

BON À RIEN

By

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Whether or not his newspaper and a set of senses reduced to five are the main sources of the so-called 'real life' of the so-called average man, one thing is fortunately certain: namely, that the average man himself is but a piece of fiction, a tissue of statistics.

Vladimir Nabokov

Chapter 1

A confederate angel stared with the luster of uncut opal. Thin lines of moss undercut her eyes and nose. They grew brazen underneath the ligaments of her wings: her feathers green faubourgs. The steeple of her perch, a miniature chapel, stood higher than the other mausoleums. Their roofs stuck up at odd angles from their rows, flecked by clumps of grass and light: a jumble of glorious dilapidation. Ancient and streetward-leaning oaks framed the edges of the cemetery, masking the facades of Victorian homes which lined the cemetery. Above them the blue and grey turret of the Commander's Palace declared itself against the broad sky. Beneath it lay the city. The stately homes of the Garden District. The concrete blocks of downtown. The French Quarter, low and creaking. Engulfing all of it: the wandering sigh of the Mississippi which carried barges down to the Gulf.

The angel looked at Jason, stone-faced. As the morning clouds dissipated, the light sharpened her grey features. She was getting accusative. Jason took a drag from his cigarette, still looking at her. As company she was redeemably silent. They had spent the morning exchanging unspoken pleasantries, neither of them particularly terrified. He shifted his weight forward, letting his legs dangle from the stone wall of the grave he used as a seat. At the far end of the cemetery the iron gate arched over the main path leading to Washington Avenue. On top of a structure nearby there appeared to be two birds fucking; they were really getting at it.

Their display didn't bother Jason much; he had been a teenager once. Who had respect for the dead when there was sex for the making? Janet Pinkman was his first try

at a woman. His only conquest in a cemetery. In the tall grass between tombs he had kissed her neck and face and ran his hands through her hair. Just as he'd found the groove of things, his upper lip discovered a blood-gorged tick behind her ear. He left quite embarrassed; she'd called him a queer, but it's just hard for a boy to recover from something like that.

The cemetery was quiet. Stagnant air after a short rain. His pants were damp beneath him. He hadn't been to a cemetery in some time. He hadn't been anywhere in some time. Not since he'd sold his house. Since he'd packed up all of his things from a place that was already half-empty, and transported them to his lovely little abode. It treated him well, the home and especially the move. His old neighbors had started to think of him at luncheons and on the front steps after Mass. Jason would lay in bed at night and imagine what awful things they would say. All of their whispering nearly shook the shutters.

You know, the incident with the mayor is just part of it. He's been losing his grip on things.

His wife left him and he's just been living in that house alone for years.

You know, he was just pushed out of his law firm.

Someone who went to Tulane with him said he was friends with that man killed in the Marigny Love Triangle. Beaten to death by his lover's boyfriend.

So be it. Jason now had new neighbors, and better ones in a better neighborhood. The act of moving gave everything an appropriate place. He'd put all of the kitchen things in boxes labeled 'kitchen things' and all of his clothes in boxes labeled 'clothes,' and the whole process was unquestionably cathartic. Once all the boxes were in,

unpacking only took a day which was equally cathartic. Everything found a spot, even the package which Tommy had left him -- the closest thing that the man had to a will and testament. A few items for Jason with a short note, the one clue that Tommy had seen it coming. That box didn't need unpacking. It lay on top of Buster's dog-crate by Jason's bed. It made Buster feel better in his old age; the two had always been close.

An older couple walked through the east gate of the cemetery. The man wore a camera around his neck. He lifted the lens toward the wrought-iron arch, and the crypts near the entrance. Judging by the man's slow gate, he had recently been mule-kicked. His blue-haired wife as well. She joined him, camera-less but with the air of having recently purchased post cards. The morning was so quiet and still, a thin mist rising from the gravel path. Jason swore he could hear the clicking of the camera from where he sat. Good God. He stood up. The old man pointed his camera at the two lovers. What indecency -- taking photos -- as one pigeon sat on his lady, his wings flapping in brief, ecstatic episodes. Would the man have done the same having stumbled upon him and Janet Pinkman, lying in the grass, his hand guided by lust and moonlight up her shirt? The man started to walk back to the entrance, the birds having gone to pecking softly at one another's faces.

A large man in a blue vest walked backward, leading a larger group. He stopped under the arch. So did they. Someone dropped their map. He pointed above him at the sign, Lafayette Cemetery No. 1, and the others turned, holding up phones and cameras. The old man pointed his camera at the arch again. The tour guide then pointed at a building. All of them pivoted their heads in unison, still clicking. The older couple joined the tourists. In the group, a boy pointed in Jason's direction and several heads looked

over. One person lifted a camera. Jason let out a yelp and jumped down between two stone walls, spilling some of his drink. He peeked around the corner to see if they were coming closer, but the tombs blocked his view of the entrance. He bent into a squatting position, avoiding ticks, and rested his back against the cold side of the tomb.

This was not how he often spent his mornings: crouching between graves, having been caught watching elderly tourists peep on the oblique juxtaposition of love-making and death. No, today was unusual. Earlier that morning he woke up in a tangle of blankets and fought to free his arms. The devilish cocoon of his mother's making -- a teddy bear quilt. A beer sat next to him on the floor, half empty. Tepid. He drank indiscriminately, and after a cup of Irish coffee, was struck by the fact that was something special.

He'd had a dream about a comet -- not a comet, exactly. He arrived at himself sitting in a heavily furnished room with a famous scientist. Faux antique furniture, knobby and intricate, crowded the room. They sat on a rug in the middle of the room. Jason folded his legs like a young child in school. The scientist wore a stethoscope and a long white wizard's robe. He told Jason that the comet spent four-point-five trillion years of the most recent part of eternity in the farthest expanses of the universe. Now it was heading toward the opposite side of their sun.

"This is important," the scientist said, stroking the drum of the stethoscope against his belly. He stood in a sprinter's crouch. The thin robe stretched tight against his thin knee, inches from Jason's nose. "We can learn a lot about the universe this way. The comet will graze the sun. It might be destroyed. It might skim past and come close to us." The scientist held his bristly cheek. "Either way, we will be able to study its behavior

unlike ever before.” The scientist leveled stern blue eyes to Jason. “But if it goes on...” he looked up to the blank-white ceiling and stood, “it might have been doing this forever.”

Jason and the scientist stood on a cliff overlooking a tumultuous sea. A sun like the raw flesh of a halved apricot punctuated the cloud-peppered sky. They watched for some time until Jason said, “Can you see it?” but the scientist didn’t answer. Jason looked to him, saying louder, “Can you see it?”

They stood for some time. The scientist lifted one hand to shield his eyes. He did not touch the stethoscope. After several minutes he let out a sigh, which did not seem malignant. He walked down the slope. The sun was half-hidden by darkness: redder than ever. Jason looked back to him. The scientist stood in the dark shadow at the base of the slope. “What is the comet’s name?” he called out. But the white robes grew hazy in the blackness. Jason opened his mouth to yell out...

After remembering this, Jason sat at the foot of his bed for some time. He looked around at nothing in particular (the ceiling, the kitchen, his knees), but at everything with a sense of mysticism. It wasn’t his birthday. Nor his mother’s. He clutched his hand in a fist, then opened his palm. He looked at it, too. Maybe he’d bitten it in his moiled sleep. It didn’t hurt. He lit a cigarette; then put it out. Soon he found himself wandering the neighborhood, wearing house shoes and pleated slacks, coffee mug in hand, asking a question he did not remember. The tree-lined streets offered nothing useful. He finally settled into admiring the cockeyed roofs of the cemetery, waiting. The sky was no different. Birds chirped as they always had. And then it arrived with a sense of injustice -- he’d walked through this cemetery with his mother a week after Tommy’s funeral. He died in the hospital seven years ago to this day.

Now that he thought of it, he'd been on the cusp of things for some time. He often asked complex questions about politics, the weather -- whether or not such things can be predicted. Buster, his geriatric beagle, would listen patiently. Buster would listen for these long bouts and then reply philosophically with a slow lick of his paws. He always looked wise, especially when he had that gunk that dogs get in the corner of their eyes. Everyone knows that deformities hint at an aptitude for reflective thought. Jason couldn't beat that. Jason had, however, started to read Hegel and eat brie on his toast.

Jason's legs began to get shaky from crouching between the graves. He took a sip from his coffee, tilting the cup carefully so that he could read his watch. On most mornings, he would sit in his apartment and practice this skill. He'd become quite proficient. Once he was sufficiently bored, he would examine the intricate, patternless system the popcorn plaster formed along his ceiling. By the time these two activities had come to pass, it was usually noon.

Jason sighed and stood up, walking past the wall of his tomb and stepping over a patch of tall weeds into the open. The tourists were gone. He stood at the intersection of the two long gravel paths which cut the cemetery cruciform, subdividing the grandiose collection of past lives. Jason was happy to be alone with the dead again. Tourists had been coming to Lafayette No. 1 in recent years, drawn by Ann Rice novels or the occasional movie graveyard scene. This city of the dead had even hosted the New Kids on the Block when they shot a music video, not to mention the seven thousand residents it had taken on since the Eighteen Thirties. Some society vaults housed scores of bodies. There were tombs for volunteer fire brigades, the New Orleans Home for Incurables, the Home for Destitute Orphan Boys, and Independent Order of Odd Fellows -- even the

YMCA. All but a few of the residents were long forgotten, their plaques missing or the markings worn away. A few of the more ornate tombs had survived quite well, recreated in Styrofoam for the sets of vampire movies.

The tourists must have traveled down the block now. Jason pulled a tape recorder out of his pocket and held it up to his face.

“It has been several weeks since I have been held in self-preserving house arrest, waiting for this, this *imbroglio* to die down. There was a point when the video interviews from bloggers (spineless lampooners), the college reporters, the *Times*, the cable talk shows, the memes.”

Jason looked out onto the path, speckled by clumps of grass rising tall like kudzu against the solemn houses of the dead. A pigeon pecked at the ground near his feet.

“Reporters, like pigeons, are some of the worst of all vermin. The worst in this Great State of Louisiana.”

He watched the pigeon pluck. A beam of sunlight colored a spot of earth by the bird. Jason traced the light up between two spires. The mist running through the shaft of light was something fantastic. The bird kicked at a dirty pamphlet. Jason shooed the bird and picked it up. The top read in green letters: *Horrors of the Swamp*. Underneath a shirtless man with a complex musculature pulled the tail of a ten foot gator.

“A reporter is nothing. Nothing like the stature of the Louisiana Alligator.” Jason held the pamphlet above his head. “This noble beast would eat pigeons and reporters for breakfast. It is no pest!”

The sun warmed his back and shoulders. Jason walked up to the front gate. Steam rose from a sewer grate.

“It is no pest of the sewer. The tourists of these streets talk of the many caiman in drainage ditches and swimming pools, and shake with fear.” He paused for breath, adjusting his belt. “They suppose it is a mighty Louisiana Alligator, when caiman are actually a parlor trick once shipped up from the Amazon to sit in pet shops before bought, abandoned, reintroduced to the swamps.” Jason smirked, glancing from the corner of his eye. “Farmer’s children now hack the caiman with garden hoes.”

Jason took a sip from his mug. His Irish coffee was now tepid, but that was fine on a warm day. He held up the recorder.

“The reporter, like the caiman to the alligator, is an ersatz writer!”

A splatter of bird shit landed on the sidewalk a few paces away. Jason sneered into the canopy of an oak tree.

“The reporter purports itself to be a procurer of letters. It bears what it gathers from the garbage as if those scraps...mattered. A laurel brought to the benefit of humankind by a white dove. But the reporter, in fact, is a domestic pigeon set loose in the streets, vulturing down from balconies and up from gutters. It picks at the scraps and breadcrumbs -- and occasionally -- to their sheer and undeserving pleasure -- the corpse of a man’s reputation.”

Jason lit another cigarette.

“But the writer. The writer! He wants none of that. His search is for the essence, the aromatic, wisping rumination of what was, but also what could have been -- the world always still becoming!”

He wiped a drop of sweat from his brow. He leaned against a tomb. Between two crypts, the elderly couple approached. The man paused, turning to his wife. Jason began

to walk quickly down the street. The cemetery was too crowded. He noticed mud on his shoe. On the other side of the cemetery wall the man said to his wife, "I've seen him. He's that man. The one from the news."

Jason slammed the door shut and stood panting in the dark loveliness of his apartment. He should have known it was too soon to go out again, let alone to a place infested with tourists.

It'd been weeks since he pissed on the prostitute. These things happen in this city all the time. He didn't know she was down there in a rendezvous with the Mayor of all people. Jason should have expected the Mayor to cover it all up by throwing the attention toward him. No one had seen the Mayor with the girl. He made it seem like he saved her from a pervert. In retrospect, he would have shifted to the next window at the very least.

The window had lifted easily with one hand, and Jason held it above his head. The alley stood dark and silent. The brick and mortar across the way presented no balustrades, no windows. Not a witness to be found. A stretched rectangle of light framed his distorted shadow. Jason leaned forward, fishing through his unbuttoned nethers. It was winter. The breeze embarrassed him. He shook a little and squinted toward release. It left him like warmth from a dying star, streetlights flickering around the corner. He did not want it to end: the stream gleaming down into the blackness and splattering onto the already sodden ground. Curious ferns cultivated from the gutters at the top of the building.

Jason realized the voice of a female, already screaming. The alley was total blackness. He heard scuffling below: feet on pavement, someone being pushed against the wall.

“Shut up!” a man said in the blackness. Jason leaned further out the window. Everything below was shadow. The woman’s voice became muffled by a hand. She was being captivated by the foulest thing a man could do.

“Hey! Hey!” Jason yelled into the blackness. “Don’t you ravage her! I’m calling the police!”

Jason dug his phone out of his pocket and, still peeing, abused the screen with his hand until the EMERGENCY CALL came up. He held it up to his ear, thrusting his loins, still pissing, out the window.

Jason yelled into the phone: “There’s a woman being ravaged by a pervert!” Jason’s stream scanned the alley as he looked down into the black. “I’m above her. It’s so dark!”

Jason listened for the woman in the alley. The scuffling noises were now flung into the far corner of the alley. A trashcan overturned, bottles clanging.

“It’s piss!” the woman’s voice said, followed by shushing. The operator was still speaking into the phone.

“Sir, what is the location of the incident?”

“Cafe Lafitte in Exile! Come!” He hung up the phone. “They’re getting away!”

Jason stood, leaning out the window, listening to the alley. He hadn’t heard any sign of them for some time when a short, fat man with busy eyebrows (but balding at his

head and forearms) walked down the hall, pointing. He led two men with black t-shirts and biceps as thick as Jason's legs.

"That's the man who was snatching beers from behind the bar," the fat man accused.

"You have no evidence!" Jason yelled, ashing his cigarette out the window. When the bouncers grabbed Jason by both arms, he hadn't even shaken himself dignified. At the entrance of the bar the waist of his pants had folded around the tips of his loafers. He peddled, trying to inch his pants back up to a respectable distribution of coverage. He tripped, his feet dragging, and hoisted up by their arms. Jason became aware of the nauseous quality of staring at floorboards.

Outside the police, batons in hand, were standing with wide grins. A man in a suit stood near a squad car.

"That's the man who urinated on this poor woman," he said, gesturing loudly toward a pair of cheap stockings who stood shivering before a small crowd of blinking onlookers. Jason's memory had forgotten what he'd yelled in reply, although he was sure he'd kept yelling.

"He pissed on me," the woman said, her hair matted with damp, makeup smeared beneath one eye.

An officer turned to the man. "Mr. Mayor, are you sure. This the man who pissed on you as you saved that woman?"

"Yessir. Never could forget." The crowd narrowed their eyes toward Jason's current exposure. He tried to bend down to lift up his pants, but the officers were already on him.

In the squad car he'd heard the Mayor. "I heard her yell out, and then I ran in to see. He got me too when I pulled her away. He gets some sort of satisfaction from this kind of thing. He was just up there cackling."

Maybe the cops would have snickered more if it was actually a lovely joke at the tramp's expense? Or if they had not been feeding from the mayor's palm. Regardless, those policeman laughed, saying "*this guy, this bon a rien*" as the two officers cuffed him, writhing to pull up his pants: fallen like sails in port at his ankles. For their own amusement they'd kept him exposed to everyone -- including the smart-phone of a citizen who called the *Times-Picayune*. The headline said it all:

Man Caught Urinating on Woman for Sexual Pleasure

Then,

Mayor Woman's Savior from Pervert

And,

Pervert, Exhibitionist Called Police on Himself

It was what it was, but not what it seemed. Not a crime at all but the results of collective efforts beyond his control: his shortsightedness -- both literal and figurative -- he admits; but also the City's astounding inability to properly light its alleyways; the public's failure to pressure the City within the established democratic process, demanding such lighting; the Church's equal failure to curb the innate lust which propels all men forth to prostitutes who linger in said alleyways, undeterred by the light of scorn (and in many numbers); the various establishments throughout the French Quarter who offer a wide variety of alcoholic beverages, supremely made, yet coupled with a lackluster

distribution of available urinals. A man can't help having a bladder the size of a hummingbird.

Jason walked across his dark apartment and into the bathroom. He turned on the fluorescent light. In the mirror he saw eyes, blinking. Harsh swaths of dark beneath them. A new freckle on the side of his nose. He turned on the water, let it run over his hands until it was warm. He folded them together in a cup, collecting a pool which he held up to his face, holding his breath. He let the water trickle through his fingers and into the sink. In the mirror water dropped off the tip of his nose, the cut of his jaw pixelated with scruff. Jason wiped his face with towel and turned to the toilet, unzipping his pants. Yesterday had been his thirty-fifth birthday. He'd been a procurer of the law.

Jason turned on the light over the stove, which cast a bronze hue over his studio apartment. A thin frame of white light pushed out from behind the double-layered curtains of the single window. The place was shadowed and calm. He knew its smell: of himself, the wax on the floorboards, the fabric softener of his choice. Well appointed, yet unassuming. Life in his small hole was grand.

The apartment was a perfect size. In one open room he had his bed on one end -- his mother had sent him the headboard from Thailand when he got his first place -- along with his dresser and nightstands. On the other was a kitchenette, granite topped in a recent remodel. Between these two ends of the apartment was everything a man needed to live simply: a kitchen table for two, and a couch for non-slumberly leisure. Much better than his old place, which had too much idle room. This was an address of reputation, yet avoiding the moral repugnance of a house ten times his needs. He

accomplished this balance by occupying the newly-converted carriage house of Miss Linda Thibodeaux, who still resided in the main house, a grandiose antebellum affair (stately, albeit dated) which her former husband, George Bannon Thibodeaux, left her nestled sweetly in the heart of the Garden District.

Jason knew this neighborhood: the faubourg lines (Delord, Saulet, La Course, Annunciation), set low on the Mississippi, on old high ground south of St. Charles. Barthelemy Lafon crosshatched their tributary streets lined with crepe murtles, magnolias, and ancient oaks -- their limbs knobbed and twisted shadowed the streets in a display of noblesse oblige. His mother's family had been there since it was a city of its own, Lafayette. They were among the wealthy Americans who did not care to live in the Quarter with the Creoles, who bought the parcels of Livaudais Plantation put up their Greek Revivals, sheltered from the street by their gardens.

Had Buster been outside today? He was always pissing the floor. Jason glanced around. He hadn't seen him all morning. His food bowl sat empty next to the kitchen sink. Had he even been fed? Jason halted mid-pace on his way to the bowl. Was this Buster's day to die? Was that what was different? Buster was the last living remnant of his life before -- when he and Missy had been together. When he'd had a job.

