

## ABSTRACT

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*And Other Stories* follows four characters as they discover, relinquish, evolve, and deteriorate within the jobs that they occupy. Dominic Ruggers and Koji Itō find themselves in a forced choosing of career as they attempt to find footing in worlds that have constraints beyond their power. Roger Duckney's story—a reaction to contemporary politics—depicts an unwitting man who finds the best in his otherwise disturbing involuntary post. Meanwhile, Marv Morgan displays his commitment to his wife and profession by spending one of his final living days in selfless duty. All four characters, despite their circumstances, unearth deeper meaning in their pursuits at the conclusion of their spent days.

AND OTHER STORIES

by

Tara Kun

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## Dominic Ruggers

Every three months we get a whole bus of them. We watch them from the yard behind the razor wire. Always dragging their feet in the dirt like kids, like that's gonna make the COs change their minds. Attention, attention, y'all! This here man is sorry he did it, just see how his heels pare into the ground and he kicks up this mushroom of dust. Let's just put them all back on the bus, send them back to where they came from. Yeah. That'll be the day. The orange county jumpsuits go back up north, over the state borders. Ratty grey ones are from the big city to the east, the skunk stripes—honest to god, straight outta them old movies—come from a bunch of counties down south from here where there ain't even enough walls to make trouble in. The rest are like a bunch of painted up toy soldiers snagged from different boxes. Just because they look different, don't mean that they're not all here for the same thing. Guys don't even know that when the COs take their jumpsuit to give them the Hanz colors, they'll be gripping the old ones harder than their momma's hand the last time they said "sorry."

But me, I ain't here for the thing that all of them are. It all started with a stickup in Las Cruces gone bad. Now, I ain't no robber and I definitely ain't no killer, but momma's birthday was coming up and she really wanted one of them metal dishwashers that she saw on T.V. Said now that she's old, her fingers were already too pruned to prune up anymore in a sink of suds. As far as I'm concerned, what momma wants, momma gets, but my check from the deli counter ain't buying nobody no dish washing machine. My boy Ricky was looking to buy a new truck and one night over beers he said, "Well, how abouta stickup?"

Ricky and me picked up a couple of guns from the Halloween shack down by the border. They had weight on them and looked like the ones on those cop shows, but mine had paint that started to chip before we even made it back to Hatch. Hatch, New Mexico, named after the chiles themselves. Decided to do a bank down south in Las Cruces where nobody knew us. All they do down there is pick pecans, anyway. Money grows right back up every season.

Ricky and me met up for coffee and sausage the morning before.

“I’ll pull open them doors, then you holler, ‘All right everybody! This is a stickup!’”

“Aw, Rick, why do I gotta do the yelling? Why can’t I open the doors?”

“Two words, Dom: intimidation factor. I’ve got four inches and thirty pounds on you, but your voice is deeper. Remember I had to get one ball chopped off in the third—”

“Shit man, OK! I’ll do the yelling. What happens next?”

“Well what the hell do you think happens next? We take the money!”

“I can borrow momma’s airplane bag to put it in.”

“It ain’t pink is it?”

“No, Rick, it ain’t fucking pink.”

Ricky chews his last sausage and wipes up the grease on the plate with his finger. He rubs it on his gums like something else and looks like he’s thinking. “Gotta leave the car running too.”

“What the hell for? Gas ain’t growing on trees, Ricky.”

“What for? Dom, use your damn head! To get away faster!”

“Oh, all right. So you open the doors, I yell, we put the money in momma’s airplane bag, get in the car—the running car— then back to Hatch.”

“Ain’t exactly brain surgery.”

But we never got to the part where we put the money in momma’s airplane bag. Me and Rick drove down and parked right out front, engine on and everything. He pulls open the doors, I do my yelling, then I feel something on my right ankle, kinda soft like a lady’s touch but then it starts to squeeze. I see the bank folks’ eyes real big, so I look down and one of them coral snakes is making its way up my leg. Now, corals ain’t no rattlers, momma taught me so. They were all over our yard as a kid. They don’t bite all that much, but when they do, you better hope you’ve got God on your side. This little lady didn’t look too angry, so I shake my leg to get her off, but she ain’t budging. I shake harder, nothing. Ricky’s by the counters with his mouth open and the gun in his pocket.

“Well, do the goddamn thing, Ricky!” I throw over momma’s bag and the coral wraps even tighter, so I kick up my leg in the air and she flies forward like a jacked up boomerang. Lands on a guy with a wiry black moustache and a cowboy hat. Little lady doesn’t waste no time and sinks her teeth right on in, probably still tasted the guy’s T-bone breakfast, gravy and all. But that don’t matter much because he’s dead now. Waste of a good moustache.

Less than an hour later I’m sitting with my wrists cuffed to a chair, the chair cuffed to a table, and the table bolted into the floor. “Now, I want y’all to know that I believe in the law.” One cop looked at the other and at the time I thought that was a good thing, like they was hearing me but now, well, obviously it turned out the other way. “And I do believe that shithead Coral should be sent to prison for murder.”

“Coral?” One cop stopped writing down his notes.

“Yeah, Coral. The snake?”

“We’re not here to name nothing, Mr. Ruggers. You threw a venomous snake at a man, and now he’s dead. Can you explain that?”

Turns out no victims of a stickup is interested in coming to the defense of the robber, even if the paint was half melted off the plastic gun by the end of the whole thing. Moustache is dead. Coral’s dead. Ricky’s watching T.V. in his underwear someplace, and I’m at Hanz Fed until those suits can figure out what to do with me.

I know you think that you got it all figured out by now. Guy gets put in shackles for something he didn’t even really do, then gets red and starts punching queens in the jaw and making shivs from bananas or some shit. But I’m not like that—I told you already, I ain’t a violent guy. And to be honest, Hanz ain’t so bad, even if you’ve got all day a night. It’s kinda like Hatch, but without the corals, and the sky, and the mailman, Jesús. What them movies don’t show you is that prisons are like neighborhoods. You got the mayor who you never see and the ladies just run rumors about, you got the COs like the pigs, gripping their little beating clubs and clicking around like they own the lot, you got the commish where you can buy Fritos and shaving cream, the creepy doctor with a light on his head and his college certificate up on the wall. There’s a dentist but we don’t go there. See? It’s just like real life.

I was telling my momma about it the first week she visited me and you know what she said? “Dominic Theodore Ruggers, for God’s sake shave your neck, brush your teeth, and try to find a friend in here who reads the holy book. If my son is going to die

here, you best get yourself a job because I ain't telling the ladies in the choir that my boy sits on his ass all day. Give yourself some purpose, Dominic." She grabbed my hand but then started to pick the dirt out from under my nails. "Basic hygiene. My son is not a barn animal." And then she left. After momma's visit I checked out the job board. I mean, I ain't having God himself tell her during services that I ain't listening to what she says to me.

Pretty much all the fellas here at Hanz are in for bodies that ended up in their cars, or their cellars, or they had some gunpowder where it shouldn't be or something like that. Sometimes a body washes up wrapped up in their bed sheet. Sometimes a killer fucking snake goes rogue at a stickup. So the jobs we can get are based on the crime that "we committed," and how ace we've been since getting to Hanz. Me, I'm somewhere between "first degree murder" and "accessory to murder." They ain't sure yet, but it ain't really a bloody crime. Snake teeth are small like the nail on your little toe, they don't pull much blood. And I ain't making no waves since I got here at Hanz, because like I said, I'm a good guy.

But let's say that I was caught bang, bang, banging Moustache with the gun in my hand and the powder on my wrist and his blood on my face and I had wads of cash coming out of my pockets and then I chucked Coral at his neck like a grenade after the bang, bang, bang? Then I'm not a good guy. Then I'm a bad guy. Then I'm looking at a whole different side of the job board. This is how it goes down:

The job boards, they're divided between the good guys and bad guys. I mean, it don't say in those words, but we all know. You making ladies panties? Man, you've got a



bad guy crime. Doing the wash? Bad guy. Everything has them soft edges in those quarters. You working in the nurse Ratched station? Nurse has got all the stuff for poking and slicing, so only the good guys go in there. Basically, if you're getting a job here at Hanz that can make you or your boss bloody, it means that you in for a good guy crime and on real smooth behavior. Working in the Dutch? You gotta be an angel in a jumpsuit. Them COs need to do double and triple and fourthple checks on you because you'd be in there with the chef knives and graters and burners and blenders. You get the point.

“Hiring: Kitchen Staff. Previous experience not required but encouraged. Inquire with your CO.”

In Hatch, ladies like momma did the cooking. They told us it's because roughed up hands don't make soft biscuits and meat only got tender in a woman's grip. It was a maternal thing, they said. The cows felt it or something. But at Hanz, there were no ladies. And anyway, who said momma is the only one who can make a pork chop? When my momma dies, bless her soul, I'm gonna make her a four course meal up there in heaven with the big guy. I call up a CO, “Get me one of those white hats, I'm working in the Dutch!” They say four weeks of observation, then they'll decide. I don't turn one head that whole month.

First day at the Dutch those COs patted me on the shoulder and told me that I “better fucking behave,” then squeezed my arm so hard I had purple bruises for weeks. Behave? I'll show y'all how I behave. I'll be the best damn chef the Dutch has ever seen. God himself will be asking for me to send food up for supper, just you watch. They put

me in with the top cook—a guy they brought in from the outside—and a Dominican from block B named Angel.

First day, top cook had me on stirring duty. “Cook, stirring duty? Man. These hands are priceless. You’re wasting my time.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing yet, Dom. You’ve been here for five minutes. Just stir the pot and make sure that the beans don’t stick to the bottom.”

