papers, but everyone on campus (all thousand students) knew me as the writer. The sometimes poet, the editor of the literary magazine: everything short of the tweed jacket with the elbow patches, basically.

During my senior year of college, I began to write a novel. I began it at an interesting juncture in my life. When I was engaged. When I stopped pretending I wanted to be a doctor, decided against medical school, switched my degree from a BS in bio to a BA in Lit (I'm six credits shy of that second degree, actually. One day I'll get it).

It was after my ex and I had broken up. It was when I'd started temping, and then producing. It was when I was living in the City, working on Madison Avenue in midtown, fresh out of college. I was like an incontinent puppy back then: I was so excitable one was never sure when I was going to piddle over myself.

I'm exaggerating, but only just.

I put everything I had into that novel, then. I was three months out of that relationship, I was six months into a job I knew I didn't want for the rest of my life: it was time to put up or shut up, and I put up as hard as I could. I wrote and I wrote and I wrote and I wrote and I wrote and I wrote, and then, finally, I had something I was . . . well, proud of. I had told this story that, before me, hadn't been there before. I'd thought I'd nailed it.

I finished it in the middle of December. I went home for two weeks. The moment I went back, the beginning of January, I started sending it out to prospective agents.

It was dumb, I know, looking back. I should have sat on it for a few weeks beforehand. Revised. Because, yeah, it basically was a first draft I was sending to agents.

Fuck did I know? (fuck do I know?)

I did all the research, and I sent queries and the first three chapters to seven agents.

And I sat back to wait.

I didn't have to wait long.

I don't remember the day I sent it out, but the week following, it started. Within three days, I got six of the seven rejection letters.

I wasn't devastated, though.

Six of the seven meant there was one out there still. By golly, that was the one who'd represent it (I told you I was deluded).

I went down south that weekend. My buddies were playing. I busted out my leather pants and danced and drank and let someone else drive me home.

Sometime during the evening, my buddy Tim mentioned a CD called *Glee* by Bran Van 3000. I trust Tim's music recommendations. I don't know why, because we never, ever agree, but if Tim mentions a band, I want to hear it. He mentioned *Glee* was one of his top-5 albums ever.

I'd just been rejected six times, and I decided I deserved a CD out of it. And a good one. And if Tim loved it so, it had to be. So I picked it up in HMV Times Square on my way to the PATH from Port Authority's Greyhound station.

When I got home, there was a letter waiting for me. It was from the last agent.

It was thick.

Now, generally, when you get a letter from an agent, it's a single slip of paper. A single page is all it ever takes to say, "Sorry, this isn't for us." Which is what 9 out of 10 of them say.

But this envelope: it wasn't a single slip of paper. I could feel that much.

Yes, I got excited.

I did not, however, open it straightaway.

Because, you see, I'd been waiting for it for so long. And I totally and completely believed that was it. That was how certain (deluded) I'd always been.

So I could put it off a few minutes. It was the start of something brand new. I had my whole life to be a best-seller: I was only going to get that "We want to represent your novel" letter one time (kinda like realizing, "This is the last first date I'll ever go on." I hope I realize that someday).

And besides, there was my new CD. Celebration!

I put the CD into my stereo. Cranked it.

Went about a couple of other things. I no longer remember what.

What I remember is finally thinking, “Okay,” and going back into my bedroom, and picking up that letter.

Hefting it one last time before opening it. Before reading that someone was finally recognizing my creative genius and wanted to sell my novel for a bazillion dollars.

I slid my finger underneath the flap thingy.

I got a papercut.

So I bled on the page. And I thought: “How fitting.” I pulled it out. It was several pages. One cover, and then: What? An order form?

Dear Author:

Thank you no thank you blabiddyblabiddyblabiddy you suck etc. ad nauseum. No, we don't want to represent your shite. Seriously.

But:

*If you'd like to represent your own shite, please find attached an order form for my book *How to Be Your Own Agent*.*

Signed,

Soulless asswipe guy

Talk about defining moments.

I can't describe how I felt (I'm laughing too hard about it right now).

If I had known then what I know now, I would have not washed my hair for a week, put on my nonexistent girlfriend's jeans, and single-handedly started the emo movement. Chris Carraba can scream his infidelities, but he's got nothing on what I felt right that moment.

And I'll admit it: I was beyond religion, then, but that moment drove me to my knees. Crushed me down. I hadn't prayed in years. I'd been to church a couple of times in the previous couple of years, but it was those Gaelic masses.

I don't know if I prayed right then.

But I did something, and I guess it amounted to prayer. It was: “Look, man, I've been doing this for so long, and I want this so badly, but maybe I'm wrong. Lord knows I could help

more people, do more tangible good by becoming a doctor. Or something. Maybe a nurse. I don't know. But I'll figure it out. No problem. This . . . this is just a bunch of words. And what the hell does that mean? They're just characters on a page, and what difference is that going to make? So yeah, I'll walk away. Except . . . I've always thought this is it.

So look: if this is it, if this is what I should keep doing, fine, but give me something, here. Anything. I don't give a shit what, and I swear to Christ I'll never, ever ask for anything again, but I just need something to go on here. A sign, a message, whatthefuck ever. I'm not asking for fucking Gabriel and trumpets, or anything, but give me something."

And I stopped.

And that was when I noticed my stereo was still going. And when the next track on the CD started. I can't quote the song for copyright issues, and I'm just a broke grad student who really can't afford to pay whomever would want the money for a license to quote it, but it was a song called "Carry on."

And it basically told me to do just that.

Carry on. Don't give up.

As such things go, I'd say that moment could've been slightly more subtle. But, then, that's probably just because I'm still completely deluded.

A Little Heaven

I was a sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania the very first time I fell in love. I worked as a tutor at my college's language center. It was a dumb little job with a dumb little wage, but I didn't need any more. The only thing to spend money on was the dollar drafts at the local bar that conveniently forgot to check IDs on Tuesday and Thursday nights.

Genevieve was supermodel tall, her body was all lithe muscles and break-your-neck curves, hair like blonde and brunette had come up with a better color between them, chic-framed glasses whose lenses didn't quite blunt her piercing eyes. I wanted to be the cause of her wide, white smile the moment I saw it, and her French accent pronounced her name "Zhaun-vee-ev," and never once met a syllable it couldn't either soften or elongate. She was quick to laugh and quicker to think, and even now, through time and life and distance, she can still short-circuit my every thought. Whoever first coined the phrase *je ne sais quoi* probably only gave up thinking because he met Genevieve.

She brought a paper to our language center, and I helped her revise it. Her topic was Michel du Montaigne, though I didn't know who he was then. I learned from Genevieve. He's why we call them essays, she told me, from the French *essayer*, which means 'to try.' So I tried; I asked her out for a pint, and she accepted.

We went out to the pub that forgot to check IDs that Thursday, I walked with her but then we got there and saw

dozens of people we each knew, and so we spent the evening together with friends. We drank and laughed and danced, and we kissed half a dozen times, but it felt too comfortable and certain to be hooking up. Most of that night is gone to alcohol and memory, but I remember her hair blazed golden-red by the neon, and her smile cut right through my buzz and clinched on my heart.

When I offered to walk her back to her dorm, she slipped her hand inside my elbow to accept, and the night couldn't have been any better than it was right then. We left the bar and walked the couple of blocks back to the college's apartments, to the stone steps of her building.

I wondered if she was going to invite me up when we got back to her place. We paused on the steps that led up to the door of her apartment, and she told me she'd had a lovely evening, that she'd really like to do it again, before she kissed me softly on the lips and then was gone and the door was closed and all I ever had of that moment was its memory.

Dating during college is unlike dating at any other time in your life. I'd like to think that the dating process changed as I got more sophisticated, but I'll only claim it happened as I got older. Back when I was just a squeaky voice with braces and acne, I thought a successful date was going to a movie at the local plex and dinner at the Olive Garden, in either order. Of course, I'll be the first to admit I didn't have many dates you might consider successful. I only had one girlfriend during high school, and that didn't even last a month.

I was barely prepared for college. I still thought it was courtship, that you pay for her movies, her dinner, and eventually—well, I didn't really know what happened eventually. I'd guess I supposed marriage, and I'm reasonably sure I thought sex had something to do with it.

There wasn't so much courting involved with Genevieve. We'd go to parties together, or just stay in and watch a video, and suddenly I was always at her place, or she was always at mine. I've already showed you how gorgeous she was, but she was smart and witty, too. She was challenging, sarcastic but not

overly so, and she was the type of girl who looked at me, chuckled, you're such a goober, sometimes, Donovan, and I love hanging out with you.

Is it any wonder I fell so hard?

I didn't know what to do or how to handle it. We kissed, held hands, saw each other every day right up until Thanksgiving break. I invited her to my house for dinner, because it wasn't as if she were going to fly over to France for four days, but she declined because she had a lot of studying to finish.

I couldn't believe how very much I missed her, to the point that I returned early on Saturday to beat the Thanksgiving traffic on Sunday. I got back to my dorm room at five, called her, and she invited me over for dinner and movies.

She opened the door wearing a black turtleneck and paint masquerading as low-riding blue jeans, hair pulled back in a ponytail loose enough that a few stray strands defiantly fell about her face, and she spent much of the evening tucking them back behind her ear. She smiled and invited me in. She shared the apartment with another girl and you could tell how well they got on by the way it was decorated: tasteful, black-and-white photos, but also the winking sense of humor that had put the lava lamp next to the fuzzy pink telephone that could only have been decorative, as both Genevieve and her roommate had cell phones.

We ate Thai and drank wine. I don't remember the whole evening, not so I could give you a minute-by-minute of the conversation. I don't remember how long it was before we started to kiss.

I remember it was one of the most comfortable evenings of my life. It held a million kisses and me in her arms. Her lips and mouth tasted like apples from the wine over the tang of the Thai food. She lit candles, and their golden reflections danced in her eyes. I knew what Peter Gabriel meant when he sang about seeing the doorways of a thousand churches, because her eyes flickered like votives and I wanted to offer my meager contribution in return for whatever salvation she offered. I remember her hair like spun gold so vividly I feel as if I could

reach out and play my fingers through it, and now I have to apologize to you because the only experience of this girl you're getting is silly cliches and references to pop songs.

Think of the first person you loved. Think of her smile or his arms. Think about the first dates you went on, all the breathless anticipation, will she— does he— think of that first kiss, and swoon for me now like you did then. Close that door after he left and let your back melt down the back of it, or think of the memory of her lips on yours that made you skip back to your car like the dork that you are. Think of how time seemed not to stop or stand still but rather stretch like it was waking up and getting ready to face the day, because that was how that night felt. I don't know how long passed; all I remember is kissing her and touching her and tasting her, and then she looked at me, candles reflecting pinpricks in her eyes like newborn universes ready to bang, and she invited me to stay.

I'll admit right now it both surprised and scared me. My main experience with girls and relationships up to that point had been awkward fumbling and too many nights on the same damned phone hearing the same damned line over and over and over again.

"You're a great guy, Donovan, but I just want to be friends."

Of course I said yes. When a girl like Genevieve asks you to spend the night, you do so, because what you get in return will stay with you all your life.

She pulled me by the pants into her bedroom. We did that slow, wonderful, fumbling dance of undressing and kissing and laughing, then sank to the bed, together.

We slept very little that night; there were new worlds to explore. We had no maps, no guides but our lips and tongues and fingertips, but neither did we have a destination; all that mattered was the brilliant sense of discovery, the forming of another person in the perfect darkness of a bedroom from scents and tastes and glancing touches. The pucker of her nipple, the concavity and then rising of her long, lithe stomach as it flowed into her waist. Her hair smelt clean, and her body

like water-sprinkled flowers except where it smelt like nothing so much as primal, ab-clenching attraction.

I brushed my lips over her navel, and with my right hand I touched her sex. She wore a black thong, and she lifted her bottom from the bed as I slid it down, off. I kissed her inner thighs, each one in its turn, started in the middle of each and licked along her skin toward her center, felt her curly hair tickle my nose and had to restrain myself from burying my lips against her. I touched her, slid my finger up and down and up against the slick wetness of her sex, and it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I never had before, not in person. Oh, my dad'd had porn, and I had of course snuck a peek, but never before had I seen a woman au naturale. I paused to relish the sight of her body near on silver in what little moonlight shone through the bedroom window, her full breasts, her glorious skin. Her head was on the pillow, hair splayed out around her face, eyes closed and lips smiling. Her fingers played lightly in my hair, and I realized how very much I was in love with the girl before me. I wanted nothing more in the world than her pleasure.

I kissed those full lips swollen with her arousal, and she made a small sound; not a moan, just a breathy sound of contentment, and so I kissed, kissed again. Her smooth hair crinkled against my tongue, and I played my fingers over her, gently, lightly. I touched my tongue, tentatively, to those full-swollen lips, and her tangy scent danced on my taste buds.

I was as terrified as I was excited. I'd read hundreds of articles about pleasuring women in men's magazines; every one of them seemed to have a new survey each issue about what pleases the girl next door and would give her an 'O' so big it shortcircuits her whole body and crosses her ears. I now realize what an awkward young man I was when I remember that, in the interest of objectivity and wanting a full set of data, I sought out back issues from previous years to find previous surveys. No, I didn't even have a girlfriend, and there was, in fact, only one girl before Genevieve that I'd even kissed, but dammit, I had faith there was a girl out there for me, and when she came along, I'd be well prepared.

All those articles and surveys and blurbs started flashing through my head, then, there in that darkness, and I realized, suddenly, how useless they all were. If nothing else, they made me more nervous, like the one that said whatever you do don't exhale while you're down there, because the lubrication is supplied by dilated blood vessels, and air can get into one and give your poor girlfriend a heart attack right when she's building toward a hopefully Earth-shattering orgasm. I tried to remember the geometric shapes I was supposed to trace, with my tongue, over her clitoris, guaranteed to make her ears ooze, but it defeats the purpose when you seize up because you can't remember the difference between an isolateral hexagon and a trapezedus rhomboid.

And then I heard her say, "Oooh, yes, right there, keep doing that, faster—faster—" and I realized something: all those magazines might have taken thousands of surveys, but they'd never once asked Genevieve.

Certainly, she could've filled out one of those cards, because heck, sometimes filling out a sex survey is a hilarious way to spend an evening in college. But the point was, I was running through a mental rolodex full of useless facts from a thousand random girls, and I'd forgotten to use the very best source of information I could've possibly asked for.

And so I put all those surveys and articles out of my mind, and I listened.

She didn't give me implicit instructions; at some times it wasn't even verbal and at better times it was totally unintelligible. Once I started paying attention, though, I started to understand how to pay better attention: the arching of her back, the clenching of my hair in her fingers. Some of the signals were subtle: a different tone or moan, but others . . . there wasn't anything subtle about her upper body rising from the bed and her thighs' tensing against the sides of my head. When her abs clenched and she came up in a half-crunch, I snaked my arm around her bottom, fingered her breast, and her hands moved from my head to my arm, clenched around my bicep and my forearm, yow she had a good grip, her breathing stutteredshutteredtightertigher—

and I felt all that energy burst, put the bang that started the universe to shame, but that didn't matter; there was a new one, and we were the creators. I felt her pure, beautiful energy wash over me.

I started to kiss my way up her body. I'll admit I was very proud of myself. My lips brushed one of her nipples again and she seized up, pulled her elbows together; her body'd gone too sensitive. I palmed my still-slick chin, moved up beside her and kissed her lightly, propped myself up on an elbow and gazed down at her. Her fingers were on her forehead, and she looked for all the world as if she were coming back to it from somewhere farther off than I knew. She was smiling, and that room might have been dark but still it shone like grace in the moonlight.

She chuckled. "Wow."

I laughed. "You enjoyed that, then?"

"As if you could not tell."

"I've never done that before."

The expression on her face changed, I don't quite know what it had been before, but it was a little surprised and a little bemused. "What? This is your first time?"

"Well, I'm hoping so, yeah."

She caressed my cheek. "You are an amazing person, Donovan, and I love you for that. Do you know that?" she asked me, and I tried to speak, tried to tell her I felt the same way, tried to tell her how deeply I'd fallen for her, and how truly and madly, too, but all that came when I opened my foolish mouth was high-pitched somewhere between a sob and a laugh and equally committed to neither.

She kissed me, then, and we slow-motion tumblesaulted full of skin and sex, and then she was above me. I could feel her warmth against my abdomen. She kissed me, sucked on my lower lip, bit it, gently. I could feel her full breasts against my chest, and then she grasped me and her hand went up and down and up and down and had it gone up again it might have ended then and there, I was that far gone, but she paused and reached out as if stretching. I heard the drawer of her night table open, a crinkling, then she reached back again and slid the condom onto

me and guided me into her warmth and wetness. Her hair fell around our heads as she ground her pelvis against mine, slow but urgent, gentle but wanting, needing. There in the darkness, I offered up to Genevieve everything I had and was and wanted, set them before her and opened myself, moved my hips up to meet hers, groaned, closed my eyes even though I didn't want to miss an instant of seeing her above me. It was too much to handle, so I sought to see with my hands and mouth, squeezed her bottom as it ground against me, kissed her breasts, and then my whole body felt as if it were unraveling-unspooling and seeking her out, and I exhaled, in the darkness. It felt like my soul wanted to escape with my breath; the sound they made was laughter. Brilliant, joyful, near-tears laughter.

Genevieve stayed where she was, straddling me, her hands on my chest, looking down at me, smiling, and when she spoke, her voice was low and murmur-y and sounded like she asked if I'd enjoyed dying.

“What?”

She moved, then, her legs, her body, settled down next to me, propped up on her elbow and now it was her hand, her finger that traced over my abs, lazy, intimate circles and whirls. “In my country,” she said, “The, how do you say—orgasm, yes?”

I nodded. “Orgasm.”

“In my country, the orgasm is known as *le petit mor*. The little death. There are those who believe it is the closest we come to death.”

I considered that, a moment, then said, “*Peut-etre il est le plus etroit que nous pouvon venir au ciel,*” because I really would have believed that right then, with Genevieve above me, offering everything up to her, I was as close to Heaven as I was ever going to get while still breathing.

Genevieve's laugh sounded delighted, delirious, dreamy. The darkness had crept in around us, blanketed us, and there, in each other's arms, we were drifting off into night like an ocean and dreams like leaky little boats. “*Vous ne m'avez jamais dit que vous savez le Francais,*” she said, and she was right, I hadn't ever told her I could speak French.

“*Je ne parle pas le Français,*” I told her, which was true, I couldn’t speak French.

She chuckled, sighed, and in that exhalation was most of the rest of her thoughts. “Good night, *mon petit homme,*” she said.

“Good night. *Je t’adore,*” is the last thing I remember about that darkness. It swooped in then and carried me off, but Genevieve remained in my arms through its entirety and so it remained perfect.

I’ll never forget waking up next to her. I was on my back, one arm under her, her bare flesh pressed close against mine, hair filling my world with a scent like sunshine and eucalyptus on new linen sheets. The world came in waves, retreated when we dozed again only to rush in breaths later. I stretched the arm that wasn’t beneath her, and she looked up at me, her eyes sparkling full of dreams.

“*Bonjour,*” I whispered.

She smiled, lazy, sleepy, breathy-chuckled. “*Bonjour,*” she said, put her head back on my chest, tracing her fingers along my skin.

“*Avez-tu bien dormi?*”

She looked up at me, her face a cross between amusement and surprise. “*Bien sur j’ai bien dormi. J’ai dormi avec toi,*” she told me. Of course she’d slept well; she’d slept with me.

I laughed and kissed her, because I had to feel her skin against my lips.

“*Pourquoi ne m’avez-vous pas dit que vous pouvez parler Français?*”

It was a very good question, why I’d never told her I could speak French, so I told her, “*Je ne sais pas le Français. Je n’ai jamais étudié le Français.*” I didn’t think about it, because I didn’t know French, I’d never studied it.

But, yes, I said it all in French.

Genevieve laughed aloud, pushed against my chest so that her body rose, all except her full breasts against my chest, full and lovely. Half of my brain was there in bed with her, feeling her skin against mine, in my hand that brushed through her beautiful golden hair, but the other half was wondering why I

could suddenly speak a language that had, only the night before, been composed mainly of nasal sounds and unaccented syllables.

“Bien sur vous pouvez parler Francais, et tres bien,” she told me, which was true, of course I could speak French, and very well, as well as anyone born in France could speak it. I didn’t know how to tell her that if she’d spoken to me not ten hours before, I’d have stuttered through English, nevermind French.

“J’ai pense que je t’etonnerais,” I told her. Wanting to surprise her was the only thing I could come up with.

She laughed, pulled a leg over mine so that she was straddling me, her breasts still against me. I moved my hands to them, gently squeezed, and she gasped, reached behind her and grasped me, loving, wanting, up and down. My hips moved on their own, and I could feel her warmth, her wetness, against my lower abdomen. *“Je suis etonne,”* she said. She was surprised by my tongue, of course, not by my body.

So was I, but they say men only have enough blood to think with one head at a time, and when there’s a nude French girl on top of you, her head down and her blonde hair falling into your face like spun gold . . .

We moved to each other, with each other, in and around each other. Her breath came in short gasps against my neck, and she sucked on my earlobe, moaned against my cheek; her fingers raked through my hair, her mouth found mine. I throbbed inside her, even as she licked my lips and I sucked on her tongue, and then she leaned back and the whole world became us, our hips, our pelvis, our warmth, hands and stomachs and breasts, sweat like shimmering magic in midmorning light, baptizing us into a religion ours alone, gods no one else would’ve worshiped, me, her, us.

It was near silent, save our breath, save our bodies, but what little noise there was grew more intense, louder, urgent. I was ready to explode.

And then I realized something.

She wasn’t. Not yet.

The realization surprised me. I can’t describe it; I didn’t so much think that she wasn’t ready yet, just suddenly knew, felt it, as surely as her body was mine, right then, as surely as I could

feel myself inside of her, as surely as I could feel myself beneath her.