He opened it and on top, saw the article selected from the *Times-Piqcayune*. The damn cut-out which Hal Rogers, once his best friend, had pushed forward to him from across his conference table. That was the day he had walked out from his own business. He quit, or was fired, one of the two -- maybe both. The last straw. *The last straw!* Hal, his partner in the firm, had said. What cliché. What stupidity. To what head was Hal referring? He saw no heap!

Jason stared at the glaring black print running across the grey page. Letters arranged into a ridiculous code as if every pigeon in the French Quarter had found it to spatter with shit. Jason had not known at the time that it would be the first straw. Things can be blogged! Then there was that page on the social networking site, the one that tracked all of the city's strange crime, *Forbidden Garden District*. There was a calamitous uproar. A call for moral retribution. The mayor comes forward as a witness. The whore tells a news station that Jason had paid her to stand there. The next thing he knew, the host of *America Today* was making graphs of the piss trajectory it would take to hit her, playing and replaying the video footage of his arrest in slow motion, and the Tennessee legislature decided to make some sort of fundamentalist law restricting how one can and cannot piss. All because of that first clipping from the *Times*.

Jason held down the red button on the side of his recorder, looking under the bed for the dog.

“There is nothing more sinister in the grand burlesque we call the human experience -- than the unsolicited observation of another's intimacies. A man viewing the mind's inner-most workings, when no one has willfully exposed them. What travesty! It makes me want to run into traffic!” His crimes were nothing unusual in New Orleans. Dixie Boheme. A city of lust and kink. The gutters of its streets wet with bourbon. No one would have turned their heads and longer than a glimpse, if not for the attention which came from outside the city: a Puritan nation blinking into Gomorra, sending in picketers by the busload.

“Note to self: develop this pigeon metaphor.”

Jason bent down slowly, hoping there wasn't a smashed beagle against the wall.

“Reporters bob their moronic skulls, while scribbling on notepads, then strutting about as if victorious, flapping the sleeves and waistcoat of flimsy, ill-fitted suits about the street, peppering it with a garish hue which can only be described as pigeon.”

He put his head to the floor, then held the recorder up to his mouth.

“Note: the word pigeon should be in italics.”

He lifted the dust skirt and peered under the couch, ear to the ground. Thank Jesus, Buster was smashed underneath, but of his own accord, the cute little shit flat against the ground, half curled against the wall with at least an inch of clearance above him. He wagged his tail. Two blinking eyes behind a snout, which let out a burst of moist dog breath. Jason held up the recorder.

“The dog is safe; it is not my fault.” He then looked at the recorder, and put it on top of the seat.

“Buster? Come here, boy?” Didn’t dogs respond better to calls inflected as a question? Their hearing was evolutionarily adapted to the shrill register of their own species, leaving the male human voice inaudible at its lower frequencies. The upward tone at the terminal word of his own sentence piqued the canine’s attention, so said *Living Southern*, not that he regularly read *Living Southern*.

“Buster?” The dog didn’t budge from where he lay. Fuck women’s magazines. Jason grabbed the recorder from the couch.

“Fuck women’s magazines.”

Buster peered out from the dusty floor, his snout against his tail, still wagging up against him. He blinked every time the furry appendage flecked his face. Jason didn’t want to drag him. Nor did he want to lift the couch and wait for Buster to oblige to his

wishes. It'd be days before Buster would lumber out from under it, Jason's arms straining. Jason walked over to the bag by the sink, and returned with a handful of kibble. Buster was uninterested. Jason went back to the kitchenette and pulled out a pan. He opened the fridge. The top shelf was bare except for a box of baking soda. The residue of a dark liquid stained across the back corner. On the lower shelf sat a few beer bottles stacked on their sides, a tube of cilantro paste, a couple cans of chunk white tuna, and the TV remote. He opened up the produce drawer: a bag of shredded cheese product and a molded-over lime. Jason took the lime with a barbecue tong and shoved it into the garbage disposal.

Jason heated the skillet and turned on the recorder, setting it on the oven vent.

“Multi-tasking is one of the glories of human cognition.”

He put a cube of butter onto the skillet.

“Buster? Here boy?”

He maneuvered the melting butter around the cast-iron surface.

“Hmmm. Back to the pigeon which thinks itself the dove of peace.” He grabbed a spatula.

“What counts as victory for this subspecies? Why, simply being in close proximity to anything of interest to the populous. Because gossip mongering has long replaced the news ... note to self: the news should be capitalized ... Gossip has long replaced The News, when The News once tried to replace the ignorance of those with little patients to discover the complexity human language affords.”

Jason threw a tortilla on the skillet. Then sprinkled cheese.

“To those with only superficial curiosity, the pigeon-man sold crumbs of what really happened, packaged into a simplified ethical dilemma.” The only time the Times-Picayune had produced anything which resembled journalism was after Katrina. Calling the nation toward the city’s plight. Every detail. The submerged homes. The thick film of dead sea creatures across the top of the aquarium. Criminals chained to street signs. Bodies in full rigor mortis on the highway.

He paused, putting bits of sandwich meat over the cheese. Then more cheese on top.

“Headlines. That’s what they are! Crumbs.”

He stuck another tortilla on top, and pressed it down with the spatula.

“Countless headlines to make us want more of The News.” He drummed his fingers against the countertop. In his mind, he conjured a brief history.

THE GERMANS RAVISH EUROPE.

THE RUSSIANS RAVISH THE PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE OF THE
INDIVIDUAL.

WE, LIKE THE RUSSIANS, CAN TRANSFORM THE IMPORTANCE OF
THE INDIVIDUAL INTO A WHISP OF CARBON ALONG WITH THE REST OF
EARTH, RUSSIANS INCLUDED.

TERRORISTS CAN FLY PLANES INTO US!

Jason put the remaining butter back into the fridge.

“Note to self: terrorist can fly planes into us. Research if this is actual headline? Surely.”

Jason flipped the quesadilla. Then remembered his mug. He reached across the counter and drank from it, wincing. It was tepid. He put several ice cubes in the cup, then poured in a bit more bourbon, swirling the cubes.

“But what was the news when it was still The News, crummy as it was. Albeit, less degenerate?”

Jason stood up and began pacing again, sipping from the mug. He grabbed a piece of paper from the table, then scribbled the words,

Note: terrorists can fly planes into us -- research if this was actual headline.

He continued his walk around the apartment, reciting the rest of it in his head.

But that was the news when it was still The News, crummy as it was. What does the everyman wake up to when enjoying his morning coffee now? Long answer: what he asked for when deciding that The News was boorish. The newsmen, the radio hosts, the televised solicitors of attention were forced to adapt, pandering to the concerns of the purely contemporary individual, revealing the short answer: gossip.

Then he spoke into the recorder, “That’s when The News, became about which celebrity has just done what, and whether or not it was perverted. Why? Because every person sitting at the kitchen table drinking their coffee and picking at the particles of burnt toast on their plate must search, inevitably, for some means to lift up their shoulders and start their day knowing that it could be worse -- and at least they, as obscure as their lives may be, have the quiet dignity of being an unremarkable member of the public. A

privacy cherished now that the news is no longer The News, and everyone is fair game, and the everyman is supremely thankful -- each morning -- that he is un-noteworthy, and thus unexposed to be spattered with pigeon shit because the filthy birds are dealing with something else entirely -- perhaps being chased by a terrier.”

Jason looked down at the clipping. He’d meant to throw it out for a month now. Since the *Times* had ignored his third and last set of corrections which pointed out the final pieces of context left unattended, but then thought he might broaden the conversation to the general direction reportage had been heading. Would it be more beneficial to add further historical progression to the sampling of headlines? Surely they wouldn’t mistake this for a treatise to incapsulate all of history.

He scribbled on a napkin.

Note: Possibly add headlines preceding WWII. Ex: MARIE ANTOINETTE, HEADLESS: CAN NO LONGER EAT CAKE.

He placed the napkin on the table and looked to the window. He, sadly, had been one of those individuals -- remarkable enough to pique the attention of the *Times*. He was a normal yet distinguished citizen caught in an act so estranged from public values -- inept as the masses are in facilitating even a brief chance at feeling empathy, impatient to the complexity of the ordering of events preceding *the* event -- that he found himself now, unquestionably worthy of scorn by all institutions inherently to blame. He slammed his fist on the table, then topped off his coffee.

He cut the grease-laden tortilla into wedges and selected a large one. He held it under the couch, just out of sight. A groan, a thump, thump of a tail, then shuffling underneath. A tug on the quesadilla and Jason pulled on it, a small chunk missing. Then

there was another groan, and a nose emerged from under the couch, sniffing. Buster squeezed further forward, nipping at the quesadilla.

Jason reached in and grabbed him, backing up and pulling the beagle, who hissed in protest, but nevertheless followed the quesadilla into the open floor of the living room.

“Yeah, thought you’d be motivated by this, pal.” Jason scooped him up with one arm, cuddling him like a baby-child.

“You better go outside for a pee break.” On the way out, Jason grabbed his coffee. Buster chomped on the cheesy thing upside down, the fat momma-otter, balanced in one hand. Jason juggled the flubbery, setting the coffee mug down on the floor next to the door. He grabbed the handle shifting Buster toward his chest. He closed his eyes, bracing himself for the white light that would soon flood in.

Chapter 2

Jason squinted, the spot behind his left eye afflicted by a galloping discomfort. The morning birds proclaimed nasty things about his mother. He stepped into the shade of a tree by the side of his carriage house, blinking. Buster let out a shallow burp, then sighed. The heat had dried most of the backyard's dew, leaving the grass stark. The air was damp and muggy. Across the lawn, the rectangular pool lusted toward him like the call of a mermaid. A statue of a small, winged child pissed into a fountain without shame. Behind it the leaves of Miss Thibodeaux's ancient magnolia reflected a dull sheen -- its flowers bumblebee laden, humming in full orgy.

Jason set down Buster.

"That dawg's surely done with this world." Miss Thibodeaux crouched in her garden tucked between Jason's deck and the main house. She wore a sunhat which stuck out over a tall patch of flowers. She stood up from her weeding, the grand-white house behind. It made her tiny. Her grey hair curled around her face and up against the brim of her hat.

"Morning Miss Thibodeaux, you old shameful thing of a lady." Jason turned away from her, shielding Buster from his landlord's words.

"It's not like he can understand me. That's right Buster, isn't it?" she said in sweet doggy-talk "we're gunna find you dead under my shed soon; gunna have to get the gardener to push you out with a broom stick."

Buster wagged his tail. He stretched across the flagstone.

“Or maybe we’ll have to do that to Miss Thibodeaux next month, won’t we boy?”

Jason patted his head, and Buster’s tail wagged expediently.

“Moan, *moan*. It’s the truth. You know it.” Miss Thibodeaux lit up a cigarette, tilting her head to blow the smoke out from under her massive hat. “Vet’s told you he’s need’n be put down.” The look in her eye was more sympathetic than accusative. She was right, the old bag amongst her flowers. Earlier that week Buster wouldn’t get out from under the bed. Jason took him to the animal hospital on Magazine and Louisiana. The vet diagnosed Buster with oldness. The quack.

“So pleasant this morning, Miss Thibodeaux.”

“I apologize. I’m not friendly until I’ve fully digested my breakfast.”

Jason stirred his drink, which now only tasted slightly of coffee.

“But you will bring him his sweet death, like the vet and the Lord want, won’t you?” She walked into the back of her house with her gardening basket. Jason followed.

“I would. I would just bring him the sweet death, but he’s got family.”

“Hmm. Hmm. Yes, this girl. Let it out, it needs to come out.” She sat down at the granite island in her kitchen and wafted her hands toward her face as if to usher in all of the chaos from inside of him, so to breathe out a solution. “This has to be the reason you’re such a mope.”

Jason hated when she asked about Missy. He stood on the same side of the counter, near her. Across him in the dining room stood a portrait of Jefferson Davis, framed by gold filigree. His eyes seemed so fierce, as those forgotten by history tend to haunt. Jason looked away. She was looking at him hard, hands now on her hips.

“C’mon.” she said, pointing her cigarette to the dining room. “Jeffy over there got your balls in a vice?” She put a hand on her cheek and laughed--ripe and flirtatious as a chardonnay, a half-empty bottle of Boone’s Farm sticking out of her flower basket. Then her face got serious and she put out her cigarette.

“I know what you’re going through sugar. George ran out on me too, the Cajun.” She took a swig of the wine and put it back, arranging the flowers around it. “He just walked out one night after his sixty-fifth birthday, only took the clothes on his back and his pistol. Left a note --said, ‘I’m leaving everything to you, darling. Won’t need money where I’m going.’”

Jason took the bottle of wine out of the flowers and gulped at it.

“Ho, now. That’s my breakfast.”

“So, what’d you do when he went off?”

“No, you have to tell me about this Missy girl now. It’s a trade.”

“Ha, no. I won’t play that game, ma’am. You tell me, and I’ll tell you about that woman I want nothing to do with.”

“Deal. Oh, I just hired a private investigator to find the coward, and he did.” She took a swig of the wine and looked at the Davis painting. “I’ve always hated that thing.” And then she pulled a feral brach from a flower stem. “Four months later I found his body. Very sad.” Suddenly she looked away, putting her hand up on her face.

Jason didn’t know what to say, so he put a hand on her back. She started heaving. He stood there, not sure when to take his hand off. She started heaving more and let out a snort of laughter. It was the church giggles.

“Wait.” Jason said, “I could have sworn you said your ex-husband lives in Houston, you *bon a rein*.”

“Alright. Alright.” She was pleased by her craftiness. “So I found his ‘body’ naked, in a shabby little apartment in Houston, laid up with a woman a fraction of his age. It was awful: a rat nibbling at a banana peel on the floor, the tramps with barely a sheet to cover them. Lice ridden, really. And I just looked at him and do you know what I said? I said, ‘Fair enough, if this is what you really want ... I’ll forget about you’ and he looked up at me, the wretch--eyeballs glazed by lust. He looked at me right in the eye, and said, ‘okay.’” She took a sip of the wine, her face still red from laughing. “And the house is mine now, without protest. At least a good banker he was, the Cajun.”

She held a flower up to her bottle. “This one’s red.”

Jason nodded in agreement. The flower looked like wine. But now Miss Thibodeaux had her eyes fixed for a story in return.

“Buster has a brother, Cougar.” Jason sighed. “Is why I can’t bring him the death.” Jason could feel the stares of both Miss Thibodeaux and Jeffy Davis, so he continued with what they wanted. “Missy, she has him.” Missy and Jason rescued Buster back when he was a pup, back when they were together.

“What kind of people name a dog Cougar?” She rolled her eyes.

“He’s a cat: John Cougar Mellencat. They’re separated, but they’ve always known one another.

“So when you two separated -- well I mean, when the Buster and the Cougar separated --you came here, and for the past month you and Buster have turned my carriage house into a sad-man hovel?”

“No. I came here when I left the firm, for a temporary hiatus.” He hadn’t seen Missy’s face in a year. Not two months before his incident, he’d learned that she and Cougar now lived with a prick of a man, much younger, in a tired little subdivision in Gentilly. What a sad little existence. He was probably a closeted queer, with his ironed shirts and trimmed goatee. Jason always wanted to ask him: *hey clean shirt, how do you get your shirt so clean?* But that didn’t make any sense, and even his own shirts were always pressed when he left the house.

“I hear tell she lives with a homosexual.”

“Well I think the two best reunite,” she pointed the bottle of wine toward the yard, “so that you can put that poor creature down.”

“But I’ve really always hated that cat.” Miss Thibodeaux gave him that damn look she gave. Like when he tried to explain the court mess and the hiatus. Miss Thibodeaux was still looking at him, the old crumpled thing in a brown cocktail dress at 10am, more of a chewed-up milk-dud than a woman. Missy would look at him like that if she came.

“What would we talk about?” He snatched the wine. It was almost finished. “What would we say while the two said farewell?” How long must a cat and dog be reunited before it’s time for one to die? It was all too messy, and he didn’t want Missy over there smirking. She’d think his lovely carriage house was the prison for his hoveled sadness. He preferred it. His lovely hovel. He looked at Miss Thibodeaux, and folded his hands resolutely.

“She lives in Gentilly now with a fag-and-a-half.”

The word “Missy” shined on his phone’s contacts page. Jason stood in the dark of his apartment. Buster sat on the floor and watched. Jason pushed the call button. It rang twice, then he hung up quickly. He smoked a cigarette, with the phone in front of him on the counter. He called again. Four rings and he was still looking at the screen. A squeaking voice came out of it, *hello?...*

He put the phone up to his ear.

“Hello? Missy?”

“Yes. What is it?”

“It’s me...”

“I know.” There was a flatness to her voice that darkened the pause afterward, made it crowd his brain. What can be said after that? “Is something wrong?” The same flatness made him want to slam the phone on the ground.

“It’s Buster...well...I went to the vet Wednesday and --”

“I can’t give you any money, Jason.”

“Dammit, Missy, it’s not that.”

“I see you’ve been talking to Hal.”

“What is it then?”

“It’s Buster...he’s, I’m going to give him the sweet death.”

“What?”

“Buster is dying. He’s old.”

Jason listened to the white noise of the phone.

“I’m sorry to hear that...cute little guy. How old is he now?”

“I wanted to tell you, before I put him down, you know? John Cougar is his brother and Miss Thibodeaux my landlady thought...”

He heard the water turn on. She always busied herself on the phone. She would turn on the water to fill up a vase or rinse a dish. Often Buster would lay by her on the floor on his back, and her hands full, she'd rub his belly with a bare foot.

“He misses you.”

“Jason, are you doing alright?”

“Yes. Fine. Fantastic actually.” He glanced around the room. “I have a new place in the Garden District. It's beautiful over here. Perfect houses and lawns--so green, you know I'm only a few moments from the Colonel's Palace. The property I live in is civil-war era. The crime rates in this part of town are considerably low -- which popular wisdom would attribute to the race distribution -- remember the days when that kind of talk could fly? You know, when you could say, 'It's a nice part of town, no blacks.' ... I guess people do still say that here...” his mind trailed off, his voice still pouring idiocy. At one point she found it charming, really: the idiocy, that is.

“Jason. That's not what I mean.”

“I need to go, Missy.” She turned off the water. He could hear her inhaling.

“Buy Buster a muffuletta for me, if he can still eat anything. Will you?” Missy had always given Buster the second half of her muffuletta. They would walk him down to Central Grocery on clear days, her hair pulled back, sunglasses perched on her head. When she said goodbye to Buster she'd even bought him one. He'd been nervous for days. All of her stuff was packed up and sitting by the door. He'd started ripping up pillows, peeing on the floor in protest. Since then Jason would drive him down to Central

Grocery on Sundays. He'd give Buster half and he would sit in the back of his Toyota licking the olive from the bun after the meat was gone. A few weeks ago Jason had walked up to the store and seen Missy entering. He waited across the street on a bench for her to leave. As she walked away carrying a bag, her hair was tied up as she had always done, but it was more copper now. She must have dyed it. Or maybe it was the light. He sat there wondering how it smelled.

"Wait. Missy?" he said into the phone, laying back, looking at the ceiling. "Will you say it? I just need to hear it. It will make me feel better."

"What?"

"I want you to tell me what you said when you left."

"Jason. I -- I don't think that's --" She sighed, and said with a wavering tinge to her voice, "You know it won't make you feel better."

Jason looked up at the ceiling, and set the phone on the floor by his ear.

"I know," he said.

He hung up. Buster sat near the door. He let out a moan, agonizing in Jason's embarrassment. He looked at Jason with shame, his head down -- like when Jason undressed in front of him.

"What now, Buster?"