I’m gonna be honest with you for a sec—I messed up stirring duty. All the beans got like mush and burned into the bottom of the pot like brown sludge on the side of a river. I was scrubbing that shit for literally days. It wasn’t that I was a bad cook or nothing, I just wanted to know what Cook and Angel were up to. So I was watching them slice and dice and whatever else they was doing and just forgot about stirring duty. But on my second day, man, on my second day I stirred that pot up so good Angel started called me Hurricane.

Day three Cook had me making them sauces from scratch like Criss Angel or something. Pow! I made you a tomato sauce. I gotta admit, it wasn’t nothing too crazy. Mostly I was cranking open cans and dumping them into pots, then back to stirring duty. But I knew this was a test because cans aren’t something that outsiders are, you know, comfortable with around guys like us. Even the good guys. You gotta twist the can lids all the way off and save them next to the empty ones. The COs come in after every shift to count them and take them to the dumpster. I guess even in the Dutch, they don’t trust us with the lids. You’d be surprised what it can do to a guy’s face.

I never told you this, but when I was working at the deli in Hatch I got promoted three days after I started. Monday I was organizing the hairnets and by Wednesday boss

had me on meat wrapping. Well after a couple of weeks, Cook had me making whole batches of chili from canned beans and tomatoes and handfuls of seasoning from the tubs. Told me I had a woman's intuition with the paprika. Damn right, I do. The better I got, the more I realized that Angel kinda is a shit chef. Brother doesn't know what he's doing at all, but I couldn't tell at the beginning when I didn't know what I was doing either. Cook started teaching me how to use the knife, ways to cut the vegetables and meats. Turns out there's like fifty ways to chop a carrot and I'll be damned if I don't know every last one of them. Couldn't wait to see momma's face when I told her.

But Angel chopped like he didn't give a fuck. His hairnet was always half on his head and he put so much chili powder in everything it was like he was trying give the whole damn place the runs. Was always showing up late and snapping at Cook when he didn't feel like doing nothing.

"Yo Angel, if you don't wanna be here then you don't gotta be." I was scrubbing out a meat bucket and he was sitting on the counter kicking at the cabinet.

"What are you trying to say, man? You think I'm bad at this or something? Hell, I've been here a long time, longer than you, man. You don't even realize it. It's sad, bro."

"Shit Angel, I realize you've been here longer. I ain't stupid."

Angel lets out a laugh like one of them Hatch bobcats and it gave me goosebumps even though I was scrubbing under boiling water. "*Estar por la luna*. This kid. No, you don't realize it's me and you against him. Cook. We gotta stay on the same side, brother. It's us against them." He shot a bunch of snot onto the tiles by my feet.

"Whatever you say, man."

mon. 9/8 supper

beans + franks

potatoe

3 slices bred

pack butter

apple

bev

So this is what I get for making fun of my stirring job, huh? Cook's gone, Angel's in the hole, and I gotta post the damn menu on the b-boards and fix it all up myself. Dominic Ruggers ain't afraid of no challenge but right now I'm sweating my balls off and trying not to let my nose drip into the crock of beans. My brain says this whole situation is fucked, but my hands know what to do and I'm just following their lead. I roll-cut the franks like Cook taught me and throw them into the skillet to brown up.

But I bet you want to know what happened to Cook and Angel. I'll tell you. But don't go saying that I didn't warn you.

Yesterday morning we was in the Dutch doing prep for supper. Prep is like when we chop up all the vegetables and marinate stuff that needs to sit all day. I was pulling the carrots from the back room to start peeling them and Angel is up at the front counter with the onions and I see him chopping like a maniac.

"Hey Angel, you dice those, not slice or whatever the hell you're doing. Dicing you make tiny squares out of the thing. Same for the peppers. Dice, not slice. Have some respect, man." I thought that it was important to cut how the recipe said, but Angel didn't always think so.

“You think that Gio from Queens knows a dice from a slice, Dom? Fuck it man. Hey, listen.” He put down the knife and crumpled his hairnet in his hands. “My lady’s coming for a *sweet* visit today.” He licked the fronts of his jacked up teeth. They were the color of curry powder and it always looked like he had that shit from the bottom of a burnt pan stuck by his gums. “You wanna watch the COs and maybe make some trouble so I can at least get a lil’ something something under the table, you know what I mean, bro?”

He put a hand on my shoulder like we were cool.

Before I could even say something, Cook came from around the corner with his arms full of cereal for that morning and stopped at Angel’s cutting board. “Nice job, Angel. But next time try to dice a bit more finely if you can.”

Angel pulled apart the hairnet in his hands. I watched that fat, blue vein in his neck start to pop out and he smiled behind his closed mouth. “The fuck you say to me?”

Cook looked between us and I tried to warn him about the bang bang bang but he didn’t catch my drift. “Just smaller next time, Angel.” He nodded and started to walk off when Angel got up behind him and threw the boxes out of his arms. He backed him up into the counter.

“Nobody disrespects me like that. Nobody.”

Who would’ve guessed Angel was one of the bad guys? I looked Cook in his eyes when Angel did it, when Cook yelled that pansy-ass scream and his hand was grinding up in the industrial blender, blood everywhere, I mean *everywhere*. Angel got the hole, and I heard the cook signed out of the books with his left hand and dribbling his right stump all

over the sign-in sheet. He was a good guy but have some respect man. My momma signs into that book.

But anyway, yeah, I do think Gio knows the difference between a dice and a slice. He's Italian.

I add the diced up things to a big pot with some BBQ sauce. We don't get the good kind in here, so I squirt half a tube of ketchup and extra brown sugar. It ain't fooling no Texans but it's gonna be as good as I can get it. Add in the canned pork beans and don't forget to save the lids for the CO's check. A crank of mustard and vinegar and this pot's good for an hour.

I got to make seventy pounds of potatoes and I haven't even started peeling. By the time I toss them in water, I hear it from the mess hall.

It always starts with seven or eight of them guys' trays tapping on the sheet metal tables. Tap tap tap tap. It's like the syph the way it spreads around the room, like trying to air down a pan fire. Tap tap tap tap bang bang bang bang. It ain't just trays now, it's plastic forks and spoons and hands the size of plates. Once the feet start stomping I know the last of them has stepped in the mess hall. It's the Hanz welcome of the new fish. Don't look so much like painted up toy soldiers no more. They all look like they was soaked up in some rubbing alcohol. All dressed in jumpsuits the color of the dust still on their boot heels. I peel the last spud and toss it into the stockpot.

Javier, the lunch lady, is brought in by two COs through the side door. "Where the other two douchebags?"

"Don't ask."

Soon they're lining up to the bean slot and Javier is scooping my solo masterpiece onto their trays while I sit back and enjoy the show, cleaning out my nails with a rusty pot fork. If momma could see me now.

Every day it's the same order of guys: the ones you stay away from are first, then the guys who always have some klepto weapon, the guys who spend all their time heaving iron in the yard, then the ones with the creepy smiles, then everybody else. The new fish are last.

I'm leaning against the counter scraping some sauce from under my thumb when I see a guppy eyeing the inside of the Dutch. He's a lanky dude, got hair speckled like an old banana. Not paying attention to what's going into his plate, which just ain't normal. He watches me carve underneath my nail stubs, then looks me in the eye. Javi slaps a potato into his tray and he finally looks down at his supper, the fish behind him bumping him forward. I watch his head start to look back, but he knows better.

The next morning I'm walking to the Dutch when I pass the mess hall tack board and I see:

Tuesday, September 9<sup>th</sup>

Menu, Breakfast

Imported, water-bathed orange fruits

Fortified, baked All-Bran cereals (Domestic, Kansas)

Three slivers of plush, Wonderous enriched loaf

Accompaniments: Churned heavy cow's milk (lightly salted)

Tepid antioxidants, jellied

The fuck is this?

COs give me a shake down before opening up the Dutch doors and the new fish from the bean slot line is dressed like a gay bride at the counter. He's got his sleeves rolled up and an apron tied in a bow behind his back. Didn't even know people still wore aprons—momma sure as hell didn't. He's stirring a pot of piss yellow liquid that don't look like nothing we supposed be making.

“The fuck you doing in my kitchen?”

He puts the spoon down, his face like he ain't never seen me before in his life, and he pulls a pink high-class tissue out of his pocket and starts rubbing his hands on it. “Monsieur Pascal Bertrand. *Enchanté*. A pleasure.” He sticks out his hand like he's making a sorry nickel butt deal. No callouses so you know he ain't been in but a couple days and his fingers are long and shiny with scars all up and down them like Frankenstein. No crud under the nails. I give him two weeks.

“Guard. Guard!” Two COs clang metal behind one of the Dutch doors then come running in holding their clubs. They've been quicker since the whole thing with Cook. “I don't need this here guy. Y'all know I can do it by myself—had some of my franks yesterday didn't you? He can leave. You two can take him.”

They stick the beaters in their holsters and they look pissed but I don't care. They give me a look and start to leave. One CO turns back to us. “He's here on orders. Get over it.” The other unlocks the door and laughs. “Pussy.” The doors slam behind them and it's just me and him. He turns and stirs the pot behind him.

“You're Dominic, no?”

“How'd you get in here so quick? I know you. You're one of them new fish.”



He sighs and uses a spoon the size of my pinky finger to taste the stuff in the pot. I don't tell him it smells fucking great. He doesn't look satisfied.

"I am the head chef of *un restaurant* in New York City. Was. Just last month I was the head chef. But now it seems that I am here, so I will cook here. They said there was some incident with the blender, no? I understand they must wait for fine behavior to allow one to work in the kitchen but it was... how do you say..." He adds butter to the pot and whisks the thing like there's a damn engine in his wrist. "*Une urgence.*"

He's taller than me and his arms and legs look and move like spaghetti. I tried to imagine him slicing up a guy but I just can't see it. Maybe a hit and run but I couldn't imagine him behind the wheel of a car big enough to do damage. Probably one of them European scooter things. Definitely not a gun guy. No old school poison shit or else they wouldn't have let him in the Dutch. But if there's anything that I learned since getting to Hanz, it's that you never gotta ask the guy what he did. It always comes out sooner or later.