I took a deep breath with my whole body, clenched muscles I'd never realized existed until that moment. A small, surprised sound escaped, in a voice that didn't seem like mine even if it was, and Genevieve quickened her pace, her hips, her whole body, my whole body, and then I felt her release with everything I had, every part of me, physical and otherwise.

Everything in me shuddered, and then all the thoughts I'd ever had vanished like they'd never existed, and might never again unless they were of her.

When I came back to the world, not from sleep but from that transcendental state of bliss, my whole body was struck in awe. I could feel it. Genevieve's head was against my shoulder, her face against my chest, both our bodies covered in a sheen of sweat, and the primal scent of sex hung in the air all around us like a blanket.

"Vous-etes beau," she smiled at me.

It was the first time anyone had ever called me beautiful. I was too stunned to speak. I could only smile.

She laughed, kissed me hard on the lips, moved from me.

I wish, more than anything, that I could tell you the next instant became my forever image of Genevieve: the pink nipples of her perfect breasts; the downy thatch of hair between her legs; her flat, flat stomach; the toss of her long, golden hair. But it went too quickly, and now, when I think of it, I can only recall the feeling and the impression of it. It's blurred, and then she was up and her swishing, heart-shaped bottom was retreating from me.

"Je t'aime," I used her language to tell her how I felt, and it seemed to make it truer.

She turned her head, smiled over her shoulder. Her left breast peeked around her side, her back twisting slightly. *"Je sais."*

"Je ne veux pas que tu alliez," I told her, because I didn't want her to go, and it sounded like my heart was breaking. Truth was, anywhere she went right then would've been too far away from me.

She laughed. “*Je dois verser. C’est la vie,*” she told me, turned and walked the rest of the way to the bathroom, paused at the door, one hand on the jamb, turned just slightly again, and said, “*Tu pouvez me joindre, si vous plait.*”

When a girl like Genevieve invites you to shower with her, you don’t decline.

I never did tell her. My sophomore year was a whirlwind of grades and classes and new young love, and I was far too busy falling for that French girl to try to understand what was happening enough to tell her.

It wasn’t like it mattered. My ability to speak French was a perk, and it became our secret language. We could have entire conversations around people we knew and they’d never understand a word. We built a relationship out of youth and love and in-jokes, all the silly, wonderful things that are all that matters when you’re almost twenty and barely twenty-two, when the world is just as old as you are and just as full of potential and possibility. I was a sophomore in college, and what better time in life to be a fool in love?

We took full advantage of it. We shagged each other silly, and we loved each other sillier. I’ve heard that the first few years of your life are the most formative and influential, that all your actions and decisions and choices in life can ultimately be traced back to how your psyche developed while you were in preschool, and I can’t really comment on that. I bring it up, though, because you can look at all the relationships of my adult life as a journey, and it started there, with Genevieve.

She taught me so much. Not just about sex, though, yes, there was that. I spent a lot of time in bed with her that year, and what I learned most from her was to enjoy that time in bed. A lot of the memories I have of that year are blurred, but there are highlights: the Valentine’s Day dance we went to, the Asian dress she wore, black with a sketched-red floral pattern and a Mandarin collar. Dancing with her, whispering into her ear that I agreed with Clapton; she looked wonderful that night. I remember walking back to her apartment, where I slowly eased that lovely silk dress from her beautiful porcelain skin, and I

remember how it didn't feel like unwrapping a present so much as revelation, and I cherished it.

Genevieve was my sexual education, more so than any high school class I might have blushed through. She was utterly comfortable with sex, enjoyed it, reveled in it. She had full French lips and a tongue used to syllables I'd never known existed, a body that moved to music that people don't often use the instruments to play, and she knew how to dance with me.

It was beautiful while it lasted, straight through May. I went to her commencement, where I sat toward the back with her family, who invited me to eat with them afterward. We all spoke perfect French and there was no cultural difference whatever; I didn't need to read her father's mind to know he liked me.

We all piled back into their rental car, and they dropped me off at the apartment I was staying in while I finished a summer class. Genevieve decided she would walk me to the door. That May day was beautiful, not quite summer but so very close; most of the spring was out of the air even though the bloom was strong, and Genevieve took my hand as we walked through the courtyard.

We paused there at the door. The tears in her eyes shimmered, and I don't know exactly what the ones in mine did.

"Mon vie ne sera pas le meme sans toi," I told her. My life would be very different without her, and I would miss her for it, not just the sex but her: her soft voice and lithe body; that lovely, befuddled look on her face when she couldn't think of the English word; her schoolgirl giggle and her eyes the color of almonds and gold. *"Je ne veux pas que tu alliez,"* I told her, because I didn't want her to go then any more than I'd wanted her to go that first morning. I liked my life when I woke up next to her.

"Oh, Donovan, je sais, mais nous écrivons—"

"Chaque semaine," I said, because we would write, every week.

"Nous le ferons. Et puis, quand tu recevez un diplôme, tu pouvez venir en Europe, et nous pouvons voyager ensemble," she said, and I knew something then.

Even though she really meant it and thought I might come to Europe when I graduated and we would travel together, she also knew it wasn't going to happen. The only way I can describe it is that it was like when you sign a girl's yearbook and tell her to keep in touch. You mean it when you write it, because this girl you've spent at least the past year and very often so many more with is standing right there in front of you. It's so easy to talk to her, see her, reach out and touch her, but once you close that book, hand it back, no matter how much you meant it, you know neither of you will pick up the phone, because, as someone very wise I used to know once said, "C'est la vie," and it is.

I kissed her, then, hugged her as hard as I could, and she hugged me hard, too, because she felt like letting go would really be letting go. "*Tu devez aller*," I told her. I knew she had to go. *C'est la vie. C'est amour.*

She pulled back, looked at me, her eyes full of tears, and then she nodded, backed away, slow, across that green lawn beneath that sky bluer and brighter than it had any right to be.

"*Je t'adore*," I told her, as she went.

She rushed back at me, then, hugged me hard, again, tighter, "And you know I love you, Donovan," she said, the first words in my tongue she'd whispered to me in months.

I hugged her back, but I whispered "*Allez, allez*," into her ear, go, go, even though I don't want you to, just go, please, it's going to break my heart.

And then she was gone.

It didn't just end. We did write. She wrote about applying to teach English as a foreign language, and how it felt to be back in France, for real, after three years in America, and I told her, when I responded, how strange it felt to be home after having been so free at college.

There was more, though, that went unsaid, unwritten. We weren't falling out of love, but we were realizing it wasn't going to work. There was too much distance, and all the romance our twenty and twenty-two year old hearts could muster couldn't convince us otherwise.

We'd already planned that I would visit her at the end of July, though. I'd already saved the money, bought the tickets, and neither of us mentioned our doubts. I knew it wasn't going to work, I knew we couldn't save it, but I at least wanted to see her, just one last time.

Maybe it's best we didn't talk about it; I think if we had we might have poured our hearts out, might have broken down and then tried to build again. We might have acknowledged how damned difficult it was, and we might have tried to work something out and stayed together.

We didn't, though, and I found myself flying from New York all the way to Paris. I've never felt more alone, even with two sets of thoughts in my head.

Paris should have been unfamiliar.

My plane touched down onto a tarmac the same dreary grey as the sky above, and I shuffled out, into a corridor like every other airport corridor I'd ever seen, but there was more than just airport familiarity to it; that airport had been Genevieve's destination not even a month before. This was the very hallway down which her whole family had walked, and I knew, already, what the terminal I was about to see for the first time looked like, because Genevieve was already there, waiting for me.

When she saw me, Genevieve smiled so wide it felt, just for a moment, like there was hope for some sunshine in that oh-so-dreary day. She flung her arms around me as my bags fell to the ground, hugged me, kissed me. I couldn't help smiling.

For that one moment, things were all right. I could have almost believed we might work things out.

The days that followed, too, were wonderful. Americans believe there is a general attitude of resentment in Europe, but it only comes if you don't make the effort to explore that other culture, and I intended to get the most I possibly could out of my stay in gay Páree.

At small bistros we ate all the cheeses, baguettes, and pastries they could offer us. Through the countryside we walked arm in arm, down dirt roads and past forests and trees and fields Monet wished he could've seen properly. We ate a picnic lunch

in one such field, sat on a red-and-white plaid tablecloth exactly like you're supposed to, and after we ate we lay on our backs, looking up at a sky that had little right to be so blue and pointed out the elephants and porcupines in the clouds, laughed and chuckled to each other, and then we made beautiful, sweet, young love there, with a French sun tanning my back.

We sipped Champagne in Champagne and ate the best filet mignon I've ever had. I saw the Mona Lisa in the Louvre and her puzzling smile had nothing on Genevieve's. I walked through the only Parisian rain I've ever felt, dressed in my best suit, with cobblestones under my feet and the yellow street lamps only barely lighting through the fog, arm in arm with Genevieve and still very much in love.

The more we were together, though, the more we both came to realize that those were our last moments together.

I'd like to be able to say it rained that last day, that it was dreary and the water gathered between the cobblestones, thunder sounded off in the distance, but it was the most beautiful day there had yet been. The sun shone down on those streets full of memories, and the blue sky reached right on down to those grey roofs; the only sound besides the breeze and its nothings in your ear were the birds that twittered in a language no birds in America know.

We walked in a silence too heavy for such a lovely day. Eventually we found a small park that should have existed nowhere except in a postcard, found a fountain in the center that burbled away with benches around it.

I've heard people say childhood ends the moment you realize you're going to die. While I can't argue that either way, I can tell you my childhood ended on that bench, in that Parisian park, when I looked into the eyes of the woman I loved and realized it still couldn't keep us together.

I cried then. I couldn't help it. I tried and half-succeeded, but then I thought of that morning those months ago, of our aubade and the sudden secret knowledge that had bloomed through my soul, my lips quivered, I lost it. She put her arm

around me, but she didn't try to comfort me. In fact— and it took me a while to realize this— she cried along with me.

I don't know how long we cried, but I know I didn't stop until my eyes were exhausted, and then I looked up and stared at that burbling fountain.

“Genevieve—,” I started to say, but she pressed two fingers to my lips.

That became my forever image of Genevieve; oh, I remember the blur of her moving from my body to the shower, but it's been almost a decade since that day in that Parisian park, and even yet I can see her golden eyes shimmer like sunshine through those rainy day tears.

A darkness fell over me, then, a great, grey silence.

There is no such thing as reading someone's mind, telepathy, knowing another person's every thought. Those things are fantasy, made-up devices that just don't happen. When I'd been with Genevieve, it had never been as if I were seeing the world through two sets of eyes, because there isn't only one world.

There are as many worlds as there are people in it and, for that brief time with that beautiful girl, I'd shared hers.

It ended, there, in that Parisian park. I knew the moment it was over, when I looked into those golden-brown eyes and felt our worlds separate again. I still knew things, still remembered some French, but her perspective of the world vanished from my soul like breath on a cold winter night.

It never happened again. I don't know why. There have been other girls since then, as my heart healed and loved again the best way I knew how, but I've never known any other girl like I knew Genevieve. I consider that and remember *le petit mort*, the little heaven she showed me, and I wonder if that isn't absolutely accurate.

I wonder if a part of me didn't die in that Parisian park, and if its death hasn't prevented me from loving another girl as openly, fully, and completely as I loved Genevieve those innocent years ago.

Donorhood

I'd thought that the most surreal moment of donating my sperm would be the actual production of said sperm into what I'd assumed would be a specimen receptacle. I was right, but leaving that collection cup with the front desk, behind which sat a genial, hospitable Asian man in a lab coat, ran a close second. The third came right before the production of the sample, when the same gentleman asked if I'd like a DVD for inspiration and offered a CD-wallet. I'm going to stop listing surreal moments, now, because the experience was pretty much entirely surreal.

A lot of things conspired to finally make me explore an idea I had often had in the back of my mind. I had just moved across the country, from suburban southern New Jersey to sunny Los Angeles, to study writing at the University of Southern California. Both the move and the start of grad school not only meant that money was tight but also brought with them the singular sense of anonymity that comes from chucking your old life and starting over. I found that a new sense of freedom and willingness to explore came with that anonymity, and my distinct lack of funds further inspired me. Not that either is necessary to become a sperm donor; almost nothing about the idea of donating sperm is shameful.

Except for the whole "masturbating into a Dixie cup" part.

Besides that, I have always imagined it noble. I've always thought there is something altruistic about it, something that seems inherently win-win for all parties.

Picture the target audience (and yes, the graphic joke that might spring to mind is entirely intentional). In a recent recurring subplot on the completely brilliant television series “House, M.D.,” Lisa Edelstein’s character, a single executive hospital administrator, after feeling the call of her biological clock and vetting several colleagues as potential fathers, turned to a sperm bank.

This was the idea I had always imagined; older, professional, successful women who had decided years before to put their careers first but had recently realized they wanted to become mothers before it was too late. Women for whom the prospect of dating was arduous at best and terrifying at worst. I also imagined couples who desperately wanted children but were, unfortunately, unable. Men who desperately wanted to give their wives children but were, due to flukes of genetics or fertility or physiology, ill-equipped.

This is where the whole “inherently altruistic” part came in: I’d be honored if I could somehow provide those women and couples with the means necessary to bring children they wanted into the world.

I’ll admit, though, that the idea wasn’t entirely altruistic. I had my own, private reasons for finding the idea attractive, not the least of which was that I find myself particularly attractive. I’m closing in on 30 here, and though I don’t feel my biological clock yet (yes, men have them, as well) ticking, I’ve certainly begun to feel what I’ve begun to think of as a biological and evolutionary imperative. I have a secondary degree in the sciences and am intimate with Darwin, Watson, and Crick; I get evolution in its most primal, ruthless aspects, which makes part of me regard reproduction in a primal, ruthless way and the rest of me consider myself a prime specimen of maleness who simply must procreate, who would be doing the human race a favor through the contribution of his highly desirable genes.

I’m fully aware that might perhaps sound narcissistic, but I am also aware that there is no room in evolution for coyness. Given my intellect, talent, attractiveness, and genetic pedigree, evolution should have supplied me with a seed spreader by which to sow my plentiful oats. I should be siring a brood,

fathering a clan. Polygamy was invented by and designed for spectacular men like me.

Jokes, narcissism, and multiple wives aside, I'm not entirely sure my potential contribution to the gene pool that is the human race can so easily be dismissed. I would make better contribution than most, certainly. Everyone's heard the jokes: "300 million sperm and that's the one that got through." I think of the Harvey Danger song, "Flagpole Sitta" with the line about going around the world, where all the cretins are reproducing. I'm not the only one so far not contributing; I'm friends with a lot of attractive, well-educated, intelligent people way more interesting and successful than I am myself, and many of them are well into their thirties and still childless. I see these friends often and am certain they would make fantastic parents of spectacular children, but generally, like me, they feel they aren't yet ready, and I understand.

Right up until I remember that Britney Spears and K-Fed had not one but two children. And yes, it scares me a bit.

It makes me wonder how many of my friends will have children and how many others will, ultimately, choose to remain childless. I have traveled more in recent years, and seeing couples traveling with more than one small child has often caused me inwardly to shudder. Only one couple with whom I am friends has a child, and even they are already saying they don't want any more. I've reached the age where many of my friends are married; if asked about the possibility of children in the future, half shake off the thought immediately: "God, I'm not even ready to think about that yet."

And that's the women. The men run away.

That's not completely true. Many men don't articulate their thoughts on it, but most do at least have some. I think most of those thoughts are similar to my own: a need to fulfill the biological imperative, a desire to procreate and fill the world with little them, the responsibility for which is intimidating at best and terrifying at worst. In entertainment, new fathers, indeed, fathers in general, often get short shrift: they are either doting

and wise and wear cardigans, or they are Homer Simpson and Al Bundy.

The truth, of course, is somewhere in between.

Most men, I think, if pressed, would admit that the prospect of fatherhood is an attractive one. I do, anyway, and as in most things, it's difficult to believe I am alone. I know that in my quest for a significant other, I seek a girl who is at least open to the prospect in the future, though ideally, at the present, still pressing the snooze button on the alarm of her biological clock. I think of games of catch, putting tiny shoes on tiny feet, teaching a new generation to read. I think I'd make a good father though, for now, the idea of actually being one petrifies me; ideally, my prospective girl would feel the same way about the possibility of becoming a mother.

Which is, in fact, the dilemma, or at least was mine. If I'm not in the prime of my life, I certainly feel like I am, but yet do not want to even think about fatherhood in any real way. Which is why the idea of donating sperm was such an attractive one. All the benefit of reproduction, distributing my premium genes into the ole' pool, contributing my part to the evolutionary betterment of the human race, and none of the commitment or responsibility. No changing my life. No watching my significant other first go through morning sickness and body changes over which she'd have no control, followed by her draining her breast in the morning. No "Honey, it's your turn"s, no changing dirty diapers or carrying new ones in gigantic, cumbersome bags, no car seats.

If you're thinking, "Such a typical man," I'll bet the only thing a childless woman would add to that list would be no weight gain, no stretch marks, and no labor pain.

In short, no baby drama.

Where do I sign up?

Once I had set on the option, information wasn't difficult to come by. It rarely is anymore, in the Google Age. "Sperm donation" and "Los Angeles" yielded more hits than I would have been able to explore in a week (not to mention a few that,

when clicked, made me think: “Um. What is th—how did he—and she—I didn’t realize that was physically possible.”). The first few all had information for prospective donors, as well as ways to start the application process.

It’s easier than one might think.

It was easier than I thought, anyway.

Being new to and so unfamiliar with the area, my first step was to run a few of the prospective addresses through Google Maps. I immediately eliminated all that were more than 10 miles from my West Hollywood address, finally settling on one just a few miles away, in West Los Angeles.

The sperm bank’s website was clean, informative, and easy to use, and I found myself reading over an FAQ for prospective donors, which included a link to a brief questionnaire for those who, after reading the FAQ, found themselves still interested in donating. The questions were simple: eye color, hair color, height, weight, education, and race, with a separate field for e-mail address.

Of all those traits save one, I’m lucky to fall under the more genetically attractive categories. I have blue-green eyes and black hair that remains thick at 29; a text-book weight of pure, lean muscle; Welsh ancestry; and two degrees in disparate fields (English literature, in addition to the sciences previously mentioned).

I am, however, only 5’8”. Which makes me short, though not remarkably; when describing me, people do not generally note my stature as a defining characteristic.

However, in the ruthless, impersonal logbook that is genetic evolution and cannot take into account personality and charisma, my height may not disqualify me from the race but is, perhaps, a handicap. The questionnaire even mentioned that taller, less heavy, better educated men were more likely than other men to be statistically attractive to prospective recipients. Which I could, in fact, understand: if I could outright choose a height for my hypothetical future son (or even, in fact, for myself), I’d choose 6’1”. No idea why, but there’s my ideal.

Still, I filled out the questionnaire, keyed in my e-mail address, and fired it off into the ether. A pop-up window

informed me that, if interested, the cryobank would contact me within a week or two.

Two weeks later, I received a cordial e-mail from a woman named Melissa, who informed me I'd passed the initial screening and asked me to set an appointment to continue the application. I told her my hours of free time, which were abundant, and she set a time and date before informing me about what were euphemistically described as "pre-collection guidelines." All of which basically informed me that I could not masturbate for a full 48 hours prior to the production of my sample. Which, yes, did test my discipline, but I planned ahead, and rose on the day of my scheduled appointment with some combination of excitement and apprehension.

The only remarkable thing about getting there was that I got lost on the way and had some difficulty finding the place, not least because I was new to the area. The directions to the appointment and its building came with odd instructions about actually getting to the place: I was to approach the office from the back, not the street, which meant I had to use an alley for access. The door was marked only with a number, and next to it was a buzzer and an intercom, where I was supposed to identify myself as a donor. After getting buzzed in, I was to take the stairs to the second floor, hang a left, find a chartreuse door, knock on its small, sliding-door peephole, and tell the Hungarian with the lisp that I was there to try my hand at full-contact canasta with the hirsute Siamese prostitute named Sue. And I just made up everything after the word "chartreuse," but nothing before.

The office was unremarkable: industrial carpeting, pre-fab furniture, bad art. Like pretty much every office I'd ever seen. I approached the desk, behind which sat the Asian man. He was young, my age or younger, with slick black hair and a genial manner. I told him I had an appointment, and he offered me another questionnaire.

This one, of course, went into far greater detail than the one on the website. Medical, personal, and sexual history, plus no small amount of genealogy. Parents' and grandparents'

ethnicities, genetic traits, health histories. Most of the questions would have, I think, stumped just about anyone, as most weren't details many people pay much attention to until later, when they realize just how much those things impact their own lives. Cancers and heart disease, mainly, but the list of congenital genetic disorders is as long and illustrious as that of men who'd like to impregnate Jennifer Connelly, or at least try a whole lot.

The questionnaire was several pages long and rather exhaustive, including even a graph of a family tree, complete with little stick figures and boxes for paternal and maternal lineages. The whole thing took at least half an hour to complete. I felt as if I'd taken a brief, genetic version of the SATs. I wondered what the right answers were: which ancestry was most attractive, statistically, to potential applicants? Would grand-paternal prostate cancer disqualify a candidate? Did they grade on a curve?

The questionnaire made me think more critically about myself in terms of genetics; I seem to make an almost ideal candidate by appearance, but plunge down a little further and things aren't quite so rosy. Both of my grandfathers passed away at rather early ages (before 70, I believe) because of prostate cancers. A few years ago, my father, then barely 50, had a quadruple bypass, the result of an apparently congenital heart condition. My mother and brother both have heart irregularities due to tiny holes in their valves, and both my grandfathers, both my parents, and several of my parents' siblings exhibit symptoms of alcoholism (this latter is one of the reasons why you'll never see me partying quite as hard as all that. I'll have a couple, but my friends know that my getting drunk is a very rare thing indeed. The cards are stacked pretty high against me, and I'm perfectly happy to switch to water not-so-late in the evening, if at least partially because I have a dramatically intense personality that seems like it would accommodate addiction far too easily).