Buster slouched his head down almost to the floor, looking up at Jason. He pushed his side against the wall as if to try and hide. He looked over, as if to say, *look at you. Look what you've done.* Jason stood over him. Buster looked at the space under the couch, then at the door. He gave it a timid scratch.

“Fine. Go. Leave me too.” Jason shoved Buster at the doggy door, which was latched. The dog rammed into it with a yelp and scrambled on his side. “Always overreacting.” Jason opened the doggy door and pushed Buster through it head first.

“Go, get!” He yelled through the door as he latched it back up. “Go, get!” he yelled again. “Just leave me!” He made himself another drink, had a cigarette on the linoleum of his kitchenette.

Buy him a muffuletta. Buy him a muffuletta! Like the one from Central Grocery, their first date, when she laughed at him and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I like your twisted point of view, Jason.” The sexiest damn thing a woman could ever say.

His cigarette and drink were both gone and he sat tearing up, teeming with regret. He flung the door open, calling for his lost companion, “Buster?”

The deck was empty. Nowhere in the backyard. Not under the shed. Through the kitchen window, he saw Miss Medina bumbling about. The stout Mexican cleaning lady who scrubs the oven and disposes of wine bottles. He always kept his distance. When they first met in Miss Thibodeaux’s kitchen, she looked at him funny, her eyes becoming sad.

“Tall men--Raul was six foot, six foot four--always dying early.”

She went on to explain how years ago her husband--Raul, God Bless Him--was a tobacco farmer in San Luis Potosi and one day, walking in his fields, collapsed of heat exhaustion and was eaten alive by ants. She did not know the word for ants, nor devour, so she pantomimed the process, pinching Jason up the arm while chanting, *to death, to death*. When her hand was on his clavicle, she paused. Jason stared. They both stood in a

quiet intimacy neither of them had solicited, like the Gulf--stinking and green--between them. She withdrew, holding her cheek.

“You call me Maria Lorena, if you want,” but the gesture was weak, and Jason never did. Always Miss Medina. After a while, not sure when, she only spoke to him in simple commands, usually repeated three times with urgency: “No, no, no., Yes, yes, yes., Take off shoes, take off shoes, take off shoes!” etc.

Standing on the patio, he looked through the kitchen window: she bent down in the kitchen; she was always scrubbing the oven.

“Miss Medina, have you seen Buster?”

He heard a faint, “No, no, no,” echo from the oven.

He found Miss Thibodeaux sitting with a new bottle, even riper. “That dawg’s surely gone off to die.”

“So you haven’t seen him?”

“Didn’t you hear me? That dog’s heading toward his impending death. Dog’s always know when it’s coming.”

“Where do you think he went?”

“I don’t know? Where do poor mutts go off in shame?” She thought for a moment, and raised a grey brow, “Houston?”

“Gah, you’re no help.” Jason went back into his search. A few tiny spots wet the pavement of the drive leading to the open gate. It had been years since Buster could walk without leaving a steady drip. Jason stumbled up the drive bent over, following the path of ingenious drops. At the street they turned north. At the corner of the block they disappeared where there was little shade. He kept on in that general trajectory.

Chapter 3

The street was bright; everything seemed angry. The road stretched on in a hot haze down toward the river, dotted by parked cars. Steam rose from cracks in the asphalt on the sides of the street. Jason ducked into a back drive. Buster probably wouldn't stay on the sidewalks of the wider avenues where shade was harder to come by. He poked around at a bush, calling out. Maybe it was best to go back to where he last saw Buster's piss drops. The guy probably couldn't have made it so far. He might have turned up another road.

Jason examined the empty street as it stretched, finally obscured by trees. He'd be better off looking for Buster with his car. He ran back to the carriage house, sweating. He called out occasionally, *Buster? Buster?* but did not bother to stop. He was going for speed. On his way back, the block or so that he'd just searched backtracked before him. The houses he'd passed presented themselves, pushing up from the hedges and front steps he'd examined. The austere houses of the Garden District, built by the French and British, who became antebellum Americans. The landed class, who could not see themselves living in the Creoled streets of the Quarter. That class who Miss Thibodeaux married into (her name had been Kowalski). He began to slow down in the heat.

Jason stopped, heaving. He wiped his brow and stood under a tree. It was a fig. Its delicate limbs reaching out over a hedge and above the sidewalk. Jason turned to look into the front gate. Not unlike his grandmother's house, the cobblestone steps leading up to a white veranda, detailed with scrolling woodwork. The windows looked out onto the porch, their ancient glass fixed in a languid swirl, framed by shutters. He could barely see them through the garden. That class of traditionalist who needed space, even when in the

city. Whose houses demanded a bulbous facade, grand as the plantations. In a place which needed hedges, looming willows, azaleas as tall as a man to keep the facades guarded from the gaze of unwanted eyes -- to whomever they may belong.

His mother had been one of them. Not a facade, but a girl propped up in a house obscured by greenery. Jason examined the scissor-cut grass in this yard. Was there a child unseen, lingering? His mother had left in search for something more than the yard which stretched out -- it was nothing more than the place between all things she imagined about the world and a Victorian porch. She had left more than the yard behind: her mother's ideas, that is. That woman who would stand behind him, dentures clicking in her sunken jaw. Beady eyes looking down on him, her body swollen with lace. His grandmother had many ideas. His mother would always say: your grandmother has ideas: the grandest of all, the one she never let go -- the wish for her daughter to marry none other than a second cousin. Her cousin!

When Jason stayed at his grandmother's house, she would point to his photo on the shelf in the parlor. It would never be the first photograph she would show him. She would circle through all of the photos, the paintings. She did this every time he came. *History*, she would say, *History*, when he came each summer; for Easter; for the feast at the end of Epiphany. His grandfather on the mantle -- young, he was just a boy -- Jason only knew him as a boy, in this painting mostly -- and his father sitting just above him, his mother too, and his sisters below. His grandmother would point at that painting, and tell him about where he came from.

"Your great grandfather once owned much of the city," she'd always said. She said it so much he'd found it hard to believe. "He kept it decent," she would say, jaws

clicking. “Not even decent. He kept it grand. But when he died, most of the neighborhoods were sold off by his accountants. Then the place went to the devil.”

Jason would sit and watch her as she walked from painting to painting. “This is where you came from,” she would say again, gesturing around the room. She would tell him about where he should have come from, gesturing toward the neighborhood, and then picking up a photograph, “See that handsome man? That’s your mother’s cousin in his uniform. They were in love. He died in battle.”

Jason always figured this was appropriate, that they should be in love. The man in the photo. He was so young when he died. He was very handsome. He did not look like Jason, his brows were heavy. He had a strange look in his eyes. They looked into some distance he could not know. They seemed impermanent. The world he viewed was meant for him only. Everything before it had been a precursor to what he would be at that moment. Everything thereafter would be legend. His pupils sat on the photo paper, black as periods.

“Jason,” his grandmother said, “do you know that when your mother ran off, she hadn’t been herself? That your father should have been someone else?”

His father, he learned, was not this man, and that was something wrong. Her mother had not run off before the marriage ... she had seen the death of her destined-husband-to-be as a silent new freedom. That’s what his mother told Jason, anyway. That’s what she had said when he told her he had bought Missy a ring.

Jason backed from the gate. He knew that kind of house. There was a fig tree in the yard by the side gate of his grandmother’s. Some places in the house smelled of

mothballs. Places where his grandfather once had been, and how the best of times it was filled with the scent of thyme, cayenne, bay leaves; his grandmother threw the best parties. He would run around as people rushed, getting things ready. Everything came out of the cabinets and into the dining room. At these times, there would be cake. He would run around, trying to figure out which tray held above his head was cake. During Mardi Gras, this was more urgent: he needed to eye it for every lump and wrinkle. For any sign that below the icing was the baby baked into the dough: to make him king! His grandmother's man would grab him from the kitchen, take him to the bath.

His grandmother said children were sticky. But during those parties he didn't have to take off his shoes at the door. Others, she would yell when he didn't, because shoes tracked mud and grime onto her Persians. He'd always had to be barefoot unless there were people there. Once, he heard someone ask her, ice cubes clinking in a glass: "And he just runs around barefoot?" And since then the rules changed. He didn't have to bother with leaving his shoes by the back door during her parties. He didn't have to take them off at all, even on the Persians in the dining room.

He'd always liked her dining room. He would sneak in because that's where everything was that he couldn't touch. The strange things he most wanted to touch had a name and a place. The candlesticks were from England, some of the china was actually from China! Most of it was from France. He'd thought for the longest time that the pictures of birds had been purchased on Audubon Street. His spiteful grandmother had purposely hung them so high he could only see them from a distance. It was agony trying to examine the feathers from across the table. His toes on the last strip of wood before the

carpet. Everything in that room was only for seeing, not for touching. Over time, he'd found great guilt in even looking at them.

Jason pulled the tape recorder out of his pocket. "To echo Sir Thomas Moore, the treasure that goes hidden is an immoral one. The king does not weep for a chest he believes to be buried in the ground, not knowing it has long been robbed. It is no loss to him. But what of the chest -- the coins in which -- go observed, but never counted? Never examined for the elaborate scrolling along their edges?" He then looked into the yard, up at the tree, the window above the porch. He thought of the trunk pushed to a corner of the attic, bearing his grandfather's shirts, his diaries. He pushed the button on the recorder: "My grandmother hid all of the things most precious to her."

Even the china was locked up most of the time. His grandmother had once caught him about to touch a fluted glass in the cabinet: it was covered in tiny roses. He wanted to know if the residual etch of a petal in crystal against the ridges of his finger felt as delicate as it must be. His finger was almost there, when he heard her steps, and sat down on the chair, staring into the mahogany of the china cabinet.

"Were you about to touch that?" Her voice echoed against the open glass door. Her dress stood blurred and shadowed, stretched with the swirls in the glass.

He didn't answer. He just looked at her reflection.

"That's what I thought," she said. "You know, the devil looks for little boys who touch things they aren't supposed to. He opens up the earth and swallows them whole."

He'd told this to his mother, who asked many things about his grandmother, as his grandmother did of her. They never talked when he saw them both. Most times when he

was dropped off, mother sat in the car while he stood by the side gate. He told his mother about how the devil devoured little boys. She laughed and put an arm around him.

“Do you notice how grandmother’s eyes have sunk into her head? How you can barely see them looking at you under wrinkles?”

He didn’t answer. This was a trick.

“Well, that’s what the devil does to people who say such things to little boys.”

Since then he took immense pleasure by the fact that he’d touched everything in that room that he could, even with the devil watching. His mother even took more pleasure. It was a fun game they had together, when they were apart. But once -- he hadn’t been careful -- fingerprints emerged on the candlesticks. His grandmother called him in the garden. She was standing by a tree.

“Someone has been touching the candle sticks,” she said, “Do you know who it was?”

He didn’t answer, but stood with his hands behind his back.

His grandmother pointed at a fig. It hung on a slender limb on the tree she’d been pruning.

“Would you like one?” she said.

He shook his head up and down. He’d always liked figs. His grandmother clipped the branch, and held it down to him.

He reached for the fig. It was ripe. As soon as he grabbed hold of it with both hands, it fell from its stem. He looked at it in his palms. It was just right. Speckled and plump. Dark. Purple veins ran up its body and into the tiny green closure at the stem.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?”

He shook his head up and down again, his palm closing around it. She stepped closer, her dress was a pattern of vinery and roses.

“Now,” she said, breaking a few fledgling branches from the limb, “did you ask me if you could touch it?” She was looking down at him, the vines in her dress became sinister.

She bent him over, pulling up his slacks to expose his calfs. She lashed at him with the branch. All he could see was grass. A fig leaf fell by his ankle. She’d long before taught him not to cry. He looked at the grass. It must have been noon. There wasn’t a shadow to be found in those blades beside his own. When she was done, he had a crushed fig in his right hand. Seeds stuck between his fingers.

“See what happened.” She turned him up, reaching down to straighten his collar. He examined the fingers. Rings held by knobby, wrinkled knuckles. They came up to his chin. A cold diamond pushed his eyes up to hers. “That’s what happens when you touch things you shouldn’t.”

His mother’s car pulled up the next day, a week early. He’d waited for it outside of the gate, under the tree. His grandmother was on the veranda, watching him until he got in the car. Jason’s mother waved before she drove off. The next time he went to his grandmother’s, Jason’s mother convinced him by offering a surprise for when he came home. But only if he was good. Only if his prints stayed on the tips of his fingers. Only if he didn’t cause any trouble and she didn’t have to come and pick him up early. The week had been excruciating: trying to read the mind of that woman. Following all of the rules which always served to tempt him more. And he would have something at home when he

got back. It could be a stupid surprise, which made him mad at his mother. But it could also be something that'd make it all worth it. A gambling game it was, behaving.

That's when he'd got his first puppy. A beagle he named Stanely. Stanely was there in a box, ready to lick his face when he got in the car.

Jason walked up the side of the carriage house. Miss Medina stood over by the shed with a hammer, artfully smashing up a garbage sack full of wine bottles. The shrill clanking of the glass put him in a state of real discomfort. He was suddenly aware of how his T-shirt stuck to his chest and shoulders.

In his apartment he wrestled with the shirt. He didn't know why that house had him suddenly reminiscing. Maybe it was the drink. That house was a simpler house. Nothing like his grandmother's. He hadn't been there in years. His mother had decided to sell. She said the house had pinned her down, made her pace the hall late at night. Now that he thought of it, the last time he'd been there for any significant time was at Tommy's funeral. Had it really been seven years since he'd been there? They'd hosted the reception there. They greeted everyone in the main hall, as Tommy's mother had stood in dining room, looking at the Audubons.

Jason dropped the T-shirt on the floor. He unbuckled his belt and let his pants fall. He then stood in front of the window unit in only his underwear. He flapped his arms drying the sweat on his arms and in his pits. From his wardrobe he pulled out the clothes he'd readied for bringing Buster to Missy. A blazer he'd worn on his first date with Missy.

Only a little dusty. It fit him tightly at the stomach. A crisp seersucker, cool in summer but stately. Necessary for a city like New Orleans, where the Mississippi breathed a hot mist. It, of course, wasn't that cool. Nothing could be in the heat of this place in summer. He'd also worn it when he showed his mother the ring he'd bought. When he announced his plans. The blazer had been hot as hell, his pits swelling with stink underneath. But he had to wear it then, when he thought it was appropriate for the occasion. His sweat was all he had thought about at dinner, sitting on his grandmother's porch -- now his mother's -- as she sat across from him. The table stripped of everything but two pieces of tiramisu and a bottle of pinot. He'd thought of how Missy had once asked a waiter if they had *Tiramasus*, but he'd never had the heart to correct her. He just told her later that he didn't really like Italian restaurants.

He was from a family that had afforded him a view of the world, an education and scrupulous eye for refinement. At least that's what his mother said when looking at the ring. She said it was nice, but her nostrils flared. She had the same tone when speaking of Missy.

"She is nice," she took a sip of the wine, "but I never thought you'd want to marry a girl from that world."

He'd been confused. Missy wasn't a girl from The District. She was self-made. She was from Arkansas for Christ's sake. His mother should love this. Missy's people were poor farmers of the Ozarks. They didn't have two pennies to rub together. Her parents were probably cousins in the most unintentional sense. She wasn't in school to find a husband. She wasn't rich. She was smart: the currency of modernity. She was

going to be a lawyer. She didn't put on airs. She put peanut butter and corn syrup on her pancakes while editing her amicus briefs! This was fantastically authentic.

His mother had listened to him, but he wasn't sure if she'd heard what he said. She looked at him.

"It's not that. It's that ... her life is so unexamined."

"It's fine ..." she'd said later. "She's a nice girl. I trust you, as my son -- that your decision is well examined." She'd put her napkin on the table. "How is your father?"

Jason had buttoned his shirt when his phone let out a shrill ding on the kitchen counter. He walked over and looked at the screen.

Missed Call: Missy

1 New Voicemail

He stood in his underwear, looking at the phone. He pecked at the screen and held the phone up to his ear. The voicemail began. It was just the heavy, uncomfortable silence from before. She'd probably just been put on voicemail and hung up. But then he heard an inhale:

"Hi, Jason. It's me." There was a pause. "I, I was just thinking, and maybe I do want to see Buster. I know it's a strange situation, but I feel like we might owe this to ourselves ... you know?" There was an unrecognizable clanking in the background. "Just give me a call back when you get this." She let out a sigh. "Just give me a call. I hope I'm not too late."

The voicemail cut off. Jason held the phone in front of him, looking at the screen. Then he rushed across the apartment, taking the blazer off of the counter and slipped it on, adjusting the lapel. It fit tightly around his stomach. He slipped on his house shoes

and ran toward the door. He paused at the handle, realizing he'd yet to put on pants. He put on the pair of kaki's he'd been wearing before, over his shoes, as he pulled the keys out of a pocket.

Chapter 4

Jason's Toyota SUV crept down the streets, windows down.

"Buster" he cried aloud. "Buster?"

He was already in the busier part of town, but the street was rather empty. At a stop sign, a group of twenty-somethings emerged from a restaurant into the late morning, sloshing plastic margarita glasses. Jason pulled over to the side of the road, and sat with the car idling. Music from a live band blasted from the restaurant's front door and the windows looking onto the patio. The group stood on the sidewalk, lighting cigarettes and speaking to one another in the out-sized voices of drunken youth. One of the men in the gaggle put his friend in a headlock and was pushed back, bumping into his lady's margarita. There was a crispness to their frenzy. They would soon be missing these days.

He watched the group with a heavy kind of want. He and Missy and Tommy and Hal and all of the rest would wander around the district, drinking on a Sunday afternoon. They would end their days in summer on the slanted roof of the house they rented. Almost every day of their last year of law school he and Hal had sat on the roof of their apartment, drinking whiskey and smoking cigars, talking about their life after they graduated. They would start a firm. Their families both had the money to get it started. They would bring in others, Tommy would be a partner if he brought in enough business. On the roof was when they got the idea for the house boat. Buying a lot to dock it, and having a place outside the city. He hadn't been there in years. No one had. He owned it now. Missy bought out as part of the divorce. Hal and his wife did after Jason left the firm. Had everything sorted out and accounted for when he slid that paper across the

conference table. Hal was always one for planning. Anything to throw him off, and he'd stand there, nervously pulling at the hair behind his ear, pretending nothing had happened at all.

The night Tommy came out, Hal had stood not looking at anyone. Tommy had slammed the door and everyone waited as he walked up the road. Jason shifted forward, and everyone turned to him.

“Should we go after him?” No one replied. No one even looked at him or said a thing until the ignition of Tommy's car turned in the night, headlights behind the brush. The houseboat speakers had been turned down all the way, and filled one side of the room with a hushed white noise.

Hal pulled the tab on a beer can. “Well, I didn't expect it to happen like that,” he said, shrugging as the beer swirled, foaming against the inside rim of the glass. He rubbed his index finger behind his ear and stuck it into the head. They all watched the hissing foam die down. Missy stood up, steadying herself on a chair. Her eyes were red and Jason wanted to say something to her. He'd been distracted. He didn't even think to look at see how she was taking it.

She walked over to the speakers and turned them back up. Billy Joel sang out into the room:

“Workin' too hard can give you a heart attack-ack-ack-ack-ack-ack”

And with the symbols and music everyone started talking again.

I always knew it!

Where do you think he went?

Do you think we know the guy?

I'm kind of grossed out just thinking.

Missy stood in the corner by the entertainment center, picking at a nail. She looked up suddenly and leaned over Katherine Hundley to grab her purse.

“Are you okay, hun?” Katherine said, putting a hand on her wrist. Jason started to push through the people in the room. When he got to the bunk hall she was shutting the door of the back cabin.

“Missy,” he yelled over the noise.

“Fuck you,” she yelled slamming the door.