I start doing wash prep. I scrub my hands with the rough part of a sponge but they don't shine like his. They haven't for at least a decade.

"What's with the fingers, man? They look like a day count from one of our cell walls." The water's hot but I keep scrubbing.

"I am a chef, remember? All my life. Sometimes you miss the carrot."

He's peeling a bag of onions so quick the skins are spreading around like a sandstorm. He starts humming something and he's got a bunch of wrinkles by his eyes. Must've had a pretty good life before the brown jumpsuits.

I wipe my hands on my suit, leaving dark marks on my thighs.

“Dominic, do tell me. You know the difference between a boil and braise?”

“And a slice and a dice. And a julienne. I can cut a carrot every damn way that God made up.”

“The *julienne*. Do you know why the impossibly thin vegetable matchsticks were given this name, the *julienne*?”

I don’t say nothing.

“I can teach you, if you would like, Dominic.” He looks up from the onions and balances the tip of his knife on the cutting board.

“Let me teach you something first, Misyur. Ain’t no one gonna know what the hell you talking about with that menu up there by the mess hall. No one.”

Misyur shows his crooked teeth and shakes his head. “Respect the food. Respect the people you serve. Respect yourself.” He claps his hands. “Now we work.”

“I still ain’t fondling no oranges.”

Friday, September 12<sup>th</sup>

Menu, Dinner

Potato Carrot Nests served with Lemon Raisin topping

Grilled Caesar Salad (Iceberg)

Herbed Canola Oil Fantail Rolls

Accompaniments: Heinz Ketchup

I’m trying not to stare but I just can’t help it. I know I look like a guy on dope gawking or something but really it’s just Misyur chopping celery. You’ve never seen a

knife do this. I've never seen a knife do this. If the guys in the yard knew a knife could do this then they'd be in someplace worse than Hanz. Old Cook used to sound like a jackhammer. Zing zing zing zing! But Misyur's knife is so quick that it sounds like the air vents at night when everything else is quiet. Just a woosh in the dark so that you know you're still alive.

His arm stops moving and says over his shoulder, "Dominic, did you make those baked beans on my first day here?"

"Wasn't nobody in here but me."

"The stove, Dominic." He butts his head in the direction of the skillet bubbling over on the burner. I turn down the heat. "The brown sauce had some very fine undertones."

"Brown sauce? It was barbeque. Dutch recipe with a little twist of my own." I didn't tell him but I couldn't wait to make it for momma when I got home.

"Barbeque?" Misyur laughs like a cartoon and I go red. "That was *certainement* not barbeque. But it was better than many of the barbeque sauces I have had. You'll make the sauces from now on. Is that agreeable?"

I use a wooden spoon to mix figure eights into the pan in front of me. I'm not gonna say no to a guy who could filet me in less time than it takes to boil up a ramen. I hear him start up chopping again and I can't help but stare.

"I know what you are thinking," he says to me, but he sings it like one of those horror flick villains. "And no, it did not involve a knife. Although many do think that it did." He empties the cutting board into one of the metal salad trays and starts on the lettuce. "It was really more of an accident."

“Isn’t it funny that some guys’ accidents let them go home and eat T.V. dinners in their underwear and other guys end up at a place like this?”

“Oh, but I am guilty of my crime.” He shakes up the tray to mix it and puts it in the bean slot. “After I killed him, I realized that I was happy that I did it.” I’m looking down at the sauce and he’s working the carrots now. “My colleague in New York. Very untidy worksmanship. I was embarrassed to have our names next to each other on *le menu*. One day we get in an argument about the quality of the meat. He wants poor meat and to charge high prices. I want strong Brazilian meat. Same high price, but good quality and reputation, no?” He takes strips of carrots and makes cages out of them in muffin trays. Birdcages for prison birds. “We are yelling in the freezer. No need to upset the staff who work hard. Then I just leave the freezer and shut the door. Peace and quiet, you know?” He kisses his fingertips. “Solitude. Same word in English and French. *Solitude*. Then the orders come in and I cook and cook and I forget he is in the freezer and...poof! He is dead.”

He finishes the tray of birdcages and puts them in our oven that can fit at least two Doms.

“Now I am here. I try to eat strong meat, and for the rest of my life I will eat the poor kind. That is life. But at least I still have the meat.”

I toss some sugar into the lemon sauce I’m making and stir it up. “Yeah, well, my momma always said, ‘If you live long enough, the pigs will take you in for murder’.” Misyur turns from the ovens to look back at me. “She didn’t actually say that. I just can’t remember the other half of the phrase.” He shuts the oven. I turn the burner on low and stick a cover over top.

“Guy looks like a huge flaccid dick! He’s your new boss?”

“Limp cock or no man, dude can make chow like no Dutch guy we’ve ever had, eh Nico?”

“Yo Dom, maybe you can bring us the leftovers after, you know? I got like six packs of bats I can trade you a week. I got a fast metabolism, Dom, look you can see my ribs.”

Misyur was making me the most popular guy in block C. Guys used to spend their stamps in the commish on noodles and Doritos. Mix that up with the shit on a shingle from the old cooks in the Dutch and call it a meal.

“I gotta admit Dom, that first day when he made that orange Indian mush I was kinda nervous but my mouth was like...!” Nico starts gyrating and licking the air.

“And those crispy little...” Javi makes his hands into a big open ball. “Carrot circles. Damn. Can y’all make those again?”

“Fuck the carrot circles, how about that lemon stuff we dipped them in? Class right there. Class stuff.”

Misyur was over in block F but I’m sure he wasn’t having a hard time being a new fish and all. Guys got to save stamps for things like bats and dirty rags now that they were being fed real good in the Dutch and they made sure we knew it. Started getting food requests in the yard like a damn takeout order or something. Even the COs wasn’t as rough with us than the rest of the guys. One of them even let me bring my mom some extra rolls from lunch that I pounded out myself.

“I made that dough, mamma.” She took a bite out of the side.

“Dominic Ruggers, it’s a sin to lie.”

“Swear to God, I did!”

“Don’t say God’s name in vain, baby.” She grabs my hand. “I’m so proud of you. Making something of yourself even though you’re cooped up in this tin can. If I’m alive—God willing—when you get out of here, you’ll make me something, won’t you?”

“Anything you want, mamma.”

“Did I ever tell you about the time I went to Cape Coral as a girl? Down there in Florida?” I shook my head and watched her take another bite of the roll. “My mother brought me. One morning she quit the diner and said me and her were going to drive to the end of the world. We drove for four days then stopped at food truck on the beach and I had a *medianoche*. Know what that is, Dominic?”

“No, mamma, I don’t.”

“I can’t remember either. I was just a little girl. But I remember that morning that it was the best thing I had ever had in my life. When you get out of here Dominic, make me one of those, will you?”

Thursday, November 30<sup>th</sup>

Menu, Lunch

Crisped bruschetta topped with a whisper of tinned, smoked tomatoes

Braised mint Bolognese draped over Pappardelle

A bed of hand-tossed mixed greens

Exquisitely flaky sourdough, sliced

Churned heavy cow’s milk

Local, foraged grapes (quite succulent)

Misyur dices the tomatoes with his bony wrists and not one bit of guts squirts out of them. I'm rinsing the greens and as he shuts off burner three on the pasta noodles I begin to spin the leaves to dry them.

"Wetter than parchment paper but drier than a sponge."

Misyur takes my place at the sink to drain the noodles and I double back to the burner to add chopped mint to the tomato sauce. It's the color of the soup Angel made of Cook's hand in the blender a couple months ago. The bubbles are simmering up and popping red on my jumpsuit making it look like I got a snake angry by my liver.

"Hot behind, Dominic." I hear Misyur behind me with the sourdoughs straight outta the combi. He hasn't showed me how to knife like him yet, but he did teach me some things like "hot behind" and "Nancy rare". The second one is when you cook the meat so much that it ain't even meat no more. I guess Nancy is some prude.

Misyur starts up burner five with a layer of oil and opens up the can of meat. It was his idea to name the burners, said it helped things run in the kitchen like they're supposed to. I didn't think the Dutch needed any fixings but it turns out that "burner two" does fly off the tongue a little easier than "braised mint Bolognese." You need to name the burners when the names of the food ain't Chop Suey no more.

Misyur peels the lid off the can and dumps the ground up chunks into the skillet. He turns to toss the can into the bin.

"Lid!" I holler over my shoulder as I slice the end off the loaf of sourdough.

"Ah, yes." Misyur swings back around to the spice shelf and adds the can to a tower we already got going underneath it. Misyur really got us in the pits last week for

tossing all the cans and lids on Friday. We had to rifle through the damn dumpster to find them because by the time our shift was over and COs were doing their check on us, Javi already took out the trash.

By the time we heard scuffling in the mess hall and Javi's cuffs came off by the bean slot, Misyur and I were leaning against the counter just waiting for our diners to arrive. He doesn't let me use the pot forks on my nails anymore, but I'd rather watch guys like Nico threaten Javi for one more scoop anyway. COs aren't so excited that the fights in the mess hall have been happening a lot more since Misyur and I started working together, but I like to think of it as an inmate's compliment to the chefs.

Javi's COs pull two trays from the cabinet and nudge them his way for a couple scoops of the Pappardelle. He serves them up standard size but their trays hover right there by Javi's jaw and he shovels on two, three servings of dinner. I toss them half a sourdough and they nod my way. That's respect.

"Hey, Misyur..." I pull off my apron and lob it onto the counter. "You ever heard of a *medianoche*?"

"A *medianoche*...not for a long time, but yes, I know a *medianoche*."

"Well? What is it?"

"Ah. What is it? It is a sandwich. Hails from Cuba. It is made with sliced meats, cheese, pickles...something else that I am forgetting. *Moutard*! And it is on a sweet bread, made with egg. You press the sandwich, serve it warm. Very nice to eat. Where did you hear of this?"