I probably should have given up then, sensed that I might be kinda pretty but that's really all I have to recommend me, genetically, to potential suitors. But I also know a lot about medicine, and the breakthroughs society has made in the past few years have made me believe that histories and

predispositions don't amount to all that much in the great scheme of things. I read only yesterday about scientists' developing a pill to treat alcoholism and addiction. And when my father had his bypass, he was literally in and out of the hospital in substantially less than a week.

After the questionnaire came the really nerve-wracking part.

It was a small, plastic specimen cup, the same sort used to collect urine samples for drug tests. It was clear, with a thick, blue twist-top lid, and it came in a clear, sealed plastic sleeve to ensure sterility. I was instructed to print my name and assigned number on the top, solely so that my sample could be matched to the questionnaire. And yes, that is how it is referred to throughout the entire process. It's not masturbating; it's production and collection of a donor sample. Throughout the entire process, neither semen nor sperm were referred to even once.

The man pointed out to me a donor room just down the hall, instructing me not to use any lubricant, then offered a DVD of my choice from a CD wallet.

I declined. I've always had a good imagination.

I should not have.

I have never had performance anxiety, nor drunk enough to experience so-called "whiskey dick." In fact, I'm lucky enough that there has been precisely one instance during my decade of admittedly limited sexual activity when I was, er, unable to fully execute a performance, so to speak, and I'm reasonably certain that single occurrence was largely the result of my eschewing maintenance of a good, strong erection in favor of a 105-degree fever. I maintain the hope, then, that my inability to perform up to my usual level was due to the atmosphere of the donor room and not the spectacular failure of my own physiology.

Imagine a dentist's procedure room without the scary chair, glaring light, or porcelain spittoon and you get some idea of the donor room. It was small, with a grey marble floor, a stainless steel sink to the side of which was a tall pile of C-fold paper towels, and a single, generic, black faux-leather seat across from which was a gorgeous, flat-panel television. I figured it was the

television for playing the DVDs I had declined, and then I noticed the wire magazine rack full of hardcore pornography just next to the chair, and suddenly I couldn't help thinking of all the other potential donors who had watched that television while sitting in that chair, mast—er. Producing and collecting their donor samples.

Did you shudder?

Because I sure did.

I stood there with my specimen cup in one hand, looking at those magazines and that chair, and I came close to walking out. It's not that I have anything against either masturbation or pornography; I do enough of the former and view enough of the latter that it would be silly. And of course, it's not that the room was disconcerting; in fact, everything in it seemed to strive to achieve not really the exact opposite but rather to render the entire nature of its existence completely beside the point. As if to not really acknowledge that masturbation is a natural, biological desire but rather to render it clinical. And while sex is natural and biological and so many other things, one of the things it distinctly is not is clinical. It is usually private and generally intimate, an activity for darkened bedrooms and to be shared by two people.

Of course there are exceptions to this idea. Sex in more public places with, perhaps, the possibility of getting caught can be truly exciting, and I know that many people feel that, when it comes to partners, the more the merrier. I make no statement about either predilection; sex is an intensely personal thing. Sex varies and ranges, including any number of scenarios and any assortment of accoutrements, but what it doesn't generally include is a communal chair, a handful of paper towels, and a collection receptacle for the production of a sample. Even the wording: so proper and clinical, as completely sterile as the plastic cup I was even still holding.

That's not the language of sex. The language of sex is full of fricatives and plosives, fucks and cocks and cunts. Full of sounds not unintelligible but rather completely pre-verbal; moans and grunts and cries out into the night. Full of the desire

to take and be taken, a primal need insurmountable in its urgency.

Even masturbation: it's solitary. That's the whole point. There can be some degree of ritual to it (which sometimes even makes it more fun, like taking yourself on a date), but really, it's just you alone, in your bedroom. Or shower. Or wherever. I've never understood the idea of wankbooths in pornshops; surely that's what God invented high-speed Internet for. What, you think everyone's downloading legal movies and watching the news?

Which was, perhaps, why I had a hard time there, in that room. At first I used half the stack of C-fold towels to create a makeshift covering for the chair, before I realized, no, I still wasn't going to sit down anyway. There was a small table in front of the chair, between it and the television, and so I opened one of the hardcore mags, and began to peruse it. All ads for phone sex lines, or pictures of overly made-up young women with large members in their mouths. Handjobs and blowjobs, full-on penetration, and facials.

I thought about opening the door, going back up to the desk, and saying, "You know, on second thought, I will borrow one of those DVDs." I wondered if they'd ask if I had a particular preference, and imagined a menu like a winelist: "Tell me what you have in lesbian."

I didn't. I just employed my imagination as hard as I could to make myself as hard as I could, achieved production and collection of my sample, threw out all those paper towels, and hightailed it out of there. Looking the man behind the desk in the eye as I placed the specimen cup into the little receptacle they had there was awkward, and I'm fairly certain I blushed.

He told me I'd hear from them soon, and then I left.

I did hear from them soon. A week or so following, I got an e-mail from the same cryobank. It was short, curt, professional. Not even personalized. "Dear donor," it began, before it informed me that, for any variety of reasons it wasn't their policy to indicate, my sample was unusable. Any variety of

reasons included: “low count,” “genetic undesirability,” and “lack of adequate sample.”

I had to chuckle when I got the note. I submit a lot of stories and articles to various publications, and I’m used to form rejection letters. “Dear Author,” they begin, before they inform me that, for whatever reason, whatever story I submitted did not find a place with their publication.

I’m used to such notes, and I no longer even meet them with disappointment. Not that I expect them, of course, but rather simply that I’m no longer surprised when I receive them. They’re part of the territory now, and their reception is no longer extraordinary, nor remarkable; what will be is when I receive the letter that someone, somewhere, has accepted something for publication. In the meantime, I don’t give form rejections much thought.

Except when they come from a sperm bank, apparently, because the letters might have been the same, but the implications are not. My writing is improving and I’m finding success with it; the possibilities of rejection from a sperm bank aren’t so optimistic. Of course it could be something as simple as an inadequate amount of sample; I managed to produce one, yes, but not without some difficulty, as I noted, and the amount reflected the difficulty. It could be my height or the fact that I have family histories of things like cancer and heart disease.

Or I could have produced enough semen but not enough sperm. They could be damaged in some way, due to some tiny genetic abnormality about which I’ll never know. I’m smart and attractive but may be such a perfect male specimen in every way except for the single way that will ultimately prevent me from contributing my evolutionary part to the gene pool.

Or maybe I will eventually know the real reason. In several years, down the line, when I’m good and married to the girl I love and we decide we’d like to explore parenthood. That I currently run quickly away from the notion doesn’t mean that I’m not open to the eventual possibility of becoming a father; I think I’d make a good one. I know I won’t be a perfect dad, but knowing that I could learn as much as I can teach during the

process of rearing another human being might actually make me great at it.

And I'll always prefer greatness to perfection.

I wonder, now, if, several years down the line, when my partner and I have decided we'd like to have children, we'll be unable. I wonder if we'll try for many, many months (which, of course, can't be terrible. Being a parent is hard work, but at least half the fun is trying to become one in the first place) before we seek the advice of a fertility expert, who will inform us in somber tones that my male equipment isn't performing up to snuff. That my little guys aren't swimming properly or that there aren't enough of them. That all those years of writing with my laptop on my lap heated my reproductive bits to such a degree as to sterilize me.

In which case, of course, we'll adopt.

Perfect Day for a Ride

I should really just sell the damned thing. Manhattan just isn't a place for such a beast, much less the Village. New York's a walking town. A subway town. Sometimes a bus town, and some other times still a taxi town. It's a bustling town and a jogging town, a drinking and dancing and staying-out-till-4-am town, and in fact it's a different kind of town just about every minute for just about every person in it, but it's not so much a driving town. There are too many cabs, too many long limousines with precious celebrity cargo, too many delivery trucks and big buses, too many Lincoln Town Cars shuttling CEOs to the office and back. The air is too bright and the sounds are too vibrant and the color is too loud to be shuttered away from the world by four windows and a growling engine, but still I keep the dilapidated duster.

I tell myself I keep it because I wouldn't get much for it. The old lady who used to own it never did know much about anything she put a key into, and the engine's hoarse in her memory. The duck tape on the torn cloth top; the old, nearly bald tires; the muffler that might as well not exist—selling it might cover a month's rent or a fancy night on the City, but not much more.

That's what I tell myself, anyway.

But I know the truth. I don't keep it because selling it wouldn't make enough; I keep it for days like this.

As soon as I woke up this morning, I knew you were going to call. You always do on the days when I wake to sunlight like

glory streaming through my bedroom window. Golden hardwood floors, red brick walls. Sheets like eucalyptus. A good day to be alive. A good day for you to call.

And when my cell rings and it's you, I answer it. We haven't spoken in months, but we do so now like no time at all has passed.

"Good morning, sunshine," you say.

"Indeed it is. I knew you'd call," I tell you.

"Did you? And why is that?"

"Perfect day for a ride."

You pause. As if you want me to believe you're looking out your window. But I know otherwise. I know you're fingering the knot on the checkered silk scarf already around your neck. The one you wear when we go for a ride. "It is, isn't it? Do you want to go out?"

I know you use me for my car, but I don't mind. You use all the boys, and none of us ever do. The supermodels who bicycle across town in the rain just to bring you chocolates and flowers, the schoolboys with deliriously fawning crushes, the older ad execs and producers and artistes who want to cast you and make you a "Stah, baby, make you a stah."

But you and I both know you're already a stah. A shooting supernova across all of Manhattan, and the entire city wishes on you when you streak on by.

You show up just like I knew you would. Giant, chunky, black shades. Your silk scarf over your short, smart, black hair. Your gingham farmers'-daughter shirt tied in the front and the daisy-dukes you painted across your hips and thighs. You look innocent, and that's even more dangerous, isn't it? You smile and greet me, throw your arms around me in an effusive hug I feel your chest in, and I'm sure you can feel me in it, as well, but if you do you don't mention it.

And for that moment, just that one moment, I feel like the luckiest guy in the world. I'm certainly the luckiest guy on the lower East side.

"How's the Baroness?" you ask as we walk down to the old yellow jalopy, even though you don't need to. The Baroness is the same as she was the last time you rode in her. The same, in

fact, as the first time you rode in her. The Baroness doesn't change. And maybe that's why you love her. And me. Us.

We fall right away into our familiar ritual. We put the top down. We drive to the first Starbucks we find, and you hold the two lattes because the Baroness is too old to have cupholders. We turn the radio up full blast, and the music cuts out twice as I attempt to start it. It's an ugly old heap, but it gets us where we want to go, past Union Square and Saint Mark's, past the NYU buildings where you teach beauty and truth. You may feel all grown up when you do so, all dressed up in your professional slacks and studied words, but you take off your scarf as we leave the City and the wind whips through your hair and you giggle like you're six years old.

People watch as we leave the city, and I'm the envy of the entire city when you smile at the passers-by.

I know you use me for my car, but I don't mind, because it's mutual. I don't mind because you remove your top as we drive farther into the green hills of the country outside the City, as we reach stretches of unoccupied highway that go for miles. And finally we are the only people in the world, and you climb atop me, and we ride, baby, we ride. It's a perfect day for it.

For What It's Worth

Oh, you're so cool with your tambourine haircuts,
And you're so lovely with your foresty eyes.
You're serene as the breeze off the waves of the ocean,
And I could follow you like a star in new winter's sky.
So guide me on, dear lady of mine
Straight on to the light of a newcomin' dawn.
And when I get there I will offer it to you,
Whatever you ask, just don't lead me on.
'Cause you've taken my dreams and you've given them meaning,
And you've taken my soul and you've given it hope.
So now will you take all of my love,
And will you do with it whatever you want,
For what it's worth?
'Cause it ain't worth nothing if you're not receiving it,
So please won't you take it and simple my life?
Take my words and my gift and my every meaning
Take my head and my hands and the work they might do.
Take my eyes and ears if they can't see or hear you
Take my tongue and my lips if they can't taste or kiss you.
Take my hope and my joy 'cause without you they're nothing,
Take my magic away 'cause without you it won't work.
Take my wish and my life if they can't be for you
And take my self and my faith if they can't be in you.
But mostly just take all of my love
And you can have everything else I can give,
And you can do whatever you want,
For what it's worth.

What I Saw That Day (September 11th, 2001)

Tuesday, September 11th, 2001 began for me, as it did for almost everyone in the world, like any other day. As on most days back then, I woke up in my crummy little apartment in Jersey City, just a block away from Journal Square and the PATH trains I rode every weekday morning to 33rd street before walking a few blocks to work.

I was born on May 8, 1978, and so I had six months experience being 23 years old. I was mostly single and certainly didn't have any commitments in the world. I was working as a freelance broadcast production assistant at 285 Madison Avenue, which was my fancy way of saying I was a temp at Young & Rubicam, New York. I was only a year out of college and deserved fancy ways of saying things, didn't I? I was young and naïve and blissfully unaware of the world on a grander scale, all of which was about to change.

Given that I didn't know that morning was going to be different from other mornings, I didn't mentally record it. I remember the shower curtain with the tropical fish in my bathroom and the trunk of the old elm tree just outside the bathroom window, and ironing my pants and hurrying out of my apartment at a few minutes to 8 in the morning, but those are as likely memories of other mornings as they are of that day. There were a lot of mornings like that back then. I miss mornings like that.

The first real memory I have of that day, the first that I am certain, mentally, was part of that day, is of waiting in the line of

the corner breakfast cart to buy a cranberry muffin and an orange juice. I did that often, but I remember that day, an attractive brunette was in front of me. I'd seen her before. She had a nice figure and was gorgeous in spite of her enormous nose. Or maybe I thought she was attractive because of that enormous nose; perhaps it added a touch of distinction to her to separate her from all of the other spectacularly attractive brunettes I often saw on the streets of Manhattan. I remember thinking one day I'd have to say something to her. Maybe later that week. Maybe I'd invite her out for a drink.

I paid for my muffin and orange juice and walked into my office building. Young & Rubicam had temporary ID patches for their freelance workers, but I'd been there for more than a year by then and could greet all of the front desk attendants by name, and they always just waved me by. They did so that morning.

But that was the last morning they ever did.

I worked on the third floor, and took the stairs to my desk. It was in a cubicle, and I got to my cube at five minutes to nine. My voicemail indicator light on my phone flashed, so I dialed our audix system as I booted up my computer.

Just as I did so, one of the business managers with whom I worked came hurrying down the hallway opposite me. It was not unusual to see any of my colleagues hurrying down hallways.

"I just heard a plane hit the World Trade Center," she said as she passed, heading further down the hall toward the office of the director of our department.

I wonder if you ever realize the exact moment your life changes. I didn't. I keyed in my extension and password to listen to my messages. I don't remember what they were, but I remember I wasn't concerned. I do remember my first thought: single-engine Cessna, pilot error, clipped that giant antenna sticking out of the top of the one tower. Port Authority officials would be fishing the yahoo out of the water off Battery Park before most of the city had gotten its coffee, we now return you to your regular programming. Not for a moment did I consider the possibility of . . . well. What actually happened.

I walked down the hallway to our director's office. The business manager had fished the key out of the director's assistant's drawer and tuned the cable-enabled television to CNN. That third floor office was on the corner overlooking the intersection of 40th Street and Madison Avenue, and given the density of sky scrapers in Manhattan, we couldn't see the World Trade Center from where we were, and so we watched it happen on cable, just like everyone else in the nation. You know what I saw. You saw it, too. Somewhere, wherever you were, you saw it, or heard about it. Your eyes were riveted to a television, your ears to a radio.

Given the timing of the impact of those two planes, many of our producers were already on their way to work when the first struck, and as they arrived they joined us in the office. The usual morning pleasantries were dismissed for something more intimate: exchanges of information, and hugs. "Did you—oh, thank God you're okay!"

"I was so worried."

"Did you hear from her?"

"Has anyone talked to Los Angeles?"

No one had. It was still early. The towers still stood, pouring grey smoke into the sky like blood into water. We all had cell phones, but the circuits overloaded in an hour, and even the land connections were spotty at best.

When the first tower fell, I went numb. Words like "shock" and "surreal" were used a lot during the following days, but neither quite adequately describes what I felt at that moment. Not even terrified manages it. To really explain that feeling, I need to take you back to my childhood, when my grandmother gave me *The World Book of Knowledge*, which contained hundreds of articles arranged with no real order about subjects from the first money to black holes to odd musical instruments. It was a fun book, and, at the end, included an article about Nostradamus. Who he was, what he did, what people believed he predicted.

That article mentioned several of his predictions that hadn't by then come to fruition: shooting stars and a couple of others,

but the one I remember most was “The destruction of New York and the start of World War III in the late 1990s.” I was six or seven years old when I read that sentence, during the mid-80s. It terrified me. For years I had recurring nightmares about that sentence. Buildings falling, airplanes and boats... In my teens, those dreams came less frequently, then stopped completely when I went to college. By then I was anxious about other things.

Until my senior year. I was engaged then, had just realized I didn’t want to be a doctor but not yet figured out what else I might do, and was completing my major when my nightmares began again in earnest. One every few weeks. Dreams of watching the Manhattan skyline fall, of fire and smoke and chaos.

I don’t believe those dreams were precognitive; I think the book scared the wits out of me when I was young, and it became a great subconscious source of anxiety. When I started to worry about grades and credit card bill due dates and assignments, I think I made that anxiety into the biggest, most terrifying thing possible.

And there I stood, in a corner office, and the biggest, most terrifying thing I had ever thought possible, the thing that had haunted my dreams for so many years, was happening. That was how I felt when I saw that first building fall. That terror had been part of my dreams for so many years that it was almost familiar. It was like opening the closet door when you’re thirty and meeting the bogeyman.

I don’t remember much about those first few hours, save a few intermittent moments. I remember the moment of looking out those office windows, down at the corner, and seeing cars backing down Madison Avenue in reverse at decent speeds. I don’t think, before that moment, I’d ever seen a car in Manhattan driving in reverse before. It may have been related to the evacuation of Grand Central Station, but I can’t be sure; there were many rumors, and even having been right there, I’m still not sure exactly what happened.

I remember the moment those towers fell. I remember the image on CNN; that one moment both were there, the tops in flames and obscured by smoke but still intact, and then one just wasn't. The tumbling down of dust as first one tower and then, an hour later, the other. I remember watching that occur with my colleagues. I remember the tear that traced out of a green eye and down the drawn cheek of one. I remember the empty feeling that came, the feeling deep in the pit of my stomach that I still haven't been able to identify. I still feel it sometimes, and I still can't figure out what it is.

I knew I should call my parents, who lived near Philadelphia, to let them know I was okay, but I realized I knew neither of their work numbers. Instead I called my old high school, where my sister was then a student. She was out at lunch and couldn't be contacted, so I told the principal I'd call back in 45 minutes. When I did so, they put my sister on the phone. She was in tears; they'd told her I'd called but not that I was okay, because I'd forgotten to tell them I was. She gave me my mother's work number.

My mother burst into tears when she heard my voice, but I don't think it was the first time she'd done so that day; I could tell by her relief just how worried she had been. She asked what I planned to do and where I planned to go from there, and I had to admit that I hadn't gotten that far yet. We'd all agreed that it was safest to remain in our office building for the time being, but as the day progressed, that changed. People made plans to stay with one another, extended invitations, made plans to find homes with people they'd only ever drunk coffee with, previously. My director pulled his backpack over his shoulders and set out to walk home across the Brooklyn Bridge.

Just after noon, one of my colleagues and her husband mentioned that they were going to trek across town to the Hoboken ferry to get back to their own apartment in New Jersey, and they invited me to join them. Though I'd been invited to stay with friends in Manhattan itself, I hadn't wanted to remain in the City: I had nothing with me, no contact solution, no toothbrush, no extra clothing, nothing but what I

had with me and maybe twenty bucks. I didn't have any credit cards because my credit wasn't very good after college.

I also wanted to get back to my room. My bed. My floor messy with the clothes I'd laundered but hadn't yet put away. My apartment. Home. The PATH train from 33rd Street was my normal transportation home, but they had shut down the subway in downtown Manhattan for fear of the subterranean vibrations, so I accepted the invitation from my colleague and her husband to walk with them, and at around two in the afternoon began a journey across the city along 40th street.

It was only upon leaving the building that I realized how quickly and vastly Manhattan had changed, and that I suddenly felt completely exposed. In the office, I had been insulated from the noise, the chaos, the destruction. The windows and walls and floors and ceilings had created a bubble, isolating us, where we already had friends and family. I consider that now, and it makes me feel so terribly guilty; so many people were lost that day. Almost 3,000 workers and rescue personnel lost their lives during the attacks and the subsequent recovery efforts, and there I had been, in a cushy corner office on Madison avenue watching the events unfold on CNN. When those buildings fell, when I watched them tumble down over themselves in massively roiling clouds of dark grey dust, I watched it happen on the large television in that office, surrounded by the people I loved and worked with.

I couldn't sort my feelings that day. Scared and shocked, yes, but mostly just numb. Overwhelmed. Everything felt new, and different. I'd always believed Manhattan is a city unlike any other, but I realized even more true how true that was that day when I realized how different it had become.

The Manhattan I'd grown to love over six years was a cacophony of discordant scents all jostling each other for elbow room: body odor under failed deodorant; streetcart pretzels and hotdogs and falafel; those hot, muggy, surprising blasts of foul-smelling steam from subway grates; sudden-and-then gone whiffs of designer perfume like lavender and lilacs worn by beautiful women who make so much money in such high

positions they could buy and sell you and you probably wouldn't mind, not when they smelled like that.

Manhattan, too, is a million-instrument orchestra: car horns and engines; jackhammers and clanging percussion; people shouting on their cell phones; homeless people who are probably mad and certainly angry. The sound thrums through the streets like blood through veins, some in frequencies you can only feel, and as though it is the City's life. It is industry, and it is constant. I often went out with my friends to bars and clubs, at nights at the end of which I would trek back to 33rd street to take the PATH train to my Jersey City apartment at 4 in the morning, and there were always other people around. Sinatra sang that Manhattan never sleeps, and he was half-right; it never even goes to bed.