“Missy, let me in,” he said with his face against the door, turning the locked nob. He couldn't hear anything but the music and voices in the other room. He pressed his shoulder against the door and pushed it in, a splinter of fiberboard hit the ground by his leg.

“What are you doing?” she yelled, rifling through her purse. She pulled out her phone. “I'm just calling my sister. Leave ... just leave me alone. God.” She looked up at him with drunken anger, a strand of hair in her face.

“Missy, don't,” Jason said. She scrolled through her contacts. “You should wait.”

“Can you believe it?” She pressed a button on her phone, and waved him out holding the phone to her face.

Jason wrested the phone from her hand and hung up.

“Get the fuck away,” she said, kicking at his legs as he held the phone above his head. “I need to tell Alice.” She stood up on the bed and grabbed his arm.

“Missy.” He grabbed the phone with his other hand and held it away from her. She started kicking at him again. “Missy, stop.”

She stood panting, both hands around his wrist.

“You can’t do this. Let him tell them himself.” She let go and stood there.

“So what? They’re my family too ... I grew up with him.” Her eye makeup was smudged, a few strings of her hair stuck to her lip.

“Give a man his dignity, Missy. At least for tonight.”

She stepped back on the bed, letting go of his arm. Jason lowered his arm, holding the phone at his side. She looked down at blankets and then stepped off the bed.

“Are you better now?”

She looked up. Her eyes were wild. “Fuck you.” She grabbed the phone, and Jason reached for it again.

She slapped him -- all the power of her torso behind it. A white flash rimmed his vision.

“You bitch,” he pushed her onto the bed, grabbing her wrist and lifting his other hand in a fist. She stared back at him, a look of genuine confusion on her face. She yanked away from his grip and scrambled to the back of the bed. She curled up against the wall and held a pillow to her face. The song in the other room ended. He could hear her whimpering into the pillow. The music started up again. The Billy Joel song was playing on repeat. People sang along. The phone lay on the floor. When he thought to pick it up, he realized he still held his fist above him. He bent down and put it in his shirt pocket. He straightened and shoved both hands into his jean pockets, walking to the door.

“He didn’t give me any dignity,” Missy said bitterly through the pillow. Jason stopped, his hand on the nob. “I was just sitting there, talking to Katherine and then I hear

him yelling at Hal. Then at the crowd.” She breathed heavily into the pillow. “Like I was just someone in the back of the room.”

Jason couldn't look at her. He took the phone out of his pocket. He turned and tossed it on the bed near her feet. He opened the door and walked out.

Jason sat, twisting the rubber lining on the steering wheel of the Toyota. He'd never hit Missy. He could honestly say that. He'd raised a hand to her, sure. But never before had he wanted to hit a woman, so he hadn't known what it was like to resist. And in that moment he was so glad he didn't, felt guilt just for having reflexes. He'd never thought of himself as a man with such capacity. Sometimes, he imagined it otherwise. His thoughts weren't often that dark, but sometimes he even longed for it. He often thought of Tommy waking up the next morning in that man's arms, Tommy's nose and forehead brushing the hair on his lover's chest. Then Tommy would reach for his phone to check the time, his lover pulling him back into bed. Tommy stood there, naked: the voicemails, the texts from his cousins, his sisters. He would not hear from his parents for months.

Jason could have been the man who walked out of that room and joined them all, arms locked, holding up their drinks as they sang.

“Mamma. If. THAT'S. Movin'. Up. Then, I'mmmm ... MOVIN' OUT.”

And he would join Hal, standing on the couch playing an imaginary saxophone, and with the last words of the song, Jason would throw the phone out the window and into the swamp, everyone clapping and cheering.

“Thank you. Thank you. You guys are awesome,” the lead singer of the restaurant band said above symbols crashing an applause. They had just finished a set. Jason stared

into the dim windows. A man can't even look for his dog on a lovely morning without all of this racket. Jason put the Toyota in park. It lurched as he let his foot off the break. He slammed the car door as he got out, marching toward the restaurant. He stood in the middle of the street.

“Hey, fuckers!” he yelled. The hostess and a man with a notepad and an apron looked up from behind a counter just inside the open door. A group on the patio turned their heads.

“Yeah, I'm talking to you!” They two employees stood wide-eyed and blinking. “This music is obscene! It's trash. You're disturbing everyone with this lyrical catastrophe.” The man with the apron walked briskly into the restaurant, disappearing behind the doorframe.

“Fuck you,” someone yelled from the patio.

Another person yelled out, “I love this song.”

Jason turned in the general direction of the patio. “Billy Joel is a hack and the band can't even get close to his level.”

A fat man in a black shirt walked out the front door, followed by apron guy. The band was starting up again.

“Hey, brother, you got a problem?”

“I'm just trying to find my damn dog,” Jason yelled, and walked back to his car. In the rear-view mirror he saw the group of twenty-somethings half-way down the block. Jason pulled out of the spot. The bouncer watched from the sidewalk, arms folded across his chest, as Jason backed down the street.

He pulled up to them and parked the car by the curb across the street. A few glanced at him, looking away immediately. They walked past a bum who lay with his head bent down, sleeping. Most of the group ignored him. One boy made a game of hopping over his legs. The man didn't stir. Jason wanted to go out a check his pulse.

Tommy had been beaten in the early hours of the morning, left on his lover's porch. A waste-management worker found him at 7:30 am. He'd crawled into the yard and collapsed. All the others who had passed him assumed he was a homeless man, a drunk, passed out with his face down on the steps. Jason visited Tommy in the Tulane Medical Center. Missy wanted to but would explain how she had too many projects at work or her mother was unwell. She always gave such ramblings while holding back tears. Jason went every three days for all those months; would sneak cold beers for Tommy in his briefs. Even snuck in Buster under a trench coat -- all the nurses knew, but nodded him up despite. All the others came no more than three times.

"Buster!" Jason yelled out, looking around the road. "Buster!" Of all things, he wasn't going to let his dog die out here alone.

"I'll kill you Rett," the girl with the spilled margarita said, mimicking stab motions with her free hand and running up ahead of him.

Jason pulled his car out and backed up the street, yelling out to the kids.

"Hey, hey you guys!"

A few glanced up, stopping: their smiles fading a bit. They looked back up the direction they were walking and kept on.

“Hey, excuse me ma’am,” he said to one of the girls who wore large sunglasses and had her black hair in a ponytail. She started walking a little faster. Jason began to back up his truck, keeping parallel to her on the street.

“Excuse me. Have you seen a beagle around here?”

One of the young men (it was Rett) jogged a few paces up to her, and put his arm around her shoulder.

“Lay off creeper!” he yelled, smiling. A few of his buddies suppressed laughs. The girl glanced at him with a playful scold.

“No. I’m looking for my dog!” Jason yelled.

The young man exchanged glances with his buddies, still snickering.

“Yo. If you’re gunna try and get girls, shoot for your own age.”

The group of boys erupted in exclamations: *damn son, burn, you tell ‘em*. The friend in front of Jason’s heckler bowled over, holding his stomach.

Jason slammed on the breaks.

“Hey, Rett,” Jason yelled. The man turned, his face turning to cautious embarrassment behind his brass rimmed sunglasses.

“What?” he said, looking from side to side. Then taking a step toward the truck.

“I was just going to politely ask your friend if she saw my dog. He’s lost. So why don’t you go and fuck yourself on a barren mountain?”

With this the boys burst into laughter. The girl under Rett’s arm pulled free and cackled.

“You’re awesome, man!” one of the guys yelled. “Let me shake your hand.”

He walked up to the car and extended a palm.

“No, really,” he said.

Jason shook his hand.

“So he’s a beagle. Real old. Have you seen him?”

“Hmm. Let me think.” He put a hand on his chin. “Hey Rett.” The guy turned to his friends on the sidewalk. “That girl you fucked last night. She was a beagle, right?”

“Fuck you, John,” Rett yelled. John went back over to his friends, slapping all of their hands but Rett’s.

Jason was tired of these imbeciles. He would fight them if he had the time, or if Rett didn’t have such youthful dexterity made obvious by a rather large chest and presumed fighting prowess. Why can’t young adults these days have respect for a man’s dog love?

“Hey, wait a second,” one of the girls said.

“Does he have a white spot on his ear?”

Jason looked at her. “Yeah.”

“And he’s real fat?”

“Have you seen him?”

She walked up, holding out her phone.

“He’s on the Nancy’s Fancy Boutique page.”

Jason leaned out of the car to look at the phone. On the screen was a picture of Buster standing on a sidewalk, looking at whoever took the photo from inside a shop window. A caption read below the photo:

“Saw this critter come up to the window like he was want’n to shop! Anyone lost a beagle?”

“Where’s that shop?” he asked the girl.

“Hmm. Let me check.” She started scrolling down the screen. Then she started pecking at it.

A car honked behind him.

“I’m dog searching!” Jason yelled back, slapping the side of his car, then waving the car around him. It snuck by, and the middle-aged woman in the car gave him the finger.

“It’s on Canal and Felicity.

“How’d he get that far?”

“Look. It’s only about three blocks.”

“When was that posted? You think he’s still over there?”

“Wait. No. The woman said he walked off before she could give him a biscuit.”

“Come’on Allie,” someone in the group yelled. “Quick talking to him. Another car honked past.”

“Hold on!” she yelled. The group started to walk away.

“Hey, creeper,” Rett yelled. “Give up. You know it. Your dog’s dead on the side of the highway. The garbage man’s probably thrown him in the dump.”

Jason watched the kid turn and walk away. He stomped on the gas pedal; he wanted to meet this fucker eye to eye.

Jason whipped forward, nearly hitting his nose on the steering wheel, then slammed back into the headrest. He was struck by a certain pressure behind his eyes. The street before him narrowed from the edges with a dark haze, then widened back again to its normal state. All of this was accompanied by a resplendent clamor that he only

recognized after it was over. Jason took a deep breath. A shrill, undulating whine let out from behind him. Jason looked out the door.

“Glory be. That was fantastic,” he said to the windshield, holding out his arms.

“What happened?”

Jason glanced around, and opened his door, looking back. He couldn’t see anything, but the back of his truck was hitched up slightly.

“Shit, man. You really fucked it,” Rett laughed. The others howled too.

Stepping out of his car, Jason was able to make sense of it now. The back bumper of his truck was resting on the hood of one of those little European-style clown cars: its headlights flashing underneath his car, the siren whaling. The door opened and a woman got out, her mouth open, incredulous. She looked at the car, then at him, then at the car, and let forth a loudly uttered rant of questioning:

“What the hell did you do that for? What do you think you are doing? Why on Earth? Are you drunk?”

This all made sense now. Jason had backed up into her. He stared her down.

“You rear ended me!”

“What?”

“The law says you’re at fault. Anyone who rear-ends someone is universally at fault.”

The woman’s face contorted with disgust. This is how she probably looked reading the newspaper.

“But you backed up!”

“What? That is ridiculous! Why would I drive backward! Did you hit your skull?”

She looked at him confused. His accusation had been rhetorical, but he started to wonder if she had, in fact, been concussed.

“No. I was driving, and you were blocking the road. I had to stop. Then you rammed backward. I couldn’t move!”

Some of the kids on the curb started to take photos with their phones.

“This is great,” one of them said as Jason walked up to the woman.

“Did you black out before the accident? How is your blood pressure? Any history of cardiovascular problems?” Jason paused for a moment, looking her up and down, then said: “Dementia in the family?”

“I have witnesses. I’m calling the police!” she said, fumbling in her purse.

By the time she found her phone, and dialed 911, the twenty-somethings had scrambled. The woman looked for them, but the only person on the street was the man sitting on the sidewalk by a fence (ratty jeans, shirtless, wearing a winter cap). He was leather-faced with a long distance stare.

Jason sat in the front seat and put the car into drive. This woman was not going to impede his dog-finding. Time was of the essence. There was little more to be discussed, anyway.

Back home, Jason backed his car into the drive, making sure to pull to the side of the carriage house so that it would not be visible from the street. He assessed the bumper.

Chapter 5

Somewhere near, a power hammer controlled everyone's steps. Their blinking. The pace of their hearts. Shrill metal on metal. Loud and crisp. The kind of sound for blacksmiths. Each strike echoed briefly against the sides of buildings downtown, then left the street haunted by a comparative silence. Like snow. Only for it to be interrupted by another sudden clang.

With each strike Jason closed his eyes, wincing. He couldn't help it. After the first few times it rang, he tried to keep them open. So did the others on the street. It was no use. A woman in front of him scanned the wide concrete avenue and put her hands over her ears, her purse dangling from her elbow.

"What is that?" she yelled to her friend, as if a Roman pleading to the Huns to be driven out of civilization. Jason didn't have any success on the street. The shop owner had said she hadn't seen Buster for some time. She said he kept walking toward the Quarter. Jason didn't even know where that was from here. That noise!

A suited elbow bumped into Jason, nearly knocking him into a bench. Everyone was walking faster. Jason couldn't tell if it was getting louder or softer. The sound was so stark and fleeting; it was impossible to know if he was walking toward it or away. Between the strikes he found himself holding his breath. He started walking faster with the crowd. As they walked, the hammer strikes made everyone freeze, both feet on the ground, their strides in full span. As soon as the sound was gone, echoing against the street, they'd continued moving.

Ahead, a woman pointed to a fenced lot. Above the chain-link towered a mound of earth. A few steel beams jutting up. A bus lumbered up to the curb, lowering itself

with a hot, mechanical sigh as its doors opened. Jason stepped in, fumbling for change. The bus driver turned to him, yelling through the noise.

“You can’t board the bus with that margarita.”

He stepped back and passed the crowd trying to get on. He threw the margarita in a trashcan. The plastic cup hit the side of the bin with a shocking clang.

The bus was hot, saturated by a collective sweat. Jason sat next to a woman who waived an asian-style folding fan. She gave him a grimace.

“Fuck you,” Jason said, turning to look out the window, hands folded in his lap.

Everything was lovely. The voices, the timid pattering of machines, dishes clanking in the restaurant kitchen, laughter! a bird on the telephone wire. The city went by him in pastels. He wanted to say *hello, hello!* to everyone who passed. Vines hung low from the balustrades of a building across the street. What loveliness: the lackadaisical backdrop. A cup of cappuccino and an Old Fashioned on a wrought iron table, napkin in his lap. God, it was like love! The turrets of the St Louis Cathedral lifting above the city, the street cars, the fruit stands. A white stage-coach rode by, the driver with his top hat. Even the sweat on everyone’s foreheads glistened.

“There is nothing greater than ice in an expertly made drink and the leisure of watching the world go by,” he said into his recorder. “The downfall of our society is that we no longer spare time for thought ... unadulterated by necessity.”

Jason wrapped his half-eaten muffuletta in a cloth napkin and tucked it into the inside pocket of his blazer -- in case he were to pass Buster unawares, who could then

follow the scent. Lunch had been lovely, but he had a dog to find! He looked around for the waiter.

“Where has that man gotten off to?” he said into the recorder. Then looked at it, smiled to himself, and set it down. The waiter stood nearby, talking to a group of young women. He held his order pad underneath his arm.

“Where has my waiter gone?” he said, projecting to the patio. He held up his open palms, and looked from left to right, pantomiming his query.

The waiter looked up. He bent down and said something to them and shrugged. The group laughed and looked over at Jason as the waiter approached.

Jason nudged the check at the edge of the table.

“I’ll have this back out to you sir,” the man said, smiling through well-trimmed scruff.

Jason took a sip of his drink. The sidewalk had become spotted with raindrops. But it is so bright? He stood up and bent over the rails which guarded the patio, leaning out from under the awning. A large, dark raincloud loomed over a section of sky directly above him and to the west. The rain wouldn’t last too long. He would have another drink as it passed.

The waiter was at the table next to Jason and had just unloaded a tray of drinks. He waived him over.

“I’m very sorry to bother, but could you add one more whiskey to my bill? I’d like to wait out the rain.”

The waiter hesitated for a moment. “Sure thing, sir.”

“Thank you so much,” he said, “and by all means take your time.” Jason would reward this young man with a swollen tip. He looked back up at the cloud, and then scanned the skyline. A red billboard caught his eye. It hung on a building a few blocks away, one of the taller ones at the skirts of Canal Street. The sign read in gold lettering: Chase, Fisher, Trischman,

He turned and scanned the patio -- a hand on the back of his neck, embarrassed -- but no one noticed him. Then he looked back at the sign, reading through each gold word again. He walked back to the table, and picked up his drink which was now mostly ice. He downed the liquid and sat down and folded his arms.

He was glad for this new development. Why, wouldn't it make sense for the firm to rebrand? He'd always been telling them to rebrand. Almost every partner's meeting. And if they were wanting to cleave themselves of his reputation, it was only fitting for them to take his recommendation to heart for once. Obviously they would have started with taking his name off the firm. Even if it had only been two months since he left. Hal probably made sure to strike it from the letterhead the next day. He wouldn't know, he through all of their letters away without opening them. His lawyer got copies anyway. The time it took him to sell his house, it also took them to get a new advertising plan. This, Jason decided, was good for both parties involved. He certainly was glad to have his break. If ... when they eventually ask him to come back, he would have to demure. The waiter placed the new drink on his table and walked away. Jason swirled the large cube. He sat for a moment watching the ice swirl. He pulled the recorder out of his pocket.

“Look up the best ways to demure,” he said into it.

He sipped the drink, and looked out onto the street. It was starting to drizzle more heavily now. His job hadn't been unbearable. It hadn't even been bad. Sure, there were times when he would think things like, *my job isn't bad; it's unbearable*, but those utterances were always in the fervor of a particular moment. That came along with the business. He liked the dailiness of it. It didn't drag him down too often. There was plenty of variety -- it's just, he wasn't thinking as fluidly then as he was now. Thinkers need freedom from routine. It was quite dull.

He would go to the office at nine thirty. After reading his emails, he would have a few appointments. At least one a day. At these appointments ... they were something. His line of work was something, for sure. He had to explain this to his secretary, Bessie, when she first came to the firm from Hugh Vonnegut's practice not three blocks over. She was so touchy at first. During her interview he had seen how easily thrown off she was. He sat across from her. She'd declined a drink.

"Bessie, are you uncomfortable with the word *cunt*?" he had asked. She reeled!

After some pause, she said, "I'm not sure how to respond, sir."

"Well, you'll have to get used to it if you want to work with me," he said, taking a drink of bourbon. She looked at the door, then started to fumble with her things. The room was silent for some time, except for her trying to grab the leather strap of her briefcase. "Bessie," he looked her in the eye. "It's a word that is thrown around a lot by clients during the divorce process." His clients would often cry and, or curse. Typically, the sobbing and, or cursing was audible from at least ten feet from his office door. This was something she should be able to take.

“They come to me to display their most erratic temperaments. I promise they are stable, considerate creatures most of the time. A generous handful of them, anyway.” He then took another sip and put his feet up on the desk. “There was this one man. He went right into my office and before I could shut the door, he yells, ‘That cunt!’ and he looks at me sober as the Donner Party’s last mule, and he says, ‘What’s with outer space? What are we even doing there anyway?’” Jason lifted his eyebrows. “Sound’s crazy, right?”

Bessie nodded.

“But the thing was, he was having what I call a divorce attack. Took me forever to figure out his puzzle; this guy had paid to have a star named after his wife when they first got engaged, as a gesture, you know -- *of love* -- they had sent a certificate and everything. They bought a telescope and set it up on their balcony. He tried and tried to find the star; they both did. A month in, he realized it was a scam. Those stars, you couldn’t even really see them. NASA and the Russians had already named them with some number, and that’s what they used. Not her name. The numbers the website used didn’t even match up. The company didn’t even put her name on their website. The website hadn’t even been updated since 1998. He never told her this; they’d already bought a telescope online; she had already fallen in love with the idea of it.

