

broken bulbs

Frank Fisher is nothing. He wants to be something. When a mysterious young woman named Bonnie offers assistance by injecting seeds of inspiration directly into his brain, Frank finds himself involved in a twisting mystery full of addiction, desperation and self-discovery. *Broken Bulbs*, a novella by Eddie Wright, tells the story of the lengths one young man will go in the pursuit of "somethingness."

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eddie wright

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for erin...

one

And here I am again.

I chew my nails. I tap my foot. I chew my nails. I sweat. I bleed. My nose bleeds. It drips. I drip. I'm dripping through my chair.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

I wipe it. I smear it. I wipe again. My head is throbbing. From inside. The wound. Like a golf ball. It pulses.

Pulse.

Pulse.

Pulse.

It squishes. It's wet. Something's gonna grow. Something. Hopefully. Something's gonna be born. Be alive. It's alive. It *should* be alive. *I* should be alive. It's dead. Dying. Dead.

The mummy wrap 'round my head is soaked with dirt and blood. It needs to be changed but I'm sick of it. Sick of this. It

covers my eye. My right eye. Half the world is gone. Only the left side exists.

I chew my nails again. Bite 'em too low. Too short. They hurt. They bleed. They drip. I drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

RING RING RING RING RING RING RING

The phone. "Yeah?" It's her. Does she have one? Does she have a new one?

"I Scooby Dooby do," she says. Cute.

"I can't keep going. It's dull. It hurts. It's boring," I say. "This one's got *nothing*. It's no good. It's no good! It's all *gone* now. It's all dried up. I need something more. I'm sick of these same ones. I need something else. I need a *new* one. Just one new one. I need *one* new one."

"Ya know what ya gotta do, baby-boy," she says.

"I know I know I know..."

She owns every bit of me. She knows this. I know this. My head, especially knows this.

She tells me the way. I listen. Barely. I'm outta my chair and into the mess...

The unfinished.

The wasted.

The nothing.

I step over the birdhouses and the spice racks and the painting of the naked one-eyed lady and the blueprints (for

whatever the hell it is) and the charcoal sketch of the evergreen and the books bookmarked halfway through and the plaster cast of the dead squirrel and the overexposed photo of the tiny cabin. I walk through a stack of "*Meat is Murder*" flyers. I wipe my bleeding nose on a "*Fur is Fashion*" t-shirt. I knock my shiny new mountain bike over and I'm into the closet.

Iced tea. Iced tea is all. At this point in my life iced tea is all I am right now. It's all I have right now. It's a delicious treat. Its deliciousness is powerful. It's the powerful powdered goods and into the mug it goes – scoop after scoop.

"*Uncle Franky Rules!!*" That's what it says on this mug. That's what a cartoon dinosaur tells me every time I sip the drink. It was a gift from my nephew. I forget how old he is but I scoop anyway – scoop scoop scoop – spoonful after spoonful goes in, way more than the recommended amount. I don't care. I like it. I like it sweet. I like it good. I like when it rots. It's rotted now. It hardly hurts now. I think its dead now. I think I lost it now. Do I care? Do I need it? Do I need anything? I just need this. This pulse. This pulsating...ness? Pulsatingness. In my head. I need pulsatingness.

I grab some water from the dead flower, the one I grew during the gardening phase. I dump and stir with a pen. The iced tea is sludge. It's good.

"*Maybe you can...*" she begins.

"I CAN'T!" I yell into the phone. "It doesn't work for me anymore! It's dried up I said. It's dull I said. I hate it and I want a new one!" I drop my head into my hand, "*Please*. I need it. I'm serious this time."

"FINE FINE FINE!" She shouts and hangs up.

My eyes meet with the monitor on the desk. The blinking cursor. The flashing fucker.

“A Big Pile of Misery: The Life and Times of Dusty.” That’s what it says.

My reply? “Open up and say, *AHHHHHHH...*” and I boot the bastard. It pops into sparkly sparks on the ground. The cracked screen flickers and goes black.

And I’m off to the diner to meet Bonnie.

two

“You know I don’t smoke.” I hold an unlit cigarette in my palm.

Bonnie shoots it a look then locks my eyes, “So?”

“So every time I meet with you, you give me a cigarette, but I don’t smoke and I tell you every time.”

“Put it in your mouth,” she says. Her left eye is blue. The right one is brown. My eyes are coals, burning my brain.

“Your eyes are two different colors,” I say.

“I lost a contact. *Here...*” She stretches across the table and pops a Zippo at my face. I put the smoke between my nasty teeth and lean the tip into the flame. I take a drag and exhale the mouthful. I hate cigarettes.

“I hate cigarettes. They smell and I hate the way they taste.”

“I know. Take a big puff.”

A long pull this time. Bonnie watches me. I know she wants me to inhale every bit. Fill my lungs with the badness. I do. She smiles.

“See, you didn’t even cough that time!” She’s delighted. That’s all that matters.

“Which one?” I ask.

“Which what?” she says as she slides a piece of her dyed, jet-black hair away from her eye and behind her ear.

“Which contact did you lose? Are you really blue or brown?”

"Well you should know," she says.

"How?" I say. I can't focus on anything anymore. Her face is going blurry, then sharpening, then blurring again. I feel like my face is going to tear from my head.

"I always wear my contacts," she says as if this statement should be obvious to me.

"Okay..."

"So you should know what color my eyes are all the time."

"Okay..."

"And whatever one that's there right now, the one that's not *always* there, would be the real one."

Pause.

"I can't, Bonnie."

"You can't what?"

"I can't start thinking about eyes right now. I just don't have the mindset. I can't—"

"Franky-boy!" she says like she's speaking to a dog.

"Just tell me!" I say impatiently.

"No. I refuse to tell you."

"Fine."

"I'm blind as a fucking bat anyway." She bites her thumb nail and spits the half moon into the ashtray on the table. She loves to do this. She knows it makes me tingle.

I rest the smoke next to the nail. "So you got it?"

Before she answers the waitress is at the table. She's been working six decades straight, easy. Serious sweat-stache. Sunken stuff and lines all over her face. Blood shot eyes and yellow-yellow teeth. She seems nice though.

"What can I getcha?" she says in a Virginia Slims growl.

Bonnie smiles the shittiest of shit-eating grins, "You could bring my boy here *three* coffees."

"Three?" The waitress asks as she scratches her temple with the tip of her click-pen adorned with a Speedo-clad muscle man. His name is probably Niko and he's smiling at me.

"Your strongest and blackest. All at the same time," Bonnie says.

"That's a lotta caffeine."

"He's needs a *lotta* energy. He's sluggish."

The waitress raises an eyebrow in my direction. Her eyes dart to the bloodied bandage on my forehead barely covered by my woolen cap. "What's the deal?" she asks.

"Oh this, I—"

Bonnie chops me off, "He has tumors all over his brain. They call him Cancer Carl in school. Sometimes they drop out of his nose. One time...I mean two times, we were eating breakfast and a tumor dropped into his oatmeal." Bonnie holds back the giggles. "It was awesome!"

"*Oh no kid!* That's bad news!" the waitress says with god's honest concern.

"It's—" I begin but Bonnie jumps in again.

"It's cool. He loves them. He loves surgery and he can't wait to die."

"*Oh no kid!* That's bad news *too!*" The waitress says.

"He's dark. That's why I'm into him. It's hot," Bonnie says all sexy-like. I know she's not serious but this too makes me tingle.

"Tell ya what Cancer Carl. Foods on me. Tonight you eat on my dime."

Bonnie's jaw nearly hits the table. "Oh my gosh, waitress!"

"Bethy," the waitress replies.

"Oh my gosh, Bethy! You are truly God's gift to the food service industry!"

The waitress let's out a nauseating, phlegm-drenched chuckle that honestly causes me to dry heave.

But Bonnie is charming. I was charming once, I think. I think I was. I don't know. All I am now is a shit. I'm fried. I'm a french fry. I can barely breathe on my own.

Bonnie skims her menu. "I'll have an entire plate covered in sausages, Bethy. I'm talkin' two or three dozen sausages. Pile up the porky protein I say. I mean, to me, grinded up pig parts is like the same thing as vitamin C, you can never get enough right?"

The waitress nods.

"I also want like, a shit-load of maple syrup and a glass of water with lemon."

"K," the waitress mutters while scribbling in her pad. She snaps a look at me. "Food?"

"No Bethy. No food Bethy. No food for me Bethy. I'll eat cigarettes." Words float through my mind but I can't seem to grab them. Slippery, slippery words.

The waitress slides me the cockeyed, *what a weirdo* glance and looks to Bonnie for help.

"Tuuuuuummmooooorsssss," Bonnie whispers.

"Oh yeah!" The waitress politely recalls and shakes her head. "Bad news kid, bad news." She looks at me for a beat and sighs. "I'll be back with drinks."

"Glorious!" Bonnie shouts.

"I think I'm gonna throw up," I say.

She watches the waitress walk away, "What?" she says hardly paying attention to me.

"I think I'm gonna—" I try to repeat.

Bonnie quickly turns to me. "I should've gotten some cheese fries too."

"But my brain feels like—"

"And like five hundred pancakes!" she says.

"Are you listening to me?" I shout.

Bonnie pauses. "She's giving us free stuff, Frank!"

"Who cares?"

"Who *cares*?"

"Yes. Who cares! My head is—"

"I care Frank! Life doesn't always give you free stuff. This is a good thing. A nice thing."

"*Christ...*" I sigh as Bonnie launches daggers from her eyes.

"Okay...sorry... I'm very happy about the free stuff."

"Good."

"But...I really need to know if you have the thing or not?"

"Why...antsy?"

"A little." I bite some skin from next to my thumb nail and chew it like a tiny piece of gum, "I feel weird."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Itchy and annoyed...and bored." I spit the skin onto the floor.

"*Awwwww!*" Bonnie mocks me.

"I am so profoundly unhappy."

"Oh shut your fucking trap!"

"Seriously...I feel like I'm constantly rejecting myself or something."

"Do you want another cigarette?"

I lift the burning butt from the ashtray and show her. "I haven't finished this one yet."

"Here..." she pulls one from the pack and hands it to me. "...for later."

I drop it into my shirt pocket and smirk.

"Don't reject those, baby-boy," she says with a smile.

I shake my head and we sit silently for a beat or two. Bonnie never takes her eyes off me. She makes me uncomfortable. She is a master of discomfort.

I wonder what she's thinking. I wonder if she thinks I'm interesting. I always fantasize about this. I always dream it. I wonder if she wants me. And not the way she's wanted me all

along but I wonder if she really, really wants me. I wonder if she's attracted to me. I know she's not but I always hope for it. I think about what it would be like if she was my girlfriend. Like my real-deal girlfriend. I wonder what we would do. I wonder if we'd go to the movies. I wonder if we'd smile a lot. I wonder if there would be a TV show that we would watch every week together. I wonder if she would think of it as *our* show. I wonder if she would ever let me touch her. I wonder if she would tape the show for me if I wasn't around. I wonder if I could make her things. I wonder if she would put my picture in a frame. I wonder if she would yell at me for not calling her. I wonder if she would let me keep clothes at her house. I wonder if she would rub my back when I threw up. I wonder lots of things.