"Let's make them. Tomorrow."



He rubs his knuckles and looks back at the stock shelves. “Impossible. Too much time. Hundreds of sandwiches would have to be pressed. And eggs for the bread? We do not receive that amount in one month. Maybe something else, Dominic.”

“How many eggs we need?” He raises his eyebrows and begins counting in French like he does. “Seven hundred guys, seven hundred sandwiches. How many sandwiches per loaf?”

“Eight, nine. But this is not an easy bread to make, Dominic. And we would need five eggs per loaf, which we cannot have.”

“So you’re saying three hundred and fifty eggs, and then we can make them?”

“That is what I am saying. As well as the time to—”

“—I’ll get the eggs. Make sure we have everything else.” Misyur looks at me knowing this ain’t a request from some inmate but something else. He doesn’t ask but nods his head instead.

Friday, December 11

Menu, Dinner

Butter poached Hasselback potatoes

Plated with caramelized onion and scamorza fondue (Land o’ Lakes)

Mixed spring vegetables drizzled with basil oil

New England Macintosh apple

Hanz Mendant

I don’t really do nothing no more but be in the Dutch. Prepping and washing and thinking up things to cook up with the chintzy ingredients we get from the state. Don’t

hang out in the yard so my arms are getting like noodles like Misyur's, but no one's messing with the guy who makes his mouth dance three times a day. COs were told to keep a watch on us in case any of the guys wanted to be rough about something—maybe they don't like the bougie desserts or the greens and they want the teriyaki water and Spam cans back—but far as I can tell ain't no one angry about what's coming out of our Dutch. Every night we get a line of COs down the hall waiting for their scoops and they pat us on the back like we're cool. One night Javi's doing the scooping and Misyur is chopping in the back and I make my move.

The CO's a kid, younger than me. His shirt is tucked in so tight that he's stuck forward like he's got a spine problem and he's such a rail that I can see all the bones in his elbow. Kid usually bounces around in line then scarfs the chow practically before he leaves the Dutch every damn night. I give him my best smile.

“You like those potatoes?”

“Golly, yes. I've got to say that you two are really outdoing yourselves in here. Making do with everything you've got. It's really a splendid thing to see.” He eyes the stack of chocolates that Misyur made from scratch the night before.

“You got a sweet tooth, man?” He smiles back at me and his teeth are gnarled like a bunch of rocks. “Here. Have a couple extra. On me.”

“God sure knew what he was doing when he crafted the two of you.”

“Yeah, I'd like to think that. Hey, what's your name?”

“Carl.”

“Carl, you like sandwiches?”

“Well gosh, I mean, I think they’re OK but then again, I’ve never tried one of your guys’s sandwiches.” He eyes his food and I wave my hand like it’s cool for him to eat. He starts in on it.

“Listen Carl, we’ve got this recipe planned for a bunch of Cuban sandwiches. You ever had yourself one of those?”

“No, can’t say that I have,” he says with a mouth full of potato.

“They’ll blow your goddamn head off, Carl.” Carl laughs like he thinks I’m gonna do something and steps back from me. “No, not like that. OK these sandwiches will like, help you see God or something. Cheese. Meat. Pickles. Warm bread. The works.”

“Wow, well, it sounds like a normal sandwich to me, but I guess I can take your word for it.”

“No, no, no, Carl, not a normal sandwich. You see, this sandwich has a special bread. It’s made of them eggs and sugar and it’s sweet and chewy and...it’s like, a holy bread.”

“A holy bread.”

“Yeah, a holy bread. Misyur and me really want to make it for...Christmas for y’all. For the celebrations of our lord and savior, Jesus Christ.”

“For the birth of Jesus!”

“Yeah, the birth of Jesus.”

“Well then, that sounds good to me!”

“There’s just one thing, Carl. You see, we need some more eggs. And you being one of the Dutch COs and all, maybe you can get a word to the big man up there about sending in some more.”

“You want me to pray for more eggs?”

“No, not that big man. The other big man. You know, Hanz mayor. Maybe he can change up the order, get us some more eggs for the holy day. Times are tough in the Dutch. You know how it is.”

“Eggs *are* a symbol for rebirth.” He puts down his fork and looks me in the eye. “And how can we even celebrate the birth of Jesus without referencing his eventual resurrection?” He squints his eyes and thinks real hard. “Will there be ham?”

“Sure, Carl. There can be ham.”

Carl thinks for a minute and looks back the line of COs. “Ok. I’ll get you the eggs.”

I grab his hand and shake real hard. “Thanks, Carl. Really helping out your brothers here.” He looks confused so I add, “helping out your brothers celebrate Jesus.” He takes a bite of one of the chocolates and practically dances out of the Dutch.

The COs start to talk when I walk by, and not in the way they usually do. They stand far apart enough so that the guys don’t hurl gay stuff at them and they turn their head and talk into each other’s ears so that we can’t hear nothing. They did that before I was in the Dutch, but after Misyur and I started making our masterpieces they would yell, “Hey Dom! What’s cooking tonight?” But not anymore. Now they’re back to the whispering and I’m afraid Carl the snitch has been running his mouth and they’re gonna

put me in the hole or something for talking to a CO like they was one of us. Maybe eggs is a crime just like the snake that got me here.

But then Carl, the motherfucking man, comes through! Misyur and me are dicing up radishes for some coleslaw, like two whirring air vents in the Dutch, when a couple COs just stomp on in with two big dollies full of eggs. More eggs than I ever seen in my life. The COs are trying to make conversation with us about what we're scheming up with all these chickens but we keep our mouths shut and they go. I wanted to throw them all in the air like a kid in a ball pit. But instead I said, "This one's for you, momma! And Jesus!" and Misyur just shook his head and kept on chopping.

Prep started on the day before Christmas in the morning. I opened all the meat tins and started slicing up the ham and pork real thin, then the pickles. Misyur said to save the pickle juice for a sauce we had coming up. Like Apache, him and me, never letting nothing go to waste. Two weeks of stocked up cheese was in the big fridge calling our names. Misyur! Dom!

Misyur laid out all the flour, yeast, oil, salt, water. I wheeled over the dolly of eggs and started opening up the crates. He cracked his sliced up knuckles and looked over at me. "*Prêt?*"

"As I'll ever be."

I'm the yeaster. Yeasting is one of the most important parts cause if you burn the yeast the whole thing can turn into a rock. Then all the stuff you put into it is wasted and you got to throw it all out. But I don't mess up. Not anymore. I beat in the eggs, oil, salt. Misyur is the flour guy and he kneads the dough, rolling it out and punching it down. Could've made use of some of the angry guys in my block but it's just me and Misyur. I

watch how he uses his palms to flatten the dough and then rolls it up like a huge joint. A joint for God. Then knocks it back down and starts all over again.

By the time we're done with the dough, every counter and flat spot has a raw loaf on it covered in a dank towel to rise. Give them two hours or so then punch them down, knead them again, then into the oven. We bake about eight at a time and Misyur says the kitchen smells like a cat's deli. He says it's some Jewish place in New York around where he used to live.

"Next week, we make Pastrami."

"Sure, boss."

It's the morning on Christmas and it don't snow where we're at but I imagine big hunks of it falling out of the sky. We don't got windows in the Dutch but the vents are blowing out cold and I feel tingly like today is a different day than all the others even though I know it ain't. Jesus wasn't born on Christmas. I know that, but my momma and Carl don't. Jesus ain't real and Christmas is a day just like all the rest.

Misyur and me got eight burners going with pans on every last one of them. We gotta be quick to get the sandwiches out to the guys so that they don't get soggy. This morning Misyur went around the Dutch looking for something heavy to press on top of all the sandwiches. He got three heavy pans, a meat mallet, the bottom of our new blender, and some pans with potatoes stacked on top for weight. I made the seven hundred sandwiches and laid them all out nice in rows like square inmates in line for the burner. We got the fat, yellow egg bread, two slices each of ham and canned pork, a slice of Swiss, two pickle rounds and a swipe of *moutard*, as Misyur would say. We got ten

minutes until the lines start so I toss eight sandwiches onto their buttered pans and Misyur lays the weights.

“So that’s the sandwich, huh?”

“*Oui*. This is the sandwich.” The pans sizzle next to us.

“Think they’ll like them?”

“Perhaps. It is a nice taste.”

“What if they don’t?”

“I do not think we made the sandwich for them, no?” We lift the weights and flip the sandwiches. “If they do not enjoy the sandwiches, then they do not enjoy the sandwiches.”

Javi walks in and stands at the bean slot. “Coleslaw! Hot damn!”

“Order up, Javi.” We toss the pressed sandwiches on a tray and the guys start lining up outside. For an hour, we press, Javi scoops and serves. The egg cartons are recycled and the sandwiches are disappearing from the counter and from the guys’ trays. None of them sandwiches end up trash barrels that day. The COs line up after lunch and get their fill. I finally take a bite, and goddamn, momma was right. This ain’t just a normal sandwich. Carl takes three and winks at us. I let it slide.

Misyur and me are cleaning up when the COs clang behind the steel Dutch door and come in with a little dude, bald, big moustache. He’s got a pitchy voice and his eyes glue to mine.

“Dominic, I’ve heard so much about you. You seem to be thriving in this environment. It’s always a blessing to tired ears when I find my men are choosing to

improve the quality of their lives after incarceration rather than continue to make poor decisions.”

He talks and waves his hands around and I hear Misyur behind me hold in a laugh. I don’t say nothing.

“Oh, my! I haven’t properly introduced myself. David Werner.” He sticks out his hand and I shake it but I still don’t know the name. I look at the CO to his left for a clue and he mouths it to me.

“Well, no shit! You’re the Hanz mayor!”