The first difference I noticed when I left my office building that afternoon, through those revolving doors and into the still-brilliant sun, was the smell. The air seemed heavy, as dense with dirt and dust and grit as it could possibly be without actually becoming solid; I could taste the grains in it, feel them rattle down my throat and into my lungs. I was several miles from the World Trade Center, on 40th and Madison, breathing the towers and the attacks and the fear into my body. Though I was several miles from the site of the attacks, they became a part of me, trapped in my lungs, in my eyes, in my memories, as crystallized as silica and asbestos.

It smelled like a construction site. A vast, near-silent, deserted construction site.

Even now, years later, I sometimes find it difficult to take a deep breath. I work out, and afterwards I struggle to get enough air. I know that smokers get emphysema and cancer because foreign particles accumulate in their lungs over the years and form tumors, and I wonder if a similar thing occurred that day. I wonder if I still have dust from that day in my lungs. I wonder if my breath caught the World Trade Center and won't let it go.

The city was near-silent, too, and nearly empty. I walked out into the same city, with the same great buildings, the same famous avenues and streets, the same stores and public library, but they seemed different, sapped of their usual energy. The

whole city was preternaturally quiet. There was no industry, few cars, even fewer people. I felt as though the city were hurting, and I could feel it on the street; without the sound and the life that was its energy, the city itself seemed to be in shock, as if it were bleeding out.

It felt so foreign.

It hurt.

My coworker, her husband, and I made light conversation as we walked across a City that felt unfamiliar. All that remained of the towers was the dust you could smell all over the City. I remember hitting Broadway and looking downtown; given the density and height of Manhattan's architecture, I'm not certain I would have been able to see the World Trade Center from that spot on 40th and Broadway, but I couldn't then. All we could see was a great, settled mass of grey-white smoke we could taste even from where we stood.

I only ever managed to visit the World Trade Center once, that previous June, when I'd attended a reading by Neil Gaiman on the day his novel *American Gods* was published. The Borders in which he'd read was at street level, and its second floor was the highest I had visited; I'd never had occasion to go any higher. When I was in college, however, I'd taken a class called "Culture and the City," in which our professor took us on walks in various neighborhoods of Manhattan, pointing out the architectural styles present. I remember going on the walk around downtown Manhattan and pausing next to Saint Peter's church and listening to my professor talk about the Chinese gothic style of the World Trade Center, and I remember standing there, in the shadow of the towers, and craning my neck as far as it would go and still not being able to see the tops but goggling anyway, because that was really all you could do.

As we continued walking across the city, I remember hitting 9th Avenue and seeing a dazed business man. His shoulders were hunched, and I couldn't determine how old he was because he walked slowly and as if he were much older than he appeared. His charcoal suit hung loose on his frame and looked expensive

but didn't fit him well; it was wrinkled, too, and it appeared as if he had slept in it. His hair was mostly dark streaked with some grey, and then my coworker pointed out the man's feet.

His shoes and the cuffs of his probably-tailored pants were caked with thick, white dust.

I wondered if he'd walked all the way to 40th Street from the World Trade Center. It would have been a long walk, in the bright, warm sun, dressed in a suit like that, and walking as he was.

When we finally got to the line for the Hoboken ferry, which went down several blocks, I don't know how long we stood in it. Quite a while passed before we boarded the ferry: a large, white boat with benches for seating spanning starboard to port with two aisles cutting through. We took a seat in the middle of the boat; on any other day it would have been a gorgeous ride on the Hudson River. The water was calm and sparkled silver in the late-afternoon sun, and the ride was smooth.

It was 5:20 then. I don't remember the time because I looked at my watch; rather, I know what time it was because I've read, since then, that was when the third building, World Trade Center 7, fell, and I watched that happen from the middle of the Hudson River. Everyone on that ferry watched that building fall, in fact, because all our eyes were fixed to the dust cloud that covered most of downtown Manhattan as we rode past it. There's been a recent proliferation of conspiracy theories about "what really happened" that day and much speculation about why that third building collapsed when it did; I've read many people argue that it was controlled demolition.

I've seen controlled demolition, both on television and in real life. I've watched construction crews collapse the buildings in on themselves so that first one section falls and then the next and the next, until all that is left of all those stories is a pile of rubble and dust.

What I watched happen to World Trade Center 7 from the middle of the Hudson River did not look like any controlled demolition I've ever seen. I remember seeing that reddish-tan

building in front of the dust cloud. There were no tiny, squib-like explosions that puffed from the sides to bring that building to the ground; rather, it shimmered like a heat mirage over hot asphalt, didn't sparkle with the light of tiny explosions but rather wavered slightly without ever actually moving, and then it sank as if the ground beneath it had become water.

That was the moment I remember having been terrified. It was a cold, icy, resigned terror, not a panic, because why would you panic when you're on a ferry in the middle of the Hudson River? There was no place to go. I remember wondering, in that moment, if there had been a nuclear weapon aboard one of the planes, if it had been timed to go off several hours later to wipe out the rest of downtown Manhattan, and I remember wondering, in that detached way, how quickly it would happen. How long before the blast radius hit the ferry I was on and capsized it and blew us apart and boiled the very water on which we were floating, all at the same time?

I counted to five, and those five seconds seemed to last forever. I didn't feel safe after they had passed, either, only reasonably sure that whatever had made that building fall hadn't been nuclear, and that we people on that ferry were going to survive that day, that we'd made it out of Manhattan alive.

I didn't feel excited, nor jubilant, nor triumphant, nor even relief.

I remember noticing that my coworker was watching that same space, where that third building had been, as I was, and that her eyes filmed over and that several tears streaked down her cheeks. I remember taking her right hand, and her husband's taking her left hand, and I remember riding for the remainder of the ferry ride like that, and I remember how I felt.

I felt incredibly sad. I felt heartbroken. I felt guilty. I felt deeply affected, but also like I didn't have the right to feel that way, that there were people who had jumped from the building, that there were who-knew-how-many rescue workers who had lost their lives, and there I was on the ferry on the Hudson River because I only wanted to go home. I'm an Eagle scout, part of the Order of the Arrow, and I felt like I should have put on my uniform and gone down to the site and helped hand out water or

helped sort through the rubble or God, helped any goddamn way I could, and I felt so selfish because all I wanted to do was go home. All I wanted to do was hug my family and my friends and for everything to be okay, even though I knew that it wouldn't be, it couldn't be. I felt so impotent, so useless, too, because what could I do, really? I couldn't even give blood, because I'd just gotten a tattoo the previous January.

I was 23 years old and I might have been strong and smart but it didn't feel like enough. It was the first time in my entire life I felt like the best I had to offer wasn't enough.

When we got off the ferry, there were several places to go: one was a general exit, while another included decontamination equipment, including flash-showers, for anyone who had been caught in the dust and the cloud that had permeated the air at the site of the attack. My coworker asked if I was sure I didn't want to join them at their apartment, but I declined. I only wanted to get to my own, and so we separated. I found my way to the Hoboken PATH train, and realized, even as I did so, that if I had left my apartment only ten minutes later that morning, I would have been on the train when the first plane had struck.

The PATH train is much like the subway, with a similar set-up of seats, but I never sat: trains always filled up, and I always gave up my seats to people who looked like they needed them more, anyway. I took a spot against a wall by the door, and for the first time that whole day, I exhaled. I felt like I was almost where I wanted to be. Almost home.

While we waited for more passengers, two gentlemen boarded the car, a well-dressed black man in a caramel leather jacket guiding a white man dressed in a wet, flame-resistant jumpsuit. I wondered why it was wet if it was flame-resistant. The white man's eyes were red and irritated, and the black man led him to a pole in the center of the train, then sat down. I noticed the man with the irritated eyes was constantly blinking and shaking his head, and I offered him the eyedrops I always kept with in case my contacts started acting up.

He declined, telling me about what had happened. He'd been there when the first tower had collapsed, and the dust had

scratched his corneas badly. They'd taken him to their decontamination shower, which was why his clothes were wet, and even as he explained I realized that the dazed business man my coworkers and I had seen hadn't slept in his suit; it had dried that way.

The train ride was smooth and uninterrupted, and I felt a rush of guilty relief when the doors opened at Journal Square, as I bounded up the stairs and into Jersey City, as I walked the block back to my apartment and then collapsed on my bed. I didn't realize how much nervous energy had been thrumming through my body until it finally left, and I passed out.

I was awakened by a call from a girl who lived just across the street and with whom I'd gone out a few times even though nothing physical had ever happened. She asked if I was home and then what I was up to, and then invited me to her place to split a bottle of wine and just be together.

I went. She opened a bottle of red and we split it between us, and she turned on CNN until we couldn't watch the planes fly into the towers any more, and then we just sat and talked. She was an accountant at American Express and had been at World Trade Center 7 the day before, and she was supposed to have been there the following day.

This is probably the point where it would make sense, storywise, if we had sex. That we needed to connect somehow, that our words and feelings had failed us and we needed to use our bodies to do something physical, something to escape, however temporarily, from what was occurring, but we did not. All I remember, now, is that I wasn't in any sort of mood for any such thing; I was tired and scared and felt impotent in a way that had nothing to do with sex, and maybe I could have initiated something, but I didn't have the heart. The wine had gotten to me, perhaps, and I just wanted to be back in my own bed.

I kissed her on her forehead and left her there, in her apartment, on her couch, settling in to sleep. I let myself out of her building and crossed the street to my own; night had fallen, but still I could smell the dust in the air on an otherwise clear night. If I dreamt at all that night, I don't remember them.

Five years later, those are the details that remain with me and probably always will. The pain and the hurt remain, as well, and in the years since I have realized that they extend more deeply than I had at first realized. It is only now, recently, when I have begun to write about it, that I have begun to unravel my emotions about it. I'm starting to believe that I blocked myself from feeling certain things until very recently, that perhaps I sensed I wasn't strong enough, yet, to face my feelings about that day.

Not the fear and the pain; those were the easy ones. No, there were other ones, as well. Guilt, for one, and selfishness for another. The posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms I feel are not nearly so severe, nor acute, as those of others who experienced that day, but they are there nonetheless. Perhaps one of the most revealing things I can tell you is that I feel ashamed that I may be suffering from survivor trauma because I don't feel like I have any right to that feeling. I didn't survive that day: I lived through it. I'm not certain I feared for my life except in retrospect; it all happened so fast that I experienced it, that day, with some detachment.

My memories of that day are interwoven with my memories of the years I spent in Manhattan. I was only a New Yorker for a short time, less than two years, and even then my address was in Jersey City. But that was just where my bed was; I worked and ate and danced and lived in Manhattan. When I went out, which was often because I was 23, I did so in Manhattan. I have a lot of memories I hold dear of those years, and that day has become part of them. Part of college and working and being with my friends. When I think of September 11th, 2001, I also think of the "Kiss Me, Kate!" revival, the Met and the Cloisters. When I think of how that day smelled, I also think of my office, of the commercials I helped produce, and all of my friends. When I think of the fear, I also think of being inside the World Trade Center and listening to Neil Gaiman read about *American Gods*, and of later looking up at those towers from the ground, of standing in the far-reaching shadow of those towers.

I wonder, when I think of that day, what American gods passed away that day, and how many. How many of us has it killed, and in what ways?

It is difficult to write about that day, and the only way I can end this account is to acknowledge that. That as essays and writings go, I don't feel this is successful even if I don't know how it could be successful: I've laid bare everything I have, everything I remember, and still it feels inadequate, as I still do.

Perhaps it is that I still have trouble believing that this world I find myself in can possibly be real. That my nation, my great country of which I've always been proud to be part, has strayed so far and done so many things I disagree with. That our own government could have possibly corrupted the ideals on which our entire national ideology was based in an effort to trade our freedom for some false sense of security. In the years since, we have run a rainbow of terrorist alerts and been prevented from bringing hair product with us when we travel.

I can't seem to shake this feeling that it's a bad dream. I can't help looking at the plans and design for the new Freedom Tower and wonder why we can't just build the World Trade Center back. Why we can't recreate those buildings so that, one day, when we talk to our children and tell them about that day, they can look up at us and say, "What're you talking about, Daddy? You mean those buildings? Right there? They fell down?"

I live, now, in Los Angeles and attend school at the University of Southern California, but I can't help the desire that, tomorrow morning, I might wake up back in my tiny, cluttered bedroom in my crummy little apartment in Jersey City, and I might shower and dress and take a PATH train into midtown, where I might walk again to that advertising agency like I would have every day for the past five years, and I might spend the day writing copy and brainstorming new ideas for new clients and new accounts.

And that I might, at some point in the day, find myself on the higher floors of the building, and I might look out the window, toward downtown. I would see the Empire State

Building just a few blocks south, but it wouldn't be the tallest building in Manhattan again; just a mile or so beyond I would see the sunlight shining off the windows of the World Trade Center, and beyond even that the Statue of Liberty.

And I would stand there looking at it, and I would appreciate where I was, and I would smile.

Addicted to Praise

“Edgar Allan Poe is dead.”

I find the small obituary buried in the back of the post while I’m sitting at my small table, cluttered with half-read books and the remains of breakfast. My stomach flips as I read it and threatens to send the eggs back up my throat, and I take a deep breath, squeeze the corners of the table. The pine creaks beneath my fingers, but my effort doesn’t work; I rush to the window and retch until it hurts my stomach.

I moan and spit the taste from my mouth. I try to get my breath, and I use water from the basin to splash my face. My eyes are wet, but I don’t know whether from sickness or sadness.

Edgar was a small, slight man I never knew well enough to call a friend. I only met him twice, and the first time only for a few short moments during which his large brown eyes became larger at my mentioning my reputation for ratiocination.

He requested an interview.

I was, at first, reluctant, but he implored. He was working on a story of detection, he told me, and he would certainly benefit from the added advice and expertise of a sage such as myself. My wheedled ego appreciated the praise and agreed.

I was, back then, a young Parisian analyst who did not yet require a daily shave. I was in addition full of the hubris of youth but did not yet have the reputation to support it, but I thought perhaps I could translate Poe’s stories of analysis into quick respect and success.

I began to thrill at the idea. The American man of esteemed letters establishing the reputation of the French guru of clever cipher. Why, Baudelaire himself would translate the stories for consumption on the Continent, and very soon all the world would be familiar with those fantastic stories emblazoned with the passion of the man who had penned them. I would build my success on those stories without ever having solved a case on my own.

Back then, I had not yet done so. I had only studied the methods of deduction and detection and was eager to use them; I thought that, after they had read of my proposed application of rational techniques, local constabularies would turn to me to solve the cases they could not, the mysteries beyond the meager grasp of their collective intellects.

I became, instead, a laughing stock. A novice condescendingly dismissed by men who were older than me, of many far wiser than me. When I approached the local official forces to help them with their most recent cases, their detectives would point and laugh. “Oh, that’s rich, Dupin, but when we suspect a monkey of the crime we’ll come find you,” or “But you do realize, Auggie, that the young lady’s lost more’n a letter!”

And so it is that I subsist solely on my inheritance and continue to spend my time consuming these books about reason and deduction. The sum on which I live has in recent times dwindled from one appropriate for a dauphin to one more fitting a lord. Perhaps, even, a baron. I live in cluttered squalor in a section of Paris populated by whores and pickpockets, here in my small apartment filled with dusty books and skittering insects and my vices. It is not much of a life, perhaps, but it is the one I call my own.

My stomach clenches, and the convulsion is so great that, for a moment, I fear it is going to turn me inside-out, that I am about to loose an organ and all my remaining humour. Icy sweat pops out on my brow and down my back, and my knees buckle. The wooden floor is cool against my suddenly fevered cheek, and the last thing I think of before I succumb to the black of midday night is Poe: his sad, imploring eyes; his downcast features and his sickly nature.

I feel him reaching out to me, but I cannot accept his grasp. Not yet. For now, the darkness.

I wake to cold darkness, Parisian October creeping through my small apartment and into the hollows of my bones, snake-slithery as quicksilver and arrows. My body quivers. The chill has seeped into my marrow, and I groan as I move my leaden joints. I crawl to the hearth and, with trembling fingers, light it. Orange-yellow light flickers out into my small sitting room, crammed with old books and second-hand furniture. I retrieve the post from the table before I settle into my creaking armchair to enjoy the slow warmth of the fire.

The obituary doesn't offer many details. He died the day before yesterday, it says, but the paper notes the piece was published in the issue of the New York Daily Tribune dated October 7th.

"The announcement will startle many," the text states, "But few will be grieved by it." It delves briefly into his character, his eloquent speech, the way he sometimes muttered to himself as if in prayer, before finally it closes with, "We have not learned the circumstances of his death. It was sudden, and from the fact that it occurred in Baltimore, it is presumed that he was on his way to New York," finishing with the line "After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well."

It is signed, simply, "Ludwig." The name means nothing to me. I wonder if it would mean anything to Poe.

I want his death to grieve me more than it does and so I feel guilty when it does not. I decide, then, that the single most effective recourse against the lack of grief and guilt and the inevitable is the recourse I usually seek. On a small table beside my chair, I keep a carafe from which I draw a glass of chocolate-colored alcohol I raise to my lusting lips. Of all my vices the sweetest wine, oh, laudanum, how I sing the praise for which thou art so aptly named, how I chase thy delirious dragon through the maddening dreams of the poet who destroyed my character, how I cry out in the stillness of nights punctured by visions of disembodied but beating hearts, of thrashing ravens and dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.

I drain the glass to the bone and pour myself another when suddenly I hear a tapping, as of someone tik-tik-takking against the window's wooden frame. I raise reluctant eyes to the glass, beyond which I can discern nothing around the flickering dancing light of flames within the hearth. Curious and not a little startled, I cross the room to release the shutter, allowing in a chilling, wicked gasp of wind that smells of crime and greed and whores.

Just that wind, but nothing more.

The city sighs as I turn away, retreat to my chair, carafe, and glass before I hear a great, dark flapping as of velvet violent-tearing that flips and screams about the room. So suddenly am I struck with terror that I drop my glass upon the floor, where it leaves a great, dark stain upon the threadbare rug. Hard, percussive air blasts my face from wings within the tiny space, until a great and stately raven lands upon the floor, lands and flaps and squawks and caws before it comes to rest upon my floor.

I seek my breath in shortened gasps breaths and stumble back in fear. Tongues of flames like votive candles dance within its liquid eyes, and it spreads its wings like parting night before, within its careful talon, it grasps the fallen glass. It ducks its head down to the rug as if to smell the stain, and then with a shot it lets fly the glass to shatter it within the hearth. Flames leap to lick the liquid sizzle and the room begins to fill with a scent like flowers for the dead, while the raven squaws and flaps and takes to perch upon the high back of my chair, where it sits to regard me from above.

Says the raven: "Nevermore."

It steels me with its oily eyes as I move to sit across from it, and the word may not be formed from lips and tongue but still I understand.

Hearing it speak cuts through the haze of my inebriation; I fight for a moment against sobriety, but it throbs in my head like waves.

I wonder if the raven is a familiar. Surely, it must be. Its appearance on the very day on which I've read Poe's obituary is too neat to be coincidence. I know that ravens have a reputation

as representation for those beyond the veil, and I wonder if Poe is reaching out to me in the only way he can.

I find myself speaking to it. I cannot say why I do so in English, but perhaps it is because that is the language in which I spoke to Poe. "I do not care if you are. Your stories destroyed my reputation. And for what? Never a thanks, never a cent. The only thing you ever earned from them was a reputation as a drunkard and an opium addict."

Says the raven: "Nevermore."

"No, nevermore indeed! Nevermore at all. I can forget you," I say, and I feel anger coursing through me, but underneath it I feel sadness, which I know is the more true of the two emotions. "I can go on with my life, but what of that is there? What is there besides a broken-down flat and a failed consulting business and ---," I say, and my voice catches on me, but I force it on, "An addiction to praise?" Even in honesty I cannot accept it.

Says the raven: "Nevermore."

"Right. You said that. So what? Am I going to give it up because you say so? Will everything just get better?" I ask, and that's when I realize, fully, that I am speaking to a raven as if it will tell me what to do with my life, and I feel even more chagrin that part of me believes I might even get some sort of an answer.

The raven speaks again, and at first I hear the same word, again, but then I realize it said something else entirely.

I look at it. "What?"

It speaks again. Three careful syllables. As clearly enunciated as any syllables might be when coming out of a beak. "Ball." "Tin." "More."

"Ball-tin-more?" I ask. "What does that me—," and then I stop. Because I understand. "You think I should go."

The raven is silent.

"To Baltimore. To America. I should go and investigate your death," I say.

The raven, again, says nothing, but it doesn't need to. Because by then I am looking around my own desperate surroundings and realizing there really is no reason for me not to go. Some small part of me wonders if, perhaps, I investigate

Poe's death and can discover the cause, I may rebuild my reputation.

Some greater part of me, too, hopes. I am glad that latter emotion recognizes me, for I have changed so much since last I saw it.

Almost as soon as I have the thought, the raven takes to wing and goes.

It takes more than a week to gather my affairs and make my arrangements, but before two have passed, I and my bag are en route to America, to Baltimore, to Poe. During those almost two weeks, I drink laudanum only to prevent the intensity of withdrawal symptoms, only to keep my hands from shaking, only to remain sane.

Baltimore is a new, raw city, bricks as pink as fresh skin and cobblestones the deep grey of a winter storm. I nearly gag on the smell, some grotesque combination of roasted nuts, ground shells, and horse sweat and waste. The air is so sharp and cold breathing feels like getting socked in the nose, and the men old enough to grow winter beards have, while the women's faces are extra pink with rouge over windburn. I first secure a room for an extended stay, then visit the local constabulary.