Her eyes don't budge. Not for a second. She stares directly into the center of my brain. She can see my thoughts. I know there's a connection now. I know there's some kind of conduit running between us now. The seeds have created some kind of invisible tube with invisible wires transferring invisible information. She's downloading me while she stares. She's making me uncomfortable on purpose. When I'm uncomfortable my mind is off balance and I'm more susceptible to the downloading process. She knows this. She knows everything. She knows that I'm picturing her pubic hair right now. She's gonna get mad. She knows I'm scared. She knows I'm trying not to picture it but I can't help it. She knows I'm getting nervous.

And now my leg gets going. It always does this when my nerves pop. It's pumping and my foot is tapping. The table is shaking. The ketchup bottle and sugar packets are vibrating. She knew this was going to happen even before my leg did. She can access the information as it's sent from my brain to my leg. I know she can do it. She's like a phone tap.

My leg moves faster as my nerves fire like lightning bolts all while my brain tells my stomach that it's time to throw up. I feel

the blob-like iced tea climbing the walls of my throat. *It's time to throw up.* So I'm gonna throw up. I'm gonna throw up. I'm gonna throw up...

"So do you want me to rub your back?" Bonnie says.

"What?!?" I yelp in a Peter Brady puberty shriek.

Bonnie gently bites her tongue, playing cool. "Do you want me to give you your bag?"

My hands tremble. "I don't know what you're asking me..."

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a brown paper lunch bag with **FRANK FISHER** written on it in thick black lettering. She enticingly shakes it next to her smirking face and tosses it in front of me. My eyes go wide and for about four seconds the world makes sense. I eagerly grab the bag, unroll the top and look inside.

"You're such a sucker," she says.

I raise my head and hit her with a goofy grin. "Will you put it in for me?" I ask.

"Addict."

"Will you?"

"What is this like eightieth time you've changed?" she says smugly.

"C'mon! Seriously, will you?"

"Oh Frank! You know I'm going to say yes."

Of course I do, but for some reason, I always ask.

three

My car smells like a running chainsaw. It's disgusting and unhealthy. The "check engine" light came on earlier in the evening but I simply covered it with a piece of the duct tape that patches the giant hole in the material on the ceiling. If I can no longer see the sign, the problem ceases to be.

We're in the back seat. Bonnie yanks off my hat and places her hand over the bloody stain on the bandage around my head.

"Does this hurt?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Bad?"

"Yes."

"How bad?"

"Very."

"Awww, poor little kitten-face..." she says with a pout then *violently* tears the medical tape and gauze away from my head, pulling large chunks of my dirty-blond greasiness with it.

"Holy cowboy!" she shouts as she stares into the oozing, puss-filled abyss on the right side of my forehead.

"Is it bad?" I ask.

Bonnie gently slides her finger along the edge of the wound and sniffs some gunk. Her head jerks back like someone tugged on her reigns. "This shit fuckin' stinks, man!" she says.

There's no doubt that I have a serious infection that'll probably kill me. But I can't think about that right now. I'm not even sure if I care right now.

"Just load me up, okay?" I ask her.

Bonnie chuckles. "You got it bad now, huh?"

I sigh. "You shouldn't make it so good."

She quickly tousles my hair like a father congratulating his boy for a close but no cigar effort in some organized sport that he never wanted to play in the first place.

"You're so friggin' cute," she says.

"Thanks."

She always says that just before the implantation. Buttering me up must soften the brain tissue or something.

"I think I'll load you up real good this time, okay?"

"Is it gonna be a good one? Cuz I need a good one."

Bonnie places her hand on top of my head and looks into my eyes. "That's not up to *me* baby-boy, you know this."

"I know..." I say.

She leans in closer, so close our noses nearly touch and for a second I think she's going to kiss me, but I'm wrong again. She says those same four words with such precision that they land right in the bullseye of my heart, "You. Are. Not. Nothing."

I close my eyes and breathe as deep as my pathetic lungs will allow. "Please, just load me up, Bonnie...okay?"

Bonnie sits up straight and sighs, "*Fine...*"

She unrolls the paper bag, reaches inside and pulls out a small leather zip-up case. Like the kind that's filled with various dull carving tools you get when you have to dissect a frog or some kind of crustacean in seventh grade biology. She unzips and I see the applicator. It's about the size of a candy bar and it looks like one of those epi-pens that kids with peanut or bee allergies carry around. It's off-white and adorned with what has now become the all-too-familiar "INSPICORP" happy cartoon light bulb logo. I've since named him Bulbereno.

I see the little clear-green globule locked and loaded in the barrel. It looks a like a radioactive vitamin E. I can't believe how thrilled I get every time I see it. It's like the first time every time.

My mouth fills with saliva as Bonnie clutches it in her hand. She holds it the way Norman Bates holds a butcher knife and grabs my face like *his* mother preparing to wipe away a smudge with a spit covered thumb. Every muscle in my body tenses to the point of explosion. I squeeze my fists so tight that my skin sounds like leather.

"How's the tooth?" Bonnie asks.

I relax and sprout a bit of a grin, "What tooth?"

She laughs. "Ready?"

I nod.

She draws her arm back.
She bites her tongue.
And she slams the applicator into the wound.

I feel it working already.

four

Eighty miles an hour.

This car is not meant to go eighty miles an hour but that's what I'm doing. I'm doing eighty in an '87 Toyota death-box. The thing is shaking like a Chihuahua with a smack habit that's reentering the atmosphere. It's gonna break to pieces. It's gonna burn up. I don't care. I'm alive. I'm in love. I'm alive and I'm in love and I'm in love with alive.

"This is the one!" I shout over the rushing wind and blasting music. "I know it! This is the good one!"

Bonnie's feet are on the dashboard. "What's it gonna be?" she yells.

"I'm writing the screenplay!" I reply.

"Again?"

"I gotta keep going! I gotta keep moving! I love movies, ya know! I love them! I fucking love them!"

"You're a whack-job!" she yells. She's amazing.

"There's so much to it! So much...stuff! Ya know like, bad guys and good guys and mystery! Fuckin' everything! This is what I've always been meant to do. This is it!"

"You gonna stick with it?" she asks.

"Fuck yeah I'm gonna stick with it!"

"Promise?"

She holds out an extended pinky in my direction. I look into her mismatched eyes and wrap my pinky around hers.

“Promise!”

Bonnie lets out a maniacal laugh, jumps to her knees and wraps her arms around my neck. She pulls me toward her and I lose control of the car.

“Whoa!” I yell as I steady the death-box.

She laughs. “You’re the best one, Frank!”

“I HAVE the best one, Bonnie!”

“Go faster!” She screams as she settles back into her seat.

I press the pedal against the floor and push the little rusted junker to eighty-six. This is top speed, any more and it’s toast.

We pull into my complex and park the tiny beast. We jump out and I sprint to my apartment. Bonnie chases after me, laughing all the way. I burst through the door and notice the busted monitor on the floor. Bonnie rushes in, picks it up, sets it on the desk and gives it two sharp slaps on the side. It pops back to life and I drop into the chair. Bonnie lights a cigarette, sits on the bed and crosses her legs.

I sneak a peek at her thighs, get a tingle and attack the keyboard.

Dusty is good.

five

FADE IN:

INT. DUSTY’S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM – FIFTEEN YEARS
AGO

Toys are scattered everywhere. *Batman* sheets line the bed. A signed-framed photo of Freddy Krueger hangs on the wall. An 11-year-old boy

lies on the floor on his stomach and watches *Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child*. This is Dusty as a child.

Through the walls we hear the muffled sounds of GLASS BREAKING and a SCREAM followed by VIOLENT SHOUTING and more CRASHES.

Dusty reaches for the volume knob and cranks it up so loud that it crackles. The sounds of the movie almost drown out the noises from the other room.

Dusty looks to his dresser, we see a HAMSTER CAGE. He gets up to his knees and shimmies over to it and rests his head in front of the cage and watches the HAMSTER as it runs on its wheel. The cage is filthy.

We hear another loud SMASH from the other room followed by a series of horrifying SCREAMS. Dusty looks toward the sounds, sighs, brings his attention back to the hamster and sniffs.

DUSTY
Your cage smells.

The hamster continues to run.

FADE TO BLACK.

six

Dusty is bad.

I'm on the floor, staring at my bedroom ceiling shouting, "I'M A FUCKING WASTE!" I've been here before.

Bonnie leans in and blows two lungfuls of smoke into my face.

"But you were onto something, Franky-boy. I'm serious."

"What's with this Dusty stuff?" I ask.

"I don't know. You tell me." she replies.

"I can't shake it. It won't go away."

"So?"

"Like the last six have been the same."

"So?"

"The last six have been Dusty."

"So?"

"So? That's a problem, Bonnie!"

"Why? You said —"

"I fucking hate Dusty!"

"*Oh Frank...*" Bonnie says with a shake of her head.

"It doesn't feel right."

"Nothing feels right, Frank, that's the thing."

"The thing is nonsense, Bonnie. It's boring now."

"Frank..."

"It's dying again."

Bonnie takes a long drag, "That window's really shrinking huh?"

"I guess."

She checks her watch, "It's down to like twelve...maybe even ten now."

"What can I do?"

"I don't know."

"C'mon!"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know."

"And that's what I said."

THUD - I drop my head against the floor. "I feel weak."

"Frank, you just have to go..."

"Go where?"

"I don't know."

"Where's it supposed to go now? Where *could* it go now?"

Bonnie is clearly annoyed. "I don't know, Frank."

"I didn't even think about it. I didn't even think about what's gonna happen. What the fuck am I doing writing a screenplay?"

"You're expressing yourself."

"I'm wasting my time."

"Why?"

"Cuz a screenplay is nothing. It's nothing until it's made into a movie. It's just fucking words on a page."

"Everything is just words on a page."

"What happens when it's done? What do I do then?"

"I don't know."

"I don't think I'm supposed to be doing this. I don't think this is meant for me."

"Frank, you just have to keep going *on...*" she says.

"How can I—"

"...and on and on and on and on..." she continues.

"How can I go on when I don't even know where to go?"

"*Oh Frank!*" Bonnie repeats more aggravated.

"What?"

She sighs, "So what are you saying then?"

"You know what I'm saying, Bonnie."

"Tell me anyway."

"I need a new one."

Bonnie shakes her head.

"What?" I ask.

She pauses and smiles. "Got any booze?"

"Booze?"

"Let's get drunk."

“Why?”

“Cuz I think you –”

“Can’t you just load me up real quick?”

Bonnie shakes it again.

“What’s the problem?”

Her eyes drift into disinterest, “Nothing.”

“So, can you?”

Bonnie sighs and slides off the bed and sits Indian-style next to me. “Put your head here...” she says patting her thigh.

“Why?”

“No ceiling for a while.”

“But Bonnie...”

“Just do it!”

I lift my head and rest it in her lap.

“Hang on...” she says while reaching for her bag on the bed. She pulls it down and removes a tabloid magazine. “Now...” she peels open the cover, “...stare.”

“At what?” I ask.

She lowers the pages and smiles, “At me, of course.”