“Mayor? Someone once told me that you all did call me that, although I can’t begin to understand why. At the federal level, we’re just called prison superintendents. But mayor! How fun.” He rubs his hands like he’s washing them in midair. “So, Dominic. Your reputation has preceded you. I’ve been told that you’re quite the culinarian here.”

I don’t know what to say. “You want a sandwich or something?” The look on his face tells me he ain’t here for a sandwich but he takes one anyway. I start to think of the COs whispering when I walk by and Carl getting us the eggs. Mayor might be here to put me in the hole but I don’t know why he’s stringing me along.

“Wow. Remarkable. This is truly delicious, Dominic. Bravo to you and the chef.” He lifts his sandwich to me and Misyur like we’re cheers-ing or something.

“You here to put me in the hole?”

He takes another bite. “In solitary? No! No, why would you think that? Not at all, Dominic. I came here to pass on some good news.” The meat is boogying around in his mouth and the mustard stains his top lip. He swallows. “New Mexico Police Department



got a hold of the video footage from the bank. Despite the bank claiming that the cameras were malfunctioning that day, it turns out that your robbery —”

“—stickup—”

“—stickup was, in fact, filmed. They really know how to hold a grudge, huh?” He laughs. I don’t. “A DA was interested in taking on your case because it was so unique. And with our blessings of your remediation and the new evidence brought to court, your DA has been able to reduce your sentence to just parole. A snake! What a stroke of bad luck.” He laughs again and keeps eating.

“So you’re saying...”

“Dominic, next week, you’re free to go.” He finishes the last bite of his sandwich and licks the pickle juice streaming down his fingers.

Saturday, January 2

Menu, Dinner

Cajun Seafood Pasta with Ginger Glaze

Crisped Cheese served with Pears

Ginger raspberry compote doughnut holes dusted with sugar

“This is the telephone number. You call this number, they will employ you.”

“You’re telling me this place will want to hire a guy you met in prison after you popsicled another chef?”

“Oh Dominic, you will learn. Chefs do not care about such a thing. We care about this,” he presses his finger into my temple, “and these,” and my hands. “Nothing else is

important. Just do not murder any of my coworkers. Then I will not have a job when I leave.”

We don’t make eye contact because we both know that ain’t happening. He’s all day and a night. “Ok, boss.”

“You know what you are capable of, Dominic. Do not get lazy.”

“Always caramelize shaved onions over onion powder and liquid smoke.”

“And practice your roux. Whisk, always. And if you are going to make ramen...”

“...then make it like the Japs do, I got it, I got it.”

“Dominic, even I know not to call them—”

“—Japs, I know.”

“ And never, I mean *never*, over knead the dough. You remember what happened with your first Focaccia. Now. What temperature deactivates yeast?”

“Anything over 70.”

He stops creasing the edges of his apron that he’s folded on the prep counter and looks over.

“70 degrees Fahrenheit. I get it.”

“Dominic, you *know* the catastrophes that can occur if one is not clear in his diction. Well.” He flattens out his jumpsuit where his apron was and sticks out his hand like day one. “Dominic, it was a pleasure.”

I look down at his grimy hands, scraps of potato skin wedged under his fingernails. I grab it and shake. “Misyur.”

We lean against the counter while the COs to come get me. I pick at the crud underneath my fingernails, then turn to the sink and scrub them hard with the bristle

brush we use to clean out burnt pots. My fingers shine red like the stripes on a Coral. I wipe my hands on the pants of my suit.

The COs come in through the side door of the Dutch. I face the counter with my hands behind my back waiting to be cuffed. The COs don't grip my wrists like they used to when I got here. They let me walk in front of them without snagging the cuff chain when Misyur yells from behind me.

“And for god's sake, Dominic. Just use a serrated knife on the tomatoes.”

I thought that I never saw the painted up toy soldiers until Hanz, jumpsuits from counties all over the west, but it turns out they're everywhere. People wearing every color God made like they don't want to belong to each other. I watch them from the cart I set up in town in front of the deli. I keep the number Misyur gave me, but I don't need it. I see momma walking toward me from the east. I press down the sandwich and sweat over the burner in the Hatch sun. Order up.

Marv Morgan

“More eggs, Marv?”

Marv, a man of forty-six with the lungs of a man recently deceased reads the paper, holding it high against its will.

Jan wipes her palms on her apron and refills his glass of orange juice. She returns to the stovetop, brings the iron skillet of eggs to the table and using a wooden spoon, piles the eggs on his breakfast plate.

The eggs begin to soak into the bottom edge of the raised paper and Marv begins with a guttural sound of disapproval, but ends up irritating his emphysema. He folds the paper in half as he wheezes between his knees.

“You’ll have some coffee, too, Marv. You need your energy. This is a big day.”

Sputum begins to collect on the floor between his tactical boots. Well practiced, Marv strains open his eyes and forces a gust of air into his rotting lungs as he lashes himself backward into the nook of the chair. He wipes the water that collects underneath his eyes.

Jan hands him a napkin and smooths back his thinning hair. She glances at the clock above the doorway and pours Marv’s untouched coffee into a battered thermos and screws the lid on tight.

“Just take the eggs. No room in me today.”

She carries his untouched plate of eggs to the counter and begins to pick at it with her fingers while Marv hoists himself out of the chair and begins to zip up his Maine-issued law enforcement jacket. Jan stands with one hand on her hip by the counter but then bustles over to Marv to help him with the buttons.

“Well, hon, how many do we need today?”

Marv clears his throat.

“Uh, I got about a...”

Jan tilts her head and lifts her eyebrows, anticipating his answer.

“...less than a quarter book.”

“Well, that isn’t so bad!” Jan fusses with Marv’s hair. “You have eight hours to give out, how many? Four, five parking tickets? We did six last Thursday! You know Marv,” Jan retrieves a gun from the drawer under the microwave and firmly places it into Marv’s holster on his right hip. “As long as that narcotics detective from unit F doesn’t sneak up behind us and issue an entire book of tickets today, I think it’s ours.”

“Remind me again why I can’t just drive over to the shops and pick you up this...”

“—Cuisinart set—”

“—Cuisinart set from the kitchen store? Why do we have to win it in this thing again?”

“Marv, we went over this already. Couples who work together stay together. And couples who have their eyes on the prize during periods of...”

Marv adjusts his coat.

“...medical stress have better prognoses.”

“So if we win a set of kitchen pots from the station my lungs will stop falling apart?” Jan sighs and avoids Marv’s eyes. He places his hands on her shoulders like a middle school dance. “Ok, Jan. I’ll do my best.”

Marv turns to leave and his shoes squeak on the linoleum floor before he pauses by the doorway.

“In your left pocket, Marv.”

Marv feels the outline of his inhaler. He pulls open the door and exits into the November flurries.

Marv didn’t quit smoking until three months after his emphysema diagnosis. Stage two was just some typical coughing and shortness of breath—nothing he wasn’t used to already.

“Sweetheart, why would a smart man like you even begin smoking? I can’t imagine.” Jan always shook her head and watched the cigarette burn between his fingers. “How many is that today? Two? Three? Remember our plan. We’re slowly eliminating them to ensure success.”

“*I’m* slowly eliminating them, dear.”

“You heard what the doctor said. We’re in this together, Marv. The more we work as the team, the more we accomplish. So *we* are slowly eliminating them. Say it with me.”

“We are slowly eliminating them.”

“Eliminating what?”

“Cigarettes. We are slowly eliminating them.”

He parks in the fire lane at Nicky’s Diner—Nicky doesn’t mind—and unbuckles, leaning into the back of the leather headrest. Winds at 35 mph this morning. With wind

chill, Allagash temperatures were looking at a hair below 0 degrees. Marv feels his lungs straining against his chest, begging for rest, or warmth, or permission to die. He pulls the inhaler out of his jacket pocket and shakes it with slow, deliberate movements while watching a family of four exit their station wagon and enter Nicky's. Tourists. A young girl is sitting atop her father's shoulders, an older boy dragging the heels of his snow boots playing a Nintendo.

A long exhale. A sharp inhale. Marv tightens the collar of his jacket and exits the squad car. His boots crunch below him and his lungs recoil into the recesses of his ribcage. He heads toward the recently emptied station wagon, licks his index finger and thumb, and feathers through the booklet to the next available page.

**Date:** November 3<sup>rd</sup>

**Time:**

Marv pulls back his sleeve.

**Time:** 8:43AM

**Location:** Nicky's Cruisin' Diner. 900 Kenduskeag Ave.

**Make & Model:** Oldsmobile Customer Cruiser

**Color:** BLU

**License plate no:**

The boy sits in a booth shielded from Marv by a pane of glass that reads, "Corned beef hash, \$1.89!" The father turns to scold the boy for furiously thumbing at his game when he sees Marv, edging down the side of the car toward the rear license plate. He launches from the booth and out the front door, haphazardly zipping up his jacket as he loses his balance on the iced doormat.

“Hey, fella! Now what seems to be the problem here?” The man plants his feet through the packed snow, his family looking from the window. The boy has finally put down his game and stares wide-eyed at the showdown.

**License plate no:** 6LIK274

Marv straightens slowly to allow his lungs to expand and scratches the beard on his neck.

“Well, sir, I am issuing you a parking ticket.”

The man hesitates, then begins to inspect the parking job so as not to offend the officer.

“And...hm, well, I just can’t say what I did exactly wrong here, officer. On what...grounds are you issuing this parking ticket?”

“On account of the fact that you parked over the line into the handicap slot here.” Marv tears the ticket from the book and holds it toward the man.

The man looks over to his family in the window and continues. “Officer, respectfully, I just barely crossed over the line here. Listen, I’m just trying to take my family out for a nice breakfast, I don’t get paid until next Friday and—”

Marv retracts his hand, and moves toward the front of the vehicle.