"You're here to investigate the death of Edgar Allan Poe," the officer repeats. He is dressed in a dark grey wool suit that barely retains his immense girth; his neck, when he talks, waddles around his shirt collar.

I nod. "Yes, sir. I was wondering if you might share with me---"

"And who'd you say you was again?"

I sigh. "My name is Auguste Dupin, sir, and—"

"Rightright, Dupin. And you're from..."

"France, sir. Paris."

"Right. You're far from 'ome, ain'tchya? 'Cross the ocean, inn't it?"

"Yessir. In Europe."

"Europe," he repeats, and in a voice the same tone as if I'd told him I'd come from Hades, or the Garden of Eden. "So what'd you come all this way for?"

“I told you, to investiga—.”

“Right. The death. Poe. But why?”

“Well. Sir. I am an analyst—.”

“Oh, you’re a detective. I see. Why didn’t you say that in the first place? Thought you could lend your expertise, eh?”

I hesitate. “Yes, I suppose—,” I start to say, uncertainly, but the officer cuts me off.

“And what makes you think we need you here? We have the best detectives in the states working on my cases, and you show up with your fancy French analytics and think you can show my men up? Go home,” he says, before he stomps off.

I am so taken aback I cannot at first move. I know, rationally, I should not be shocked; the reaction I just received is the reaction I should have expected. And what did I expect to achieve by coming, anyway? I swallow hard. I am a fool and an addict and here I am in America for the man who destroyed my reputation because some verbose bird made me believe it wasn’t the foolhardy ide—

“Excuse me.” A voice behind me.

I turn to see a young man standing behind me. He has a thick crop of dark, wiry hair and trustworthy eyes that are a little too eager.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean— but I couldn’t help overhearing you and the chief— did you say you’re Dupin?”

I look at him.

“The Dupin? From the stories by Mister E. A. Poe?”

“Edgar based the character on me, yes.”

The man’s face bursts into a genuine smile. “Sir, it is pleasure of the most genuine degree to make your acquaintance. My name is Franklin Dixon. I have only recently enlisted in our city’s proud policing authority.”

I congratulate him. I try to find the heart to make it sincere but I do not think I manage it.

Dixon, then, does something that surprises me; he puts his hand in the crook of my arm and begins to lead me out of the station. “Let me escort you out.”

We get outside, into the bright Baltimore sun. Down the steps, turn and go several steps before Dixon steps me aside into the opening of an alleyway.

“I shouldn’t tell you even this much, but here are the facts in the case as we know them: Poe was found near Ryan’s Tavern on Third October by Joseph Walker, who contacted a man named Snodgrass. Snodgrass knew Poe, and took Poe to a physician named Moran at Washington College Hospital, where Poe died. We believe Poe’s ultimate destination was New York, but that he was mugged before he arrived; his mother-in-law indicated he had approximately five hundred dollars on him, but that money was not recovered,” Dixon says. Licks his lips as he looks around. “The case is still open.”

I try to absorb it all. Moran. Snodgrass. Walker, mugging. “Why do you tell me this?”

“I know you’re good.”

“What? How?”

“I read the stories, Mr. Dupin,” he smiles, and he takes out a small notebook and a pencil, scribbles on a leaf of paper and tears it out, thrusts it into my hand. “Here. Get a carriage. Go to this address. Talk to Snodgrass. Maybe you’ll think of a question we didn’t. I must return. I shouldn’t even be talking to you,” he tells me as he urges me forward, while he himself turns the other way. “Backway,” he says as explanation, and then he disappears.

I leave the alley alone, and I hail the first carriage I can find, read off the address.

The carriage takes me to a gleaming white house with foliage-green shutters and a large, dark wooden sign on which “Dr. J. E. Snodgrass, est. 1840,” is emblazoned in large white letters. Almost a decade, then. A small bell above the door tinkles as I walk in. The entire first floor, I realize, is the good doctor’s office. I ask if I might speak to him, and the reception tells me to wait.

And so I do. There is a simple wooden bench, and I sit. And wait. And think. About Poe. So far, already, there are several possibilities; the first is a mugging, but I am unconvinced.

Poe might not have had the strongest constitution, but I cannot believe a mugging would have killed him.

“Mr. Dupin.”

I stand as a man I take to be Snodgrass enters, fills the room. Most of his grey hair is gone, and he wears a large, salt-and-pepper beard. “Right this way,” he says, leading me through a door, down a hall and into an examining room. “What ails you?”

“Poe,” I say.

He pauses, then: “I thought I recognized your name. You’re the detective Edgar was always talking about.”

I nod. “I suppose so.”

He sighs. “I don’t know much beyond what I already told the police.”

“I would still like very much to hear it from you. Do you mind?”

He does not. He got a letter from a man named Walker, who had found Poe completely intoxicated just outside Ryan’s Tavern. Walker sent for Snodgrass, who collected Poe and brought him to Washington College Hospital, where a man named Moran treated Poe. Poe spent almost four days bedridden in fevered delirium. “He’d had some shock to the system, and he’d never been a strong man. He was unconscious most of the time, and what little time he spent awake, he was incoherent. At one point, he kept yelling for ‘Reynolds.’ I didn’t know what he was talking about. He barely made it to midnight of October 7th. Stopped breathing. Unconscious when it happened.”

“And this Walker?” I ask. I remember Dixon mentioned him, as well.

“Joe Walker. He was just leaving a pub when he saw Poe stumbling outside.”

“Did he leave an address by which to contact him?”

“I have it,” the doctor says. “Wait here.”

He disappears but returns a moment later with a scrap of paper on which Walker’s address is written in tight, spidery letters. I pocket it. My hand trembles as it does so.

“You know, there are things you can take.”

I look at the doctor. "Sorry?"

"Your addiction. You don't look well. I can prescribe something to help. Laudanum, for instance."

"Laudanum is what made me this way," I tell him as I rise.

"You're abstaining all together?"

"I am trying," I tell him.

"I admire that. I'm a staunch supporter of the temperance movement. Tell me, how is your body handling it?"

I look at him. "Not very well. Please excuse me," I say, and leave the office. I hail another carriage, a big, black, loud affair of horse hooves and wagon wheels, and tell the driver the address where I'm staying. On the way, I copy Walker's address onto another sheet of paper. I have to pause several times, unable to control the pencil, and I tell myself it is the bump of stones under carriage wheels. I almost believe myself.

When we arrive, I give the driver the address, along with a large tip. "Go here. Please ask Mr. Walker to meet me this evening at seven at Ryan's Tavern."

The driver nods. I watch the carriage rumble away like a departing storm. In my chest, my heart trembles. It has been a long time since I have known this much activity in so short a time, and I feel it. My muscles and limbs feel loose and rubbery. I realize, too, that my breath is short, that I am nearly gasping to keep up with it.

I put my hand on my chest, feel my hummingbird pulse, and I turn. There is a railing on the stoop leading up to the building in which I have rented a room, and I lean against it, let my weight settle onto it because it feels like too much for me. My vision blurs, and just as it does, I see a dark shape light on the railing closer to the door, a foot above and in front of me.

It caws at me.

"I am here," I tell it. "I am here." I am surprised my voice is a whisper, for I did not mean for it to be.

It caws again, and then flaps off, a great, black blur as big as the world, and the percussive blast of its wings against my face is too much for me. I collapse, sideways, downward, into darkness.

I wake in a bed. My head throbs. The room is dark except for a flickering candle. I detect movement to my side but do not move myself. My tongue is sour and swollen, and I want to ask for water, but it comes out a groan. I feel pathetic.

“You’re awake?” the voice comes from off to the side, and I recognize it as belonging to the woman who is renting me the room in her house.

I know enough not to nod, and speaking didn’t work either. I raise a leaden hand, fiddle my fingers.

She puts a glass of water to my lips. I drink.

“Found you at the bottom of the steps. Pale as a ghost,” she says, as if she is familiar with them. She presses a cool compress to my head. “One of the other tenants helped me get you up here.”

“Thank you,” I say. My voice is still weak. I realize, then, what the darkness means. “What time is it?”

“Half till seven.”

I groan. I have to meet Walker. I started to get up, and pain like a giant, flapping bird screams through my brain, but I manage it, anyway.

“Where you think you’re going?” she asks.

“I have to meet someone.”

“Now? You’ll find your death.”

“I have to meet someone.”

Ryan’s Tavern is an Irish place with a brick exterior and windows that barely let any light through. Smells like old Scotch and bangers and mash, like someone’s cooking cabbage and corned beef somewhere. Air as thick and substantial as soup.

I sit at the bar. It’s a big, beautiful, gleaming hunk of wood.

Walker is a young man with dark hair and a bushy mustache. He is reticent until I tell him who I am, after which he opens up. “Yeah, I seen ‘im. Bad shape. Drunk. And not just drunk like he drunk one too many. Like he’d been drinking for three days. The stench was coming off him in waves. Clothes all rumply. But I know the Doc, and when Poe mentioned him, I figgered the Doc could help. That’s when I sent for ‘im.”

“Just here for a drink after work?” I ask him.

“No sir. I was votin’. Election day. Fact, I thought Poe was votin’, too, just got one too many free drinks out of it.”

I take this information in. Something about it is not right. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Joe smiles. “I wondered when you’d ask.”

I call the tender over. He’s a large man with reddish hair and freckles, and I ask him for two lagers, which he draws and slides across the bar to us.

“Slainte,” Joe says.

I clink his glass. It is only when I take a drink I realize I’ve not eaten much yet. I decide to go slow, if I even finish.

A memory comes, then, of drinking with Poe. Or, rather, of not drinking; of meeting him and drinking a lot, myself, but that he drank water most of the time we talked. And that he became intoxicated from a single drink.

“You said he was drunk,” I tell Joe.

Joe’s pulling another long draw from his glass. He drinks in great gulps. He nods. “He was in a bad way, yeah.”

I wonder if the tender would remember serving Poe. I call him over again. Briefly describe Poe.

The tender shakes his head. “Sorry, sir. If it’s when you say it was, a lot of people came and went that day. We had a poll here for the election. Free drinks for casting a ballot.”

Would Poe have voted? He wasn’t a resident of Baltimore.

“New bar,” Joe says to the tender. “Wasn’t here for the election.”

“Oh, aye,” the tender says. “Just put it in.”

“Local guy?” Joe asks. “I need some work done on my house.”

Tender nods. “Namea Reynolds. I’ve got his address.”

I nearly choke on my drink. I cough and splutter, wash it down with another gulp, then get out: “You said Reynolds?”

“I did.”

It cannot be a coincidence. “Is he a regular here?”

“He was the judge for the election. Never seen him before that night.”

I need to speak to Reynolds. “I would like that address, myself.”

“Sure,” the tender says, retreats away.

Joe is looking at me. “You need work done?”

I shake my head. “But I think I need to speak to him, anyway.”

Joe nods, perhaps knows not to press the matter further. The tender returns with two pieces of paper and pushes them across the bar to us. Joe picks one up, drains his beer, stands, excuses himself for home. I shake his hand and thank him for meeting me, and he thanks me for the beer before he’s out the door and gone.

I only barely pay attention. Everything feels distant, now. I have only consumed half the beer, but I feel it sludging up my joints, my thoughts. I feel as if I should know by now what occurred, as if I have all the facts in the case, but they seem not to fit together. Cobwebs in my hazy brain muck up my thoughts.

I look around the bar and realize being here is going to do me no more good, so I settle for the drinks and rise. I leave half a beer behind, but I’m having trouble walking, anyway. The door is heavier than I remember, and then I’m outside in the cold, Baltimore evening.

The wind braces me immediately. November air stings tears into my eyes, and my breath plumes in front of me. Oil lamps flicker orange in the darkness, but mostly it’s just black. Cobblestones glisten treacherously beneath my feet, and I walk on careful legs, but still I can’t help stumbling occasionally. If anyone saw me, they would believe me drunk.

I wonder if it was this cold when Poe was here. I wonder if he had the same problem, and I wonder why he was drunk. In fact, he was. But surely he must have been. Walker didn’t seem educated, but I believe Snodgrass would have realized if those slurring movements had been the result of weakness more than alcohol. I wonder why Poe wanted Reynolds, and if it had something to do with the election.

I sigh like steam.

Dixon mentioned money and the new magazine, but none was found on Poe's body. I wonder if it was stolen, and why Poe was here to begin with. Why was he inside that tavern if he did not even drink.

I imagine Poe walking the street just as I am now. I imagine his rubbery knees, his weak-lightning heart. I imagine his gait was similar to mine, that it might have been accurate to call him inebriated but that there was more to it, that the cold Baltimore air was stealing his breath away and he was fighting to get it back, and I realize, then, that I am, too. My breath won't come; I am hyperventilating but still it eludes me.

A cry, piercing the darkness. I wonder at first if it is my own until I hear it again. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle, and another, shorter, softer sound follows the first, drips like ice down my back.

I look up. The gassy streetlights seem to be bleeding orange into the evening, and I know there cannot be as many as I'm seeing, because I know that what I see above me cannot be true; there, on the ledge, looking down at me, are ravens. A great, seething mass of ravens that merge and blur and caw together. As if they were waiting to confirm they had my attention they take to wing at once, flap into the night, which wavers with their motion. I see nothing but inky eyes and oily feathers, and I hear nothing but the screaming, screaming, screaming like Hades in flight.

I gasp. Again. I cannot breathe. The darkness is too much, and that's when brightness explodes like sunlight through my head. My knees will not hold straight, and the sidewalk is cold and hard.

A voice in the darkness. "If you know what's good for you, froggy, you'll quit pokin' your nose where it ain't wanted." It is like sandpaper through my skull.

I groan.

He boots me hard in the gut, and I cry out, and then the world goes so bright it crosses over again into darkness, and the last thing I hear is the raven's caw. As if beckoning. And I follow. Into the darkness. Beyond.

I am on a cliff. It is dark, but lit lonely silver-grey by a full moon. Waves crash angrily against the rocks far below, and white foam shivers wet thunder into the air.

The poet is here. He has lost some hair but grown a small moustache since I last saw him, but his eyes are dark as they ever were. "I'd hoped you'd come," he says.

"I had no choice in the matter," I tell him. My voice surprises me. It is confident, and strong. Unburdened. Comfortable.

"I'm still grateful. Especially after what happened. You deserved better."

I nod. "So did you."

He says nothing. The waves crash against the rock.

"You going to tell me what happened?"

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry. I don't quite know myself. It's so blurry. One minute I was in Philadelphia, and then I find myself here." He shrugs.

"Where is here?" I ask.

He shrugs again, then nods to the side. I look that way and see a cave. "In her sepulcher there by the sea," he says. "In her tomb by the side of the sea."

The air is pungent with dashed salt. I wonder if dreams smell.

He looks back at me. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I hadn't meant—"

"I know," I tell him.

"Good," he says. "Then we can rest. We can be free."

"We can," I agree, and the poet turns back to her tomb while I turn to face the precipice, the freedom beyond it, and with strong, sure lungs I take a giant gulp of air kissed with ocean spray and I run and I leap, and I fall, at first, but then I leave behind my body, trade in reason and logic for the freedom of flight and dreams, and I flap the giant wings I find in place of arms and soar toward the moon, toward the stars, into the darkness as black as night.

Man in Tights

It started with such an innocent request: “Miss Mary wants to know if you can come to a class to help us learn lifts.”

The request came from my sister, Nyssa, and Miss Mary in question was her pointe teacher. My sister, then 17, had started dancing at 3. Over the years she’d danced in various recitals and competitions, in ballet, in jazz, *en pointe*.

I generally find it difficult to say no to my sister. I think she knows that, and uses it to her advantage.

“It’s the last class before the break. On the Tuesday after you come home. It’s only for an hour,” she told me.

I admit that I’m a guy who loves to dance. One of my favorite stories I’ve ever heard involved two buddies of mine who were in an original band that used to play in bars in Philadelphia. An upcoming gig was planned, and one asked the other if I was coming. When informed I was, he said, simply, “Cool,” because, the buddy who relayed the story told me, I bring the party.

However, the thought of Nyssa’s class, which contained six other girls who had all been dancing as long as she had, was intimidating. I hesitated.

“Come on, Big Will,” which was what she usually called me when she wanted something, because when I was feeling big-brotherly I always called her “Li’l Nyss.” “You missed my last recital. You owe me.”

Must’ve been her secret weapon. “Where and when?”

I could hear her smiling over the phone. “I’ll tell you when you get here. It’ll be fun, I promise,” she told me. She also told me her boyfriend, Kyle, had agreed to help out, which meant two things: I wouldn’t be the only guy around, and, in her words, I would “get to lift the hot girl.”

So I took a break from work and writing, and when I returned home, I drove the three of us to her dance academy one Tuesday night for her practice. She told Kyle and I to wear a pair of basketball shorts like we might wear to a gym and a tee shirt.

The academy Nyssa danced in was small, and the room she and her dance-classmates practiced in had a floor with a hard-rubber coating that had worn through in places, exposing the wood beneath and creating trouble spots the girls had to watch for. One entire wall was mirrored, while opposite was a rounded wood railing that ran half the length of the room. For the first five minutes, the girls put on and then adjusted their pointe shoes, which were basically ballet slippers but which had a bit of wood in the toe, which the girls could balance vertically on, and then Miss Mary, the instructor, told everyone to go to the bar to warm up. Miss Mary was around 40-ish, and the kind of instructor for whom precision was less important than intensity, though both came behind form. She regaled us with stories about her night at the local bar that weekend before she showed the girls precisely how to perform the movement she was prescribing.

The girls all moved to the wooden railing, but Kyle and I remained off to the side. We were there to lift, we figured.

Miss Mary looked at us. “Come on, boys. No time to waste.”

Kyle and I looked at each other. “Er,” I said. “But—.”

“No buts. Gotta warm up. Gotta be limber. Lifting is more about flexibility than strength,” she told us as she ushered us over. “This is the *barre*,” she told us, and spelled it. I think it’s French. Kyle and I took our positions, beside the girls, behind the girls, and we put our left hands on the railing.

“First position,” Miss Mary called out.

The girls' bodies immediately moved, but Kyle and I had no idea what to do. "Heels together. Toes apart. Right hand in front of you, near your abdomen," she told us. Kyle and I moved our bodies accordingly, as she told us, and achieved first position. It was a minor victory. We could see ourselves in the mirror opposite. The girls all looked poised and graceful. We looked like we'd developed sudden onset rigor mortis.

"And second position," Miss Mary called out. I no longer remember what the other positions were. I thought there were four, but other friends of mine have since informed me there may be five.

"Okay," Miss Mary said. "Floor."

Again, the girls moved as one from the barre. I hoped for a look of encouragement from my sister, but she was so focused on her own movements she didn't even acknowledge I was there. Kyle and I moved from the barre, as well, but with not nearly as much confidence. We both stood awkwardly, as if we didn't know what to do with our arms. The girls formed a single straight line across the room, and Kyle and I remained just off to the side. I figured I just didn't want to be in their way.

For the next twenty minutes, Miss Mary ran through dance moves with the girls and introduced Kyle and I to French words we'd never heard and couldn't wrap our bodies around. We tried to do *ronde du jambes* ("round of the legs"), which is a spinning sort of move, and kept stumbling. We attempted *pas de bourrees* and *pirouettes*, as well, but I can now no longer remember what either was (though I think one required standing on our tiptoes). And then the piece de resistance, though I cannot remember the name: we leapt across the room.

Finally, Miss Mary felt it was time to dance.

That year, her pointe class was dancing to Meatloaf's "I Would Do Anything for Love (but I won't do that)."

She kept Kyle and I off to the side while she guided the girls through two run throughs of their dance as it had already been choreographed, and then she called for her lifters. She assigned Kyle to my sister and asked me to lift another girl. It wasn't difficult: one hand on her abdomen, one under her thigh, lift,

hold, down. She demonstrated hand placement, first, then told us to try.

I looked uncertainly at Kyle, then went to the girl. Kyle went to my sister. Before I could be big brotherly, Nyssa beat me to it: “Watch your hands,” she told Kyle.

Miss Mary started the song over, then again, changing the choreography slightly each time. Kyle and I tried to keep up. When Miss Mary asked us both to lift the girls and then hold them as we turned around the room, we did so while trying not to drop the girls.

Class ended without a hitch, and Miss Mary thanked Kyle and me for helping out. I told her it had been no problem; I’d done it for my sister.

Two weeks later, my sister called me again. Miss Mary had thought about the dance over the break and decided she wanted to incorporate a lift into the girls’ routine. It surprised me: looking into that mirror while I’d been lifting that girl, while Kyle and I had been leaping across the room, I’d thought we’d looked like nothing so much as epileptic lemurs.

“Kyle won’t do it,” my sister told me. “So Miss Mary wants to know if you would lift me. It’s only right at the end of the song. Just me and you. Please?”

And so, for the next two months, I returned home every other weekend and my sister and I played that Meatloaf song over and over and over again in our basement as we practiced the routine. And very quickly, what had begun as a simple lift became a lift and then a spin, and then a lift and spin and my own solo and then interact with three other girls. Miss Mary asked me to try a *ronde du jambe*, which is basically a spin with one leg on the ground and is supposed to be one of the simplest of all ballet moves, but still it took me two weekends to get right even once, and even afterward my ability to perform them was spotty at best.

Through this, my sister and I became closer. We laughed when I fell. We shopped together for my jazz pants, which are tights but not as constricting, and ballet slippers. I think she even felt proud of me when I finally nailed the *ronde du jambe*.

I got nervous before the recital. The girls had their own changing area, and I was obviously allowed nowhere near it; I had to change in the men's room. I came out to find my sister in the hallway with another girl. They were applying their makeup. My sister beckoned me over. "Hey, you need your stage makeup."

"What?"

"Eyeliner," my sister explained. "Otherwise, they can't see your eyes from the audience. You look blurry, and terrible. So hold still while I put some eyeliner on you."

I held still. I looked up when she told me to, all the while hoping that she didn't line my contacts, as well.