And I do exactly as she says.

I stare at her face, occasionally into her nostrils, noticing the hairs and tiny traces of dried snot. I look at the cracks in her chapped lips and the just-sprouting pimples on her forehead. I observe the subtle unevenness of her eyes, the small scar under her chin and the freckles about the bridge of her nose and cheeks. As I stare, I drift into other worlds. I slip into new places as the turning pages graze my ear and run through my hair and I imagine them as Bonnie’s fingers on a Sunday afternoon as we lie in bed surrounded by the best kind of nothingness.

In these other worlds, Bonnie is mine. In these other worlds, Bonnie wants to be mine. In these other worlds, Bonnie wants

me to be hers. She wants me to belong to her. She wants my heart dangling from chain around her neck. She wants my soul wrapped around her finger. And I want the same from her.

In these other worlds, Bonnie waits for me when I come home. In these other worlds, I wait for her when she comes home. In these other worlds, we hold each other and we drink coffee and we talk about things and we are happy.

In these other worlds, Bonnie kisses me. In these other worlds, I kiss her back. In these other worlds, we take off our clothes and press our bodies against each other and touch each other and we laugh. We put our mouths wherever we want. We whisper. We sing. And we are happy.

Bonnie knows what I'm thinking. Bonnie's been to these worlds. Bonnie's been everywhere I've been. Bonnie knows how I feel about these worlds. Bonnie knows how I feel about her. I can see her beyond the glossy pages of that celebrity rag. She reads the words intently though I know she's reading something else. I know the information is passing through. I know she's downloading. I know she's processing. I know she's letting me think what I think. I know she's letting me think that she thinks that I think that she's not thinking about this. I know that she knows that I know. The connection between us is undeniable. She brings her hand to her mouth and gently licks her index finger. As she turns the page I can feel the slight suction of the downloading process. She knows I was just turned on. Her mouth nearly flinches into a smile. She likes it. She likes knowing these things. She likes knowing I care. She likes knowing that I like her. But there's nothing I can ever hide. She can access even the most meager brain activity. She can access every opinion and every true feeling I'll ever feel for the rest of my life. But in these other worlds, in these other worlds none of that matters, because we are happy. And when we are happy, we are happy.

But how can I be happy when I can't create? I spend this time fantasizing. I spend this time dreaming. Bonnie gives me the seed and I piss it away. It's disrespectful. It's careless. It's fucking miserable. Bonnie gives me this gift. She loads me up. She inspires me and I get on something and I dump it. I ask for a new one, she gives me a new one I get on something else and I dump it. She gives me this one, this new one and I spend the time with my head in a dream. I spend my time with my head in a dream and my head in her head and her head in my head. She plants these seeds. She plants these beautiful seeds and shows me beautiful things and I let them die. The seeds grow beautiful trees with endless fruits of creativity dangling from the branches just waiting to be plucked but instead I let them fall to the ground and die. Sometimes I take them. Sometimes I take them and bite them and they taste wrong. They taste bad. They taste like poison. They taste like pain. So I don't even bother sometimes. Sometimes I just look at the tree. Sometimes I just stare. Sometimes I imagine how good the fruit tastes without ever taking a bite. Sometimes I imagine the sweet juices flowing inside my body, resting inside my stomach and making me strong and making me healthy and making me happy. Sometimes I imagine not traveling to other worlds and just eating this fruit and feeling right and being happy where I am with what's been placed in front of me. But that's just dreaming as well. It's all dreaming. And all dreaming means all nothing. Dreams are nothing. Dreams are brain activity. Brain activity that Bonnie can access and judge and attack and remember. Bonnie plants these seeds and these trees grow and these fruits grow and this fear grows. Out of all the fruits on these trees almost all of them are poison and the only way to really know is if I taste every single one. And if I taste every single one I am *going* to be poisoned. And the fear, the fear of poison is so strong that sometimes, I won't try any. I'll let them fall. And I'll let

them die. And I know that the ones I let fall. The ones I let die may be the ones that change everything, but the fear is just too strong. The fear is even stronger than the fear of never trying and letting the good ones die and rot away.

FADE IN:

INT. NOWHERE

The Nowhere is filled with nothing.

NO ONE, 20's, not so tall and not so short, does nothing.

NO ONE

Nothing!

I've got these words. I've got this nonsense. I've got this shit. I've got these things ready to pour out of me. I've got this vomit. I've got this bile. I've got this blood that's ready to spill. From the gut. From the soul. Twisting, turning, tearing. From the gut and soul and balls and the brains, in that order it moves. Twisting and turning and tearing. I've got this pain. I've got this ugliness. I've got this beauty ready to be unleashed. I've got this beast. I've got this creature. I've got this man. They're ready to fight for me. I've got these things. These things are ready to go. These things are ready to fly. These things are ready to run.

But they never come.

They never come when I need them. They never come without the seeds. They never come without Bonnie. They never come when it's only me. I can't get them out. Only she can do it. Only she can set them free. Bonnie's got them on a leash.

Bonnie's got it ready to go. Bonnie's got it. Bonnie knows it.
Bonnie's ready. Bonnie's real.

But when Bonnie leaves me alone, I'm alone. I'm alone and with that flashing fucker again. That monitor. It stares at me. It laughs at me. The crack across the screen looks like a sinister grin and it laughs at me. It sounds like a super-villain. It sounds like evil. It is evil. It hates me.

NO ONE

Nothing nothing nothing
nothing nothing nothing!

And I've got nothing again. And I am nothing again. *You are not nothing.* Bullshit! I am nothing. I'm the worst kind of nothing. I'm the kind of nothing that wants to be something but has nothing to be.

When Bonnie first loaded me up I ran laps. Literally. My first seed went in, it dissolved and I ran laps around the track at my old high school. I don't know why my first thing was running but that's what it was. Something just told me to do it and honestly, it felt fucking amazing. The sweat dripping from my bandaged forehead, my body chugging with machine-like rhythm, the feel of the cool air entering and exiting my lungs, the blood moving through my system. I could feel the goopy, toxic stuff drying. I could feel the bad things slipping away. I could feel the world dissipating like steam. I felt real. I felt alive. I felt free.

I felt sick...

A copper taste in my mouth. A cramp in my side. A burn in my thighs. A pain in my ankle. I was down. Legs clutched. Face in knees.

Huffing.
Puffing.
Nothing.

I told her it didn't work. I told her it felt wrong. She said I looked great. She said I looked happy. She said I looked right. She said I was fast. I said I needed a new one.

She said the seed was just the inspiration. She said that *I* take care of the rest. She said it's all a choice. I said I needed a new one.

She said they could be dangerous. She said they could be habit-forming. She said I should think about it. I said I needed a new one.

She said okay and I built a birdhouse. It felt like a good idea. It felt like the right idea. It felt like I found what I was supposed to do with my life. I was supposed to be a birdhouse manufacturer. I was supposed to sell them to old people. "*It would be a goldmine,*" I said. "*Make them with my own hands,*" I said. "*Blood, sweat and whatever,*" I said.

In twenty minutes, I hated birdhouses and I needed a new one.

"But it's such a *beautiful* birdhouse," Bonnie said.

I didn't believe her. I just wanted a new one. I just wanted the feeling again. I just wanted the rush again. There's nothing like inspiration. There's nothing like new ideas. There's nothing like that millisecond when thoughts and feelings and dreams

and creativity and pride pile on top of each other to form a mountain of hope that you can climb to overlook all the shit that clouds your existence.

But there's also nothing quite as horrifying as the inevitable fall that comes when you realize that the mountain was made of nothing. When you realize that you've been standing on false hopes, broken dreams and idiotic, unrealistic thoughts and you plummet right back into the middle of all that shit and it's worse than you remember. There's nothing quite like nothingness.

But I crave what I've never known. I crave this something. I crave this somethingness yet I don't even know what it is. How can I crave something I've never experienced? How can I know what somethingness is when I've never seen it? How can I know how it feels when I've never felt it? Nothingness tastes familiar. It tastes like everything to me. It looks like everything to me. But somethingness, somethingness is strange. I've never seen it. I doubt I ever will but I want to so badly. I want to jump into somethingness. I want to gather it in my mouth and spit it into the sky. I want to swallow it. I want somethingness inside me. I want the somethingness to eat up all the nothingness. I want to be alive. I want to be something.

NO ONE

I want to be something...
blah blah blah blah! I am
nothing! Nothing nothing
nothing nothing!

The seeds are potentially potential. The seeds are potentially a glimpse into a life of potential, into a life of somethingness. The seeds show me. Bonnie shows me. The seeds are maps to the stars' homes. Bonnie's the gal selling them on the corner. The seeds give me what I can't get. They show me what it's like.

They help me see. She helps me see. Without them, without her, I'm blind.

seven

FADE IN:

INT. CLASSROOM - FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

A fifth grade class sits in small desks. A teacher, Mrs. McWick sits at a desk in the front. Next to her, 11-year-old DUSTY stands and reads from a composition notebook.

DUSTY

"He took a bottle of smelling salts and put it under my nose. I opened my eyes in a jolt. Then the guy said, 'You little prick, I'm gonna kill you as soon as we get to my farm!' I had to do something. But what?"

He looks up the class as he turns the page - they're riveted. Mrs. McWick looks on concerned

DUSTY (CONT'D)

"I grabbed a scalpel and cut part of his ear off!"

CLASS

Ewwwww!

Dusty giggles.

DUSTY

“‘Ahhhhhh,’ he screamed, ‘You jerk, I’ll kill you now!’ I kicked him in the stomach and punched him in the face. He pushed me and I tripped over a first-aid kit and hit the shift in the front of the ambulance into neutral. The ambulance started rolling down the hill. He jumped at me and hit my head against the dashboard. He smashed me through a window and threw me out. He thought I was dead but I held on to the door. I pulled myself up and grabbed him by the throat and said, ‘If I’m going, you’re coming with me!’”

CLASS

Whoa...

DUSTY

“Then suddenly the ambulance flipped over and flipped off a cliff. I prepared to die when suddenly, a blue light surrounded me and I was taken to Heaven. I heard a voice, it must’ve been God. He said he needs me for another great adventure, should I choose to accept, it will be my most challenging ever. I would have to stop Satan and Hell from taking over Earth. I said I accept. Suddenly, everything got black. I awoke sitting in my pool in my backyard. To be continued in my new series, ‘The Flames of Hell!’”

The class erupts into APPLAUSE. Dusty is elated. Mrs. McWick looks worried.

CUT TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - LATER

The class is empty. A MAN and WOMAN sit in the small desks - DUSTY'S PARENTS. Dusty's father wears a MILITARY UNIFORM and thick STANDARD ISSUE GLASSES. Mrs. McWick sits on her desk. She's holding Dusty's composition notebook.

MRS. McWICK

Dusty is a natural leader. The kids in his class will follow him, no matter what he does. He's very popular. And he's very confident.

Dusty's parents smile.

MRS. McWICK

And he's very, very creative. The stories that he writes are...

She flips through the notebook.

MRS. McWICK

...very interesting.

DUSTY'S MOM

That's nice.

MRS. McWICK

But, they're also quite troubling.