The man, desperate now, launches himself toward Marv and grabs his elbow. “Officer, please we’re on a family vacation—”

Startled by the man’s grip, Marv’s chest tightens and his lungs fold in half. His chest begins to expel viscous liquid and he steadies himself on the hood of the car, gasping for air. He squeezes shut his eyes and begins to pound at his stomach. The man, terrified of what he might have done has frozen in his tracks. Marv attempts to straighten



his back and look up like his doctor taught him. Supposed to let the lungs expand and open up airways. He throws his head back and chokes on bronchial phlegm but manages to calm down his breathing. The man's family looks on horrified. Three other window booths and a waitress look on, mouths open.

"Officer?" The man can't tell if he is now off the hook or in deeper trouble.

Marv exhales deeply. He releases the ticket from his balled fist and flattens it out on his thigh. He takes a deep breath, then slips it under the windshield wiper.

"Have a nice day."

Marv's usual was to wait out at Nicky's for a couple of hours, get the double-parkers which is easy when the snow banks are five feet high taking up parking spaces, but today he's made too much of a scene to stick around. His lungs won't take a day of outdoor car-by-car inspection, so he drives downtown to the corner of Salisbury and Main to catch the frenzied errand runners parking illegally in front of the post office.

Marv's parked for about a minute and a half before he gets his first—a woman in the no parking zone up front. Marv watches her put on a show as she hurriedly steps out of her car with two handfuls of brightly colored holiday cards. As she's shutting the door with her hip, she shuts the edge of her parka in the door, forcing her to stick the cards in her armpit, dig around her pocketbook for her keys, manually unlock the door, pull herself free, then unsteadily crunch through the snow in her low heels.

Marv flips through his book and writes the ticket from the driver's seat, heat blowing at his chest. He keeps the squad car running as he slips the ticket underneath her

windshield, and awaits her return. Ten minutes pass. Marv decides that this ticket was, rarely, deserved.

His phone sounds and he presses hard into the green button.

“Marv?”

“Mhm.”

“Marv? Are you there?”

“Yes, dear. I’m here.”

“I was thinking a roast for dinner. What’d you think?”

“Yeah, fine.”

The woman still hasn’t exited the post office.

“Marv? Are you there? If you want a roast, I’ve gotta start basting soon. And mashed potatoes. Sounds good?”

Marv raises his voice slightly to overpower the static. “Yes, dear.”

“Ok, hon. See you at 5:30, then.”

The woman exits the post office. She grabs the iced railing and carefully steps down the front walkway. She enters her car and drives away without noticing the ticket. Another car takes her place in the no parking zone, blocking the front stairway.

“Oh, and Marv? You still there?”

“Still here.”

“How many more Marv?”

Marv clears the phlegm from his throat. “Uh. Three, four maybe.”

“Oh, Marv! Keep it up, sweetie. I believe in us. It’s an eight-piece set, Marv. An eight-piece!”

“Mhm.”

He presses the ‘end call’ button and places the phone in its holder. He pulls the ticket book out of his jacket pocket to begin writing out his third, but the man exits the post office and drives off before the ticket can be made. Marv huffs out deeply like his cardiologist taught him and heavily shifts in his seat as he replaces the ticket book into his jacket pocket. While this location is fruitful, Marv can’t find it in him to race the drivers back to their cars. He shifts out of park and moves on uptown.

They met after he returned from Vietnam. His grandmother knew a girl his age. Her name was Jan and she had curly brown hair and long eyelashes. Jan was studying to be a bookkeeper and played field hockey in college. She was attentive and loyal and kind. She would have been the perfect girl, but before the war, Marv met Alice.

Alice worked the counter at Sunnie’s Sundries on Market Square. One morning in November on his way to police academy, Marv saw her and knew she was it. The bell chimed as he pushed open the door.

“Welcome to Sunnie’s.” Alice offered a smile and continued stacking pomades.

Marv pushed out his chest as he approached the front counter.

She briefly paused. “May I help you, sir?”

He glanced at the clock above her head. 7:47AM.

“Yes. I would like...” Marv picked a tiny box from a display and placed it in front of Alice. “This.”

“A single hairnet?”

Marv went red. “And a pack of those Viceroy’s behind you.”

“Buying for your wife and daughter?”

“My who? No, no. I am...unattached. The hairnet is for my mother.”

“And the sugar cigarettes?” She firmly placed the box of candy next to the hairnet and raised an eyebrow. “I prefer Winston’s. Care to try?”

He grips the front tire of the squad car, buckling over as he empties the mucus from his lungs. The cover of the ticket book is to his left in a snow bank, the paper beginning to dampen and separate. He practices the breathing Jan taught him, two short breaths out and one deep in, something she found in a library book called *Emphysema & Common Sense*. It helps some, but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s now coughing up bits of lung. Doc said that would signal progression to stage four. He’d have to hand in his resignation soon.

He gathers himself and stoops down to retrieve the ticket book, brushing water from the cover, and continues toward the Pontiac parallel parked half way in a fire lane. He clears a layer of snow from the window to use it to write against, and sees a man sleeping in the front seat.

**Date:** November 3<sup>rd</sup>

**Time:** 11:18AM

**Location:** 422 Hammond St.

**Make & Model:** Pontiac Acadian

**Color:** OR

**License plate no.:** 7MK8274

Marv removes the ticket book from the window, and glances once more at the man who has been undisturbed. He pounds a muffled knock through his thick gloves but the man continues to sleep, and Jan needs her Cuisinart set. No—Marv and Jan both need their Cuisinart set. Marv tears off the ticket and slips it under the windshield. His phone sounds from his squad car across the street.

“Hi honey, are you keeping warm out there?”

Marv hears a knife on a cutting board in the distance.

“As warm as I can get.”

He leans against the window, straining the phone’s cord.

“Is it bad?”

“Not so bad, Jan.”

“Well, that’s good, honey.”

“It is.”

“Doctor Warren called just a few minutes ago. Wanted to remind you of your appointment tomorrow afternoon. You haven’t forgotten, have you?”

“No Jan, I haven’t forgotten.”

“So you’ll be there?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Oh, and one more thing, Marv!”

Marv eyes the parking meters across the street through his fogged windshield.

“You remember how I told you the pamphlet said that the Cuisinart set comes with two saucepans?”

“Mhm.”

“Well it actually comes with a third saucepan—a 1 ½ quart, too!”

“Well Jan, that’s just great.”

“How many more left, Marv?”

“Bout two, I’d say.”

“Try for three, just to be on the safe side. Gosh. A 1 ½ quart, too!”

“I will, Jan. I’ll do my best.”

“And zip your jacket up over you neck, Marv. If I know you, it’s halfway down to Antarctica. Well, I love you, honey. Stay warm. Bye bye now.”

“Bye, Jan.”

Marv replaces the phone into its holder. His jacket is zipped to his chin.

For forty-two consecutive days Marv stopped into Sunnie’s. Each day a pack of Winston’s. He began to arrive earlier so that the two could share a cigarette over the counter before police academy.

“And then, a strange girl came to the town,” Alice tilted up her chin and exhaled toward the ceiling.

“Strange? How strange?”

“I’m getting there, Marvin. Be patient!” Alice passed the cigarette over.

“This strange girl...never slept! Well, she had insomnia, really.”

Marv arched his eyebrows the way he used to tease her.

“No, keep listening! That wasn’t the strange part. The strange part is that the entire town caught her insomnia! Like the plague!”

Marv took another drag and propped his chin into his palm on the counter. “So the insomnia was contagious.”

“Yes, very.” She grabbed the cigarette from his fingers and in her fervor, forgot to smoke it.

“And before long, the *entire town*—” with sweeping arm gestures, she continued, “had this...insomnia epidemic.”

“Insomnia epidemic.”

“Yes,” Alice widened her eyes and took a drag. She continued, lungs full of smoke. “And then they all began to forget. Forget everything. Their names, their purposes, the names of objects,” she exhales the smoke. “They start writing up labels and sticking them to things: chairs, tables, each other. ‘Cup. Dog. Fence. My wife.’ They make this ginormous sign to remind them that God exists.”

“If they keep forgetting things, won’t they forget how to read and write though?”

Alice hoists herself onto the counter in excitement and presses her index finger into Marv’s forehead. “Exactly! You’re exactly right!”

“So then what happens?” Marv pulls the cigarette from between Alice’s fingers and stubs it out into the glass ashtray between them. Her eyes follow his movements, but she finally looks up at him and grins.

“Oh, I don’t know. I haven’t gotten there yet.”

The red parking meter is a stain against the snow. Marv approaches it to be sure, then pulls out his ticket book. He’s only got one ticket left after this one. He crouches by

the license plate to wipe the brown slush from its surface, and writes out the ticket on his knee. He checks his watch: 12:02.

He heads back down the sidewalk by the Pontiac. The ticket is flapping against the wind, but otherwise secure. The man is still asleep in the driver's seat. Marv crosses the road and knocks his boots against the front tire of his squad car, then settles into the driver's seat with the heating on. Today Jan packed him two roast beef sandwiches on bulkies with a handful of pickle spears. He clicks on the radio and takes a bite of a sandwich.

*During an hour long run, a jogger's heels will strike the ground about 20,000 times. And in that hour, that jogger will absorb about 4.5 million cumulative foot bounds of punishment. People call this 'keeping in shape.' Well, if you'd like to keep your teeth in shape, we'd like to jog your memory by reminding you that chewing great tasting Trident after sugary snacks helps fight cavities and all the exercise that requires is chewing. Trident. Millions of teeth can't be wrong.*

“So then everybody in the town starts to forget everything that they knew once. You know, like their names, and the words for stuff like ‘car’ and ‘chair’. And they even forget that God exists—”

“Hold on. Is this fiction?”

“Yes, Jan, of course it is.”

Marv and Jan were on their fourth date at a diner eating steak and eggs. Marv used a thick slice of bread to sop up gravy.



“I find it hard to believe that anyone could forget God exists. If they really believe, you know.”