The recital was surreal. Our routine was toward the end of a show that included 3-year-old girls dancing to novelty songs and beginning ballet students dancing to Chopin. Our dance, then, with its rock song, its funky costumes, its intense choreography, came as a welcome relief, a surprising moment of excitement. We got a standing ovation.

I had a lot of fun. People came up to me afterward, while I was waiting for my sister, to tell me what a great job we'd done, and I thanked them. When they asked me how on Earth I'd gotten involved, I told them I'd done it for my sister. Miss Mary found me and gave me a big hug, told me how great I'd done and thanked me for having done it. One of the other teachers asked if I'd consider dancing with other classes.

I thanked her but declined.

And finally my sister came out. We hugged.

"You looked great out there," I told her. I always told her. She always did.

"How would you know? You were out there with me," she told me.

I laughed.

"So," she said, "Miss Mary wants to take the dance to competitions this summer. She thinks we could place. Will you do it?"

Did I mention I have difficult saying no to my sister?

Factory Life

I live
in a sheet-metal working facility.
The light is canned,
fluorescently glaring down on me
as if in judgment
by some industrial being.

All day and all night long,
I place tiny metal beads
in tiny metal clamps
and measure them
precisely,
adjusting them if necessary,
all the while knowing that should I
miscalculate,
people will die.
Even though they always have,
and do,
and will.

My coworkers continuously talk to me.
I try not to let myself get distracted
from these tiny steel beads,
but it is difficult;
whispers in my ear,
and their voices itch

like wool in my brain,
but I can't scratch it.
They shout, sometimes, too,
loud, discordant voices like metal scraping metal,
hard, sharp angles in my ears.
Sparks fly
every which way
and blaze brilliant-orange-golden
before burning themselves out in the air.

Sometimes
I feel as if someone
has struck me on the head
with a large rubber mallet,
and a blinding flash jolts me
from my small, chrome stool
with the worn polyester top.
I look around
as I rub my face
because it feels like
egg yolk is running down my cheeks,
but my hands are always clean.

I worry
about the water here.
They have coolers into which
snake white lines from the walls.
Who knows what venom they inject?
Everyone drinks it
except me,
and I wonder if they know,
if they suspect
that I know
their suspicions.

Sometimes
men in white coats come
and smile,

and ask me questions.
How am I?
How do I feel?
Is today better than yesterday?
They give me
tiny, circular, yellow tablets
that dissolve on my tongue,
and then they leave me,
and I feel as if
I am wearing a new safety mask
to protect me from the sparks
and the laughter
and the voices
and the water,
but I can only see the world
through the tiny,
grey,
scratched
lens.

How the World Will End

This is how the world will end: a somber-faced reporter wearing a smart blue suit, her make-up freshly applied, her hair perfectly coiffed. Her professional voice will waver on the word “missile.” She will speculate about triangulations over night-vision green images of jungle-gun fights that will stand in for footage of the warhead: horsemen of the Apocalypse cannot be captured by conventional means of photography. She will continue to speak until interrupted by dead air.

The world will fall silent, preternaturally so, stripped of the sounds behind which silence hides. Gone will be voices, laughing and arguing. Gone will be guttural engines, gone chirping of cellular phones and birds alike. Gone doppling sonic booms, gone sounds of industry and business, gone jackhammers and opening doors and music. Gone, gone, gone.

In the sudden stillness of angels, we will take each other’s hands and set out into the unknown, past abandoned cars and houses, in search of edible food and potable water. We will pass entire buildings whose facades have crumbled into fine dust that will cling to our shoes and pants and eyes and lungs, and we will hold our breath as we pass for fear of ghosts. We will seek nature and wilderness, hope and survival.

We will find a river. We will pause on its muddy bank, listening to its heart thunder along its way. We will disrobe and plunge into it, allowing the water closing over our heads to drown out the empty silence of the world. There in the clear,

cool water, our flesh will gooseprickle as our bodies glance against each other.

We will continue on, and we will find a mountain, which we will climb. We will sweat as we do so, and our bodies will shimmer in the moonlight, moisture glistening pearl-like on our foreheads, on our limbs. We will sigh with pleasure at the whispering caress of the night-breeze.

On the mountain we will lie together. The soft, loose soil will be our bed. We will be thirsty, and I will drink of you until we both are satisfied, my thirst quenched and yours forgotten. We will cry out together, in pleasure and in greed, and afterward we will lay on the soft soil, under a great silver moon, glowing warmly green as the radiation seeps into our bones, and we will watch the world end, again. And again.

And again.

Inspiration Point

The town spreads out below us, looks up to us, admires,
Wishing that it could be where we are for a moment.
We're on top of the world, blessed in our youth;
We'd better enjoy our positions while we can.
The stars look down on us without our condescension;
They all wonder what happened to God.
They see what we have done and are doing
But never realize that we can change.

The moon shines down on us its scornful eye;
We are uncomfortable though others are less moral.
It is only half there, but where the rest is I cannot say.
Perhaps it is with God, waning philosophic.
The wind moans against wood and our flesh,
The same sweet nothings we whispered earlier.
And when it howls like fury through the darkness,
It almost seems like it knows how we feel.

Moisture like morning dew beads blades of grass;
Tiny, clear jewels of dripping condensation.
The whole world smells primal and visceral,
And it glistens in what little light there is here.
There are sounds all around us, some loud and some not,
From furtive, unknown sources in the darkness.
They seem to be everywhere at once and yet nowhere at all,
And isn't that exactly how we are sometimes?

There is night all around us, overhead, up above,
Silk and satin and dark to the touch.
It is almost oppressive but somehow refrains;
It shows more restraint than we did, earlier.

And so we stare down at the town with a smirk on our lips,
And look up at the stars and feel less than we are.
We throw an 'up yours' in a scream at the moon,
And whisper nothing in reply to the wind.
We let the moisture bead and then drip off our skin,
And the sounds gradually become unnerving.
But we live this night, my lady, on Inspiration Point,
Despite darkness' trying to steal the only one we've got.

Imperfect Thirst

Jesus of Nazareth did not know temptation until she found him in the desert.

It was night, then, cool and dark save for the lonely silver light of the moon, dry sand wind-rippled in places like it had once known water. A breeze shivered his paper-dry skin, and his breath rattled in his lungs. His coarse hair hung like a shadow over his face, and he passed in and out of sleep like a freefall through clouds; what dreams came were thirsty.

His head down, eyes closed, he didn't see or hear the woman approach, only felt her shadow on his body. His mouth surprised him by watering and he swallowed by reflex, the first moisture his body had known in a long, long time. He'd known she would come, of course. She always did.

"You're thirsty," she told him. Her voice lilted like smoke, oozed in his head like oil.

He didn't answer. He didn't need to. Even if everything in his body hadn't been pleading for moisture, that voice would have persuaded him.

"I don't understand why you do these things," she said. Her dark, familiar voice slid through his soul to find the empty parts, the thirsty parts, where it gave them a taste of what they could have if they so wished. Her tongue found sibilants even where none existed and stretched them mesmerizingly.

The muscles in his neck screamed when he looked up. He could make out none of her features; she was dark against the darker night, with a silver silhouette like a moonlight halo.

He didn't answer. Tried to swallow, had to do it twice to make it work.

She looked around at the lonely, deserted night and clutched her arms around herself as if cold. "It's so lonely out here," she said, almost to herself, "So dry," her voice straining, and then she turned back, her eyes starred, her smile like quicksilver in the dark. "I'm wet." A breeze carried the invitation to him on the musky, oh-so-wet scent of her sex and arousal.

His abs clenched, and his body forced an exhalation. One taste. Just enough to wet his cracked lips, shrink his swollen tongue, soothe his leather throat. And why not? Why not immerse himself in it, lose himself in all her dark and sex, feel her wet skin against his lips and lose all the other sensation in his body? What change in the world could possibly be brought about by one man's imperfect thirst?

He would have shaken his head but he didn't have the energy. He exhaled like wind eroding the desert, and then everything he had was gone. He slid into blackness like sinking into a pool, calm and easy only because his body had long before given out.

He returned to the world gently as he'd left it, and the first thing he was aware of was the hard surface beneath him. Cold, porous; when it didn't give out under him like fine, loose sand, he realized just how exhausted his body truly was. His legs trembled as he rose, knees shook, and he worried they wouldn't hold him.

He was on a roof, high above a city in the middle of its night. The sky was deeply, eternally blue, lit by a full moon bright as a million human hopes pinned on a single, bloated star, and his heart trembled in his chest because it knew how they all felt. All those human hearts in that huge and lovely city, living through their days, dreaming through their sleep, laughing through their tears with all the courage and fear a universe can know.

"They'll never believe you," came the woman's voice from behind him. It ran all the way up his back, prickling the hair on

his neck on its way, and it aroused him. He turned more quickly than he realized he could.

She was nearly as tall as he was, and her pale skin seemed to glow, contrasting the night-dark garment she wore. It fit her well. Her long hair rustled, as likely in the breeze as in the night, and her eyes burned into Jesus' soul like cold, pale fire.

"They don't have the faith," she whispered in her sonorous, warming voice.

Jesus said nothing. He couldn't. His body trembled, muscles like bands stretched tense and quivering, and his heart cringed because it knew the woman was right. They wouldn't believe the message he carried, or would corrupt it.

A single tear escaped his eye, full of more than that harsh, dry land was used to.

"You can change that," the woman told him. She nodded toward the edge of the roof. "Just a single step, and they would hang upon your every word, believe every last thing you said to them."

Jesus looked toward the ledge, the city beyond it. His legs trembled beneath him, and his faith shuddered in his soul. He took a deep breath, though, and in it was everything he needed to say, "There is no room for proof in faith."

The woman looked at Jesus, and those ancient blue eyes pitied him. Her chuckle was the timeless wind against the sand, comforting against the heat but also a little empty, a little eroding. "Can you really be so idealistic?"

Jesus never answered. His body gave out under him, and the night wavered around him before it closed him off.

He next awoke under a sledgehammer sun blazing a suffocating white sky. His breath burned in his chest, and the air seemed to push down as he struggled to his feet. He didn't trust his body; it shivered as if cold and threatened to give out on him like everything else in the world had.

He was on the edge of a cliff, and that whole world spread out before him. He could see towns and villages immediately and, farther out, the shocking blue of the cobalt sea.

“It could be ours,” the woman’s voice whispered into his ear, sent a thrill like water through his whole body. She gestured at the world. “You can see where they’re heading, and it’s nowhere worth going.”

Jesus’ heart trembled, but he said nothing.

“We could change that,” the woman said, stepped forward, turned to face him. “You and I. Think about it. We could have the world,” she told him, standing just beyond the cliff’s edge, “And we could change it.”

The woman smiled when she said it. He gasped before he could stop himself, because he found everything he’d never known he was searching for, right there, in that beautiful woman’s beguiling secret smile.

“Ramses? Tutankhamen? I knew them. They had their chances, and what did they build but glorious empires that crumbled into dust? But you’re better than they were. You know things they never did. You are like no other I’ve ever known, and together we could succeed where there’s only been war and loss. Join me. Be my king, and I will be your queen, and together we will rule this world and beyond.”

Jesus looked out at that civilization on the sea, all those proud buildings built of dust and tears, all those people, too, and he breathed out. “I am not here to lead the way, only show it,” he said.

The woman sighed, ancient wind in glaciers from before the world knew words, and in it was the knowledge that time was to be long. “I’m sorry it has to be this way.”

“It cannot be otherwise,” Jesus said.

“It could be if only you—.”

“It cannot be.”

The woman breathed out, weary and expectant. She stepped to the sand again, put her hand on Jesus’ shoulder.

They stood, then, looking out on an uncertain world, and two hearts weighed heavy because both, at some level neither understood, knew what was to follow. They looked out at that world, that bright, sun-bleached land full of dreams and lives, and they hoped.

“This is where we part, then.” There was regret in the voice.

“It is,” the woman agreed, and she wiped her cheek.

Jesus looked at her a moment, and then he took her hand, held it. A tear glittered on her index finger like a single drop of rain full of golden stars, and he brought it to his lips, kissed it from her skin. It was salty, and it filled his body with all the moisture it could hold.

She smiled at him, so full the sun seethed in jealousy, and then his legs buckled. Her ever-so-secret smile was the last he saw before darkness.

Jesus would have fallen down that cliff, but the woman was there, and upon her hands she bore him up lest he dash his foot against the stone. She carried him from the cliff and, when they were a safe distance, she set him down, caressed his cheek, and walked away.

Jesus lay there in the sun, only finally woke when it was dark again and the world had cooled. A breeze came from the night and felt like a lover’s breath on his body, filled him with energy. He stretched his tired, near-defeated body, and it loosened where he only remembered there being dry.

The moon shone down, less harshly than the sun. It cast a colder light on the world, but there was something comforting in it. The whole city bathed in it and looked more refreshed for it. He rose, his body awkward, trembling, testing before committing to posture and even then doing so carefully.

There were footprints there, he saw, in the light of the moon; they started at the edge of the cliff and traced off into the desert. He looked at them a long moment, feeling like there was something he was forgetting, but nothing came.

He looked into the distance of the desert, following those footprints with his eyes as far as he could, and then he looked down at the city and started toward it. He didn’t consider for a moment the footprints been left by someone else, and even had he, he wouldn’t have followed them. Which was fine, because they didn’t lead anywhere; they traced off back, started to fade, and eventually vanished as if the wind had blown over them.

Deserted

I.

The desert
is all you can see.
Monochromatic, golden-brilliant;
the sun glares down on you so hard
your whole body squints.

You don't remember how long you've been out here.
Your skin has leathered.
Your bones form odd angles and crevices beneath it.
It hurts to breathe.
The acrid air burns your lungs.

You mutter to yourself
under your breath.
You may be the only person
who has ever heard your voice.

Your lips are chapped,
cracked,
broken and bled and scabbed over.
You would cry if you could remember
what moisture was.

You shuffle-shamble along.
Sometimes a burst of energy makes you sprint;

most times you are deliberate and going is slow.
Eventually you stop,
thinking you cannot go on.
But there is still much to say,
and so,
unable to find a stick with which to trace in the sand,
you gnaw into your wrist,
letting your blood.
You stain the world.
Whorls and swirls and symbols,
And you write:

II.

In the beginning,
because that's when the words started.

In the beginning,
before the dryness and the brightness and the sand.

In the beginning was the word,
and with it you create the world.
You populate it with your thoughts and your dreams.
You create your gods to protect yourself;
you create love to save yourself;
you create madness in which to seek sanctuary;
you create cities of gold and jewels,
underwater,
because your dreams remain thirsty.
You create the universe
in your eyes
which,
if you are lucky, and good,
no longer remember your image.

In the beginning,
and on and on and on.
Stars explode in lonely distances you'll never know;
civilizations thrive and prosper

and are conquered.
People live and die and curse and fuck,
in the beginning,
and eventually,
if you are lucky, and good,
the coyotes come out.

III.

Servants of a trickster god,
they see into your dreams because they are part of them.
They wish to be shared,
and so they give you tools.

They offer you a pen,
which you take,
in exchange for what you are not certain.

They offer you a voice,
which you accept,
and use to ask for
water.
And help.
And salvation.
And redemption.
And a chance.

And they give it to you.

IV.

With your pen,
you record your new stentorian voice.
You speak with authority and conviction.
People hear you.

Your voice carries farther than you had expected.
Sometimes
it says things you did not expect it to.
Some of the time, you regret that.

Your voice carries you to new places that are not the desert.
Places in which water falls from the sky
like a miracle.
Places where you meet other people who feel the same emotions
as you,
who see the same world and work with hands like yours,
and so,
when you see a mirror,
you are surprised you do not look like everyone else.

When you see the ocean for the first time,
you cry tears in waves;
it all tastes the same.

V.

You are able to exchange your words
for currency in this different place.
This world of skyscraped clouds,
of hurrying,
of hummingbirds, whose wings blur,
whose hearts beat so fast
just thinking about it makes yours want to burst.

With their long beaks,
they seek single drops of nectar
for sustenance.

And you look out your window
to the city beyond its pane.
The sirens.
The brilliant lights,
the lovers of the night
and the traders of the day.
Cars and engines belch their fumes into the acrid air,
which burns your lungs.
You can't drink water from the faucet
because it is treated with chemicals

whose names you cannot pronounce.

You lose track of the time,
as you stare out that window,

and you think about
and dream about
and write about

the desert.

VI.

And so,
finished,
blood let and soul exhausted,
you collapse to sleep,
at peace,
deserted.

A Million Distant Shores

I dreamt, last night, that I was floating on my back on an endless ocean, looking into a night as endless as my soul, brilliantly lit by a giant silver moon. Brilliant white clouds eddied their ways across the night, and every single passing one reminded me of you. If there had been tiny, hoping stars up there, endless millions of miles away, I would have wished for you on all of them, but there weren't. There was only the moon, and then it splashed down into my endless ocean, surged me upward and outward to some distant shore a world away.

I stood there, wet and breathing heavily. There was nothing in that world besides the ocean behind me and the sand glowing passionately all around me as far as I could see, blue-white as snow even though there was no longer any source of light. I scooped up a handful but a breeze I couldn't feel glittered it away and left only a million constellations clinging to my still-wet hands. When I brought my hands to my face, they smelled like you; warm and pink, but the fragrance fled on velvet heels, leaving my wanting more.

I was still wet, and I pulled off the flannel shirt I hadn't realized I was wearing and let my jeans drop to the sand. The ocean lapped up hungrily and carried them away. I crashed into the water after them, not for their warmth or concealment but rather because I realized they would carry your scent, too, but by the time I caught them they smelt only of the sea, and tears, so I let the tide carry them away from me.

I turned my back on them, and waded out of the sea.

I dreamt I trembled there, in that new world naked, and I heard the ocean behind me urging me to walk on, so I did. There was no moon to see by, only sand glowing for no discernible reason, but the ocean was urgent. I never considered direction except forward, and I walked that way a long, long time.

I dreamt I stopped, then, and turned. The ocean was no longer visible, if it was even still there. All I could see were my footprints, tracing back as far as the horizon, dark patches in that shimmering sand until the wind blew like a lover's whisper across perfect skin and even the footprints vanished.

I continued to walk.

I dreamt I saw a tower in the distance, at first small but larger as I approached, until finally it was so high I could no longer see the top. It was hewn of dark blue stone that glimmered like ancient stars and was warm beneath my hand when I touched it. Not hot, just warm.

I shivered anyway.

A large archway trimmed with rough, silver-grey stones marked the entrance to the tower. Inside, its walls glowed faintly. A silver staircase lined the wall and spiraled up into darkness.

In the very center of the tower, five feet from the ground and five feet in diameter, a blue sphere glowed like a supernova. The moment I reached toward it, it became a silver pole, toppled toward me; I didn't have any choice but to heft it over my shoulder.

I looked up and saw in the darkness a beam of silver-blue light bisecting the tower. It didn't look solid enough to be a bridge, but, then, the pole I was carrying hadn't been solid, either, and it was still over my shoulder. I started climbing; if you'd asked me why, I might have told you I wanted to see that beam of light more closely, but I might have also told you I hoped, hoped, that I might find you at the top of the stairs. I had to be careful on them, for they were steep and roughly carved and I was trying to balance that pole, too, which I didn't want to put down. I don't know why I didn't want to put it down.

I kept going. I don't know how high or long I climbed before I discovered that shaft of light was spilling through a window carved into the tower wall. I put my hand forward as I approached it; maybe I expected it, too, to suddenly become solid, but it didn't. Perhaps, too, I thought it would be warm, that perhaps it would feel evanescent on my skin, but I stepped into it and let it wash over my still nude body, and I discovered there was no warmth, and it did not evanesce.

It was just light.

I looked out at the world beyond the window through which that light spilled though it seemed to have no source, but the change on my outlook was its perspective. From my distant height, all that silver-blue sand suddenly looked like ice over a cruel and hostile world. Out in the distance I could see the ocean, and it appeared that the tide was coming in.

I don't know how long I looked out that window, only that all the time I did I thought of you. Your long brown hair and your lovely green eyes; your soft, intoxicating lips and your miles of oh-so-glorious skin; your firm breasts and the small strip of hair between your legs. Your warmth and wetness, and how wonderful it felt to be inside of you, and how much like home. I thought of your skin shimmering with salty sweat as if you'd just emerged from the sea, and I remembered how the ocean tasted like infinite tears. I remembered all those things because when we were together I secreted them away from life and the world; I cherished them, because I didn't know how many there would be. I remembered how it felt when I was with you, how it felt to find a little bit of something me in everything in you, how it felt to fall in you and drown in you and finally, finally, to lose you.

There were more stairs ahead of me, and I wondered again if I would find you at the top of them. Would you still remember me? Would you recognize me? There in that dream I still realized it's been a very long time indeed since last we saw each other, and maybe the world hasn't much changed, but I have.

A broken heart will do that to you.

And now what? You have your life, and I know the rules.

I know I have to let you go.

I don't want to. I don't want to lose those precious few moments I had with you, any more than I wanted, there on those stairs, to set down that long, silver pole.

So I didn't.

I dreamt last night that the tower just seemed to keep growing as I climbed it until suddenly there was no longer anything above me. Suddenly, the rough-hewn stones gave way to dawn like warm velvet, and I found myself standing atop the tower. A fine coating of sand dusted its flat roof, and the wind up there swirled and eddied and stirred those granules to form a sea of dust as deep as my waist.

You were not there.

There was nothing there, nothing at all besides that sand, besides me and that pole on top of that skyscraping tower overlooking all the world.

I waded into that fine mist of sand and approached the very edge of the tower. The grains clung to my skin as I went, and I opened my hand and closed my fingers around a fistful.

The world seemed farther down than I had realized, and bigger. From that height, I could see other oceans out there, more than I could count, and I realized suddenly that I had cried every last one of them on countless other nights exactly like that one.

A tear escaped my eye, down my cheek, and then I watched it fall like a single drop of rain. I wondered if it would make it all the way to the sand before I realized it didn't matter.