“So they spent all this time looking for the star. Trying to find it. And he finally convinced her it’s this one star. A small, wimpy one ... so it was convincing. Nothing famous. And they set the telescope so that it always pointed there. According to a pamphlet they printed off of the website, they could make adjustments so that they could always go out on their balcony and see this star through the telescope. The star, turns out, is called 15735099, or something like that -- I don’t know, I’m not even approximating

here. I'm completely full of shit -- but this star has some number and it's definitely not even the one that's named after her. If there is one."

"But he just couldn't tell her, he told me. On nice nights they would go out, and knowing it was a lie didn't really bother him. He said he liked it -- seeing her all excited about it, and how it got her teary-eyed and she said the sweetest things as they lay by the telescope. They were about to be married, and wanted to start a family. What do you know: she found out she was pregnant a few weeks before the ceremony. They got a little house on a nice street. The first day he was gone after they moved in and she set up the telescope in the back yard. He got home, and she brought him on the back porch after dinner, her hands around his eyes. "Look," she says! but, she can't find the star. He'd have to do it. He found it before. He felt sick as a dog. He spent a week just going through the moves of making it seem difficult to find another random star. He made a production of it. A few nights he stayed up late in the dark, looking blankly at the star chart in the cold, tinkering with the telescope, just so she'd believe it. It had taken him over a month to figure it out the first time. He needed to make it believable. On a Sunday night they lay out on a blanket and he rubbed her belly.

"Their kid didn't make it past seven months in the womb. They had a Catholic funeral. They needed to move on. They needed to keep trying, you know? That's what the husband kept saying -- he kept saying it to me at least: "We needed to move on; I need to move on. It's been a year," he said. But the wife, she insisted that they get a star named after what they were going to name the little boy. That's what started it all. The divorce, that is. She would mention it, tentatively at first, as if it was just a whim, but

then at dinner after long silences, or while they both lay awake in bed. He'd ask her why, and she'd say because it would mean a lot to both of them.

“Once he knew she really wanted it, he stayed late at work, studying star charts. Learning how to calculate. He ordered books and journals on astronomy. They piled up on his desk as he tried to figure out a system that was so complex she wouldn't be able to tell. Imagine that guilt. Imagine that. Coming to bed late and laying down with her, your chest against her, hand on the curve between her shoulder blades, the loveliness of her spine, your breath on her neck, smelling her hair. You couldn't imagine anything without that feeling -- all the while you can sense this membrane-thin sentimentality that separates her from the black, vacuous apathy that you already live in.”

Jason picked up the glass. “I guess you start to realize that maybe you're that blackness.” He tilted the glass and finished the drink.

“Sir?” Bessie cleared her throat. Jason realized he'd been sitting staring at the wall. He wiped his mouth and set the glass down and looked at Bessie. “And you know, it doesn't have anything to do with any of that ... but we have to look for reasons.”

She stared back at him from across the conference table, her purse in hand.

“I'm not sure what you're getting at,” she said, blinking.

“That's,” Jason said blinking back at her, “what I'm getting at.” He picked up a pen on the desk. “These people: You don't get it. You don't. So why judge them? Why get riled up with them. They're vexed. They'll yell at you. They'll yell at anything, about anything. They won't make sense. I once watched a couple spend three hours screaming over a conference table -- at the top of their lungs -- about what to properly call the color of the carpet in their living room. Shiraz, Syrah, who knows the difference? They

apparently did, and had the same discussion with the realtor four months before. They hadn't even thought of divorce before they decided to sell their house. They said all they originally wanted was just a change of scenery."

Jason looked at the ceiling for a moment. "I never figured that case out." He let his feet down and leaned forward on his desk, holding up his palms, shrugging.

"Irreconcilable differences?"

Jason saw she wasn't convinced, so he stood up and walked around his desk.

"But really, there's a story they've got, and it comes out like poisonous insanity laced with piss. You have to be patient before it starts to all unwind into something digestible, and then take the whole thing as it is. Take a far-looking distance at it all, not in the order of what's spewing." He grabbed the door knob. She was already standing. "It still leaves the taste of piss in your mouth ..." He opened the door. "But a man can start to look pretty damn ordinary again."

She shook his hand and walked out. Jason walked back to his desk. He sat for a moment, looking out the window. Then he pulled the bottle of bourbon out from his desk drawer. He poured a new glass. He opened his laptop and went to that damn star website. He scrolled through all of the names, thousands of them.

He hadn't told Bessie everything that happened with the star couple. He hadn't told anyone. The last mediation they all sat in the conference room. He sat across from the other attorney; they both held their chairs with white knuckles. The two parties sat on either side of the table, facing each other. In the window a barge listed down the Mississippi. Papers were signed. Witnesses witnessed. The room was filled with the most

cordial-seeming handshakes and relief. Then, as the others started to walk out, Jason's client stood up.

"Virginia," he said, choking up. Everyone stopped. "If you want to still ... if you want to name a star after" he looked to Jason, then back to her "after Conner, then we still can."

She didn't look up.

"If you want..." he said, and sat back down.

She stood there and adjusted her collar then ran her hands down her suit, "David," she said flatly, "David, hun, it's just a scam." She shook her head and picked up her bag. "It's just a cute little thing people do." She glanced up at him. "I just played along since you ... you seemed to care so much about it." She walked toward the door. She stopped, just as she was about to leave. She looked straight at him, her eyes welling up with tears, voice shaking, "I never would have --" her face turned to a bitterness Jason had never known, "I only suggested it because I thought it ... I thought it would help you." She left shaking her head.

Jason kept scrolling down the page. He knew before the meeting that David had gone ahead and named the star. He'd said it was just something he did without thinking -- something he felt he needed to. The names on the site went by so quickly they blurred. He wasn't looking for a particular one. He just kept scrolling. Jason thought that maybe this was the closest he'd ever get to traveling at the speed of light. The page stopped abruptly, and he checked the time-stamp at the bottom. Nothing had been updated since 1998.

Bessie didn't call back after the offer, until he found out from Vonnegut that she'd not received any other offers. That guy couldn't keep paying her as much as he was paying her with her leaving all of the time.

"Tell her she'll get used to it, Hugh. She'll end up brushing it all off. She won't have to be here all the time. We have paralegals for the other stuff."

Then she called back, not two hours after he'd talked to Hugh.

Soon enough, she was as used to all of it as he was. It wasn't unbearable. It wasn't even bad. These meetings were always exciting. Plus, clients were billed double for his time when they were in consultation. Once he even got to bill a man for throwing his paperweight out the window. The paperweight was a gift from Jason's mother when he graduated law school -- besides buying into his portion of the firm's start-up funds. It was a glass pyramid with tiny bubbles in the middle which formed his initials. The hole this paperweight left in his window was nothing close to being shaped like a pyramid -- or his initials. He always told clients that as a joke; none of them laughed, which made him wonder why he kept telling it.

The waiter stood above Jason. The sky had let out and the rain pelted the awning with the reverent amplification of a gospel choir. The waiter said something lost under the noise of the rain. He stood holding the black bill book in his hand. The card sticking out. Jason nodded, waving for the man to set it down. The waiter said something else. Jason held out his hand and gestured a signature with the other.

The man leaned in, his hand on the back of Jason's chair. "Sir, I'm sorry," he said near Jason's ear, "but this card isn't working." Jason looked up at the man.

“Did you try to run it again?” Jason yelled back, smiling. “Sometimes the machines are finicky.”

“I did sir.” The man glanced at the adjoining table, then turned to Jason. “I’m sorry, but it’s been declined.” The waiter handed the card to him.

“Oh, well...” Jason took the card and held it up, examining it with a concerned expression in front of the waiter. “Oh! I’m a goof!” Jason said, smiling, “I grabbed an old one!” He took out his wallet and rifled through it, passing over his Bank of America, his Visa Sky Miles. The waiter stood behind him, positively hawkish. He pulled out a card which had a melted stick of gum stuck to it. “So hard to keep them straight,” he said, quickly scraping the gum on the underside of the table. “Here, just take my AmEx.”

“Thank you, sir.”

As the waiter walked back into the restaurant, Jason tapped his finger against the table, counting to five. Then he stood up, put on his jacket and walked briskly (yet casually) into the rain. He stared forward, fighting the temptation to look in -- and once he was past the last restaurant window he ran for the corner.

“That was close,” Jason said, panting into the recorder as he stood under an awning on the street over. Water dripped down his brow and into his eyes. He felt uncharacteristically weak. He took a sip of his Old Fashioned, which was mostly rain water now. He’d unintentionally stolen the glass in the heat of the moment. Jason pulled out his wallet and fingered through the wet bills. He counted the money again: twenty-three dollars. He glanced over his shoulder.

A fierce wrapping of metal on metal vibrated along the side of Jason's face. He was nearly blind! He couldn't open his eyes in the brightness. His face and torso stung. He sat up, putting a hand over his eyes. Above him the statue of Andrew Jackson, glorious, at the Battle of New Orleans gleamed in the sun. Waives of heat lifted from his horse. Jackson stat, looking west, his hat lifted in one arm, his sword sheathed at his side.

"Move on. Move on," a voice above him said. "Can't stay here. You know that." Jason stared at the statue, shielding his eyes in the brightness.

"What, General Jackson?"

"Come on man, get movin'." Jason stared at the statue. A blue-uniformed police officer hit his baton against the wrought-iron railing Jason sat against. Jason jumped up.

"I didn't mean to walk away!" Jason yelled at the officer. "Absent minded is all," he mumbled, wondering when the man had talked to the waiter.

"Yeah, yeah," the officer said. "Y'all know ya can't be here." The police officer stuck out his baton and pushed Jason's blazer and shirt off of the railing, letting them fall onto the grass. Jason had walked through the rain for several blocks, worried the waiter would come after him. He'd gotten wet as a sponge. Once the rain stopped, he parked himself on the grass in Jackson Square. He must have dozed off while sitting in the sun. He looked at his chest. It was red as a tomato, a pale streak across it from his arm. Jason picked up his things. The police officer walked over to the other side of the grassy patch. A beastly organism with a heavy beard slept shirtlessly. A camping backpack and a tarp served as a pillow. The police officer hit the rail again.

"He doesn't even know!" Jason yelled in the direction of the statue.

"Listen, don't be a problem and I won't take ya in."

The bearded man sat picking at his teeth. He looked at Jason through glassy, yellowed eyes.

“I’m not homeless,” Jason said, pointing to the other man who sat up and gathering his things. “I’m a lawyer.”

The police officer snorted.

Jason hastily put on another shoe. “This disrespect is abhorrent.” He walked toward the officer. “I’m not like him,” he pleaded.

“Don’t care where ya gettin’ off to, just long as ya off to.”

“This is profiling!” Jason shouted. “What gives you the right?” The officer leveled with him. He took a few swaggering steps over. The man was on a power trip if there ever was a man with such undeserved sense of accomplishment.

“Listen, stud.” The officer pressed the tip of the baton an inch from Jason’s chest. He’d obviously been conditioned by higher-ups not to touch him. Such a transparent bluff. “By the looks of ya, a cut and a shave did ya well over on Camp Street. Why don’t ya go back to the shelter,” he pointed the baton in the general direction, “and take this guy with you.” The officer pointed to the man struggling to put on his backpack. “Ya hurt’n tourism.” Jason stared incredulously as the police officer walked over to another bench.

“Don’t forget you’re earnings, man,” the homeless man said as he walked by, pointing at the glass Jason had swiped from the restaurant. The bottom held a collection of coins. Even a dollar bill or two. Jason grabbed the glass and the rest of his things. He followed the man to the corner of the square. Jason put on his blazer, which was still wet on the inside. It burned his skin. They stood silently, waiting to cross the street.

“I ain’t goin’ to the shelter. Money’s here,” the homeless man said, picking at his teeth and watching Jason suspiciously.

“No, I wanted to give this to you,” he held out his cup, “I’m not homeless, I swear.”

The man looked him up and down. “No, you need it,” he said slowly, “that way is the way you should go.” He turned Jason the other way.

Jason held out the cup, jingling the quarters as they crossed the street.

“I can’t take you to no shelter,” the man said, speeding up. “Get, man.”

“What!” Jason exclaimed. “I’m not at all like you.”

The man looked at Jason with a real sense of pity in his face. “Listen, I can’t help you wandering, senseless types.” The man walked quickly down the sidewalk. At one point he looked back, slowing down, but then turned back and looked at the ground, running around the corner.

Jason looked around. He stood next to a coffee shop.

The door shut behind him and cool air washed over him. He shivered pleasantly. The shop was packed. A man stood waiting at the counter. Jason got in line behind him. He glanced back and leaned toward him and said, “You won’t believe this pal,” he said putting a hand on the man’s shoulder. “I’ve just been unjustly accused by the police and a vagrant. Who knew the homeless were so uppity these days?” Several people in the shop turned. The man stepped aside.

The barista, a lovely young woman, turned to see him and froze. “I’m sorry sir, but --”

“Oh, no need. I haven’t waited at all,” Jason yawned, “but as you can tell, I am in absolute need of caffeination. I’ll have a --”

“No. Sir -- I’m sorry. We have a shirt and shoes policy here.” Jason stood stark. He looked down at his bare chest under his open blazer. Jason felt the heat of the room. He stepped backward, smiling at the woman behind the counter and walked out of the shop. Jason ran back to the bench, and found his shirt lying in the path near the corner. He put it on and walked across the square, looking down at his feet.

He snuck in the back door of a brasserie and locked himself in the bathroom. As he turned to face the sink he yelled. In the mirror stood a man, his hair wild -- face red -- in a blazer flecked by grass. He examined himself, turning. Along his back ran a long streak of pigeon shit. Jason took off the blazer and wet his face and then his hair, combing it with his hands. He ran the water over his blazer and scrubbed the feces away with a paper towel. He stood holding the jacket in front of the electric hand dryer, pushing the button every fifteen seconds when it stopped. Once it was somewhat dry he inspected himself and went out to order a coffee.

Chapter 6

The square was hot and lurid with tourists. They walked in clusters in front of the cathedral, stood beneath the mansard roofs of the Cabildo -- the sight of the Louisiana Purchase and *Plessy v. Ferguson* -- and its twin, the Presbytère. The Pontalba apartment's balustrades lined by ornate ironwork. None of them could understand the grandeur.

A small boy stood in the middle of the square, holding his father's hand. He pointed up at the Cathedral.

"It's like the castle, that one at Disney World!" Jason said into the tape recorder in a shaky falsetto as he watched them from the bench across the street.

The man stopped and looked at his son. "That's right. It does," Jason said gruffly, putting a hand on his hip and bobbling his head as he spoke. "Maybe the architect went to Disney World the day before he built it." The father picked up his child. A woman (possibly the mother) took a photo of the boy on the man's shoulders. "You're so smart, son." The man said to his son on his shoulders as they smiled for the camera. "I bet someday you'll be president -- the world's most respected tax collector."

The family stood looking at the cathedral.

"Only a fool could find God in such a thing, then take a picture of it." Jason put down the recorder and took a sip of his coffee.

"Ah, another example of the travesty of public object," he said to the street.

A family -- a man, his wife, their two children's' faces recently having been stuffed with beignets at the Cafe du Monde, with such joy and ecstasy as if they were having the first ones in this place since 1862 -- and the man, a camera hanging painfully from his neck, a

map disguising his caricatured-face as he walked, happened to pause, to see out of the corner of his eye, a lovely red door. Stopping, his youngest child. A boy. Bumping into his rear. He squawked, loudly to his ma'am:

“Hey, hun, let's take a picture.” Gesture-ating toward the door with the camera, an extension of his arm.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“It's nice, isn't it.” He began turning the lens of the camera, held up to his face.

“Is it on the map?” By this time there were a few pedestrians attempting to move around them. The man was still adjusting his giant camera.

“Hun! Just use my phone!” His wife called, holding it up into the air. He ignored.

“Screw the map,” he said, “This is local.”

And as the family, the two plump children, powdered sugar coating their face, were corralled in front of the door by the mother, the father held up a hand, solicited a passerby to take a photo of them, so that he can be in it too.

A poor boy, maybe eighteen. The boy seemed resistant, and slowed down in his walking, pulling down his headphones. The man worried if the boy would run off with the camera at the right moment (he wasn't white) and the boy worried that the man would want several photographs, and if he might just run off after the third photo, but the camera would smash upon the ground. Both would be uneasy in the next few moments.

But the next thing, the boy was knocked by someone trying to step past.

“People gotta get through here!” a man in a suit yelled, stepping out into the street and around the family. The tourist with his camera gestured apologetically toward the

man, and then at the boy. Then said something to him, pointing at the camera. The boy seemed to agree with going along with the favor.

But a group congesting on the sidewalk has already become angry and curious.

“What’s going on?” said a woman, pulling out her phone, “Something going on?” She craned her neck.

This is what was wrong with the public, Jason thought. An individual can’t go out into the open without people projecting into his intentions, trying to stick their nose into it.

“They’s takin a tourist picture,” the boy said, holding the camera up to his eye. Someone else bumped him, making the man flinch.

“Is that something historical?” a voice asked from the sidewalk.

“I think it was in a movie,” the boy said.

“The door?”

“This ain’t a sitting room!” a man with a crate of fruit yelled, spitting into the street.

“What movie? That one with the romance?”

The boy shrugged and handed the camera back to the man. By this time a crowd had assembled, some taking photos of the door, others pushing on the crowd, trying to see what the matter was. The boy’s hand was still being vigorously shaken by the tourist with the camera, his family behind, when and the man with the crate came up on them, immediately yelling at the boy and the tourist man with his camera tried to step between. Soon a scuffle broke out, and the man’s camera was flung into the street.

The crowd took photos of the ensuing chaos. Some called out to get the police, while more bystanders gathered around, obscuring them from view. Jason realized his head was wet: a drizzle had let out.

“Oh no you don’t!” Jason shouted to the sky, “Not again!” He dashed across the street, hiding under a balcony. Once under cover, he looked at the group, which seemed to have dissolved. The street was cleared of people, steam rose from the cobblestone. From the street, Jason looked up at the cathedral, extensively awesome. He -- when he was young, and naive -- had always imagined Missy would have been married to him there. Without her being pregnant as well, which is the most honorable type of marriage. The wife there with pure intentions, not baby-feeding intentions. Hal and his wife got married with a thing growing inside of her (Hal, the damn dog of Mississippi, potent albeit) but not really from Mississippi, it was just an expression.

The sky had let out completely. A wall of activity separated him from everything outside of his perch, the roar of the tropical downpour drowning out everything else. He and Hal had always never really gotten along. Even when things were good at the firm. All it took was a bad dinner party and a blogger to stagnate business for Hal to group together with the others and push him out. *You’ve always been a problem*, they said in unison, *since the start*, with faces like devils. Jason just wasn’t set for office life.

He’d tried very hard to make it accommodate. Finding diversion proved difficult. The firm had luckily invested in a remarkably clever coffee device. It involved taking these small cups, which contained coffee grounds vacuum packed. They were placed in the machine, which pierced the cup. Then, making sure the mug was expertly positioned under the spout of the machine, the coffee would be made in less than a minute -- with

quite a bit of vibrating from inside. It was a marvel. The Germans had designed this machine, undoubtedly. It was the BMW of coffee makers. Jason had made a day of taking it apart.

He also enjoyed his coffee breaks. Those helped stay off the horrors of that office. Jason found such clarity in the process of lighting up on the roof of their building, watching the barges float down the Mississippi. It reminded him of living in Brooklyn. When he would stand on the roof and, between two chimneys, he could see the Empire State Building, and another chimney over, The Chrysler Building. It was less about the smoking itself, he once discovered, than the looking and the thinking of it all: the barges going by, the reminiscing on places he knew and once knew.