“It’s just a story, Jan. So then they—”

“You’re telling me that a random girl just arrived at this fellow’s house, and he let her in even though he had young children and she spread her insomnia disease? Is that even contagious?” Marv put down his bread and looked out the window. A husband and wife each held one handle of a baby stroller and pushed it along the sidewalk. Jan laughed. “Who lets a stranger into their house anyway?”

He finishes the two sandwiches and reclines in his seat. He fiddles with the radio. He puffs his inhaler. Cleans his gun. He reaches into his pocket for the ticket book, tears out the final ticket and tosses the empty cover into the passenger seat. 1:52PM. Marv looks out the window at the flurries coming down, and the Pontiac, still occupying space in the fire lane. He honks once. Then again. Then he holds his palm down on the horn until he sees a toddler walking with her mother, holding her mittens over her ears. He picks up the phone.

“Hi Gary, it’s Marv.”

“Marv! How are ya buddy?”

“Same old, Gary. I got an orange Pontiac Acadian down here on Hammond Street blocking a fire lane. Can you send a guy down?”

“Sure thing, Marv. Hey, Marv. You takin’ care of yourself?”

“Sure am, Gary.” There is silence from the other end. “Well, bye, now.”

Marv rearranges himself in the seat and waits.

“Pet the meow, Marv! Pet the meow!”

Alice’s brother was five. He stood on a chair and held a tangerine tabby cat by its scruff between Marv’s face and a half-eaten plate of spaghetti.

“Ollie, for god’s sake, you know that thing isn’t allowed in the house.” Alice’s mother turned to Marv. “More lemonade, sweetheart?”

“Oh, sure, thank you.”

“James, would you be a doll and bring the pitcher from the kitchen?”

Alice’s mother, Margaret, was a district attorney in Allagash, her father a mechanical engineer.

“Alice tells us that that you’re graduating from the police academy next week. She couldn’t be more proud. Light?”

“Yes, thank you.”

She handed a book of matches across the table and pushed the ashtray between them. Alice squeezed Marv’s knee. James returned with the pitcher of lemonade and refilled the glasses.

“And good thing about that, son. Who knows what happens if men are called to this war. At least if you’re in the force, we know you’ll be in good hands.”

“Oh dad, don’t be dramatic.” Alice asked her Winston. “Marvin isn’t going anywhere.”

Marv watches the truck inch toward him in the distance. It looks like a tank in the clouds. He shuts off the car engine and the moisture in the air instantly begins to

dissipate. He takes a shallow breath and pushes open the car door, slowly standing in the new snowfall. It happens before he can reach for the inhaler in his pocket.

The snow below him stains like the parking meters in the distance. Hot red specks melt the flakes at his feet. His mouth tastes like the metal poles that he and his friends would lick as kids just a few blocks from where he is standing. His throat is a peeling sunburn and tears pool into the crevices around his eyes. His lungs deflate and paralyze. Marv hears the tow guys yelling in the distance as he collapses to his knees. The blood stings his chapped lips and his head hits the driver's door as he slides to the ground.

James was right. In 1969 Marv left for Southeast Asia, but instead of the trenches he spent his days in a room with office chairs and overhead fans. As requested, Alice sent five packs of Winstons with every letter, until she didn't anymore.

"I'm with someone else. We met in our Religious Studies class that I told you about. He's from Vermont from a good family, and we read the same books and have the same interests. Mother said that sometimes we have to make sacrifices to be with those that are intellectually suited for us. And I love him, I really do. Thank you, Marvin, for being there when you were. I won't forget you for as long as I live.

Best,

Alice"

When Marv's deployment concluded and he arrived at the Bangor International Airport, there was a grandfather unwrapping a lollipop, a teenage boy picking at his acne, and a woman reading *Eyes of a Blue Dog* at the arrivals gate. A girl with curly brown hair, sent by his grandmother, waved him down. She arrived two hours early, she said, so

as not to miss him. She came with a brown paper bag with four different sandwiches because she wasn't sure of his taste. She read practical books about PTSD and asked him more questions in one car ride than Alice ever did.

"Say, Jan, won't you turn here?"

"Are you already forgetting how to get around Allagash? That isn't the way to your house."

"Just turn here, will ya?"

Sunnie's Sundries was a laundromat. The York Street law firm still had Margaret's name on the plaque by the front steps. No one answered Alice's doorbell even though the tangerine tabby still loitered on the stoop. Jan waited in the car and turned down the heat. She had read that the heat sometimes triggered soldiers returning from the war.

A firm smack on Marv's trunk brings him back as he gulps in dry air.

"Gosh, Marv, are you ok?"

He fumbles into his pocket and pushes his inhaler. The snow in front of him is littered with blood and melting quickly. He kicks snow over the incriminating patch. He clears his throat and swallows a mouthful of blood and bits of tissue.

"Yep."

Behind them, the second tower is firmly knocking on the window of the Pontiac. The motionless driver does not respond.

"Yoo hoo! Sir!" The tower waves his hand in front of the window and knocks once more. "Sir, we're here to tow your car! Hello? Hello, sir?"

Marv leans against the door, watching from across the street. The town clock reads 4:02.

“He isn’t going to respond.”

“What’d’ya say, Marv?”

“He isn’t going to respond.” The tower ceases the banging and turns around to face Marv. “He isn’t going to respond because he’s dead. Been like that since before noon.”

“Dang Marv, you been watching a dead guy since before noon?”

Marv opened the driver’s door and reached down to his phone.

“Didn’t realize he was dead ‘til I saw the time.”

The paramedics hoist the gurney into the back of the ambulance. It was covered, despite the fact that all parties involved had become acquainted with the dead body. The towers begin on the abandoned vehicle.

“Well. Sorry for that, boys.”

One looks up over the hood from strapping the right front wheel. “Oh, it happens, I guess.”

The other tightens the left wheel straps. “Take care of that cough, will ya Marv? For god’s sake.”

“Sure thing.”

“By the way, I guess I gotta return this to ya.”

He drops the parking ticket into Marv’s hand.

“Well, see ya on the next one, Marv!”

The truck slowly drags the orange car up Hammond and out of sight.

Marv crosses the road to the squad car. He steps over the pink slush by the door and sits into the driver's seat. The dashboard reads 5:18PM. He folds the last ticket and reaches over to place it in the glove compartment. He doesn't bother heading to the station for the tally, and instead heads toward the strip mall back on Kenduskeag Avenue by Nicky's Diner. The set costs \$79.99, and there are more pieces than the one at the station.

He sits across Jan, chewing the roast.

"I knew we had it in us, Marv. I *knew* it! What a team we are." Jan smiles through mashed potatoes, and Marv reaches over for her hand.

Koji Itō

*You'd be surprised, but the fall only lasted six seconds. I never thought that I would ever fly faster than a bird. At six seconds I'm diving into the water at 95 mph, but don't worry Koji chan, I wasn't afraid. After all, it isn't the fall that kills you. I pulled my knees into my chest and hit the river like a child being born. I never could dive like you. From there, the water seeped into my lungs. Shh, shh, Ko-Ko, I didn't even know it was happening. Then I started to sink. I danced with the river in peace, down, down, down until I softly landed in the mud. It was cold but so soft on my skin. I stayed there for several nights, but then I couldn't stand to be without you. You were looking for me. The bugs in my belly were eating slowly, and I said, "faster, faster now!" They ate as quickly as they could until I filled up with air and floated to the top of the water once again to be with you. My love.*

Koji awakens in sweat. The back of his neck is dripping down his spine and the front of his shirt sticks to his chest. He gently rises out of bed and shuffles to crack open the window. A cool stream of air blows against his face. He strips off his wet t-shirt and hangs it on the windowsill. It takes three hours for Yumi's voice to become white noise, and he's put to sleep once again.

He wakes to the sound of children laughing and basketballs against pavement. He turns over and squeezes his eyelids but the sound just gets louder.

*Ko-ko, please, will you go to the harbor to pick the fish up from the market? I'm so tired this morning. I will meet you at the shop for opening.*

Koji pushes his head further into the pillow. "Yes, love. Just five more minutes." He cracks open one eyelid and watches the silhouette of Yumi on her side, knees tucked,

hair in a grey braid down her shoulder. Her back rises and falls with her breath. He reaches out to touch her arm but she dissolves into dust floating on a sunbeam from the cracked window.

He buys sixty pounds of seafood—an assortment of tuna, bass, rainbow trout, crawfish, prawn, sturgeon, salmon. He loads the buckets into the back of his van onto cold blocks that rest on a blue tarp. He drives the eight minutes to their shop taking careful turns not to tip the buckets.

By opening, he is laying the fish over ice chips at the front end of the shop. Yumi is pricing apples and singing to the radio. But when he walks over to kiss her ear, she is gone and the apples are untouched.

She was first gone on a Saturday. Koji woke up to an empty bed, but turned over and fell back asleep assured that Yumi was on her morning walk. He ate breakfast alone by the window. Every child, mother with a stroller, teenaged boy that came into the window frame was Yumi, but then it wasn't. He placed his plate into the sink and left on her walking route. Everything that he once loved became a hazard—the sidewalks were much too high, somebody could fall and break an ankle. He made a note to call the city planner and suggest having the edge shortened. Too many tree branches were swooping over the walking path. What if there was a strong wind? Even a smaller branch could knock a person unconscious. Too many dogs on the sidewalk. Cars were driving too quickly in the street. Teenagers with no direction roamed the pedestrian area smoking cigarettes. Was it a mugging gone bad?

“Have you seen my wife? Have you seen my Yumi?”



He didn't know the people that he spoke with. He described her, "This high. The softest skin, it feels like the inside of a rabbit's ears. So many lines in her face that make her smile so lovely. Brown eyes that are so wide with wonder. Delicate hands that slice vegetables like a madman."

No one had seen Yumi. That afternoon he went to the police.