I took the pole from my shoulder, held it past the tower's edge and let it drop. It fell at first one end over the other before it straightened to plummet like a javelin until I couldn't see it anymore.

I opened my fisted hand, let the wind blow that sand into the darkness; it sparkled and flashed and shimmered. There were no stars in that empty sky but I wished anyway, a million tiny wishes for you on a million grains of sand. I cried aloud at the futility of it all, and then I looked out at all those oceans in that strange, glowing world and I stepped forward. I fell, fell, and as the wind whipped through my hair and dried my cheeks, I only prayed that I would find myself, at the bottom of my fall,

floating in the middle of another ocean, looking up at another sky and another moon. Because maybe if I do it a thousand more times on a million more nights exactly like this one, maybe I'll climb those stairs one last time to find you on top of the tower.

And if, after all those nights of climbing and crying and falling, I find you at the top of that tower, will I know how to stop dreaming?

Raven Noir

I'm sitting at a small table at my favorite library in Rue Montmartre when Dickens dashes into the seat across from me like he snuck in from the back. Which is smart; seven other patrons are currently holding various installments of *The Personal History, Adventures, Experience, and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery (which he never meant to be published on any account)*, and any might have recognized him if he'd entered regularly. Years of smiling have accumulated around his eyes, his cheeks are pinked more with windburn than a fresh shave, and his long van Dyke is streaked with grey, but still he carries the vigor of the man who rose to fame with *Sketches by Boz*, almost two decades ago. His bowler is pulled low on his brow, his collar high.

"You're here about Poe," I tell him as he starts to settle into the creaky wooden chair across the table. I speak in English for courtesy's sake.

He starts. I guess he expected me to wait for him to speak. I doubt he's surprised I guessed what's brought him here. Of course it's about Poe, dead a little over a month now, mysterious circumstances in Baltimore.

I used to be the man to go to for mysterious circumstances. Poe changed that.

"I don't know why you came to me," I tell him as I rise. My shoes click on the wooden floor, and the boards groan beneath my weight. Dickens rises to follow me.

“Mrs. Clemm wrote to me about a letter Edgar sent her. He’d been traveling to New York to bring her down to Richmond to live with him and his new wife. He seemed in good enough spirits. He’d just earned money to start a new magazine, but there was no money found on his person when he was discovered,” he says. “She believes there’s been foul play.”

“I’m quite sure of it,” I tell him as I open the door onto sunlight-spangled Rue Montmartre. Bright pink and yellow and blue as a loud calliope, grey stones cobbling ways between markets and buildings. People foot-push their newfangled bicycles bumping down the path, avoiding horsehooves and passers by, and the air smells like pastries so rich my stomach feels full at first sniff.

I’m glad. Money is tight, and I won’t have to eat for a few hours.

Dickens tails me. His agility impresses me as I weave around children eating large buttery scones and couples pulling chew candy. I sidestep an accordion player in a green jacket whose monkey is dancing a two-step.

“And you don’t care?” Dickens asks. His voice barely rises above a whisper. Of course he doesn’t want it to. There are too many people about, and most would know who he is.

“Why would I care? That hack destroyed my reputation. Writing about stolen letters and monkey crimes,” I say. I look at the dancing monkey, but it doesn’t seem offended. “The midget? That overindulgent prose? ‘Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial.’ Who speaks like that? He made a buffoonery of me with his narcissistic logorrhea,” I say.

“Logorrhea?” he asks, but I have nothing more to say, so I start to walk away. I go several steps before he forgets himself. “Wait,” he calls after me, hurrying himself.

I turn so abruptly he nearly crashes into me, and I whip off his hat and throw it at the monkey, who catches it and begins to chicker over it. “Yes, Dickens, logorrhea,” I tell him, loudly enough that my voice carries over the accordion, the crowd bustle and the chew candy machine. Loudly enough that I gain

everyone's attention. Including the monkey's. "A condition marked by the overuse of words. You know it well; you get paid by them," I say, and then I turn, duck away to dash through the crowd even as he's absorbing what I just did to him. I'm still speaking in English, so the people within earshot probably don't fully understand the words, but they understand his name.

Charles Dickens. The most popular writer on the Continent. People reach, grasp, ask him to sign whatever paper they have convenient. The last thing I see as the crowd surrounds and encloses him, cutting him off from me, is a young boy fighting with the monkey over the bowler. I cut away, back toward home. Dickens can't follow.

I'm sitting in my favorite chair. It used to be green, but it's faded now to grey, and the cushions don't resist my weight like they used to, but it's used to my shape and it's comfortable. In one hand, I hold a half-finished glass of cognac, the first such luxury I've allowed myself to indulge in in months; my other hand lies limp over the face-down book in my lap. The fire is so low the borders of the room have disappeared into shadows, and I'm about to myself, except the knocker on my door clangs against the wood. It's not a quick knock; it's an urgent, rat-tat-tat-knock that I know on hearing it will come again.

I sigh. I set aside the book, though not my drink, rise.

It's Dickens.

"I should cuff you for what you did back there," he tells me, then socks me in the nose. It's not hard enough to make me spill my drink, but it hurts.

"*Merde*," I say. "You said 'should.'"

"That was for what you said," he tells me. "Are you going to invite me in?"

"Hadn't planned to."

But he shoulders past me. I don't protest. The sharpness in my nose has already faded to mere warmth.

He looks around the room. I wonder what he thinks. Does he see the rug as well-trodden with clients, or realize it's threadbare with the lack thereof? Does my favorite chair look comfortable, or just old?

“Logorrhea,” he says. “I could buy and sell you. Probably wouldn’t cost me very much, judging by the looks of it. Business not so good? Hard times?” he asks, and I guess he sees threadbare and old.

“You could say that.”

“They don’t come to you anymore.”

I look at the fire. I say nothing. I don’t need to. He’s right. They don’t.

“You were the best.”

It’s not funny, but I can’t help chuckling, anyway. “Was.”

“Still are. You know that as well as I do. So help me.”

“Not interested.”

“But why n—?”

I explode. “Why not? Jesus, I’ll tell you why not. Because he destroyed my reputation. Because I used to have something, and now I don’t anymore. Because I used to have to schedule too many clients to fit in a month but you’re the first person who’s walked through that damned door in so long I stopped keeping track. It’s gone. I’m nothing. They’ve stopped coming to me. I tried, a couple of times, not long after those stories were published, and they laughed. They laughed,” I spit. “Oh, you know who killed her, eh, Dupin? That’s rich. Was it a baboon? Or pr’aps a lemur?’ ‘Oh, you say you know the guy what mugged her, eh, Auggie? But you realize she lost more’n a letter.’ Why not? Because I don’t want to,” I tell him, and I throw my glass at the fire. It shatters, explodes, blue-green frames leap like they’re thirsty for the alcohol. I curse.

The silence that follows is dark and cold until Dickens breaks it.

“That could change, you know.”

I look at him. I’m so mad my jaw is tight. “I’ve tried.”

Dickens nods. “I know. But I haven’t.”

I grit my teeth.

“Think about it. You believe those stories are what caused this, right? The once famous detective no longer consulted because a couple of silly stories made him a laughing stock. But now the man who wrote those stories, who rose to some small amount of fame because of them, is dead. The man on whom

Baudelaire built a reputation. The man who made my own name in America. Dead of mysterious circumstances, and it's a month later but so far there's been no respectable investigation. So here I am, because I wish to hire you, and I could promise you a handsome reward like nothing money could buy."

My jaw has relaxed, but my eyes narrow. "I'm listening."

Dickens nods. "I'm about to leave for the American leg of my tour in support of Copperfield. Accompany me. I will arrange to arrive in Baltimore, where you can begin an investigation. I will not be able to linger, but you may if necessary."

"Wouldn't be," I say without first considering the thought. Old habits.

Dickens nods.

"And in return?"

"In return I will return your reputation to the shining, shimmering thing it once was."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

At that Dickens laughs. Sincerely, genuinely guffaws. "My good man, I'm Charles Dickens. I'm the most popular writer in the world. People will believe whatever I tell them to. If I write that you are the greatest detective ever, you will be."

I can't argue. I've seen the crowds that line up when the latest installment of his most recent serialization ships. I've been in them myself.

I sigh. "I'll come along. I'll see if I can discover anything in Baltimore. But I won't make any promises."

Dickens smiles. "You don't need to," he says, puts out his hand. Gentleman's agreement.

I take it. He's right. I don't need to.

I travel first to England with him before we depart for America, docking in Baltimore. It's a new, raw city, bricks as pink as fresh skin and cobblestones the deep grey of a winter storm. I nearly gag on the smell, some grotesque combination of roasted nuts, ground shells, and horse sweat and waste. The air is so sharp and cold breathing feels like getting socked in the nose, and the men old enough to grow them are wearing their

winter beards, while the women's faces are extra pink with rouge over windburn.

We leave our bags at the hotel, then set out by carriage for an appointment with Joseph Snodgrass. The name strikes me as familiar, but it takes me a while to place it.

"Snodgrass... wasn't that the name of a character in one of your novels?"

"My first, in fact. Pickwick."

"Coincidence?"

"Common name."

Our carriage takes us to a gleaming white house with foliage-green shutters and a large, dark wooden sign on which "Dr. J. E. Snodgrass, est. 1840," is emblazoned in large white letters. Almost a decade, then. A small bell above the door tinkles as we walk in. Most home-owners, especially in cities, let out their rooms for tenants that help cover expenses, but the entire first floor has been converted to a doctor's office.

He's Dickens, so we don't wait long to see the good doctor, who fills the room when he enters. Most of his grey hair is gone, and he wears a large, salt-and-pepper beard. He shakes Dickens' hand heartily. "Bozzy, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Joe, just fine," he says. "This is my friend, Auguste Dupin."

Snodgrass looks at me, and I see him recognize the name. He puts out his hand. "Dupin?"

I nod as I shake. "Auguste is fine."

"Edgar spoke very highly of you," Snodgrass says, then looks at Dickens. "That's why you're here, I take it?"

Dickens nods.

Snodgrass sighs. "I can't tell you much beyond what I already told the constabulary. Have you talked to him?"

Dickens shakes his head.

"With all due respect to the local police, I prefer to work without affiliation," I say.

Snodgrass nods. "I can appreciate that. Less people underfoot. Too many cooks, all that."

I nod. "Would you mind telling me what you told them?"

He doesn't. He got a letter from a man named Walker, who'd found Poe completely intoxicated just outside Ryan's Tavern. Walker sent for Snodgrass, who collected Poe and brought him to Washington College Hospital, where a man named Moran treated Poe. Poe spent almost four days bedridden in fevered delirium. "He'd had some shock to the system, and he'd never been a strong man. He was unconscious most of the time, and what little time he spent awake, he was incoherent. At one point, he kept yelling for 'Reynolds.' I didn't know what he was talking about. His uncle Henry said it was like a character in one of his novels."

"Pym," Dickens says.

"Sorry?"

"The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," Dickens says. "One of the characters constantly calls for a man named Reynolds."

"Yes, that's it," Snodgrass says. "He barely made it to midnight of October 7th. Stopped breathing. Unconscious when it happened."

I take it all in, trying to make sure I'm getting everything, wondering if there's anything he's not realizing he should tell me, but I've got nothing for the moment, so I ask about the other man. "You mentioned a Walker?"

He nods. "Joe Walker. He was just leaving a pub when he saw Poe stumbling outside."

"Did he leave a way to contact him?"

"I have his address."

"That would be a way to contact him," I say, and Snodgrass tells us to wait, leaves the room. He returns a moment later with a scrap of paper on which he's written Walker's address in tight, spidery letters. I pocket it.

"I think that'll do. We'll come back if we have any more questions," I say.

Snodgrass nods. "Any way I can help," he tells us as he shows us out of the office.

When we get back to the hotel, Dickens asks the concierge to contact Walker and ask him to meet us at the hotel bar later that evening.

Walker is a young man with dark hair and a bushy mustache. He is cagey at first, until we tell him who we are and our business, and then he opens up. “Yeah, I seen ‘im. Bad shape. Drunk. And not just drunk like he drunk one too many. Like he’d been drinking for three days. The stench was coming off him in waves. Clothes all rumply,” he tells us. “But I know the Doc, and when Poe mentioned him, I figgered the Doc could help. That’s when I sent for ‘im.”

“Just there for a drink after work?” I ask him.

“No sir. I was votin’. Election day. Fact, I thought Poe was votin’, too, just got one too many free drinks out of it.”

I take this information in. I know something’s not right, but it’s not coming together yet. “Speak of free drinks, why don’t you let us buy you one?”

Joe smiles. “A drink with the most famous writer ever and a detective? I don’t think I could pass that up,” he says. We talk a while, but barely of the case, and it’s not new information.

After his drink, Walker stands up to leave. His wife is expecting him, he tells us. He shakes both our hands sincerely.

“I don’t like it,” I tell Dickens after Walker’s gone. “How long had you known Poe?”

“I met him in Philadelphia about a year after ‘Barnaby Rudge’ was published. He interviewed me for some magazine or other. Gussed the ending to ‘Rudge’ before anyone.”

“‘Rudge’... that was the one with the raven.”

“Grip. Based on my own. And that was... seven or eight years ago.”

I nod. “I met him not long before that.”

“Okay, and what are you driving at?”

“We’ve known him for almost two decades between the two of us. Do you ever remember him drinking?”

Dickens seems to consider that for a moment. “I think he had a glass of port during the interview. I don’t recall, precisely.”

“Well, I do. He took me out for a drink to ask me questions about detection and analysis. He drank water the entire time. I convinced him to have a glass of scotch with me

afterward, and he agreed, reluctantly, and then he got absolutely intoxicated on just the one drink. Because he had no tolerance for the stuff. One drink and he was gone. So how does it make any sense that he would be that intoxicated when Walker found him that night? And what on Earth was he doing outside that tavern, stinking of alcohol?"

Dickens considers that. "I have no idea."

I set my glass down. "Exactly. Because it doesn't add up. And who's this Reynolds character? Was he really thinking of some old novel he'd written? I doubt it."

Dickens drains the rest of his drink, looks into the empty glass. "I doubt it, too, but I have no idea. That's why I've retained you. You're the detective," he says. "I don't figure out the stories. I just write 'em. And speak of stories, I've got to go and read one tomorrow, so if you'll excuse me, I'm going to retire for the evening," he tells me, sets the glass down, rises. "Try not to be up too late. We'll be leaving day after tomorrow."

I nod, but I'm only barely paying attention to him. I'm still thinking. I look around the bar and realize it's not doing me any good to be in there, so I call the tender to settle, drain my own glass, and rise. I head out of the hotel, into the cold, Baltimore evening.

I'm braced immediately. The November air stings tears into my eyes, and my breath plumes in front of me. Oil lamps flicker orange in the darkness, but mostly it's just black.

I decide to walk around the block anyway. Good walks always help me think.

I try to walk carefully over the treacherous, glistening cobblestones, but still I can't help stumbling occasionally. If anyone saw me, they'd think I was drunk.

I wonder if it was this cold when Poe was here. I wonder if he had the same perambulatory problems, and I wonder why he was drunk. If in fact, he was. But surely he must have been. Walker didn't seem educated, but Snodgrass would have realized if those slurring movements had been the result of weakness and sickness more than alcohol, wouldn't he have? He seemed competent enough.

I sigh like steam.

Dickens mentioned money and the new magazine, but none was found on Poe's body. Had he been mugged? Rolled?

What were you up to, Poe? Why were you here? What were you doing outside that tavern when you don't even drink?

These are the thoughts in my head as I walk down the street, until a cry pierces the darkness. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle, and another, shorter, softer sound follows the first, drips like ice down my back.

I look up.

Standing on a ledge, looking down on me, is a raven. As if it were waiting to confirm that it had my attention, it flaps down when I look up at it. There is a tree on the sidewalk to my left, and it chooses a low-lying branch. Orange light spills from a window, dances in its inky-black eyes, gleams its oily dark feathers. It preens, then sucks in a breath and its neck extends as if to call, but then it stops. It eyes me. Curious. Juts its head out, once, twice. Twists its neck, as if I'm confusing it.

And then I realize it. "You know something," I say.

It opens its beak. Its caw is matter-of-fact and sounds like black velvet tearing.

"All right," I nod. "Show me," I tell it.

It lights off the branch to glide smoothly into the evening, and I step to follow it, and that's when brightness explodes like sunlight through my head. I can't keep my knees straight. The sidewalk is cold and hard.

A voice in the darkness. "If you know what's good for you, froggy, you'll quit pokin' your nose where it ain't wanted." It's gruff, harsh like sandpaper through my skull. "You and the writer leave, and nobody else'll get hurt," it tells me.

I groan.

He boots me hard in the gut, and I cry out, and then the world goes so bright it crosses over again into darkness, and the last thing I hear is the raven's caw. As if beckoning.

I wake in a bed. My head's throbbing. The room's dark except for a flickering candle. I detect movement to my side, but I don't move; I know the spot where the guy sapped me is

going to make my whole body sore. My tongue is sour and swollen, and I want to ask for water, but it comes out a groan. It's pathetic.

"You're awake?" Dickens asks.

I know enough not to nod, and speaking doesn't work either. I raise a leaden hand, fiddle my fingers.

He puts a glass of water to my lips. I drink. It's good.

"So what happened?"

"Got sapped. Went for a walk after you left but didn't make it far. I got distracted for just a second, and somebody must have snuck up on me, because next thing I know my head's exploding and I'm on the ground."

"Snuck up? On you? What distracted you?"

I knew he'd ask. I wonder if I should tell him. "I don't remember."

Dickens frowns, then: "Must be the blow to the head." If he thinks it's a lie, he doesn't call me on it. I'm almost grateful.

"Did you catch anything before you passed out?"

"He told me we'd back off if we knew what's good for us."

"We?"

"You retained me."

Dickens is silent a moment.

"We're close," I tell him.

"You think?"

"Otherwise they wouldn't care. Something's up."

"Okay. So what do we do now?"

"You go to your reading tomorrow, and I solve the case," I tell him.

Dickens leaves early to read at the local library, and so I strike off on my own. At first I'm not sure where to go. I've talked to Snodgrass and Walker, and I consider talking to Poe's family here, or the man who treated him, but I don't think it would do any good. I've got most of the story, I think; I just need to know how it fits together. I know how it happened, just not why, yet.

I'm certain, now, that Poe was attacked, like I was last night. I'm certain he was robbed of the money he was carrying to

launch his publishing venture, but I wouldn't have been attacked if that were the whole story. Muggings happen all the time, and muggers wouldn't be watching to see if anyone was sniffing around.

So who would?

Someone with something at stake. Someone well connected. Someone who would know Dickens is in town and had brought a friend. Someone who would know we've been talking to people.

It's not Snodgrass. He's smart enough to have pulled something, but he has neither the competence nor the motive of a criminal. Walker couldn't have mugged a five year old.

I decide to go to Ryan's. See where it went down.

It's an Irish place with a brick exterior and windows that barely let any light into the inside. Smells like old Scotch and bangers and mash, like someone's cooking cabbage and corned beef somewhere. Air as thick and substantial as soup.

I sit at the bar. It's a big, beautiful hunk of wood that gleams in spots and reflects small votive candles in its surface.

"Can I getchya?" the bartender asks. He's a younger guy with a thick brogue.

"Your best lager."

He smiles. "Man after me own heart," he says. He steps to the side and pulls a large glass of beer so dark it looks like liquid chocolate. Barely any head when he gives it to me.

"Nicely done," I say.

"Slainte," he smiles.

I take a pull. It's cold and so thick it could have been a meal by itself. "Now that's a beer."

"From me hometown in Galkenny," he smiles.

"Oh, Gaelic, eh?"

He nods. "And Gallic?"

"Paris, indeed," I tell him. "Auguste."

"Ryan," he says as he shakes.

"Ryan? This your place?"

He smiles. I see the pride in it. I look around again, with renewed interest. "Great place. Feels authentic."

“Place like where me pa used to drink. ‘Least when me mum wann’t tellin’ ‘im to git ‘is lazy arse to work.”

“Something to be said for places where our fathers used to drink,” I say. “Pretty new?”

“Ten years now.”

“Really?” I say. I run my hand over the bar. “Looks brand new.”

“Oh, aye, aye ‘tis. But just the bar. Newly commissioned it. Local carpenter namea Reynolds. Noticed me old one was wobbly and offered te repair it. I told ‘im ‘e might’s well replace it, and so ‘e did.”

I catch the name. “Reynolds, eh? Regular?”

Ryan shakes his head, picks up a glass and begins to wash it. “Nay, cem in a month or so back. Oversaw the sheriff election. Lot of cooping going ‘round these parts,” he tells me.

“Cooping?”

“Oh, aye, reight, you wouldn’t know. Politicians’nd the like. Come ‘lection day, they grab people and force them to vote. Ballot stuffin’. Get ‘em drunk and keep ‘em in tiny rooms called coops,” he says. “Oh, aye, ‘tisn’t pretty,” he adds, I suppose because he’s noticed the expression on my face.

My mouth has gone dry. I take another pull of the beer. It helps a bit, but not much.

I’m at the desk in my room, writing by candlelight, when someone knocks. I rise.

It’s Dickens.

“Got your message from the concierge. Just got back. Everythi—,” he doesn’t finish, because I’ve pulled him into the room. “What—?” he starts. Then sees my bags. They’re next to my bed, and all packed. “What’s all this? Going somewhere?”

I nod. “Home.”

“What?”

“Sit down, Dickens, and I’ll tell you what happened.”

And he does, so I do. I had been trying to figure out who was right about what had happened until I realized everyone was. Mugged, drunk, cooped: as near as I can figure, Poe made

a wrong turn somewhere and, when he got to Baltimore, he was an easy target. Accosted. Beaten. Held against his will. He wasn't a man of strong constitution in the first place, and that would've easily killed him. I tell him who Reynolds was.

"So did you go to the police?"

I shake my head. I go to the desk to get the paper I was writing on, and he stands as I do so.

"Well why not? Let's go, ma—."