DUSTY'S MOM
(concerned)
Why troubling?

MRS. McWICK
Let me read a sample from his
newest story for you...

She puts on her glasses and looks at the notebook. Dusty's parents uneasily look at each other.

MRS. McWICK
"He grabbed me by my throat and looked into my eyes, closely. Suddenly, I started shaking. I broke into a cold sweat. My eyes turned yellow, my pupils turned beet-red. I grew blood-red fangs. I grew black three-inch nails. I started bulging out with muscles and my clothes ripped off. I grew two huge wings out of my back. Thump! Satan's body fell, his soul was possessed inside me!"

She lowers the book and looks to Dusty's parents.

DUSTY'S MOM
Satan?

She looks to Dusty's father and he uncomfortably clears his throat.

MRS. McWICK
Like I said, he's very creative. But

you can see why I find this
troubling.

DUSTY'S MOM

But, he's just a boy. The other
kids must--

Mrs. McWick grabs another notebook from her
desk.

MRS. McWICK

This is from a story written by a
girl in Dusty's class; "The pony
flew through the air and gave me a
kiss. I hugged her and told her I
loved her. Then, we went to the park
and saw three butterflies. Then, we
ate ten pounds of ice cream and took
a nap."

Beat.

DUSTY'S MOM

But it's not very good, is it?

Mrs. McWick places the notebook on the desk.

MRS. McWICK

Is everything okay at home?

Dusty's parents awkwardly look at each other.

FADE TO BLACK.

eight

"Hi this message is for Mr. Frank Fisher Jr. This is Ellen Bergenmen from the registration office at Newman Community College..."

I had a toothache. A very, very bad toothache.

"We're calling to inform you that since we have not received payment for this semester's classes you have officially been dropped and will have to reregister if you plan on attending Newman this semester..."

It rattled my skull. It shook my existence.

"If you have any questions about loans, financial aid or payment plans please, feel free to call us at 732-555-8686 and we'll be happy to point you in the right direction..."

I hadn't been to the dentist in years and didn't plan on going any time soon.

"Hope is not lost Mr. Fisher, remember that. We're here to help..."

But this was the most severe pain I'd ever felt in my entire life.

"So, give us a call back and we'll try our best to answer any questions you might have. Thank you and have a lovely, lovely day."

I was having a lovely day. It's always a lovely day, for tooth decay.

Click.

“Open up and say *Ahhhhhh...*” I said to my reflection and opened my mouth as wide as I could. I angled my head so the light from above the mirror could shine on the monster. It was toward the back of my mouth and was already turning black and bleeding. It hated me. It was out to get me. It wanted me dead. So I quickly realized that there was nothing I could do but completely and totally ignore the son of a bitch. Despite the severity of the ache I chose to disregard it. I decided that it was not my tooth. It was not in my mouth. It was not me and should not affect my life.

But the throbbing was deafening, the pain was sharp and the blood flowed. So I stuffed my mouth with toilet paper, gauze, old t-shirts, anything that could sop the mess. But nothing could stop the throb. It was like the beat of a dance song that you can't stand at the wedding reception of two people that you hate, and it was the soundtrack to my life.

It was so loud that I barely heard the pounding on the front door.

When I opened, the mailman glared at me with eyes so angry that they made my feet sweat. He held a giant pile of mail like an over-sized stuffed animal that he won at the boardwalk.

I had just stuffed my mouth with fresh toilet paper and it was already saturated with blood. The look on his face told me that he found this disconcerting.

We made awkward eyes for a beat or two, and then he spoke. “You haven't picked up your mail in like, months!” He wore sandals and a hemp necklace. He looked laid-back but the tone in his voice was so upset that I assumed it was all an act; he just dug the fashion.

“I know...” I said, muffled.

“Are you like, a jerkoff?” He asked.

I said nothing.

"Cuz, I can't fit anything in the box anymore!"

"Okay..." I said, wiping goopy blood from my chin.

"And it makes my job suck!"

"I'm sorry," I said.

He paused for a beat, "You never pick up your mail."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

He dropped the mail at my feet and clenched his fist. "I ought a punch your friggin' nose right off your friggin' face!"

"That's not necessary," I said. "I won't do it again."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Just leave me alone."

"You promise?" he said with his fist still in the air.

"Yes. I promise."

He forced his fist closer to my face. "You FRIGGIN' promise?"

"Yes, I *friggin'* promise."

His pinky popped from his fist and jutted in my direction.

"Pinky swear."

Why do people insist on pinky swearing? What's so special about the pinky? Why is it considered such an honest appendage?

I don't know, but I locked pinkies with the mailman, just so he'd leave me alone.

"I promise," I said, "I'll pick up my mail from now on. I was just...*tooth.*"

"What?"

"...sick. I'm sick." I corrected myself.

"You got that right."

I didn't know what to say. "I don't know what to say," I said.

"Will you pick it up every day?"

"Yes, every day. Of course. Yes. "

"Except Sundays right?"

"Right, of course."

"And national holidays too cuz there's no mail on those days, dick!"

"I know. Okay. No Sundays or national holidays. Got it. Got it."

"Got it?"

"Got it."

"Good!" he said and turned to walk away but abruptly turned back. "Ya know, just cuz I'm a mailman, doesn't mean you can fuck with me!"

"I know..."

He took a step toward me, "Cuz I can fuck with you right back."

"I know you can," my stifled voice quivered.

He leaned into the doorway and looked into my apartment. He checked the place out and directed his attention back to me. "Whatever," he said and spit at my feet. "Have a bullshit day!" And he turned and left.

I scooped up the mail and carried it into the kitchen. I dropped it onto the table, fell into a chair and sorted. Two light blue envelopes caught my eye so I opened them. Birthday cards. *Birthday cards? Was it my birthday? What month was it? When was the last time I left the house?*

The first card was from my mother – it was addressed to "Junior" and had a cartoon bear on it.

*To Junior,
"HAPPY BEARTHDAY!"
We Love You Very Much!
Love,
Mom and Mark
XOXOXO*

p.s. If you need anything. Please, just ask. We understand and we love you.

Tucked into one of those money holder flaps was a check for \$150. I grabbed the check, folded it, slid it into my shirt pocket and tossed the card in the trash. The other was from my sister, her husband and my nephew – that one had cartoon planet Earth on it.

*To Frank,
“HAPPY BEARTHDAY!”
We Love You Very Much!
Love,
Sara, Max and Max Jr.
XOXOXO*

(across the bottom were jumbled scribbles in crayon)

I hadn't spoken to these people in God knows how long, yet they sent birthday cards and Christmas gifts and invited me to random family gatherings. I had no idea when holidays came and went. But this card also contained a \$150 check. I pocketed the loot and trashed the card.

I sifted through the rest of Mount Mail. Nearly all of it was junk and treated accordingly – supermarket circulars, photos of missing people, credit card applications, etc. But I paused when I came across a small cardboard box with the words “IT ALL LIES WITHIN” written on the top. When I opened it I found a sample-sized tube of toothpaste and a CD decorated with Bulbereno, the happy cartoon light bulb. It was called “Inspirational Toothpaste” from Inspicorp, makers of products “*guaranteed to inspire even the most meandering minds.*”

Intrigued, I walked to my bedroom, popped the CD into my stereo and hit play. After a few seconds of audio hiss she spoke: *“Hi, this is Bonnie for Inspicorp. Thanks for your interest in Inspirational Toothpaste. This is your inspirational message for the week. ‘If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it.’ Albert Einstein. Keep an eye out for more messages and samples from your friends at Inspicorp. Keep on brushing! Bye!”*

With a curious cock of my head, I brought the toothpaste into the bathroom, squeezed some on my brush and gently placed the bristles against the evil tooth. A few strokes later I was in front of the stereo replaying the CD. I sat in front of the speaker and listened intently...

“Hi, this is Bonnie for Inspicorp.”

As I continued to brush it was like tiny beads of goodness were beginning to flow through me.

“Thanks for your interest in Inspirational Toothpaste. This is your inspirational message for the week.”

I felt like the beads were gathering some of that rotten shit that was building and taking it somewhere else.

“If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it.”

It felt wonderfully strange.

“Albert Einstein.”

And for the first time in a long time...

“Keep an eye out for more messages and samples from your friends at Inspicorp.”

...the corners of my mouth crept upwards into a genuine smile.

"Keep on brushing!"

A genuine smile.

"Bye!"

nine

FADE IN:

INT. Hall - APARTMENT 86N - PRESENT DAY

THE GUY, tall, tough, middle-aged, in a suit, fedora and a pair of super thick, standard-issue, COKE-BOTTLE GLASSES knocks several times.

He looks at a piece of paper in his hand and looks at the number on the door. It's the right place.

From inside the apartment:

DUSTY (O.C.)
Hang on, hang on, man.

We hear a bunch of LOCKS unlocking.

The Guy removes his glasses and slides them into the inside pocket of his jacket. The door opens and standing in front of us is DUSTY, now in his 20's and pathetic looking. He's shirtless and has a physique like Iggy Pop. His

stringy, dirty hair is tied back in a pony tail and a woolen cap is pulled low on his head. He's holding a HUGE BLOODY KNIFE.

DUSTY

Hey Guy, what's up?

GUY

Hello Dusty, how are things?

Dusty scratches his temple with the knife.

DUSTY

Dynamite, come on in, man.

He steps aside and allows The Guy to enter.

INT. DUSTY'S APARTMENT

It's a small messy hole of a place. Dozens of horror movie posters and water-color paintings line the walls. He closes the door behind them and points the knife towards a dirty, beat up couch.

DUSTY

Hey man, have a seat over there, all right? You want anything? You want a glass of water with lemon?

The Guy sits on the couch and removes his hat.

GUY

No thanks, Dusty.

DUSTY

You sure? I got a Brita.

GUY

No thanks, I'm fine.

DUSTY

All right, man.

Dusty shuffles about nervously. The Guy acknowledges the knife.

GUY

What are you doing?

DUSTY

Oh this? Nothing, man. Well not...I'm actually chopping a guy up.

GUY

Yeah?

Dusty points the knife toward the KITCHEN area. There's BLOOD all over the place.

DUSTY

Yeah...

GUY

Interesting.

They stare at each other awkwardly.

DUSTY

It's been tough. Especially since,

ya know...

GUY

Her?

DUSTY

I guess. I don't know. Her and him really. But I don't think I really wanna talk about it.

GUY

Okay.

DUSTY

I'm not too comfortable with it yet, ya know?

GUY

I understand.

DUSTY

The headaches and what not...I don't know.

GUY

Say no more.

DUSTY

Cool.

Dusty chews his thumbnail.

DUSTY

You want some water with lemon?

GUY

You already asked me that.

DUSTY

Oh yeah, right. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm just... nervous. I don't really know what to say.

GUY

It's okay.

DUSTY

Cool, cool.

GUY

So, you know why I'm here then, right?

DUSTY

Yeah, I think so.

GUY

Good.

DUSTY

The thing, right? The EVERYTHING.

GUY

That's right.

DUSTY

Okay cool. I can do that. I can do that. I'm just gonna get it and bring it in here and I'll give it to you, okay?