He discovered this during the short period that he had disliked smoking at work. This was when the necessity to go to the roof had been eliminated by the fact that it was more efficient to smoke in his office. He was never allowed to smoke in his office, per se, but no one noticed if he blew out the hole in his window. Luckily, this only lasted a few days. It was horrible, being able to get away with it, as he would often stand, looking out of his window at the windows of buildings next to him and think: *how ordinary, how bland. My job isn't bad; it's unbearable.* It had gotten so bad in those few days that he had asked the repair man to skip replacing the glass panel and just brick the goddamn thing up. Brick it up. But, of course, Hal and the other partners stepped in.

Every month, the partners would have a formal meeting at the very end of the work day: Thursday afternoon. They would discuss goings on in the firm. Talk about finances. New business. Projected business. Cases soon to close. These were casual, as everyone was a partner, but still formal. Since no one was head of the firm, everyone

thanked one another for holding the meeting. Everyone thanked everyone else for attending the meeting. Then the other partners would bring up printing.

Every morning Jason read his emails. His secretary, Bessie, would give him printed emails. He preferred them printed. The other partners did not prefer them printed. In the field of divorce law, this is known as having irreconcilable differences.

“The activity of reading from a screen is abhorrent,” he would always say, when Hal and the other partners complained about the heaps of files on his desk, in the hallway, citing the expense of paper and ink, not to mention aesthetics. That’s when John Fisher, one of the other partners, who was older and brought in all the first clients when he left McCully, Parker & Rosenberg, spoke up. It was always uncomfortable when he spoke, for specific reasons. It is a sad case. Everyone knew he was going soon. He had come down with cancer in a private area of himself. No one was sure. Maybe of the testicles? The cock? Cock cancer was Jason’s guess, but no one would ask. He was stoic, and had this old fashioned bravado about him for weeks. Everyone saw through it. Anyway, what everyone knew was that he wasn’t telling anyone a thing, but that he got messages from specialists, and that it was private in relation to his manliness. The worst part of it wasn’t the cancer, or that they had caught it extremely late. It was the well-known fact that his wife was an oncologist. How had this happened? This left everyone pondering the fact that she had not gazed upon the region for some time -- or worse -- had he noticed, but (feeling as everyone all did, that his wife would spot such a thing) did not say a word, with faith that because she said nothing, it actually was nothing -- but when it turned out to be something (malignancy!) all he could do was sit there and wonder if she always diverted her attention while doing a deed no one wanted to think about, but surely he at

least received on his birthday, their anniversary, and various holidays. John Fisher had finished talking and stared at Jason. They all were. And then Hal pulled out this piece of paper.

Jason held up the recorder, and said, "If only I had seen it coming."

He looked down at the recorder, and realized the light wasn't on. He pushed the red button several times. Nothing. He opened up the tape deck and water dripped out. He pulled out his cellphone. The rain had killed it too.

Jason sat, looking out on the square. Everything was ruined. Now that he thought of it, he had no idea what had happened to his left-over Muffelatta. He took off his blazer and threw it down on the bench. His cigarette case felt out and bounced against the side walk. He picked it up and opened it, running his fingers over the cigarettes. They were completely dry. Jason closed the case and admired the silver, then opened it up again. It was a gift from Hal -- when Jason passed the bar. He'd had it specially engraved. Jason ran his fingertips over the cursive letters on the inside:

It had to happen, eventually.

Jason chuckled. He'd had some trouble with the bar. On his first try, the test had been skewed -- Jason had shown up just in time, but his watch was five minutes late. He was locked out of the test, didn't even get to put his name on the test. He sat outside the hotel and smoked all day. Didn't even tell the other's he'd missed it -- except for Hal. Something seemed more dignified in a failed, merited attempt.

Luckily, there were so many rooms for the test, he'd just told everyone that night that he'd been in a different one. No one let on that they knew he was missing. And no one asked any more questions about it after the results, anyway. Jason got so used to

hiding it; he'd even checked the results. He'd scrolled down the electronic list -- part of him thinking there was some chance his name would be on it -- when it wasn't, he sat there and looked at the screen. Eventually he started to laugh. That's when he called Hal to congratulate him, and told him what had happened.

Jason passed the bar the second round. He'd studied twice as much with the fear of a second failure which involved effort.

Jason held the case in his hand. This was one of Hal's finer moments. He'd always had a mean sense of humor. Everyone knew that if he made fun of you, it meant he liked you. He said no shop in New Orleans would make it -- he had to go to Baton Rouge with the drawing -- and the jeweler made sure that their name wasn't on it. Jason tilted the case in the light. Hal had designed the front cover himself -- a stick figure of a man, bent over with a tiny pecker. Between his legs was a round dog, which everyone said looked more like a pig. Jason flipped the case back open and laughed.

He'd thought it was lost for some time. He'd given up looking for it. Then, it came back to him. A few months after Tommy's funeral, his mother dropped off a box labeled "Jason." There were two things inside: the case and a hand-written note on the back of a bar receipt. He'd bought rum and a thirty pack of Coors. Jason couldn't forget the note.

Jason,

This is yours, I keep forgetting. Found it under the couch. You must have left it here. Congrats again, haha!

Tommy

And at the end were two lines which had been crossed with black marker. Jason had held it up to the light to see what it said.

P.S. And, Jason, I know you're not like the rest of them. Don't ever think you're like the rest of them.

The French quarter was fresh and bubbling with activity. A man knocked his shoulder as Jason lit a cigarette. His hip bone slammed into the side of a trash can. The whole place was hot. Fumes coming up from the sewer. Humidity reeked, pouring into the city from the Mississippi. The exhaust from cars. Beads of sweat glistened from foreheads.

The gutters were lined with particles of trash. The streets populated by noise. Voices. The pattering of machines. Birds pried at the debris stuck in the creases of the sidewalk, dodging people's feet. Jason spotted a pigeon pecking at a condom wrapper and smirked.

A strange and abrasive melody arose from the din. An old man played an accordion, performing a slow and labored grape vine under the weight of his instrument. His hat lay at his feet. The accordion man shuffled back and forth, bumped by the occasional passerby. Ignored by most. Gawked at by some: tourists mostly. The music was something horrible and discordant. An attempt at anything contemporary. Maybe a dance song from Europe. The man's voice floated the words in a drunken, lethargic monotone, his eyes darting as if searching the streets for an apparition of the devil.

Soon enough a crowd gathered. Some threw him money out of pity. Two boys mimicked his dance, laughing, punching one another on the arm. Jason felt bad for this crazed nut. The public only wanted to see people like this. Freak shows. Something to stare at for entertainment. Jason once saw a reality TV show where contestants competed in high-stakes karaoke in front of a live audience. The grand prize was a brand new car. What the contestant hadn't been told was that they were actually competing to be the worst singers in America. The show had selected the least talented, least aware contestants who had auditioned. They all lived together and weren't allowed any contact to the outside world. They all went about in interviews with the camera crew, each contestant talking about how he or she was the best contestant, how they were a sure-fire win since all of the others were so bad.

Each live performance the TV audience voted on their phones for the three best singers, and then the remaining group of the worst singers had to decide which of the three to kick off. Jason had only seen one episode. One contestant was far better than the others, but mediocre at best. He was even a little good looking. The crowd was unimpressed and silent for most of his performance. He was voted off that very episode. But Jason remembered seeing a girl perform: she sang while hula-hooping. Under her the screen read: "Contestant 5: Hula-Hoop Girl with the Hair." Jason was enamored by how earnestly she sang off pitch to "Get Outta My Dreams, Get into My Car" by Billy Ocean. Each dramatic note she hit off key made the audience cheer louder. Her energy was lovely. At one point, she faltered -- the hula hoop almost fell completely but she recovered, her voice quavering, tears in her eyes. The crowd cheered wildly. People threw their hats into the air. She smiled, returning with an unwieldily dance and such

vigor. Her votes that night hit an all-time record. It's funny how there's entertainment to be had from the fact that everyone's shortcomings are transparent to others, but the most obscured for themselves.

That girl ended up winning the grand prize. Two months later she was found in her new car with the engine running in the garage. The show didn't run past the second season. Ratings slipped since all of the contestants who tried out were amateur comedians looking to get exposure. It's hard to find genuinely untalented people once the novelty runs out.

The accordion man had sped up his dance and was pumping the instrument breathlessly. He was now gyrating his hips in the fashion of Elvis. The crowd clapped along with the music. Dollar bills were thrown. People took pictures with their phones. Many people were dancing in front of him, their companions taking pictures with their faces contorted to look like his. One child pushed her friend toward the man. Both shrieked with giggles.

The man lurched far to the right, and from behind him appeared a dark face which stared directly at Jason. Its eyes were wild and glassy. It had been watching him this whole time with a strained grin. *I know you. I know your evil*, it said through the intensity of its stare, *your fate hurtles quickly toward you*. The beast stood, unmoving, on the man's black accordion case. Jason couldn't look away. The monkey wore a red vest and cap, a brass symbol in each hand. Its frail arms were bald in places. They held a wide and expectant pose, waiting to smash the two disks together at any moment.

The accordion man kicked a pedal on the case and the monkey's arms swung mechanically. As the symbols smashed together, the monkey's jaw dropped. The face of a pocket watch fixed between jagged teeth, its eyebrows raised enthusiastically on wires.

Jason recoiled. A few people chuckled. The man's song had ended with the symbol crash. His eyes darted toward Jason. They were ice blue and feverish. The man stopped, lowering the instrument, letting it hang on its belt. He looked at the monkey, then up at Jason. He held up a finger with a black nail and took a dazed step forward. A grin broke out on his face. He had the same look as the monkey. The man knew his sins. He began to shake with silent laughter. Jason stepped back. Others were staring now with the same humanoid brutality.

Jason darted off across the street. A car skidded to a halt, breaks screeching. The driver honked and yelled inside the vehicle.

"You don't know!" he yelled, slamming his hand down on the hood and running across the street.

He felt strange with his hands up to his face, flicking—like some sort of desperate squirrel. Jason stood in the entrance of an alley, trying to stay out of the crowd. The sidewalks were overcome by people, pushing the second one slowed down. Tripping on the back of people's heels. Jason kept flicking at the lighter. It would only spark. He shook it. Tried again. He stepped forward to ask a man.

That's when he saw it. A group of people on the other corner, holding signs. Amongst them was a black figure in hooded robes. He carried a sickle. Jason ducked behind the corner, peering at the crowd. They lingered about, talking, and did not notice him. No one ran. No one flinched at Beelzebub wandering the streets. He walked back

and forth, approaching people. Who was he looking for? The figure floated, holding a sign. Jason tried to read it. He stepped forward.

SEXUAL SIN

Leads to death and

Eternal **HELL!!!**

Be forgiven and

BAPTISED!

We are in the last days!

By the time Jason made out all of the letters, the figure was a few feet away in the middle of the street. Shouting came out from his hood. He pointed at him with the outstretched sickle. There was no hand protruding from his sleeve. He shook his sickle accusatively and turned to the crowd.

“This man is without a soul and direction! He goes nowhere, and is coming from no place we can know!” And the figure began spitting with rage. “Nowhere! Nowhere!”

Jason prayed for a splendid delivery truck to crush the man in the street. None came, so he ran in no particular direction but away.

Chapter 7

The bar was nearly empty, and he sat down near the barman and ordered a beer. On the curb outside the picketer had redirected his shouting. When the glass came to him, he looked at the young man and said, "Tell me a joke; insult my mamma."

"Had a bad day?"

"That did little to deprecate my mamma."

The barman -- a young guy, probably twenty-five, with a vaguely aboriginal tattoo sleeving his left bicep -- turned up the TV a little, went to the cash register and stared at the computer screen hard. The TV emitted an underlying buzz. On the screen was an above-shot of a room of desks, gaudy carpet and heavy curtains on the wall. A woman stood at the podium, speaking into a microphone. She wore a pink blazer and had bleach-blonde hair. The caption at the bottom of the screen said: "Live: Lilly Lisbon (D) Filibusters Tennessee Urinary Deviance Law."

"Isn't it ironic?" a man down the bar said loudly to the room, slapping his hand on the bar top. "She's up there, trying to stop that pissing law, but the rules say she cain't even stop to piss."

"She's not even aloud a pee break?" The voice of a woman came up from a booth.

"Nope. She can't even sit down. Gotta stand for another eleven hours."

"That ain't right. What happens if she pisses herself? Does the law apply to her? Will she get put in jail right after the vote?"

Jason yelled out to them. “You can’t retroactively punish someone for committing a crime that isn’t a crime at the time they commit it.”

Both looked at him, then at the TV.

The man spoke to her. “Nah, I think they will give it a few months before they start arresting people for pissing in the wrong places.”

The woman had stood up, and now was next to the man.

“My nephew, he lives in Arkansas --”

“Whoa boy, one of them.”

“Hush. Now he lives in this town. They got this festival each spring called Toad Suck. In Arkansas, not here.”

“Arkansas will never make sense to me.” The old man said.

“Well, anyway, they got this Toad Suck event: Stuck on a Truck. A bunch of people get to stand by a Ford F-150 each with one hand on it. They gotta stand there until they’re the last one, and then they win it! Imagine: a free truck, just for standing and holding your pee.”

“How long they gotta hold it?”

“Depends. But I think they get a few breaks. The whole thing lasts for days. So they must get breaks, or else they all have soggy drawers.”

“They get breaks to win a truck, but she can’t? She’s in a suit.”

They were right. Anyone can have the dignity of peeing regularly if they want to win an F-150 but a lady-senator in Tennessee has to stand clenching her thighs, shifting from leg to leg if she wants anyone to pay attention to her. Everyone in the bar looked up at the screen. The news program had started to include Lily Lisbon's audio.

"Now," she said, tilting her glasses down at the stack of pages she was reading from, "not to mention that the law doesn't have anything to do with a substantial problem in this state, but there are also a ridiculous amount of earmarks in this piece of legislation. Can anyone here tell me why a law that bans someone from being able to 'lawfully urinate on or near another citizen for the purpose of sexual arousal' would include funding for a bridge over a creek in Bedford County? Or why a law that declares "no citizen shall lawfully sell his or her own urine for profit to a pervert or suspected pervert, and that any citizen who purchases another person's urine to achieve sexual arousal is deemed a pervert" also includes a proclamation that April 21st be declared "Dick Traver's Heating and Cooling Day." Senator Travers, are you attempting to use this law as a means of advertising for your HVAC instillation business in Jackson?"

The camera zoomed in on a man sitting in the front row, arms crossed, shaking his head.

"And are we to really vote for a law that has gained the support of a Democrat governor, only because it also approves of a new hot tub for the Governor's Mansion? Really?" She then looked directly into the camera. "And what will you say, Mr. Governor, when this law tells you that you cannot pee in a brand new hot tub in your very own domicile? Can't a man decide what he can and can't do in his own hot tub? What is

our state coming to? What happened to freedom? What is happening to the Tennessee I know and love?" She then looked to the camera again. "What happened to the Tennessee we all love?"

Applause erupted in the chamber, but suddenly the screen froze, flashing red. LIER ALERT flashed across Lily Lisbon's face. After a short segment which included her speaking in a distorted slow-motion with animated red horns growing out of her pink headband, accompanied by doomsday music, a male news commentator's voice cut in.

"Senator Lisbon has a point there, but is misleading the viewers. The legislation includes a seven thousand word section outlining what constitutes 'deviant urination' in the context of both public and private pools, hot tubs, private ponds and public recreational swimming areas across the state. However, these policies are rather lenient: It is legal for someone to urinate in their own pool or hot tub, but they must apply for a permit which includes a background check, a mandate for all other adults to sign waivers prior to entering the pool, and bans anyone under the age of eighteen from entering the pool without the consent of a parent or guardian. The permit holder also forfeits the future ability to adopt. The governor, having adult children, shouldn't be harshly impacted by the new law."

"Bullshit," Jason yelled. Everyone in the bar looked up. Some of them solemnly nodded. The news program continued with her filibuster. "Can we change this mess?"

"Nah. I'm watch'n," said the old man. "I know it's bullshit, but it's more interesting than that Reality TV that's on every other channel."

“Now let me get back to how this is not a problem for our state,” Lisbon said.

“There have been very few instances of so-called ‘urinary deviance’ in the Great State of Tennessee, where community values are key to our way of life. I know there are many places where we’ve heard of horrors, but that’s not us. This isn’t New Orleans.”

“Bullshit.” Everyone in the bar yelled. The barman quickly walked over and held a remote up the TV, changing the channel.

“Damn idiots in Tennessee,” he said, spitting into a cup.

“Oh, I love this show! Rock Rogers is a silver fox!” said the woman.

A man with white-grey hair spoke solemnly. Jason recognized this show. Rock Roger’s a retired Alabama Governor had a daily news show “The Slippery Slope: Why America Will Throw Itself off a Cliff.” Jason hated mixed metaphors.

“What next if we have the gays openly prancing in uniform? Dogs serving in the military, but not as dogs currently do--sniffing for bombs--but as people?” said the commentator on the screen.

Jason clinched his fist. There is an obvious difference between a bomb-sniffing dog and a homosexual. Yes. An obvious one--have some compassion people. Also, dogs have a long tradition of benefiting society which should not be overlooked. Buster once alerted him to a snake. Sure, the snake had bitten Buster on the nose, but had it not bitten him, Jason might have been bitten someplace else. The snake had been hacked to pieces by a garden hoe, and Buster was to thank.

Jason sat up in his chair, remembering his mission. He needed to find Buster! He slid off the stool, but the TV caught his eye.

The screen had switched to a fat, heinous type of woman. Obviously the ugliest liberal the network could find.

“Obviously this isn’t even a real debate,” she was saying, “Where are priorities? Why is Congress discussing such things when at the rate we’re going, the U.S. Dollar will soon have less value than the Canadian Dollar. THE CANADIAN DOLLAR.”

Fucking Hal Trischman, the Canadian and his best buddy at Tulane. They’d gone in together for that lot and houseboat in Slidell. He and Missy and Hal and his girlfriend, Margarite, who was now his wife because of unintentional insemination.

A month before Hal had swindled him out of his partnership (post-whore-pissing, police fiasco), Jason went to a dinner party at Hal’s. There was an incident when he observed a photo of Hal’s six year old son (this one was the marriage-catalyst) in a gymnastics leotard, insinuated that the little guy would develop an affinity for alternative lifestyles, and by insinuate, he was particularly clever in utterance: “Hey Hall, when’s the lily-boy gunna be ready for the debutante ball?” followed by several glasses of wine, many polite refusals of water and coffee, and a mention of a homosexual he once knew, Tommy, although hastily rendered: “Hey, Hal. Speaking of your son earlier, remember when Tommy once got a claw hammer taken to his face on account of his homosexuality?” but he had made the comment in a sober tone. The night quickly came to a close with Hal picking up Jason’s coat and shoving it to his chest, pointing at the

door: a prime example of piss-poor hosting, damn Canadians and their flagrant lack of Southern hospitality.

Thinking of homosexuals and unwanted children, why isn't anyone else concerned about human over-population? At least they're doing something to address the issue, the homos.

By the time he thought about getting another beer, he'd already had three more and was holding a whiskey. Jason watched the television screen intently.

A slow, black and white shot of an American flag flapping in the wind. It slowly faded to black. Then, white words: "Are You American?" They faded away. Words again: "Or are you not?" Then a cut to a slow motion of the first plane flying into the World Trade Center. Then the second plane. The images flashed. The Towers falling, dust consuming the streets, faces in agony. Firemen and police in the rubble. Then the American flag emerged. The famous one hoisted by firemen. Everyone looking to the sky. The sun on faces. A woman reunited with her husband. The flag in the rubble again, waiving. The screen faded to black and white, zooming in on the flag flapping. Everything went black.