"Sit down, Dickens."

He looks at me, confused.

"We can't go to the police here. It was an election for sheriff. I'm not sure whether Poe wanted Reynolds because Reynolds was the official and should've been informed of the corruption, or because Reynolds was behind the cooping itself. He's a carpenter, and maybe the sheriff paid him off."

Dickens absorbs the information, then: "Okay. So what now?"

"That's on you."

"What?"

"You retained me to solve the case. I just told you what happened, and I put it all here, too," I tell him as I hand him the letter. "I'm finished. You do with the information whatever you please."

"So you're saying we can't level charges against anyone?"

"What good would it do? This goes up into politicians, and Poe didn't have much of a reputation anyway. You heard the way Snodgrass and Walker spoke of him. Just another drunk. I've heard rumors he had rabies. Besides, a healthy man would've lived through it, so you might get some entry-level grunt on negligence, and what good's that going to do? Who's going to care?"

"I will," he tells me. "And you do."

I sigh. He's right, but not for the reasons he thinks. It's because I've realized it's not about the case. It's about Poe. I think, coming here, to a new world... I've been able to get away from a life that hadn't looked like it was planning to go anywhere anyway.

Maybe I can go someplace here. Maybe I can start all over again. Minus Poe, minus the stories, minus a reputation. All I've got is a name most people don't know anyway and some talent.

And I think, as Dickens tries to convince me to do something, it's enough. It's all I need.

After the Words

I used to love the introductions to short story collections. I think the first I read was John D. MacDonald's to Stephen King's *Night Shift*, but it may in fact be merely the first I remember. The very first short story I remember reading is King's "The Boogie Man."

Which should begin to tell you about my proclivities as a writer. My favorite story in the collection was "Strawberry Spring," a highly literate, distinctly well written story about a serial killer.

All the short stories I read had introductions, to the degree that I felt this particular one would be incomplete without one, except I wanted to put everything at the end, after the stories, which I suppose makes this, technically, an introduction to an afterword, and all of which is to say:

I hope you enjoyed them.

This collection marks my first foray into print (though I'm not sure I consider Lulu publishing). I've been writing for almost two decades now, and have maintained a MySpace blog for the past year and a half. I have also recently enrolled in the Master's in Professional Writing program at the University of Southern California, where I am studying fiction and screenwriting. My attendance there has inspired two things: a burst of short story and essay writing, and an analysis of both the literary marketplace and myself as a writer.

Let's talk about that latter first.

In exploring more of my range and versatility, I've discovered more about myself, my writing, and my style. I'm at my best when I write simply and clearly. Will Shetterly once told me that is the heart of good writing, and I very much agree.

Which leads me to state that, while I think I'm an entertaining writer, a fun writer, even, yes, a good writer, I'm not, as genre goes, a literary one. I heard Sid Stebel once say that the way to tell a "literary" novel from one of genre is that a "literary" novel is all backstory, while one of genre is story itself.

I'm not sure I completely agree with that (nor, to be perfectly candid, even that I actually truly understand his meaning), but I can say two things. The first is that, writing wise, story is always what excites me. The second is that the following stories generally don't fit in any genre quite neatly, and probably aren't "literary."

But good?

Well, I like them. The rest is up to you.

Many people have asked about my decision to and the process of self-publishing. It is not one I undertook lightly, but came as a direct result of trying to look objectively at the following stories and the prospective literary marketplace. Which has, unfortunately, grown much smaller and more narrow in recent years. When Stephen King and Ray Bradbury were young pups, the market was wider and more open: *Argosy* and *Cavalier*, etc. In recent years, the *Atlantic Monthly*, long considered the single best magazine in the short-story market, announced that it would no longer run short fiction in every issue. The *New Yorker* still does, but unless your name is Ian McEwan or David Foster Wallace is nearly impossible to get into. Which leaves genre magazines like *Analog* and the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* on one side of the remainder of the marketplace and smaller literary journals like *Glimmer Train* and *Zyzzyva* on the other.

There are some other avenues, anthologies by smaller presses, but here we find another issue: legitimacy. In an age when just about everyone has a blog, and given the recent proliferation of printing means available through print-on-

demand houses, many people are claiming editorial status and printing their own anthologies using online forums like MySpace, FaceBook, and others as pools from which to draw talented contributors.

It is getting more difficult, then, to separate the wheat from the chaff. Google can sometimes help, but not always.

The decision came ultimately as a result of looking at my stories and blog in the context of the literary marketplace. Regardless of the size of the short-story market, I already felt like I wasn't part of it. USC was the only school I applied to, after careful planning and consideration, reading scores of other books by scores of other writers at scores of other schools (USC was one of a handful of schools whose teachers I had heard of and read, and the only with my favorites).

I applied the same process to the magazine marketplace and realized that none of my stories seemed a good fit for any of them. Of the twenty stories contained in the aforementioned *Night Shift*, more than half were originally published in *Cavalier*, a magazine that, as nearly as I can gather, no longer publishes. I've never seen an issue, anyway. I looked around and realized that none of my stories really seemed to fit in any of the magazines listed in *Writers' Market*. It wasn't that I thought the stories were too good for any, any more than I had thought I was too good a writer to go to Columbia or Iowa. I looked at "Raven Noir," and didn't think it fit in either *The Strand* or *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. I thought about submitting "Donorhood" to *Playboy* or *Esquire*, but I think the whole point of that piece is its appeal to male and female readers alike.

I knew, however, there were people who would buy a magazine if it contained something I'd written, and then I figured: why not just offer everything to people directly.

So I am.

What am I offering? The strongest short work I have. This isn't reaching into a desk drawer, pulling out a handful of rejected work, and saying, "Fuck everyone else, I think it's good."

Much of the poetry survived the admittedly perfunctory editorial process of my undergrad college's literary magazine. "This Ain't Wonderland" was recognized by the Academy of American Poets. Two pieces were written more recently. I worked for 3 years as assistant editor of the *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services*, and wrote "Factory Life" just after editing an article about schizophrenia. The article had been so clinical, and I'd wanted to put the illness into terms and imagery everyone could identify with.

I don't know where "Deserted" came from. I almost didn't include it. It hasn't been looked at as closely as other pieces have. But as I was choosing work, it stuck out as connected to the themes (not to mention the imagery [I've no idea why there are so many deserts and oceans in these pages]) in this collection, and it survived the attention of my colleagues, and so it is included.

Fiction

With the two exceptions of "For Cynthia" and "A Little Heaven," everything has been workshopped at my school. Each piece has been written, rewritten, revised, polished, revised, and polished once again. There are no first, nor even seventh, drafts here.

This is actually the reason for the two stories featuring C. Auguste Dupin, Poe's fictional detective. The piece began as the version with Dickens and was re-written several times before my teacher (the brilliant, best-selling, and beautiful Rachel Resnick) suggested I try giving up the humorous, winking tone of the piece to try a darker version without Dickens. Which I did, to come up with something entirely different, which I thought is a terrific example of the idea that all stories have already been told and all pieces written and all that ever really changes is how. I like both versions for entirely different reasons.

Several of the people I asked to read this collection in its beta stages noted the use of phrases from song lyrics in some of the stories. My friends are astute readers. Several of the shorter works were conceived as translations of songs into stories. Which songs were translated will remain as an exercise for the

reader, more for reasons of copyright than mystery. I'm a broke grad student who, by necessity, must eschew licensing fees by avoiding quoting anything for which I would have to pay (which comes up again in "Deluded.")

"For Cynthia" and "A Little Heaven" were never workshopped because they are, in fact, two of the oldest pieces in the collection. They have, however, been rewritten and polished and revised the most, as well. "A Little Heaven" is actually the first chapter of a longer work that won honorable mention in the 2001 *Once Upon a World* fantasy/romance novella contest. Out of thousands of entries, it placed fourth, and in fact I was informed it would have won if only it had jibed more closely with the direction of the contest, the judges of which sought hard fantasy moreso than fabulous (although, as fantasy goes, it doesn't get much, erm, harder than "A Little Heaven."); the judges called it the best-written entry in the contest and asked to publish it. I agreed but ultimately withdrew it for several reasons, including another contest. The version contained here is not the version the judges read; it's far better.

"A Little Heaven" inspired one of my favorite comments about any story I've ever written: "Well, it's certainly risqué. I'm not sure I've ever read more instances of cunnilingus in fewer pages." For those who would ask, I have never dated a French girl.

"For Cynthia" is one of the stories I'm proudest of. I don't know why. I think it is the one that most closely accomplishes what I meant for it to.

Both were part of my grad school application. As they got me into the 3rd-highest ranked writing program in the country, one of the most respected in the world, and the only one I actually applied to, I felt them good enough to share.

Non-Fiction

"Dear Author" began its life as an e-mail to a friend of mine but grew a life of its own. I always knew it was something more. When I began to blog, I included it as an early entry, and it was received well enough that I polished it up again for inclusion.

“Deluded” began its life as a blog. It felt thematically related to several other pieces, including “Dear Author.”

“Man in Tights” was the first piece I ever wrote in my writing program. My teacher thought it was one of the funniest and cutest she’d read, and I told her the video was both funnier and cuter.

I thought “Donorhood” was worth sharing if only for the reflections on fatherhood. I don’t think most women realize men think about these issues (and no, it’s not just me). Its humorous, slightly irreverent tone made it inappropriate for some magazines, but I also thought it was as much of interest to female readers as male readers. I couldn’t think of any single publication that really was the right venue for it, so I decided to let it find its own.

And finally, “What I Saw that Day (September 11th, 2001.” This was the second thing I wrote in my grad program, five years after the events of that day. It was one of the most difficult things I’ve ever had to write. I’m not sure I’m completely happy with it, but I don’t think it’s a subject about which I could ever be happy writing; there’s so much entangled in it I’ll probably never adequately unravel it. I did, however, think that the story of the day I experienced needed to be shared, and that’s what I’m doing.

Finally, there are many people I should thank, but Mister Stick-man is waving his baton and the music’s all cued and it’s about damned time for me to get off the stage. My family, my friends, everyone who read this in its beta version. Everyone I trusted to tell me my pants were on backward or even nonexistent. My teachers and classmates, my colleagues and peers. The people who read my MySpace blog and the others who’ve known me all my life. Or feel like it.

Thank you for believing in me so hard I started to. Thank you for encouraging me when I was feeling great and supporting me when I wasn’t.

You’ve meant more to me than I’ll ever be able to express, so I’m not even going to try. I’m just going to tell you thank you, and I love you, and mean it.

But before I go, a bonus: the first two chapters of what will be my debut novel.

A Different Tomorrow

“It is not unknown to me that many have been and still are of the opinion that the affairs of this world are so under the direction of Fortune and of God that man’s prudence cannot control them; in fact that man has no resource against them. For this reason, many think there is no use in sweating much over such matters, but that one might as well let Chance take control.”

-Niccolo Machiavelli; *The Prince*

Part I: Present Tense Any Second Now

“Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute, there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.”
-T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

1

You've been here before.

Two simultaneous feelings prickled electric goosebumps down Chance Sowin's neck as he crossed his front lawn and saw the storm door of his house sway in the lazy October breeze. The first was uncanny familiarity: of infinite doors on infinite days, of the same leaves in the same places in the same yard over and over and over again.

The second was fear: brief space between the edge of the heavy front door and its jamb, and a bashed-in deadbolt had splintered the wood.

Chance eased the door further open: a dead leaf skittered inside on a breeze he couldn't feel, and daylight dazzled the hardwood floor beyond golden. His own shadow spindled into the hallway, and the walls hid in the dark like they were scared.

You've seen this.

Chance almost called out to his father. Instead, he slipped through the door, leaving it open behind him. He eased through the hallway, gasped when he saw the living room: books from the bookcase were scattered all over the floor, and two paintings had been taken down but propped against the wall. The entertainment cabinet was askew, as if whoever had done it had been looking for something.

You know this.

Chance pulled out his cell phone, dialed 911. A woman answered.

“I think there’s been a break-in,” Chance whispered. Reciting his address made him sound like he was in second grade, and he hung up while the woman was still talking.

He moved farther into the dark hallway. Realized he was holding his breath tight. Listening.

Then: sounds from the basement, just through the kitchen. Chance hugged the wall as he crept toward the wide-open basement door, then descended the stairs on his toes. A voice: his father’s, urgent, anxious; another: more urgent, more anxious.

The basement was darker than the first floor had been. Sunlight dusty and fragile as old spiderwebs filtered through windows set high in the wall, and the only other light slanted through the door of Chance’s father’s office.

Chance moved to the closest wall, flattened his body against it, crossed carefully toward the door. Already picturing the office: the bookshelves opposite the door, the computer desk on the right and the sofa on the left, the rolling chair. He concentrated to loosen his body, readied it in case he had to use it. He was trying to stay out of sight while still approaching the office, but there was a drafting table, an old chair, and a box full of books in his way.

And then every defensive thought in Chance’s head dropped down to his stomach so hard he gulped, because he’d gotten close enough to the doorway to see into the office. A ski-masked man dressed all in black pointed a gun equipped with a long silencer at Chance’s father.

In college, Chance had trained in martial arts, and the entire world slowed as his training suddenly took control of his body: leapt him through the doorway to tackle the man with the gun. The man rolled even as he fell, and Chance’s father lunged toward the man—

time snapped back to the room;
a lot of things happened all at once.
A sound
like rapid-fire sneezes caught.

Chance's father cried out in pain,
fell.

Chance kicked at the man,

but the man used the hand that wasn't holding his gun to catch Chance's foot, lifted hard and pushed. Chance's feet came out from under him, but he twisted even as he fell so that he swept the man's legs upon hitting the floor.

The gun coughed when it hit the ground, and the computer monitor exploded.

The man twisted and his gun coughed again, again; Chance dove as bullets gone wild punched fist-sized holes into the wall behind him, and the man kicked him in the abdomen. All Chance's breath steam-whistled out of him, and then the man smashed Chance across the face and he tumbled backward.

Another cough, and another: the man was shooting again, and then brick-wall pain blasted across Chance's shoulder so hard it spun him around. He smashed front-first into his father's desk.

The man's gun hacked, spat, again, then sprung-locked impotent. The man pushed it forward, forward, like he didn't want it to believe it was empty.

Chance tried to move but discovered he couldn't. Pain seared through his left arm when he tried to put weight on it, and his head felt like it was tightening. The air in the room seemed to be gaining density, and darkness pressed into his vision. When he heard distant ringing gain volume as if approaching, Chance mistook it for the pain in his head before he realized it was a siren. The man turned and sprinted from the room, across the basement and up the stairs.

Chance struggled again, ignored his shoulder, forced his body forward. He lurched toward the door, slammed his injured shoulder into it. Gagged on a wave of pain.

He groaned, blinked back the tears in his eyes, pushed off from the doorjamb. For one hopeful moment, he thought the momentum would carry him across the basement, and if he could just get to the stairs, he'd be able to shake it off, climb them—

“Chance?” His father's voice.

Chance stopped. The room wobbled, and the floor threatened to pitch him sideways.

He turned. His father was on the ground. Furious crimson stains had blossomed on his father's white shirt. Chance went to him, and it felt as though he were wading through the floor. He knelt. The wounds looked worse up close.

"Chance."

"Don't talk, dad. You're hurt."

His father swallowed, made a face. Tiny gagging sounds came from the back of his throat, and he breathed in small spurts. "I—," he started, but his voice closed on him and nothing more came. He lifted his arm, and his hand fidgeted a small, silver filigree chain around his neck before it twisted; the chain gave free, and he grabbed Chance's hands, pressing something small and round and hard into Chance's palms, closing Chance's fingers so hard around them it hurt.

A ring. A small, silver ring. A small, familiar, silver ring. What little light made it into the room gleamed around the circumference of the ring to twinkle like a tiny star, and that was the last thing Chance saw before the world washed out into darkness.

2

Southwark, England, 1611.

Leonard Kensington stood in the Globe Theater, ten feet from the stage, and he tried to ignore the smell of a hundred people from a culture that hadn't yet discovered either soap or deodorant as he watched the play. On stage, Richard Burbage, as Macbeth, strode into view. Several other men followed. Macbeth pointed outward over the audience as if he were seeing Inverness, and so the Globe Theater pretended it was a centuries-old castle in Scotland, the river Thames pretended it was, rather, Ness, and the audience went along with it.

"Hang out our banners on the outward walls," Macbeth's voice boomed through the theater. "The cry is still, 'They come.' Our castle's strength will laugh a siege to scorn. Here let them lie till famine and the ague eat them up. Were they not forced with those that should be ours, we might have met them darenful, beard to beard, and beat them backward home."

Backstage, and so in the bowels of Castle Inverness, several women screamed. Macbeth turned toward the sound. "What is that noise?"

"It is the cry of women, my good lord," Seyton answered, even as he hurried away to investigate.

Even as Leonard's head buzzed. He squeezed his earlobe, quietly cleared his throat. Which meant: wait. He eased around the people beside him, all of whom were enthralled by that big

man on the stage and his words, as was Leonard even as he made his way out of the theater.

Macbeth turned again to survey his home and, beyond it, the land over which he governed. "I have almost forgot the taste of fears. The time has been, my senses would have cooled to hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir as life were in it. I have supped full with horrors. Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, cannot once start me."

When Seyton reappeared, he seemed to halt from a near sprint.

Macbeth turned at his footsteps. "Wherefore was that cry?"

Seyton looked down at his hands, which he'd begun to wring. "The queen, my lord," he said. Then, looking again at Macbeth like he expected he might be struck, "is dead."

Leonard had made it to the back of the crowd, almost to the door, but he paused, then, because that was the moment for which he'd traveled through time and space in the first place. He watched as, on stage, Macbeth reacted with wide eyes and startled body, but then it passed: the mania that had possessed him a moment before returned, and he looked toward the walls of his castle, beyond which the woods were rapidly approaching. "She should have died hereafter. There would have been time for such a word," he said. "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps at this petty pace until the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the ways to dusty death—"

Leonard ducked to the side and through the door, his boots crunching down on hazelnut shells as he went, stepped swiftly between buildings of grey stone and brick. What had smelled bad in the Globe nearly made Leonard gag outside it: the world reeked of tanning hides and sizzling meat. The streets and byways of Southwark bustled with pickpockets and whores, and Leonard hurried to find less populated areas, then slowed. The leather soles of his boots scritch-scratched over the sand of the path and around the detritus of 17th century life: horse manure, rotted fruit, cats and dead rats, feathers like mad. He dodged as

someone on a floor above him emptied a bedpan into the street, a vile, evil-smelling lumpy-orange-liquid cacophony.

"I'm here, Race," Leonard said in a British accent he'd thought was thick until he'd visited Southwark. Only Horatio Atropos could contact Leonard via the microscopic cellular implant in Leonard's jaw.

Race's voice reverberated through the bones in Leonard's cranium. "We have a problem," Race told him.

"How bad?" he asked, stepping around a man carting a carcass of unidentifiable origin down the path. Flies buzzed around what hadn't yet been carved for food.

"We're not certain yet," Race told him. "But we need you back. We've coordinated the machine."

Leonard realized, then, that, in his effort to find less populated areas, he had also found less safe areas; several men had paused to give him more attention than he felt comfortable receiving.

"I might be detained," Leonard said, even as a couple men started moving, not approaching him, yet, but following. They wore heavy grey smocks that looked not just lived in but also slept in. One man, his stringy brown hair matted down, his face dirty, his eyes sunken, smiled to reveal a mouth full of rotted teeth.

"If you must," Race said.

"I'll only be a moment," Leonard told him.

"No you won't," Race replied, and then Leonard's inner ear clicked with the call's disconnection.

Leonard turned, broke into a jog, which he found difficult in his leather and wool clothing, bulky in all the places he'd want tight and constricting in all the places he'd want loose. Three sets of footsteps followed suit, but Leonard didn't look back as he cut left and right around buildings. Running was difficult, because the simple leather boots, common to the time, hadn't much in the way of tread.

Labyrinthine grey-stone passages and corridors intersected and looped back around each other, and then Leonard skidded around another corner, into an alley, but had only gone a few

feet before he realized it deadended just ahead, and the only way out was the way he'd just gone in.

He turned, just as three men walked around the corner of the alley.

He sighed.

The men advanced on him, and the one who'd smiled at him spoke. "What've we here," the man said, his accent thick as tar and smoke, moved forward. "You look a wealthy man, good sir, with your fine hosiery. We wondered how heavy your purse might be," the man told him. Scars criss-crossed his cheek in an 'X', and he licked his cracked lips as he reached toward Leonard. "And we hoped we might relieve you of s—."

Quick, precise movements. An arm here, elbow there, fist here and here and a knee just there, and Leonard crumpled the man to the ground before the man could finish his sentence. Just a short, low groan.

Leonard looked at the two men who'd accompanied the man on the ground. They looked uncertainly at each other, then back at Leonard. "Go on," Leonard said. "Run."

And they did, leaving Leonard alone in the alley. He pulled his sleeve up.

Around his wrist, Leonard wore a simple watch, silver with a black dial. Because it was anachronistic to Elizabethan times, Leonard was wearing it with the face on the inside of his wrist to make it less noticeable. On one side of the face was the dial by which he could adjust the time, which he did frequently, but on the other side was a button.

Leonard closed his eyes and pressed the button with his thumb.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up as if prickling before being struck by lightning. His skin crawled, and the muscles in his abdomen clenched, involuntarily, as they always did when he pressed that button. Even with his eyes closed he sensed the brilliant, purple flash. It had no heat, but his body still felt the energy crackle—

—and then it was gone, and Leonard opened his eyes. Brushed metal, cylindrical walls replaced Elizabethan Southwark, the Globe Theater on bank of the river Thames on the outskirts

of Old London. He put his hand on the touch screen in wall in front of him to let a brilliant blue laser read the palm of his hand, looked straight ahead as a second laser scanned his retina. The brushed metal walls had no seams, and yet a section in front of him slid to the side.

Leonard hurried into the darkness before him.