GUY

Sounds good.

DUSTY

Cool. It's in the other room.

GUY

Okay.

DUSTY

Alright. I'll get it. I'll be right back. I'll jus...

Dusty trails off as he walks to the bedroom.

GUY

I'll be right here.

DUSTY (O.S.)

Cool man.

The guy looks around the mess of an apartment. He looks at the paintings on the walls and notices that they are all self-portraits of Dusty, they look almost identical except for subtle differences in color.

The PHONE rings.

The Guy looks for Dusty. He waits as it rings over and over. He eventually answers it.

GUY

Hello?

DUSTY (ON PHONE)

Yeah, hey it's me Dusty. Listen, I gotta tell you something.

GUY

Where are you?

DUSTY (ON PHONE)

I climbed out the window. I'm down
on the street on a pay phone.

The Guy gets up and walks to the kitchen window over the sink. He carefully steps over puddles of blood. The sink is loaded with bits of flesh and an arm sticks out of the garbage disposal.

He looks out the window and squints. He sees a blurry image of Dusty in a PHONE BOOTH waving up to him.

DUSTY

See me man?

GUY

Wait, I'm blind as a fucking bat...

He takes his glasses out and puts them on.

GUY (CONT'D)

...I see ya.

The Guy waves back.

DUSTY

Cool. Yeah, so I gotta tell ya
something.

GUY

What is it?

DUSTY

I don't have The Everything.

GUY

You don't?

DUSTY

No. And I don't know where it is either. Well I kinda know but I kinda don't and I kinda feel like a dick but...well...

GUY

I know.

DUSTY

Are you pissed?

GUY

No Dusty, I'm not pissed.

DUSTY

Cool man. That's awesome.

GUY

I'm a nice guy.

DUSTY

Awesome.

GUY

We're nice people.

DUSTY

Good, I'm glad.

GUY

So why don't you come back up?

DUSTY

Nah. I don't think so. I'm just gonna stay in the booth for awhile. I think I'll just kinda hang out, in the booth. I'll just stay here.

GUY

Okay.

DUSTY

It's nice out and the booth is cool.

GUY

Okay.

DUSTY

Yeah. So I'll just stay here.

GUY

Okay.

DUSTY

Okay?

GUY

Okay.

Beat.

GUY

So when do you think you'll come back up?

DUSTY

I don't know. Ya know? I don't think I'm gonna. I don't really wanna. Ya know? I don't--

GUY

Dusty?

DUSTY

Yeah?

GUY

We really need The Everything.

DUSTY

I know.

GUY

Okay.

DUSTY

So I don't have it though and I can't tell you where it is. So you should just go, ya know, man? Like, split.

GUY

Dusty?

DUSTY

Yeah?

GUY

Don't--

DUSTY

I know I know.

GUY

Don't do it.

DUSTY

I won't man. I'm not.

GUY

Cuz you know, Dusty. You know what happens.

DUSTY

I know.

GUY

You know?

DUSTY

I know.

GUY

Good.

Very long pause.

DUSTY

Why do you guys gotta--?

GUY

Don't start, Dusty.

DUSTY

Everything's such a mess, ya know?

GUY

Yeah, I do.

DUSTY

With her and me, and him, and The
Everything, and you guys. It's all
like this, big messy mess.

GUY

I know.

DUSTY

I hate it.

GUY

I'm sorry but--

DUSTY

Listen, man, I got something to
confess.

GUY

What is it?

DUSTY

I just don't want anything to
happen.

GUY

Neither do I, Dusty. That's why--

DUSTY

You guys make me nervous and she
messed me up and I don't want bad
things to happen and I know they--

GUY

They won't if you just--

DUSTY

You got like five seconds now.

GUY

What?

DUSTY

Uh...now ya got four.

GUY

What are you talking about, Dusty?

DUSTY

I'm sorry man, but honestly...The
Everything is for me!

GUY

WHAT! Dusty, what are y--

KA-BOOM! The apartment EXPLODES.

EXT. PHONE BOOTH - CONTINUOUS

FLAMES billow from the apartment's windows.
Dusty holds the phone away from his head and
rubs his ear.

DUSTY

Shit, that was loud!

He hangs up the receiver and looks at his
reflection in the shiny metal on the front of
the phone.

DUSTY

You are not nothing, man.

He runs off down the street just as ONLOOKERS begin to gather. We hear SIRENS in the background.

FADE TO BLACK.

ten

“Hi, this is Bonnie for Inspicorp. Thanks for your interest in Inspirational Toothpaste. This is your inspirational message for the week. ‘When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.’ Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Keep an eye out for more messages and samples from your friends at Inspicorp. Keep on brushing! Bye!”

Each week a new box arrived. Each week a new message. Each week more toothpaste. Each week more Bonnie.

Her voice was like a blanket. It comforted me. It kept me safe. It told me what I needed to hear. And the paste was magic. It gathered the bad. It took the pain and washed it away.

I would lie on the floor in front of the stereo speakers and brush and listen. I would replay every message over and over, analyzing every word, memorizing every breath. I could hear the lip smacks and saliva as she swallowed. I imagined the shape of her mouth as she spoke. I imagined her smile as she said, “Bye!” I pictured her wearing headphones in a dimly lit room. I imagined cigarette smoke drifting through pink and blue beams of light. I imagined a big man behind glass, working a soundboard and asking her for “*just one more take.*” I imagined her closing her eyes as she leaned into the microphone. I imagined her thinking of the special boy who would listen to this message and imagine what she was wearing when she recorded it. I imagined that made her happy. I imagined it made

her happy to make him happy, and it made me happy to know that I was that boy, and I was making her happy. There was a cycle between Bonnie and me, even in the beginning. The cyclical quality of our relationship was undeniable even as I laid and listened and sucked the last remnants of toothpaste from each tube and swallowed it and felt it churn in my stomach and create a feeling that told me something could be there, if the right one came along, something would soon fill the void. Bonnie's voice told me that. Bonnie's voice brought me to life.

I waited by the mailbox every day. The mailman never hid his disgust as he handed over whatever piece of junk was intended for me that given day. It was all junk if it wasn't toothpaste. It was all trash if it wasn't Bonnie. The mailman would mutter, "Here ya go, cocksucker," as he gave me local newsletters and coupons for carpet cleanings and window treatments. I didn't care as long as the boxes came. And when they did I rushed to my apartment and tore them to pieces and jammed the discs into the stereo and brushed my pain away.

"Hi, this is Bonnie for Inspicorp. Thanks for your interest in Inspirational Toothpaste. This is your inspirational message for the week. 'Eternal nothingness is fine, if you happen to be dressed for it.' Woody Allen. Keep an eye out for more messages and samples from your friends at Inspicorp. Keep on brushing! Bye!"

And I always kept on brushing. And I always kept on imagining. I imagined her taking her clothes off as she spoke into the microphone. I imagined her touching herself. I imagined her touching me. I rubbed the toothpaste on my teeth, I sucked on the tube, I swallowed it. I lived, I breathed, I loved. I loved toothpaste. I loved life. I loved the floor. I loved the speakers. I loved her voice. I loved Bonnie.

But then she was gone.

The boxes no longer came. The toothpaste no longer came. Bonnie no longer came. For weeks the mailman smiled as he delivered junk every day. He loved bringing the nothing. He loved seeing the spark extinguished from my eyes. He loved knowing that my heart was breaking every day. He loved knowing that I could die. He wanted me to die. He wanted his revenge.

After several months of nothing my supplies were gone and I got the shakes and the toothache returned. The throbbing was so brutal that my skull felt like it was breaking apart. The blood flowed from my mouth like vomit and soaked my shirts and pants. With each throb a blinding white light clobbered me and showed me what I would soon see forever. It was horrifying. It was painful. It was nothingness.

Each day I stood on my Bambi legs and wobbled my way to the mailbox. I knew nothing was waiting for me but I continued to listen to Bonnie and she told me to keep up hope. She told me she'd return. But I felt myself sinking deeper and deeper into the white. The nothingness was calling me. It needed me.

And as the mailman handed me a crumpled advertisement for some politician's campaign he said, "Better luck next time man..." and laughed arrogantly.

I dug down and with a powerful inhale I grabbed the strap of his bag, "What are you hoarding it for yourself?" I yelled at the sandal-wearing bastard.

"What?" he said, caught off-guard.

"Is this how you're getting even with me? Is this is your fucking revenge?" I yelled.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about!" he shouted.

I yanked, "Let me have a look in this bag!"
He latched onto it and pulled, "What the fuck are you doing, psycho?"

"You're stealing my mail!"

"I'm not stealing shit, dick!" he said trying to break free.

"I just need one look!"

"Get off of me, freak!"

I spun him, "Give me my toothpaste!"

He tried to fight back, "I don't have it!"

"Yes you do! You said you could fuck with me and you meant it! This is it! You're doing it now!"

"I am not!" I could hear the fear in his voice, "That was just talk, man!"

I spun him faster. "You lie!"

He started to lose his footing, "No! I'm serious! I didn't do it! I swear to God!"

I pulled so hard that my hands felt raw, "I need my toothpaste!"

"I don't have it!"

"I NEED MY BONNIE!" I screamed as the bag came loose in my hands and he tumbled to ground.

I quickly dumped its contents and frantically rummaged through the pile. There was no box. No toothpaste. No Bonnie. Just a face-full of pepper spray and kick in the ribs.

I moaned as I rolled to my side and looked up to the mailman standing over me. I could smell the hummus on his hot breath.

"I told you not to the fuck with the mailman, junky," and he kicked me again. He gathered his things and walked off.

I got to my knees, pressed my face into the grass and screamed, "MY TOOTH HURTS!"

I had reached a new level of nothingness. I was now fully consumed. There was no turning back.

I. Was. Nothing.

I stumbled to my feet and up the stairs to my apartment. I slammed through the door and entered the kitchen, kicking and swinging like a five-year-old karate student throwing a tantrum. I bashed my hands into the counter. I yanked handfuls of hair from my head. I opened the fridge and grabbed the first thing I saw. Eggs. One by one I rocketed egg after egg into the sink letting out a ferocious "FUCK!" every time a yolk exploded onto the stinky, dirty dishes.

I spun and ran toward my bedroom, leapt and kicked the door open hoping to find something that I valued so I could regretfully destroy it.

But as I landed and wiped the savage drool from my mouth my wild eyes were magnetized to the bed...

Her legs were crossed, she was smoking a cigarette and she wore a skirt and Converse. "*What...*" I began, breathless.

She took a drag from her cigarette and stood. She exhaled as she approached and her face drifted through the smoke like she was appearing to me from another world. She was exactly as I pictured.

"My name is Bonnie," she said while extending her hand for a shake, "and I would like to inspire you."

eleven

FADE IN:

EXT. NEWMAN DRIVE - PRESENT DAY - NIGHT

A typical suburban street.

Dusty slowly drives along in a '87 Corolla. He smokes a cigarette and looks at the numbers of each house then glances at a PIECE OF PAPER.

He stops the car at NUMBER 86. He references the paper; it says "86 NEWMAN DR."

He pulls the car around the next corner, gets out and walks toward the house. A POSTAL BAG is slung over his shoulder.