Then screen read in white lettering: *Never Forget: Plug-It-In Air Fresheners*

"I think that's fucked up, man." An old man said, looking at the screen with real concern.

Jason sat looking at the screen. It was brilliant. He hadn't seen anything so clever in so long. What poison. This was the death of all self-doubt. Everything about

September 11th was infallible. Jason needed to die in a Terrorist Attack. Forever immortalized in the public consciousness as an innocent bastion of peace and virtue.

People wouldn't say shit about him if he were blown up by a terrorist.

Maybe Buster, in running off, had only looked for something honorable. To die alone. It was easy for a dog to die with honor. Even on the side of the road. People driving by would be adjusting their radios, mouthing the words to the new song, and suddenly be hit with a morose empathy. They'd never asked to see a dead dog twisted in the heap of its own body. Jason sat silently for a moment.

Humans can't ask as much. People are always peering into their deaths, asking questions of how the recently departed may have existed in the world. Maybe if Jason couldn't die in a terrorist attack, he could do something planned that would be seen as noble. He'd always wanted to give himself to science. He'd always thought himself to have the makings of a splendid cadaver. That would give him some redemption, even if only in the eyes of a few medical students who studied the state of his liver.

But still, it's not the same. The best ways to die are in a terrorist attack or some sort of genocide. To die in a group makes one gilded with an innocence and virtue which the public creates but never speaks, defined by the very evil by which those were extinguished. With those kinds of deaths people assume the victims were somehow enlightened. Of course, dying in the Holocaust -- a chain of events so bad that the public had to give the historical quagmire of causality a special name -- would be a messy way of obtaining that enlightenment for those who died. It would be awful to be in a camp. The camps were too tinged with hope, mostly because of the length of the ordeal. Those

who had made it to the barracks were left to think, to wonder about the political apparatus which surrounded them -- surely the Allies would come. Surely they would be at the gates. Surely God sent someone. He always delivered them from peril. They weren't thinking that surely they would forevermore be spun positively in the papers.

True hopelessness only came when standing before the furnace, not trudging down the long path, the sand slipping under their feet. Then they were still waiting to be released, and were presently going to take a shower.

Months of hope seems to be the most excruciating way to die. Transfixed, playing along with their games, the physical selections, the barracks politics with the guards, just to hope to get by for the time being on the Nazi's terms. A little less hope: if they had the hindsight of history, the captives would have risen up. But hope is the most deceptive of captives. It is all truly absurd. While it is enviable to die in calamity, he'd not want the mess of a camp. Plus, he didn't see himself in a foreseeable genocide. A terrorist attack. That provides the benefit of being remembered as a saint, sans the tedium of incarceration.

Imagine it. Sitting at a desk in an office, on the 96th floor, a nice big window. Rapping away at the keyboard, pausing every so often at the flippant thought of things outside that cell: back to Connecticut after the kids were already in bed, stop by at Fontina's for a drink before catching the late train. Then turn back to work. Type a number into the form. It would be the number seven.

All the while oblivious to what had accumulated far beyond one's self. Centuries of colonialism, then nationalism, politics upon happenstance, culminating in a pungent

hatred -- headed directly toward that floor, manifested by a fuel-laden jet. The horror of it would be in the papers for years -- the very infrastructure of American society weaponized against itself. But those circumstances would not be known, not now. There simply wouldn't be time.

It would be quite familiar at first. The buzzing hum of a plane. All Americans knew it. The pitch changing slightly, but steadily, so that one can intuit its trajectory. It's heading this way, not into the distance. This is where it happens. This is when the moment of pure hopelessness would begin. The moment of exuberance: the process of losing one's self. The staring before the furnace without the starvation.

He'd be at his clicking on the keyboard. Eyes moving across the screen, the sound of the plane recognizable, yet so usual it doesn't cause alarm. But then.

Something is off, he'd think.

The sound is strange. Not like at the airport, but more like from a movie -- the feeling of suspense, that's the strangeness -- that stiffness in the movie theater chair. Some of the first moviegoers saw a train heading toward them and ran from the theater, screaming. Like then, the plane comes raging, growing larger in the frame of the screen, engines roaring, only to cut away. But here the sound is not as simple as the theater. It clangs with the surgical tools of reality.

It's not a theater, this office on the 96th floor. He'd think this, if he had time, but he doesn't. Instead, the confusion would still be about him as he stood, turning, standing before his desk, bathed in the morning light from the floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall

window which frames him. At this velocity, it wouldn't be a political act, or a human hatred before his eyes. There's no time for anything social when the eye recognizes an aluminum shell, housing the weight of carbon fuel, luggage, seats, people -- a little girl on board, she has a sock on one foot; the other sock is there too, but on the floor beneath her seat, and the particles of air she breathes. All of this presents itself as one thing: his fate hurdling upon him at 482 miles per hour, the broad nose of a plane.

This would be the moment of hopelessness, and bliss. No woe's me. No regrets, or phone calls to family. No writing a note on a scrap of paper to throw out the window to people on the street below. No avoiding the blow. No thoughts happening, at least not in language. There's nothing to say. He wouldn't even be able to move, to flinch. There's nothing to lose. That has already happened. Everything now is just synapses still happening and intuition. The universe has silently revealed its open palm. It has conspired against him. He doesn't feel jilted, because in this moment of feeling he already knew. If only he could always be like this! What ecstasy! The spell-bindingness of it -- the cognitive flurry and the gut flash -- the object, recognized by the eye, getting larger -- and the pure notion that this thing, getting bigger, is heading toward him in three-dimensional space, and then, that it's big, bigger than him -- that there's no stopping it, even if it were the size of a bullet. At roughly 826 feet per second, it's only a matter of still, slowly ticking moments before it fills the window, pushes the sky out of frame. The fat of it shadows his sight.

This is when the moment actually becomes real. When all frame of knowing is gone. When the illusion of reality breaks into the realization that in less than a moment,

he will be a wisp of discordant particles -- nothing different than he already was. Instead, he's just free. It would be ecstatic. Hopelessness is pure freedom. He can do nothing, but he's still there, briefly!

At this point, there's only a matter of less than a second before it smashes through the glass, several tons of force breaking through it, flinging his body back -- a completely authentic experience. As his body travels back, it is as if he's suspended for the millisecond that the hull heads toward him at an even greater speed, and then striking him on the forehead just above the temple where the brow protrudes, his feet two feet off the ground. But even within these moments there is still time. At the tip of that instant, the hull of the plane hitting his temple, will smash his skull, destroying his brain (but even that takes time!) -- and it hasn't happened yet. His synapses travel fast than the metal, a searing white trail within a pocket of his brain, triggering something within him.

Everything is particles of lighted memory. It's a beautiful spring day. Everything is discolored with familiarity. There's a tree above him. He knows the trees entire life. It's late in the afternoon. Its leaves are glows and shadows, dancing with the niceties of color, some he can't recognize, flipping in the wind of the sunset. He knows they are moving, but everything is very, very still. The branch moves, he's sure of it, as if on loop, to and fro, maybe a millimeter, that's all -- the leaves twirling, they flick their silver undersides against the rubying of the sky, white-wisping clouds. He knows this place. He's been here forever. Nearby is a dog. He's a child. He'll never be an adult. Mother is nearby, he knows, but cannot see her. Each blade of grass has its own textural universe, and lying on the grass, he will look at his arm. Sticking out at the elbow, is its own white

bone from within. It says hello. He wants to scream. There isn't any pain, not yet. But he can't breathe. He knows in this moment that he will have breath sometime soon. As soon as he can, he will take in the biggest breath. He will have some. And as soon as he does, he will push it out, shrill, and there will be a lot of power behind it; he will hear himself. But that isn't now. All he can do is look at the silver-flipping leaves in the wind, against the sky as if it's the first thing he will ever remember.

That's what Jason wanted from it all. A bit of dignity. Knowing what people would have to say. Tommy had been left by the side of the road. No one gave him any more dignity than that. There'd been shock at first -- even a civil rights group got interested when they found out Tommy was gay. Was it a hate crime? Everyone asked themselves. The governor even made a statement about how nothing like that should happen, despite his religious beliefs. Once they figured out it was another gay man who did it, everything went to absolute barbarianism. The *Times-Picayune* couldn't let it go once they figured out it wasn't just a random attack. All of their theories about the *Marigny Love Triangle*. Channel 6 News even ran a special on how fidelity and traditional marriage lowers crime, alcoholism, and raises literacy rates. Jason had the TV taken off the mount in Tommy's hospital room. He'd started to read him the paper, skipping over articles. His picture was everywhere: one that had been taken after his first surgeries, blood seeping through a gauze mask.

The bartender came up, taking the empty glass.

"Another?" the bartender asked.

Jason didn't answer, but watched the glass as the barman walked over and put it away. The TV had sports, but the music was louder. The light outside the windows was murky and the bar was more populated. All of them were surely intending to breed: A few couples. Two guys at one side of the bar yating about girls they were wanting tonight, surely. A few old men--maybe not them. But a blue-skirted woman in the corner: her rump grinding against a businessman's leg: a real soul in want. A group of women, one of them with a tiara and a sash that read, *Bachelorette*.

"Have you ever broken a limb?" Jason asked, looking up at the row of wine glasses hanging below the cabinets above the bar.

The bartender paused for a moment, thinking.

"When I was in high school. I broke my ankle playing football."

"I only did once." Jason lifted up his arm. "I must have been four or five. I was climbing a tree. I tried to use my friend's dog as a step stool."

"So the dog wasn't patient with you?"

"No. Dogs are man's best friend, but they are piss poor stools. Too impatient."

Jason sat for a moment, then looked the bartender in the eye. "I had a friend ... the doctor said his skull was broken in too many places to count. Nearly shattered."

The bartender looked at him. He didn't respond.

"Can't recover from that," Jason said.

A woman sat down next to him. He'd been looking into his glass. She was dressed fancy in a black pant-suit. A real aura about her of female professionalism, which was surely the brand-name of her perfume.

"Don't you love this song?" She said loudly. The guy's yating about girls turned, thinking she was talking to them.

"Don't mind them. Their attention is a natural side effect of someone speaking loudly and generally in a populated place." He gave her a wink. "It happens to me every time."

She turned to the barman and said, "I'll have a wine spritzer please."

"You aren't from around here, are you?" Although, New Orleans has a slew of professionalized woman of all sorts. Much like Missy surely was now, in Gentilly.

"Nope. I'm in town on business...from Mobile."

"What work you into?"

"Hedge-funds."

"In Mobile?"

"Okay, I'm here for an interview with a hedge-fund."

"In New Orleans?"

"...Yes. What brings you here?" Jason was sure this was a ruse. She was one of two women who had it out for him: reporters and prostitutes.

“Have you ever had a dog that runs away from you to die?”

The barman handed her the spritzer, “Thank you,” she said, then turned, “What?”

“My dog, he ran off today and I haven’t been able to find him. My land-lady says he’s heading toward his impending death, as dogs do.”

“I’ve never had a dog. But I’ve had a parakeet. My whole house burnt down one night and we forgot him. My dad said the parakeet, Tyrone the Parakeet, was fine— he flew away to safety, as birds do.”

“No, you do not understand my urgency. My dog is gone. Where is he? I don’t know.”

The girl gave him a sudden, gleeful look, then sang “Scooby-Scooby-Do, Where are you? It’s time to do some working!” she paused, looking in no particular direction, “...no that’s not how it goes.”

“Popular culture is ruining our culture--the unpopular kind that is.” He sipped his drink. “Or maybe, just popular culture, in being popular in nature, is a ruining thing.” He would think about this one and get back to her.

She held up a finger—“I know!” She pulled out a phone and started pecking at its screen.

“Dee-oh-gee-ess...run-a-way-to-die...oh, wait, which one do we want? It’s givin’ me search suggestions:

do dogs run away to die

why do old dog...away to die

run away dog is it dead

She looked up.

“This is *your* question, *mister*, you gotta decide.”

“Shit, keep it at what you typed in, *missy*, uh—*ma’am*.”

“But the first one’s not up there, only these others.”

“Just press enter, or go, or whatever it is to search; you’re the one who’s doin’ the research.”

“Okay, okay. Wait for it...Okay, alright, we got stuff from the ‘Pet Loss Grief Support Message Board,’ ‘Yahoo Answers,’ and ‘Democratic Underground dot com.’ There’s more, but I’m not sure how to scroll—which one of those seems to be the most academic?”

“Again, I don’t give a shit. Pick one.”

“Hmm.” She took a sip of her fruity drink and squinted her face.

“Pet Loss it is. No, wait, oops. It scrolled. I clicked something else: not sure what.”

“You want another drink?”

“I’m still working on mine.”

“After that?”

“Oh. Here it is.” She squinted down at the screen with her left eye closed, mumbled hatred toward her contact lenses. She read aloud:

“Dogs have a strong connection to their human companions. Dog catchers tell stories of picking up dogs that have been waiting by the side of the road for their owners long after they have been abandoned—” Little Buster, the orphan pup fuzzy and all, on the side of the causeway when he and Missy got him, how happy they were he survived. They spoiled him, gave him people food, let him sleep on the end of the bed and on cold nights, despite their protests and undeterred by their laughing he’d nuzzle himself between their naked bodies. Maybe he always was looking for his death though.

“No, that’s just sadness talk,” he said. She was still reading.

Once as a puppy he had stuck his nose in a hole by the canal on Lake Pontchartrain, came out with a garden snake on it. He hollered and hollered, and Jason hatcheted the snake to death, a man he was. Buster’s snout was swollen like a strawberry for a week, and he would moan and try to scratch it, and every time he did this, Missy’s face would change back to that day they first found him on the causeway and hoped he’d live. If any time was his it was then, so how does he know it’s all over? He’s the liver of them all!

“Why must a dog listen to his internal time-machine and run off from me?”

She looked at him as a skeptic. “Wait. So, your dog time-travels?”

“No, damn it. A time-machine. There’s another word, I can’t think of it. God. Jesus. Christ. What is it? You know, those devices which present ‘supposedly’ invariable

increments so as to aid our mental facility, eh, ability to intuit time-space relationships-- why can't I think of the word--which is really just some half-assed construct of our ability to intuit things, ma'am." She gave him that damn look everyone does when he's explaining the cosmos or hooker pissings.

"Jesus. God. Christ. Fuck." He rubbed his head. "There's a word: those things. You put them on walls. They tick..."

"Clocks?"

"Yes, Damn it! Get this lady a drink!" he yelled to no one in particular and grabbed her face, tried to kiss her forehead, but she pulled away.

"Wait, what does a clock have to do with your dog?"

"You. Have. The attention span of a gnat."

"Gah, wait a second, old man." She held up her finger again. A revelation in her research. "I haven't even finished yet: 'Don't be offended when a dog runs off to die alone. While a dog may love you, and not all dogs run away, they still have strong 'pack mentalities' that can motivate them toward strange behavior. Many dogs, when sensing they are weak, vulnerable or sick, may try to distance themselves from their pack or — in the case at hand — their owner to protect them from potential infections that may result from the dog's illness or to prevent their pack from being dragged down. Think of it as a stoic doggy sacrifice, or volunteer quarantine, much like when in zombie movies, a bitten person may insist on being shot in the head, or throw themselves off a roof to prevent from turning into a zombie and infecting their loved ones. Accordingly, do not think that

when your dog runs away, it is the result of a lack of affection or loyalty. It is probably the exact opposite.”

“No. You’ve misunderstood my ponderings! Why must he listen? To the clock-machine as dogs do? I miss his snout.”

“I guess it’s rather insensitive to bring in a zombie comparison.” She took another sip of her drink.

With this she looked up at the wall and set her phone on the bar. They sat silently for a while. Then suddenly, it presented itself to his pants: the prettiness of her hair, and mostly the quality of her breasts.

“You are quite the buffoonish conversationalist. With this torture I demand a simple gesture in return. Some happy fellations?”

Her face turned rancid and she got up, moving three bar stools over.

“What? Fellatio? No? ... Okay.” Everyone in the bar was staring. A man stood up from down the bar, looking at him in protest.

Jason decided for a good exit, by walking out of the bar. From the front window he could see it was still light, and the sun was being rather accusative of his drunkinality. But the man walked up on him, and pushing his chest forward as Jason stood up, denoted that he intended to fight. The man stood in his way.

“What did you say to this lady?” and as he said it, he put his fist in his palm, then turned looking at an empty stool next to him. He picked it up and held it up by his head, the impromptu bludgeon.

Suddenly, the door flung open, letting in a blast of light -- everyone in the bar covering their eyes. When the door had closed, a holler came forward into the narrow corridor.

“Jason! Jason, you in there, hun?” Miss Thibodeaux stood in a cocktail dress, a fur over her shoulders, Mrs Medina stood behind her, holding her flower basket. Miss Thibodeaux surveyed the room. She pointed a finger at the man holding the bar stool, “Boy, you’ won’t be swinging. Not as long as I’m here.”

The man slowly let down his stool.

Miss Thibodeaux walked down the bar, her high heels clanking against the wood floors. Everyone’s eyes were on her. She stopped before the man, twice her height.

“You get!” she yelled, and the man looked at her confused, but she puffed out her chest, assuming a wide stance.

The man went back to his seat at the bar. Sitting down, he grumbled, “I ain’t gunna hit no old woman.”

Miss Thibodeaux walked over to Jason, strutting in high heels. She sat next to him. The girl next to Jason was silent, staring away from them.

“I’ll have a bourbon and ginger,” she said to the bartender, then turned to Jason.
“We were looking all over for you. Had to follow the shouts.”

Miss Medina took a seat next to her, setting the basket on the bar. Everyone there went back to their chatter. She pulled out a phone and placed it in Miss Thibodeaux’s hand.

Miss Thibodeaux held it up to Jason, pushing play on a video. As the video played it ran a title reel: NEWS17 BREAKING NEWS EXCLUSIVE: Dog on the Causeway.

A woman sat at a desk, turning to look at the camera. Dramatic music played.

“The epidemic of traffic is constantly battling civilization.” She said. “Here, today, in our city of New Orleans, traffic has struck again. We have Ron Jeffery Jefferies on the scene. Jim.

The video cut to an eighteen year old boy pressing on his earpiece. He was shown muted, speaking to someone off screen who was adjusting his microphone.

“Jim. You there?” she said.

Jim put a comb through his hair.

The feed cut back to the female reporter.

“I’m sorry,” she said, blinking, “We’re experiencing technical difficulties. Reports have informed NEWS17 that today, at 5 PM an elderly-seeming beagle

obstructed traffic on the Lake Ponchartrain Causeway, causing a back-up that lasted throughout rush hour. No reports on what happened to the beagle.”

Jason threw the phone into Miss Thibodeaux’s purse. “Take me home. I need to get my car!” he yelled, stomping across the bar.

Chapter 8

The lake was hammered gunmetal: glinty. About to tell a secret. A near-off pelican shared the sunset balcony with him among the breeze of southbound traffic and a briny mist. He'd battled many a pelican before. The creatures always eyed his love of fruits. The slicing of the lime was so close to his finger. The knife ground against the concrete ledge. Better limes had been seen in his life. This one was in want of moisture. Flesh as dry as a winter pare. He squeezed the lime harder. The liquid dripped from his fist and onto the cubes of ice. He threw the remainder to the bird. The feral swan snatched it lackadaisically, pivoting one foot, squawking. It hitched the thing from its beak. The lime spun down, hitting the surface like a curveball.

The real question was, if he and the ungrateful bird went tumbling to their fates, which parts of him would dissolve first? His eyeballs stowed away in the stomachs of alligator gar? Or his memory of this vast and shinning place?