He goes around to the side of the house and climbs a TREE.

He settles on a branch, flicks his burned down butt, lights a fresh one and waits.

A LIGHT from one of the windows flips on.

DUSTY

Here we go.

He reaches into the bag and pulls out A CAMERA.

Through the window we see a VERY PRETTY GIRL. This is her BEDROOM. She stands in front of A VANITY MIRROR and begins to undress.

Dusty brings the camera to his eye.

DUSTY

Smile.

He snaps the photo.

CUT TO:

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

The back of the local high school.

A CHUBBY TEENAGE BOY with GLASSES and tons of freckles stares directly into the camera.

CHUBBY
Holy fuckin' shit, dude!

Dusty is holding one of the photos of the girl.

DUSTY
You like, man?

CHUBBY
This is Amber Valentine!

DUSTY
Don't I know it.

CHUBBY
You're amazing, Dusty!

Dusty places the photo in a brown paper bag and rolls the top closed.

DUSTY
Okay, be 200, four-eyes.

CHUBBY
Sure thing dude.

The kid pulls out a WAD OF CASH from his front pocket, flips through and hands Dusty TWO \$100 BILLS.

Dusty hands the kid the BAG and holds the bills up to the sun, to check if they're real. The kid looks into the bag.

CHUBBY

You get any bush?

DUSTY

Hey ya never know. Might be a surprise in there for ya, cowboy.

CHUBBY

Fuckin' sweet! This means *everything* to me, Dusty!

Dusty folds the bills, puts them in his pocket, lights a cigarette and pats the kid on the arm.

DUSTY

Yeah, me too man. Me too.

FADE TO BLACK.

twelve

She sat me at my desk with a number two pencil and made me take a test.

Never Sometimes Always

1. *I am frequently constipated.* 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6
2. *I am easily irritated.* 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6
3. *I hate cold weather.* 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6
4. *Family is important to me.* 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6

The test consisted of three hundred questions. It took several hours to finish.

"This isn't official or anything," she said after I handed her the completed exam, "but just a quick scan of your results tells me that you've had some accumulation which led to aggravation, dissemination, localization, and right now, we're smack-dab in the middle of manifestation."

"Okay," I said, "so what's that mean?"

"It means that I think we need to take the next step before...disruption."

"Disruption?" I asked.

"Yes. We need to disrupt the disruption."

"And how to do we disrupt the disruption?"

"We take the next step."

"What's the next step?"

"We clean the toxic stuff."

"What toxic stuff?"

"The toxic stuff that's holding all the bad junk in one, local place," she said.

"Okay..." I said, confused.

"It can't move so it becomes, localized," she said.

"Okay..."

"Localization."

"So what do we clean it with?"

"A seed."

My palms were sweating, "I'm not sure I understand, Bonnie."

"Do you have any aches and pains? Discomfort? Discoloration? Uh, ambiguous discombobulating phenomena?"

"My tooth hurts," I said.

"Oh! Good!" She said with a wide-eyed nod. "Did you try the toothpaste?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"I loved it."

She clapped her hands, "Glorious! Then you're ready."

"Ready?" I asked.

"For implantation."

"Implantation?"

"Yup."

I paused, "Are you gonna give me more toothpaste?"

Bonnie laughed. "I'm gonna give you more than that, baby-boy. I'm gonna give you a *hell* of a lot more than that."

And she laid me on the bed.

"What's going on, Bonnie?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" she said as she cuffed my wrists and ankles and secured them to the bed posts.

"Are we gonna—" I began.

"No!" she said.

"Then what are we—"

"I'll tell you this; it's only gonna hurt like...a lot."

"What is?"

And she pulled a hammer and nail from her bag – both adorned with Bulbereno.

"Bonnie, what exactly are you planning?"

"You are going to feel things that will be so new to you that your body won't know how to react. You have no frame of reference for what I'm about to give you. This is all going to be, well...quite painful, but it will be, a very, very wild ride."

"Bonnie, are you gonna—"

She laughed, "I'm actually a little jealous."

"Are you gonna hammer a nail—"

"Into your head? Yes."

"*Holy fuck!*" I whimpered as I writhed.

Bonnie placed the nail against my lips. "*Shhh*, calm down. It's not that bad."

"How is it not that bad?"

"Shhhhh..."

"I'm scared."

"Don't be. I'm here. I'm here to make sure nothing gets you."

"But —"

She slowly, seductively slid the nail up my face. "I'm here to save you, Franky-boy. Don't you realize that?" She positioned the nail just above my right eyebrow and gently twirled it on its point. "You're why I exist. And we gotta do some work so my existence means something. Cuz when my existence means something, your existence means even more. And that's good right?"

"Bonnie I just don't —"

"You're a virgin Frank. We have to open you up."

My bones were rattling. She leaned in close, "Everything is going to be wonderful, Frank. You know how I know?"

Tears welled in my sockets, "No."

She pressed her lips against my ear and whispered, "Cuz, You. Are. Not. Nothing."

Each word sank into me and circulated throughout my system. When they reached my heart, it stopped beating and I could feel my soul melt away. I could feel the mattress dampen beneath me. It had started to absorb me. The process had begun. And as Bonnie held the nail and brought the hammer down I could feel my head explode into liquid. I was no longer solid. I was no longer human. I was simply, Bonnie's boy.

thirteen

FADE IN:

INT. PIZZERIA

Dusty walks into the restaurant and approaches the counter. An angry, tough-looking Italian man is twirling dough in the air.

DUSTY

Uh, hey man, I'm lookin' for Lester.

PIZZA MAN

For what?

DUSTY

Uh...is he here?

PIZZA MAN

No.

DUSTY

Do you know where--?

The pizza man tosses the dough on the counter.

PIZZA MAN

(angry)

What the fuck business is it of yours?

DUSTY

Hey man, I don't know...the Guy just sent me to...

The pizza man pauses a beat.

PIZZA MAN

Bullshit.

DUSTY

He said you'd say that.

PIZZA MAN

You look like a fucking junky, get
out of my--

DUSTY

He said you'd say that too, man. So
he gave me these...

Dusty pulls The Guy's COKE-BOTTLE GLASSES out
of his pocket and shows him.

The pizza man looks nervous.

PIZZA MAN

Where did you get those?

DUSTY

He gave 'em to me.

PIZZA MAN

He doesn't show those to anybody.

DUSTY

Well, I guess he really wants me to
see Lester then, huh?

The pizza man analyzes Dusty for a beat.

DUSTY

My hand to fuckin' God man.

After another beat the pizza man turns and
grabs a pizza from the oven and puts it in a
box.

PIZZA MAN

Money.

Dusty pulls a wad of hundreds from his pocket and hands it over.

PIZZA MAN

Where'd a fuck-up like you get this kind of dough?

Dusty smiles.

DUSTY

Odd jobs.

The pizza man nods and sticks the cash in his pocket.

PIZZA MAN

Deliver this here...

He jots an address on the lid of the box.

PIZZA MAN (CONT'D)

...and you'll get what you want.

DUSTY

That's it?

PIZZA MAN

That's it. Deliver the pizza, get your goods.

Dusty takes the box and turns to leave.

PIZZA MAN
(calling to dusty)
Hey!

Dusty turns back.

PIZZA MAN
You are not--

DUSTY
Yeah yeah, I got it, I got it...

Dusty leaves.

CUT TO:

EXT. LESTER'S HOUSE

A dumpy, dilapidated shack.

Dusty pulls up to it and gets out with the pizza in hand. He cautiously approaches the front door and reaches his hand out to knock. As soon as his knuckles touch the wood, the door flings open.

Lester looks like the decayed corpse of a burnt-out rock star. His skin looks brittle and yellow, his hair is long and gray and filthy, bloody, bandages are sloppily wrapped around his head. Lester looks the way Dusty will look in thirty years.

LESTER
What!?

Dusty hands him the pizza.

DUSTY

The Guy said you like pizza.

Lester opens the lid of the box with his bony hand and sees the GUY'S GLASSES resting in the center of the pie. He shifts his lifeless eyes to Dusty, reaches into his pocket and pulls out a crumpled, greasy NAPKIN and tosses it at Dusty.

LESTER

Here, leave me the fuck alone.

Lester slams the door.

Dusty picks the napkin off the ground and looks at it. He sees a poorly drawn MAP, with a big arrow pointing to an "E."

As Dusty turns, the door opens again, Dusty turns back to see Lester holding a slice of pizza. Cheese and sauce hang out of his mouth.

LESTER

C'mere.

Dusty steps close to him. Lester points his decrepit finger in Dusty's face.

LESTER (CONT'D)

They're fuckin' fast. You gotta outrun 'em.

DUSTY
(confused)
Okay.

LESTER
Remember, none of it is real.

DUSTY
It's not real?

LESTER
It's real, but not *really* real.

DUSTY
(frustrated)
Okay...

LESTER
And when you get there, do what he says. It's the only way.

DUSTY
Have you ever done it?

LESTER
Nah, no one has.

DUSTY
Why not?

Lester cracks a nasty, toothless grin.

LESTER
Cuz no one fuckin' tries.

He slaps Dusty on the shoulder and chomps on the pizza.

LESTER

No one ever fuckin' tries.

He goes into his house and slams the door behind him.

Dusty looks at the map, it doesn't seem to make sense at all.

DUSTY

Fuck me, man.

FADE TO BLACK.

fourteen

"Forward momentum," she says excitedly.

"What?" I lift my head from her thigh, slowly slipping back into the realness.

"Forward momentum. The key is forward momentum," she says while gently stroking my head like a cat, soothing me.

"You gotta keep it moving. It's always gotta go forward."

"But I can't see any farther than right now."

"I know, isn't that exciting?"

"No, it's scary."

"It's supposed to be scary."

"Why?"

"Cuz that's how it works."

"I don't like it. I don't like not knowing what's gonna happen later."

"Why would you wanna know what's gonna happen? You should find out. You should find out what happens later, when later is now. And if you keep moving, you will, because it's

always now, and it's never later, later *is* now. You should be concerned with that, with now. Not later. Later's too late."

I sigh and close my eyes and listen to the sound of an ice skater in slow motion as her hand slides through the mop on my head. "Dusty's just so..."

WHAP! She smacks me.

My eyes pop, "What the hell, Bonnie?"

She smiles her shittiest, "Let's go for a drive."

fifteen

FADE IN:

EXT. CAR - NIGHT

Dusty's Corolla flies down a curvy country road.

He cautiously checks the rear view mirror and whips the car around a corner onto a small dirt-road through the woods.

He checks the mirror again and we see - A MAN in a black suit and a pair of THICK GLASSES - running on foot.

DUSTY checks his map.

He checks the mirror again - the man is gaining ground.

DUSTY

Oh man!

Dusty grips the wheel and smashes his foot down on the gas. The car can't go much faster.

The man is about ten feet away from the rear of the car now. Dusty glances back just as he dives, lands on the trunk and smashes his hand through the window. Dusty swerves the car back and forth, trying to shake him.

He spins the car 360 degrees. The man hangs on by his finger tips and climbs halfway into the back seat.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD a SMALL BOY is playing with a toy truck. He looks up to the car as he's illuminated by the headlights.

Dusty spots him.

DUSTY

(convincing himself)

He's not real. He's not real. He's not real...

WHAM - he hits the kid, sending him rolling onto the hood and over the car.

DUSTY

...I hope.

The man is inside the car. He grabs Dusty around the throat and chokes him. Dusty fights him off. He notices the car is heading for A LAKE.

DUSTY

Fucking ridiculous, man...

Dusty pulls the CIGARETTE out of his mouth, yanks off the man's glasses and jams the butt into his eyeball. The man SQUEALS in pain.

Dusty unbuckles his seat belt, opens the driver's side door and dives out, leaving the man inside.

He hits the ground and rolls.

The car ramps up a small hill and lands in the lake.

Dusty sits up and watches his car sink into the water. He shakes his head and chuckles a bit. He reaches into his shirt pocket and comes up empty handed. He pats himself down and throws his head back in disappointment.

DUSTY

Son of a bitch!

He starts to get up when he's startled by a SMALL HAND holding a cigarette in front of his face. Dusty looks over to see the SMALL BOY smiling at him.

Dusty takes the cigarette and puts it in his mouth.

DUSTY

Thanks.

He pats his pockets again. The boy holds out a lit lighter. Dusty leans in and lights his smoke.

DUSTY

Thanks again.

The boy smiles.

Dusty slowly gets to his feet, he's hurting. He dusts himself off and notices that the boy is holding a BLUE SHOEBOX.

BOY

(whispers)

The Everything...

Dusty slowly reaches for the box, removes the lid, reaches inside and pulls out a small BALL OF FUR.

DUSTY

(baffled)

What the fuck?

BOY

Eat it.

Dusty peculiarly looks at the fur then looks to the boy.

DUSTY

Eat what? This?

The boy nods.

BOY

Eat it and you will have
Everything.

DUSTY

You sure, man?

The boy nods again.

BOY
You will have Everything.

Dusty shoots the fur one more look, shrugs and tosses it into his mouth.

DUSTY
(disgusted, muffled)
Ohhhhh gahhhhhh...!

He tries to swallow but gags.

DUSTY
(muffled)
Ohhhh maaaa gahhhhhh...

He bites into the fur and it POPS like a cherry tomato and a GREEN, SLIMY LIQUID fills his mouth. The boy looks on happily.

BOY
Everything.

After several more gags Dusty finally gets the fur down. The slime dumps from his mouth. He looks at the boy, breathlessly.

DUSTY
That was fucking awf--

WHITE LIGHT BURSTS from Dusty's eyes and mouth. He angles his head towards the sky, extends his arms and slowly rises from the ground. The

boy's face is illuminated by the light as he watches peacefully.

BOY

Dusty found Everything.

More white light pours from Dusty's body until he is completely enveloped. The light continues to expand further and further, eating up the darkness until... it quickly retracts sucking Dusty away into the darkness - gone, without a trace.

The boy smiles, crouches to the ground and plays with his toy truck once again.

FADE TO BLACK.

sixteen

The death-box cruises around the empty late night roads. Winding curves spilled about like piss in the snow. We don't speak. Bonnie looks out the window and I feel like something big is brewing. I feel like something's on her mind. She turns, opens her mouth to speak but turns away. I know she's downloading but it's probably pointless since I'm only thinking about what she might be thinking about and if I'm right then that would create some kind of feedback. She must be hearing screeches in her mind. She must be seeing a collision of rainbow images, like fantasy vomit, like children's books blended with vampire bats. I don't envy her mind right now. When I'm thinking of feedback and its creating feedback is there feedback feeding back? Is there feedback feeding back feeding back? This can go on and on and on. This is hurting my head. My head needs something. It needs a new one. It needs something

different. No more Dusty. Something new. Something totally new. Bonnie turns, "You have to work with what you have."

I knew she knew. "But Bonnie..."

"This is bigger, I'm telling you that this is big, I'm telling you that it matters."

"I know."

"Do you think I'm lying?"

"No."

"Then why won't you fucking finish it?"

"Cuz I can't!"

"You won't."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Are you scared?"

"Yes!"

"Of what?"

"I don't know!"

"You have to know!"

"I don't know anything!"

"That's such shit," she turns to the window and watches the trees as they blur into a wall.

I look at the nape of her neck and wish I could touch it, "You're supposed to be helping me."

She turns, "You're supposed to be fun!"

I watch my knuckles on the wheel as they eat the road for a beat or two. "Maybe I'd be fun if you just did what I asked and gave me a new one."

Bonnie rolls her eyes and heads back to the window, "Oh Frank you're so..."

"Do you know how hard it is without that feeling?" A van passes and momentarily blinds me with its high beams. "I am

blank. I am fucking empty, Bonnie. I am nowhere without that feeling. I am —”

“You are not —”

“I am nothing.”

Bonnie turns her body all the way toward me, “Frank...” she rests her hand on my leg and slightly leans, “...you’re not nothing. You’re whiny, okay? You’re annoying. You’re dramatic. You’re clueless. You’re a fucking baby... and you are taking *way* too long.”

“Too long?”

“Frank, your brain is gonna be scrambled eggs. There is only so much people can take!”

“I’m not like other people, Bonnie.”

She stares with her mouth dangling open and laughs like my death-box as it sputters to life. “*Oh*, you got that right.”

“So will you please give me a new one?”

She takes a breath and faces the windshield, “Pull the fucking car over.”

Confused, I start to make the move to the side of the road. I jam the shifter into park and wait. Bonnie shoves her nose into her bag and digs.

“What’s going —?”

“Shut the fuck up,” she says, “I’m trying to find...got it!” She happily pulls a flask and shows me.

“What’s that?”

“A special something, for my *special* boy.” She unscrews the cap and takes a serious swig. She swallows and her face screws into mashed silly putty as she squeaks out, “Rock and roll,” and hands me the flask, “Drink...now!” I take the steel container and notice my good friend Bulbereno is here again.

“Hello Bulbereno,” I say and knock a solid one back. Whatever the stuff is tears and torches on the way down, resting in my gut like molten Pop Rocks. It sizzles and kicks so hard

that I can't hold the coughs, "Holy fuck, Bonnie! What the fuck is—?"

"I said it's special," she says, "you never heard of it. You wouldn't know anything about it." And she takes the flask and downs some more.

"Now, tell me about the last dream you had," she says as she hands me the flask.

I gulp it and before I can think, I'm rambling, "I was flying. I was flying like Superman but I couldn't really control myself. I had just learned to fly. It was something that I just learned to do and I didn't really know how to do it though. I just kept going up. Up, up, up and up. I didn't know how to go down. But I'd start to figure it out. That was the thing. I'd get close. But then I'd fuck up and start going way up again. And I'd try to grab tree branches and stop myself but I'd always miss them and just keep going up. It wasn't easy like Superman though. I was all off balance. It wasn't really natural. I had to pretty much swim, like a frog, like the breast-stroke. That's how I had to move. Superman would never be able to move the way he does. It's bullshit. He needs wings, he needs propellers, he needs something. You can't just move like that. He would need to swim like a frog. The way I did. You need to do something if you wanna fly, you can't just fly." And I down another mouthful and hand it over.

Bonnie guzzles, takes a breath, burps a bit and stares. She downloads. She looks. She thinks. She speaks. "How do you feel?"

My eyelids are iron curtains and my cheeks feel like happiness. "Weird, but good. Good and weird," I say, "weird and good."

"Good," she says, "good and weird is good." And she hands it over and I swill some more and my face vibrates with joy and

my lips go numb and I hear her say, "Let's take a walk." And so we walk. We walk and we walk and we walk.

seventeen

FADE IN:

INT: DARK ROOM

It's cold and sterile like a laboratory. Dusty is strapped to a table. There's just enough light for us to see.

Dusty struggles.

DUSTY

I can't move man!

FROM THE SHADOWS:

MAN'S VOICE

(whispering)

It gets much worse before it gets better.

DUSTY

What?

MAN'S VOICE

You've been drugged, Dusty. You can't see because I don't want you to see. When I decide you're ready, you'll see.

DUSTY

What the fuck is going on, man?

MAN'S VOICE

When you were young you had a hamster. Do you remember this?

DUSTY

Yeah, I guess.

MAN'S VOICE

He lived in filth. He used to cram the pissed-drenched pine shavings that lined his cage into the pouches on the inside of his cheeks and use them to make little nests. They must've tasted awful. You mistreated him. He had a terrible life. Do you remember?

DUSTY

Yeah. What's this about?

MAN'S VOICE

One time, you dropped him on the kitchen floor and knocked him unconscious. You thought he was dead and went into a panic. Your father scooped him up and gave him mouth-to-mouth. He came back. You were thrilled yet for whatever reason you still forced the poor rodent to live in horrible piss and shit filled conditions. You knew that a hamster cage should be cleaned as often as possible. They piss and shit a lot and the pine shavings absorb

everything. But you would wait so long to clean the cage that the seeds that made up his food would actually sprout tiny plants within the soaked shavings. You obviously cared for him. Why did you mistreat him like that?

DUSTY

I don't know, man. I was just a kid.

MAN'S VOICE

When he started to go, after only a year, his back legs went out. It was very sad. Do you remember?

DUSTY

Yeah.

MAN'S VOICE

He couldn't walk anymore. He would just lie in the broken down, saturated nest that he built a month prior. And even though you could see that he was on his way out, you still mistreated him! Isn't that odd?

DUSTY

Yeah, I guess.

MAN'S VOICE

Thinking back now, don't you think that you should've showed some responsibility and care and made his last days comfortable? Don't you think that he should've died on a

fluffy bed of fresh smelling shavings? Not in a big pile of misery?

DUSTY

Sure, I guess...

MAN'S VOICE

Your father wanted to put him out of his misery by placing him in a hole in the backyard and shooting him with a .22. Do you remember this?

DUSTY

Yeah, I do, man.

MAN'S VOICE

What did you do?

DUSTY

I didn't let him.

MAN'S VOICE

Why?

DUSTY

Because, I knew he wasn't doing it for the hamster's own good. He just wanted to kill something.

MAN'S VOICE

Do you still believe that to be true?

DUSTY

Yeah.

MAN'S VOICE

Why?

DUSTY

Because that's how he was, he dug violence.

MAN'S VOICE

But he saved him when you dropped him on the floor.

DUSTY

I know but...that's just how it was man! He was into killing things. He was violent. He hit...he was violent, man!

MAN'S VOICE

Intriguing.

DUSTY

I guess.

MAN'S VOICE

The hamster died a sad, lonely and miserable death in the disgusting home in which you forced him to live.

DUSTY

I know.

MAN'S VOICE

It took months.

DUSTY

I know.

MAN'S VOICE
It could have been quick.

DUSTY
I know.

MAN'S VOICE
Why did you let him die in such
horror?

DUSTY
I don't know!

The man sighs.

MAN'S VOICE
Your father died shortly after the
hamster, correct?

DUSTY
Yes.

MAN'S VOICE
Do you miss him?

Beat.

MAN'S VOICE
Don't answer that.

DUSTY
Okay.

MAN'S VOICE
Dusty, what are we talking about?