A car's horn blared as it sped past, nearly toppling his bottle of gin.

"I'm trying to enjoy a sunset!" Jason disgruntled, shaking his fist. He placed the second half of the lime in his pocket and mixed his drink. He'd sped toward the causeway only to find no more traffic jam. No Buster in sight. The lanes were clear. Not a clue to be found. He'd even looped back, and -- seeing the sunset -- thought that he might as well enjoy Buster's last day.

Buster had been there for the end of Tommy.

The Hospital's front doors slid apart automatically and Jason walked through into a lobby guarded by a large textured mat which felt like walking along the treads of a tire. Jason stood on the mat, surveying the room for possible hindrances to his plan. The waiting area was speckled with a few people who looked to be in good health, yet dejected and tired. One woman held a small can of mandarine oranges. No one seemed to suspect him. A young woman in scrubs sat behind a counter across the lobby, her head down. She must have been reading since her lips were mouthing words, but she hadn't yet spotted him. Just past the nurse's station were the elevators. He took a step forward, wobbling slowly toward the elevator.

He was glad for the automatic doors since Buster was heavy beneath his trench coat and Jason had to hold him by locking his hands together in front of him, as if coddling his own obesity. The sleeping blob of a canine was hot against his chest.

"I'm just holding my fat belly," he thought he'd say if the woman looked up. No, that was too transparent. People don't just announce their actions. They just do their actions. If she said, what do you have there, he'd then say, "Oh, just thirty years of growing up in a market driven by predatory food merchandising." Then he'd rub Buster a bit and say, "Gotta have my bacon flavored whoopie pies every ten to fifteen." This would seem undeniably plausible and natural.

The woman at the desk turned a page of her magazine and Jason halted. Buster shifted under the coat, and getting comfortable, pushed his nose into Jason's armpit.

Jason snorted, holding in a laugh. He hurried forward and pushed the button of the elevator. Buster pushed his legs down on Jason's hands, attempting to stretch, his head pushing his coat out at his collarbone.

“Sir,” a woman’s voice came from behind him. Jason squeezed his eyes shut.

“Sir.” she said again. “Did you check in?”

“No, I don’t believe I did,” he said, walking backward toward the desk as Buster shifted, but then settled back into stillness.

He turned around to see the woman looking at him with a furrowed brow.

“You’ll need to sign in on this clip board,” she said, holding up a pen. Jason walked over, bent slightly backward to manage Buster’s weight as he reached one hand forward to take the pen from her.

“Are you alright sir?” she said, eyeing his coat.

“Excuse me.” He said. “I knew a fat man coming into a hospital would be judged, but I thought you people would be discreet about it.”

The girl looked at him with an expression of genuine confusion.

“I’m sorry. I ... if I insinuated something I didn’t mean too.” She looked down.

“That’s what I thought,” Jason said, bending to scribble on the sheet. At this, Buster slid down his chest, and Jason caught him with his knees.

Jason crouched by the counter, balancing the beagle on his lap. The woman looked up and the stood.

“It’s alright,” he said, grabbing his stomach and pushing it up, “just had a sudden stomach pain.”

“Do you need help?” she said, walking around the counter.

“No, no.” He held out an arm. “I’m fine.”

With this he straightened his back. He smiled and started to turn to the elevator when her expression changed to sheer bewilderment. That’s when Jason felt a cold nose

against his chin, and a warm, wet lick across his adam's apple. Buster let out a sluggish, wining yawn.

“What is that? You can't bring an animal in here!” she yelled, picking up a phone.

“Nothing to see here!” Jason yelled to the waiting room.

An older nurse walked into the nurse's station, the double doors flapping behind her.

“What's all the noise?”

“This man!” the young nurse said, exasperated, “he's got this.”

The nurse's eyes widened, and she let out a laugh.

Jason stood with his arms wrapped around his chest, his trench coat churning, and a beagle's full head now peeking out of his collar. Buster surveyed the room, blinking. He let out another yawn.

“Mr. Boudin. What are you doing?” She put a hand on her hip. “I told you last week that bringing a dog here was against hospital policy.”

“Which is why I wanted you all to have plausible deniability,” he said, pushing Buster down into the coat, and holding his snout under his arm. Buster writhed under the coat.

“Get that dog out of your coat,” she said.

“What dog?” Jason said.

The nurse looked at him for a moment. “What's his name?”

“Buster.” Jason said. “He's a good dog. He's been asking me when he can see Tommy.”

With this she paused, and put a hand on her cheek.

“Tommy, there’s someone special to see you today,” a young nurse said, opening the curtain for Jason.

Buster stood tenderly on the bed by Tommy’s side. Sniffing at his arm, and then up at his face. Tommy moved his hand up a bit weakly.

“Here,” Jason said, grabbing Buster and putting him down by Tommy’s legs, “lay.”

Buster plopped down, and licked at Tommy’s fingers. Tommy patted the dog’s nose.

Jason read him the paper, and when his eyes had closed, Buster stepped up again to sniff at his face. Jason reached forward to make sure Buster didn’t wake him, but Buster didn’t touch him besides his whiskers, gingerly stepping around his arm and walking back down to sit by his feet. When a nurse came in to check on him, Buster sat up alert, watching her every move. When she leaned in to check Tommy’s IV, Buster snapped at her in warning.

“We got a guard dog here?”

“I’m so sorry. I’ve never seen him like this.” Jason insisted. “Buster sat eyeing the nurse.”

“It’s alright,” she said, holding her hand up to rub Buster under the chin. “He knows he’s hurt. Just being protective. My dog did the same thing when my son got his tonsils out. Sat there at his feet for three days and wouldn’t let us get near him without his consent.” The nurse rubbed his chin, and Buster wagged his tail a bit.

When the nurse was gone Jason looked at Tommy, and Buster laying by him. Tommy's face was wrapped in gauze. His jaw wired shut. A section of his skull had been removed to prevent the swelling from killing him. Nothing was recognizable. The doctors said there was little chance he would survive this next surgery, let alone if he'd ever return to himself as Jason knew him. But they were hopeful, the doctors always said. A few weeks before Tommy had been fine, he'd been getting better. He'd mumbled through his wired jaw. Jason didn't know what to say to a man so broken. A man who knows he's dying is the hardest to console. It's fine to slip away unaware, but Tommy was there. Jason knew it. All he had to go by was just black eyes looking, looking. That's why they were both thankful for Buster. There's little that can be said from one on the brink of death, to another far from it. But for an animal, the most sincere of gestures is a lick on the palm.

The only other time Jason had ever been outside on the causeway, it was dark. They were driving up from the city, he and Missy. It was in the calamity before the storm, a fury of cars stagnant on the causeway. The plan was to take the houseboat up the Ponchartrain -- out of the path of Katrina before the storm. After all the trouble, they just gave up and went straight to her family in the Ozarks. That trip on the causeway was the beginning of them breaking up on account of irreconcilable personalities. Also, she was a bitch most times. They came back a few months later—after Katrina, the whole area devastated by storm surge and wind.

That night, when they'd stopped on the causeway for him to yell: he was always bad at multitasking, and they were in their fighting mode as they had been the last few

weeks after Tommy's funeral. Missy fumbled with the door and he locked it. Finally she got down and was walking onward in the headlights. People stuck their heads out the windows. He remembered it now, so done-over in his head he saw it from a side-long angle. At the time, all he could think was, *why are they watching? Why won't they let us be alone on this godforsaken bridge with a hurricane coming to slosh everything in grey and black?* But they all watched and listened. Her in the headlights ahead of the car, and him walking toward her to catch up, closing the gap between them, every step getting slower and more tiresome. He was tired. A woman in the passenger seat of a minivan rolled up their window half-way when he passed. A motorcycle that was weaving between cars had to skid to a stop to avoid hitting him. He'd cursed at the man. He didn't know what he said. He didn't remember what he'd wanted to say to Missy. She finally stopped walking, and looked out over the water. When he got to her she was just picking at a blister on one of index fingers. All he could say was, *Don't you. Don't you!*

He looked over Pontchartrain his eyes brimming. The water was vast, its brackish surface a glassy brown sheen, the same hue as the lust-worn cobblestone of the French Quarter. What excess: The wanderings of that place set forth by whiskey or the callings of the earth. All pilgrimaged toward that quagmire to relieve themselves of something, and muffulettas on Sunday mornings like ritual and Missy could never finish hers so Buster got a treat.

“And this!” Jason yelled forth, “This is where they found Buster!” Jason turned to the pelican who nodded.

It was. In a box in the morning, not a few weeks after they all had bought the boat.

He and the boys had trucked up drunk to the houseboat the night before and awoke covered in dog hair at the chest. The girls that morning took notice and inquired: Puppies, soft and limp in a box. Left on the side of the causeway—played with them, but set them back and to bed with them all. They waved at the box as they drove away.

“We have to go get them,” Missy said, and the two of them sped back in the Toyota to find the box still on the road. Five puppies: three of them dead, another one the next day, and Buster the only one they named: so that he’d keep keepin’ on. That weekend they all spent mostly in silence, none of them wanting to speak the fact that they could have saved the others if not for being so drunk. Tommy and Hal sat at the kitchenette counter. The makeshift bar of their poker boat. Tommy’d been thinking for some time. Every once and a while he’d swipe at his shirt: inspecting for hairs even though he’d already changed. At one point he turned to Hal.

“You know what I think I remember?” The girls paused with their cards in hand. Buster slept bundled in a towel on Missy’s lap.

Hal poured a bit of whiskey into his glass. “Why do you always have to be such a faggot?” Hal stood up and walked out onto the back porch.

Everyone knew what Tommy was going to get at. It just took Jason and the others longer to say it. Jason wasn’t sure if Hal ever did, since he was the one who had petted and swooned -- sleeping like a baby! he said -- holding the pup, the one that didn’t

whimper. Tommy was just too naive to see that Hal already knew he'd petted the dead one, and that's why he'd said it. That outburst the night before Tommy came out to them all. And Jason just let him walk out.

He remembered the last time he saw Tommy alive like he knew him. It was a year or so later. Jason sat watching TV when the doorbell rang. He checked his phone; it was 11:00 pm. He looked through the peep hole to see the shadow of a man. The figure stood back into the light and he saw that it was Tommy.

"Hey, stranger!" Jason yelled, opening the door. "It's been weeks."

"Is Missy here?" Tommy asked, he was red eyed and rested a hand against the doorframe.

"No." Jason put his hands into his pockets, letting him in. "She's visiting friends in Shreveport. Just told me tonight that she was going."

Tommy walked in. He glanced around the room, smiling.

"Your ... your house looks nice," he said, putting his hand on the wall. "I haven't seen it with furniture."

Jason led him into the kitchen and poured him a drink. They chatted for some time about things. Tommy asked about everything that was going on. Friends from law school. Missy's job. New business with the firm.

"You know, I could have been part of that firm," he said, into his glass.

"We wanted you to be." Jason finished his drink and poured more. "How are you?" Jason asked. "Is your family..."

“Ah, damnit,” Tommy said. “I had a package I was going to bring you. I’ve been meaning to mail it.”

“Huh?” Jason scooted forward in his chair.

“Nah, it doesn’t matter.”

Tommy swirled his drink, watching the cubes.

“Jason. He’s left his boyfriend. He did. He told him about me two days ago, and he told his boyfriend and do you know what he said? That he thinks I have the potential of loving him more than that guy ever could.”

They sat there for a moment. Tommy pointed up at the refrigerator from the kitchen table.

“Those are nice really nice appliances. That microwave. Are they new?”

“Nah, they came with the house.” Jason said. “But...” he held up the glass for Tommy to continue. Tommy looked at him.

“I mean, they’ve been in an open relationship, as long as the other doesn’t get committed. They said they’d break it off when one of them fell for someone else. They always agreed they’d support one another.”

“So this good news?” Jason said, getting out more ice.

“He cut it off with me though. What is that?” Tommy spilled a bit of his drink on the table. He wiped it with his hand. “He said he’d dated this boy for years. That they were best friends. There was no way to live his life without him. He said he had reservations moving forward with me, since I never liked the guy. He wants him to be the best man at our wedding!” Tommy slapped the table. “He’s blaming me for being jealous. He said his boyfriend took it well, and I should too if I really cared about him.”

Jason walked across the room. He'd never seen Tommy like this. He looked stretched thin. He'd seen him plenty drunk before. His eyes had lost something in them. He sat at the table, his right leg shaking. Tommy was always the most composed of them all. His aloofness had always been so charming. The one who only opened up after much booze and the privacy of the end of the night.

"Then shouldn't you give this guy space?"

Tommy looked at his glass.

"I don't want to." He took a sip and then topped it off. "If I just fade away, his boyfriend will come. Right back into the picture." He took a long inhale. "But he says he wants to be with me. He moved out. They aren't even living together."

Jason knew something was off. Why would a man pick someone who would love him more, and then just push away -- the runner up having fully conceded.

"Are you sure everything's alright? You trust this guy?"

Tommy turned to Jason. "You don't even know him."

"None of us have ever been able to meet him."

"Come on. You know how Hal looks at me now." Tommy waved a dismissive hand. "I'm like a fucking stray dog." Tommy drank a bit more and sat picking at the corner of the table. He looked up at Jason. "You know it too. You won't say anything to him." Jason had thought of how the conversation would go. Hal was more stubborn than he was. To the point that he wouldn't stand for any serious conversation if it wasn't on his terms.

"You could introduce him to me." Jason said, rinsing his glass in the sink. There was a seam at the lining of the table that Tommy had now pulled away from it.

“I don’t really know how you feel either.”

“It’s fine. It’s all fine, Tommy.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard your legal opinion. Since Massachusetts it should be federal. Gay rights are the arc of history, et cetera, et cetera. But you haven’t said anything directly to me.”

Jason looked at Tommy. He had always been the better looking than of all of them with a square jaw and heavy brows -- the face of a man at eighteen. Early on in their relationship Jason had always looked at Missy to see if she was caught up by him. In this moment, his face seemed wan and decrepit with anger.

Jason sat down. “I’m just ... what do you want me to say? I’ll say it.”

“I know.” Tommy said, giving Jason an indignant look.

Jason poured a bit more bourbon into his glass. He looked into the other room. Buster sat sleeping by the TV. His legs lurched in a distant dream.

“Look, Tommy. I don’t think you came here to be convinced.” Jason took a sip. “Go chase after this guy if that’s what you really want.” He sat for a moment, avoiding Tommy’s gaze. “If you really love him.”

Tommy got up and put on his jacket.

“I will then.”

Jason grabbed his arm. “Otherwise, you’re fine here to stay with me. We can talk it out in the morning. Hang out.”

Tommy didn’t even look at him. He walked to the living room, and as he closed the door, Jason yelled to him.

“Be careful.”

The next day Missy called him. Tommy had been found unconscious by a garbage man. He'd been beaten. She was on her way to Tulane Medical Center.

He leaned against the ledge of the Causeway. The pelican now had a friend. Jason held the drink up to eclipse the sun. Jason wondered if Buster was some sort of cosmic sign. Like an eclipse at the crucifixion, or a meteor shower to mark the Fin de siècle. Were his wanderings a way to push him forth too, to his demise? He watched the glazed sun cast over the water. The surface broke nearby, a set of bubbles coming up from the depth. Jason imagined a gator beneath the surface. A twenty-footer having just strangled a deer. It thrashed the body underneath the calm ripples. Flecks of light streaking across the surface. Jason took out the cigarette case. He ran his fingers over the engraving.

It had to happen, eventually.

It did, Jason thought. Thinking of it all. Nothing else could happen. Was this the universe revealing an open palm?

Jason looked up and down the causeway. He dropped his glass. It shattered on the pavement and the birds went scattering into the evening. He stood there, his knees shaking as he stared at his approaching doom. It barreled toward him, drawn by the crazed and viciously galloping four horsemen of wild coincidence: a small European-type car, its hood bound to the chassis by rope.

The car pattered toward him at a solid thirty-five miles an hour, and continued to slow as it approached the Toyota. He needed to make haste! Jason gathered the bottles and the lime in his arms and grabbed the knife. He scrabbled toward the Toyota. The

woman in the car was looking at the Toyota, and then turned. The woman looked at him with a stupid, ogre-like sense of shock which turned to sheer fury as she sped past and slammed on her breaks. Jason ran across the lane and fumbled with the door handle. The car backed up to meet him, lurching as she put it into park flinging the door open before it had even stopped.

“You!” she said, pointing over the roof of her insipid automotive. “It’s you!”

A car stopped behind them. The driver laid on his horn.

“Shut up!” the woman yelled. The driver kept honking. “He’s not getting away this time!”

She stomped around the front of her car, brandishing her purse like a ball and chain mace. Jason clasped the door handle with three fingers and flung it open, the bottles crashing. He turned to her, holding up his arms -- the knife in one hand.

“Just leave me alone!” he said, “Give me a break, you banshee!”

The woman stepped back, staring at the knife.

Jason looked at it, then pointed it at her.

“I just.” He jabbed the knife toward her. He did it again. “Just get!” he said, his face buckling; he’d started crying. “I just want to go home.” The woman’s face was contorted by confusion and horror. “It’s like ... you get called homeless when all you want to do is find your dog!” Jason tried to turn from the woman, hiding his face. He couldn’t look at her. “And he was just a puppy when he was right there. Right there!”

Jason pointed the knife to the guard rail and wiped his nose on his sleeve. He pointed the knife back to the woman. She had stepped back behind her car. Jason held the knife out, shaking. "And Buster, he had been there. When the priest came in. Buster is the only witness who could show me." Jason lowered the knife, and held out his hands in a shrug. "Had Tommy confessed his sins? Why should he?" Jason let the knife fall. He turned to the Toyota and slammed the door. He opened it again and slammed it open and shut open and shut. He kicked the tire, and turned to the woman. She sat in her car. The automatic door locks clicked in unison.

"That priest made him! He was in a comma and that priest sat there and gave him his last rites like he'd agreed to it. He forced us all out, but Buster ... Buster was asleep on the chair."

The woman stared at Jason just like the homeless man had looked at him, with horror and pity. She spoke into her phone.

"No, don't call the police!" he yelled, and continued to kick the car, dropping the knife. Jason fell to the ground. He sat down by the Toyota, panting. "And Missy had been right there." He pointed half-heartedly toward the north. "I didn't say anything. I just followed her up there. I didn't know what to say." Jason looked up at the sky, blinking. Cars honked. A public liturgy for their hatred for him. He wiped his face on the front of his blazer. Jason rolled to his side and grabbed the lime. He picked up the bottle of gin -- it hadn't broken. The tonic had rolled under the woman's car. He wouldn't brave it. Jason set his things on the floorboard of the Toyota and got in. The woman started yelling from inside her car, the windows up. Jason paid no attention to her glassed-in mumbling.

He pushed the gas pedal to the floor. The truck jerked forward, swerving, when he put it in drive. He watched her car in the rear-view mirror. She'd started to follow him. Jason held his breath, tears running down his face. Jason watched the car get bigger and bigger in the mirror. He could even see her nasty eyes. But the car's speed leveled out, and it started to lag. Jason was almost to the end of the causeway. Then, the hood of the woman's car shuttered and swung open. He watched the car swerve and graze the guard rail. It came to a stop, caddy-corner in the lane.

Jason exited the causeway. He watched the bridge disappear behind him and pulled onto a side road as soon as he was out of sight. The dust trailing behind. He turned on the radio. Johnny Cash was playing. Folsom Prison Blues. He lowered all the windows, letting the heat of the afternoon blow his hair. The song was near its end, and Jason clung to each word. He didn't know the song that well, but it all washed over him with some kind of significance. He wasn't sure what, exactly.