DUSTY

What?

MAN'S VOICE

What are we talking about?

DUSTY

I don't know.

MAN'S VOICE

We're talking about neglect, right?
Neglect.

DUSTY

(screaming)

I don't fucking know! What the fuck
do you want from me!

Silence. We hear the man's slow, frustrated
breaths.

DUSTY

Hello?

POP! - The lights are on.

Dusty looks around the room, squinting from the
brightness.

His eyes eventually focus on a figure standing
in the corner...

eighteen

The woods are deep and smell like a candle store. Bonnie
holds out her arms so she can feel the air. The cool and the

warm and the moisture cling to our skin and we smile and the woods smile back. And the moon is there and it's bright and it's making it seem like we've found an hour of the day that doesn't really exist. We've found a 25th hour. We've found a 26th hour. We've found another day. No one knows about this day but us. This day is ours and it will never end.

And we come to a clearing where the moonlight bounces like a pinball from branch to branch and settles in our hearts and Bonnie drops to her knees and jams her hands into the dirt. And I breathe the air and watch her dig and think how I'd like to tell her that I love her but my mouth doesn't know how to make those words. In this clearing my mouth knows nothing. It's unlearned all it's learned and all it knows is to smile. All my eyes know are to watch. They know to observe. My ears know to listen. My nose knows to smell. My hands know to feel the air. They know that they want to feel her. They want to feel her face. They want to feel her eyes, her nose, her mouth. They want to be inside her. They want to feel her heart, her lungs. They want to feel her breathe. They want to hold her and they remind my body that it wants to be held as well. Everything that's me wants to press against her. Everything that's me wants to wrap around everything that's her. I want my mouth on her mouth. I want my nose on her neck. I want to breathe her. I want to feel her. I want my everything to blend with her everything. I want to disappear inside her. I want to forget me and just be me. I want to be me inside her. I want to be her inside me. I want to be us. I want us to be one. This is the something that I want. This is the something that I want to be. This is somethingness to me. This is it.

And I feel ready to say it just as she pulls a blue box from the earth and rests it at my feet. And I look down and I immediately remember. I immediately remember what this box is. I immediately remember *who* this box is. I immediately remember

the day I put it here. I remember that this day is not new, that I've lived this day before. I fall to my knees and I uncover the box and I look inside. The skeleton is so small. The bones are so frail and so tiny. I immediately remember the sounds it made. And the feelings I had. And the happiness and the sadness, and the regret. The regret for the days that I let it die. The regret for the torture. The regret for the selfishness. The regret for the fear. The regret for the complete and total disregard for responsibility. I reach inside the box and gently move the tiny skull and find the note. And as I hold it in the moonlight I look to Bonnie and she looks at me and there's the glaze of remorse in her eyes as she awaits my words. I look to the scrap of paper and think of how my handwriting hasn't changed at all and I begin to read, "Dear Dusty, I'm sorry I didn't pay more attention to you. If I ever get another hamster I promise I'll be nice to him. Please, be happy, wherever you are. Your Friend, Frank Fisher Jr."

I reach into the box and find the glasses – black, standard-issue, Coke-bottle lenses. I notice something etched onto the arm, "FISHER U.S.M.C." I slide the glasses onto my face and scan my now very blurry world. It's as if I've opened my eyes under water. Everything is here but nothing is the same. I look to the mishmash of colors and shapes that used to be Bonnie and know that she's smiling. I know there are tears. And I know that she knows that this is right.

I place the note and glasses into the box and replace the lid and slide it back into the ground and cover it with dirt. I remain on my knees and stare at the dirt on my hands and I feel her against my back. I feel her arms around my shoulders, around my neck. I feel her cheek against mine and I hear her whisper, "Everything is equal, Frank. Everything is nothing. Everything is our minds interpretation of what we see and the values that we ourselves place on them. All anyone wants in their lives is

something. And if we look at *anything* and if we chose to place any value on any *thing* in our lives we have something. It all exists within *us*. We only have what we know. And we only *know* what we know. And what we know is that everything is actually nothing and nothing is actually everything. Because something and nothing and everything are all the same. All nothing is something if we want it to be. And you don't want it to be, Frank. That's why you have nothing, because you *choose* to have nothing. If you recognized for one minute that everything, that *The Everything* is actually nothing, you wouldn't be so worried about it. You apply too much meaning to the *concept* of something. But there *is* no concept of something, there simply *is* something. Something is nothing, so therefore, nothing is *something*."

My eyes fill and my hands shake as I turn my head and our lips press together. Our tongues dance and slide and our noses breathe in unison. And she climbs on top of me and I lay back. And she takes off my shirt and I take off hers. I roll her onto the dirt and kiss her neck and kiss her chest and kiss her stomach. And as my lips graze her thigh I feel the applicator enter my wound. I feel the seed, I feel it dissolve and I feel it explode. And I look to her and slowly, she says, "Let's go finish it, baby-boy. Let's get it done."

And as we float amongst the moon and the stars I rest my head against her thighs and whisper, "Okay Bonnie, okay."

nineteen

Dusty looks around the room, squinting from the brightness.

His eyes eventually focus on a figure standing in the corner...

A SIX FOOT TALL HAMSTER - wearing a suit.

HAMSTER

Hello, Dusty.

DUSTY

(terrified)

Uh...

The hamster approaches Dusty and rests his paw on his chest.

HAMSTER

(calmly)

Shhhh...don't be frightened. I won't hurt you.

DUSTY

Where am I?

HAMSTER

I don't know.

He pulls a cigarette from his inside jacket pocket and lights one up. As he sucks the smoke into his lungs he tries to hold back a cough.

HAMSTER

I know you're probably curious about why you're here. I know you've got a lot of questions. They'll probably be answered eventually.

DUSTY

Cool.

HAMSTER

But just realize that I'm not too sure why I'm here either, Dusty.

DUSTY

Oh...

HAMSTER

But...I *am* going to kill you.

DUSTY

What?

HAMSTER

I'm going to kill you.

DUSTY

(frightened)

Why?

HAMSTER

Because, I think sometimes, you just gotta let your dad murder something.

Dusty struggles.

DUSTY

I don't understand what the fuck you're talking about, man!

HAMSTER

Neither do I.

He crushes the butt against the sole of shoe and places it in his pants pocket.

HAMSTER

I'm not gonna pretend like I know things, buddy. But I think that sometimes, you gotta suck on some pissy pine shavings before you know how good the sky can taste.

Beat.

DUSTY

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

HAMSTER

It means you got everything backwards, Dusty. You're holding on to the stuff that you should let go and letting go of all the stuff you should be holding on to. Like I said, I'm not gonna pretend like I know things, but that situation with me was tough for you. I know it was. It was exactly a meeting place for the two biggest problems you have in your life. Your dad is a dick. He *did* just want to shoot me but on the other hand I *had* to die. I didn't wanna suffer anymore. I hated living and if I wasn't a hamster and if I had the tools, I would've slashed my god damned wrists.

DUSTY

I'm sorry man.

HAMSTER

It's fine. I forgive you. It's like I said...you gotta suck on the piss to taste the sky.

DUSTY

Okay.

HAMSTER

(smiling)

And I'm tasting sky every day.

Beat.

DUSTY

But you're gonna kill me?

HAMSTER

Yes.

DUSTY

Why?

HAMSTER

Because you're the hamster now. And I'm not gonna make the same mistake that you did. You're a loser. You're pathetic. You're wasting your time. You're wasting your time on your life, on all this stupid stuff. The Everything? The Everything is not going to lead to happiness for you! You're way too much of a nothing to ever be much of anything. Don't you realize that? Don't you realize how much bigger all of this is than you?

Don't you realize how worthless you really are?

DUSTY

I guess not.

HAMSTER

It's like I said, I forgive you but I hate you and I need to put you out of your misery. It is necessary.

DUSTY

How?

HAMSTER

Where's your dad, Dusty?

DUSTY

You already know, he's dead.

The hamster stares at Dusty and gently shakes his head.

HAMSTER

You sure?

DUSTY

What do you mean, man?

HAMSTER

Watch...

He looks up to the ceiling. Dusty follows his gaze to see a HATCH slide open. Slowly, a PLATFORM lowers. A MAN comes into view. He's wearing THICK GLASSES and a MILITARY UNIFORM. Dusty's Dad.

The platform hits the floor with a metallic
THUD.

DUSTY'S DAD

Hello, Dusty.

DUSTY

Hi, Dad.

DUSTY'S DAD

How are you?

DUSTY

I'm okay I guess, you?

DUSTY'S DAD

I've seen better days.

DUSTY

Yeah...me too, man.

DUSTY'S DAD

You know what, Dusty?

DUSTY

What?

DUSTY'S DAD

I killed *you* before you were even
born.

DUSTY

What?

DUSTY'S DAD

Nothing.

He pulls a .22 from his pocket and POPS two bullets into Dusty's head.

DUSTY'S DAD

(whispering)

Nothing...

FADE TO BLACK.

twenty

I lie on the floor and stare at the ceiling. I think about Dusty. I think about me. I think about Bonnie. And she lays her head my chest and rests a stack of printed pages on my stomach.

"I think you're done, Franky-boy. I think that's it."

"It's not much of an ending," I say.

"I like it. I think it works."

"But what about —"

She angles her head to look at me and slowly reaches for my bandage and peels it away and lays her palm on my wound.

"Leave it kinda open. Don't be neat. Don't be tidy."

I stare at the ceiling again. I notice new stains. I notice new cracks. I notice new smudges. It looks like a different ceiling to me.

Bonnie sits up and digs through her bag. She pulls out her smokes but the pack is empty.

"Crap!" she says and tosses it against the wall. She softly smiles and looks to me, "Franky-boy..." she says sweetly, "...will you be the best and go get me a new pack?"

I smile at her the way love makes people smile and reply, "Of course, Bonnie. Of course I will." And she's delighted, and that's all that matters.

I start up the death-box and drive to the store. I stare at the road and stare at the trees and stare at the sky. I think about everything. I think about nothing. I think about Bonnie's mouth. I think about her eyes. I think about her hair and her smell. Her ears and her nose. The shape of her face. The feel of her tongue. The taste of cigarettes. The smell of smoke. I think about these as *some things*. I think about how I interpret them. I think about how my feelings don't feel like interpretations. They feel automatic. They don't feel like choices. They feel like necessity. They feel like everything. They feel like everything I've never known. And everything I've never known cannot be a choice. Because these are choices I've never made. I choose to buy her cigarettes. And she chooses to smoke them. But I don't choose to tremble at the thought of her hands. I don't choose to tremble at the thought of her eyes. My chest feels like static. It feels like the static that interrupts a TV show during a storm. I do not choose the static. I choose the show. The static is out of my hands.

And so I buy the smokes and bring them back and kiss her head. And she smiles and I smile. And she places one in her mouth and lights the tip and takes a drag. And I think that *this*, this is something. This is something. This is nothing. This is The Everything.

And I sit at the computer, sneak a peek at her thighs, get a tingle and attack the keyboard.

Bonnie is good.

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Eddie Wright was born in New Jersey. *Broken Bulbs* is his first book.