"She got Alzheimer's? Maybe she walked off someplace."

"No, no. Not my Yumi."

"Listen, she's old. Maybe she just lost track of time. I bet she's at your house right now looking for *you*."

She wasn't. Koji spent hours in his photo books looking for the perfect photo that showed Yumi. He couldn't decide on one, and brought seven photo books to the police station. They pulled out the first on the first page, scanned it, brought it back, sent him home. Dinner alone by the window. Every passerby was Yumi, then wasn't. Back to the empty bed.

The missing ads went up two days after she had been gone. Wheatpasters hung them overnight on telephone poles and the side of buildings and the scaffolding under construction. Koji remembered seeing missing children on milk cartons as a child, and he went to every grocery store in town looking for Yumi's face on the side of the bottle.

"Where are the missing ads? They're supposed to be right here!" Koji shouted at the man stocking cream cheese.

"Sir, I don't think they've done that for a long time now." He picked up an empty box and retreated into the stock room.

Koji called the dairy distributor for his store. They received their milk from a local farm and the milk came in big glass jugs.

“My wife is missing. I need you to put her missing ad on the side of your bottles.”

“Mr. Itō, we don’t have labeling facilities here. We just bottle the milk. I’m very sorry about your wife.” Koji went silent on the other end. “Hello? Hello? Mr. Itō?”

During the day, Koji didn’t leave his living room. He had the television on waiting to hear news that his wife was found unharmed near a pond feeding the geese. Maybe she was caring for an infant she found abandoned in the park. She decided to sleep on the beach to watch the sunrise. At night, he kept the television playing knowing that even in his deepest slumber hearing her name would immediately wake him. But he never woke because Yumi was never on the television.

The missing ads began to peel off the walls and poles, and float into the street. Koji would walk around town repasting them to surfaces and pulling down posters placed on top of them. How could they? Was a concert more important than his Yumi?

He spoke to her poster, asked her questions.

“Yumi, where are you? Yumi, please come home.”

The photo of her was from her sixtieth birthday. She’s smiling with teeth and looking off to the side. Maybe she wasn’t responding because she didn’t know he was looking at her.

Koji woke at noon. He boiled water on the stove and toasted four blueberry waffles. He emptied a packet of instant coffee into a mug and poured over the boiling water, then pulled his waffles from the toaster and squeezed an overripe persimmon over

them. Yumi wouldn't allow him to eat with his hands, but Yumi wasn't here. Then he got the call.

"We found her body in the Sacramento River. There was no evidence of foul play. We're sorry for your loss."

Koji hung up the phone. He slowly chewed the waffle and stirred his coffee. He watched the people outside the window—children playing basketball, a toddler on a scooter, an old man with a walker, a pair of lovers grasping hands. He rinsed his plate and washed out the coffee mug. He refilled it with water and took a sip. Another sip. He picked up the telephone and dialed the police station.

"Where do I go?"

He barely made it home. The back of his throat felt like liquid stone dripping down into his heels. It was draining out of him like it was magnetized to the earth. He forced air into his lungs but his body swallowed it up, rejecting relief. Stumbling into the bathroom, he reached behind the shower curtain and turned both knobs on high, and collapsed onto the toilet seat allowing steam to fill his lungs. He breathed easier and leaned against the wall behind him.

*Pass me the bath salts, love.*

It sounded like her, but it wasn't her. He fanned the steam and it danced like smoke.

"I won't let myself go mad. I won't." Koji lightly tapped the back of his head against the wall.

*Ko-ko, please. My back is so sore and my head is pounding.*

The sounds came from the bathtub. “I am not mad. You are not Yumi.” Koji slowly rose to his feet and pulled back the shower curtain, dotted with tulips, chosen by Yumi last spring. And there she was. Her skin as touchable as the steam, she was submerged in water with a loofah to her arm.

*I don't think you're mad, love. Now hand me the salts.*

After the burial, she would come to the fish market with him. Other days she met him at the store in the mornings, or came around lunchtime, sometimes she was in and out all day.

“Where do you spend your days when you aren't with me?”

*Koji, are you jealous?* She laughs and tosses a lemon at his chest. The yellow bits scatter into light just as the lemon should hit him. *I go walking... sometimes to the gardens, or the park to play with the children.*

He tries to get close to her but he can't touch her. He tries to talk to her like they did before but he can't find the right words. Every night while he sleeps she tells him the same story:

*You'd be surprised, but the fall only lasted six seconds. I never thought that I would ever fly faster than a bird. At six seconds I'm diving into the water at 95 mph, but don't worry Koji chan, I wasn't afraid. After all, it isn't the fall that kills you...*

And by morning he has already forgiven her.

*Ko-ko, wake up. Time for the fish market.*

Koji opens one eye and watches as Yumi folds his pile of clothes. She picks up a shirt, creases the sides until it is a neat square, and as she places it into his drawer it dissipates into the air. Three shirts, a pair of pants.

*Koji! You're going to be late. There will be nothing left by the time you get there.* She stands over him with her arms on her waist. She looks exactly the same as the last time he saw her. She even wears the same outfit—a long, pink and gold patterned dress. She wears house slippers and her round black glasses. She has the same easy smile. She playfully slaps at Koji's hair and turns back toward the laundry. Koji feels nothing as the hand travels through his hair, his scalp, his skull, his brain, his memories, and through to the pillow.

He swings his legs around and hangs them off the bed. He touches his head where he should have felt her familiar palm.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

*Well love, you clearly can't keep up with the laundry.* She laughs. A pair of pants disappears into the air and his laundry pile remains the same.

“Yumi, I'm begging you.” They locked eyes, but hers aren't the same. He wonders if his are. “Why did you do it, Yumi? Why?”

Her pink and gold body fades into the wall like a sunset. Koji stares at the untouched pile of clothes. He lifts his legs back into bed and sleeps until the afternoon.

Two years ago, Yumi stopped cooking.

*“Anata, will you make the hitashi-mono tonight? The ingredients are on the counter. I need to rest.”* She slept until morning. Koji ate alone in the window.

Months later, they visited the doctor together.

“She loved to cook. She cooked for me, and the neighbors, our family, and our friends. *Okonomiyaki* and *soba* and *tonkatsu*. She would dream of new dishes and by the time I woke up she would have already been to the shop to gather ingredients and begin cooking. But she doesn’t cook anymore. She says she isn’t interested.”

“Well Mr. Itō, maybe this is her way of trying to divide the household chores between the two of you. Maybe she is tired of cooking.”

“You don’t understand. Yumi, tell him.”

Yumi sat between the two of them, her eyes shut. “I don’t know what I feel.”

He wakes up groggy and disoriented. Koji hasn’t missed a day at the shop since they bought it over twenty years ago. Even when he had the flu last fall he was in the back room balancing accounts while Yumi worked the register. His head is sore from over fifteen hours on the pillow and his joints feel like sandpaper against bone. He shuffles to the bathroom sink and runs the tap until it is warm. Cupping water in his shaky hands, he rinses his face. He runs his hands along the liver spots on his neck and the ridges on his forehead.

“When did this happen?”

He combs through his grey hair, and retreats to the kitchen. Yumi is wearing a maroon and white apron with a ruffled hem. She is humming their wedding song and stirring a pan on the stove.

*How are you feeling darling? I thought you must be ill. I’m making your favorite—yakisoba. Sit down, relax.*

Koji watches the steam rise from the pan. Yumi is made up of the same tiny particles of light and color. On the wall next to him, the answering machine is blinking red. He pushes the play button.

“Hi Mr. Itō, it’s Kevin. Um, I came for my shift today but no one was there...so I waited around for a couple of minutes and then just, like, went home. Hope that’s OK. I’ll see you tomorrow, I guess.”

“Hello, Mr. Itō, this is John Robinson, landlord of 2089 Market Street. I’ve had a couple calls asking about the hours of your store. If you could do me a favor and just post your business phone number on your front doors so that these calls won’t be forwarded to me, that would be great. All right, that’s it. Oh! Maybe think about putting some updated hours on your door. That’d be an idea. OK. Bye.”

“Huh.”

*Huh, what? Sit down, honey.*

Koji sits at the table and Yumi places a steaming bowl in front of him. He smells the oyster sauce, green onions, cabbage, and nori but it’s just a memory. He reaches for the chopsticks and the bowl fades into the table.

“I guess I never thought about what would happen if I didn’t open the shop.”

*Well, you’ll be there tomorrow.* She smiles and sits across from him.

“You’re cooking again. Are you feeling better?”

*Koji, I feel better than I have in years. It’s like my life has been given back to me.*

Koji nods and looks into the empty placemat. “But your life hasn’t been given back to you, Yumi.”

She returns to the stove and plates another dish for him. *You must be hungry today, love.* She places the noodles in front of him and he is careful not to touch the mirage.

“Yumi, I’m happy that you’re feeling better, but please don’t cook for me anymore.” He reaches for her hand but she pulls it into her lap.

*But you know that I love to.*

“You understand why though, Yumi. Please.”

She looks off to the side. She looks exactly like her photo in the missing ads and he searches for her eyes.

“Just tell me. I’m begging you. Yumi, just tell me.” He lunges across the table to pull her into an embrace, but he collides with her chair and falls to the ground. His body begins to heave and he wails into his knees.

“Why are you doing this to me? Why?”

*I stayed there for several nights, but then I couldn’t stand to be without you. You were looking for me. The bugs in my belly were eating slowly, and I said, “faster, faster now!” They ate as quickly as they could until I filled up with air and floated to the top of the water once again to be with you. My love.*

“Liar.” He squeezes his eyes shut and tries to drown out her voice.

He hobbles into the kitchen at four in the afternoon.

*Well now you’re just being pathetic.* She stands with her hands on her hips in the doorway.

“I can be pathetic if I want to be. My wife is dead.”



*Don't say that. I'm here with you right now.*

She reaches for his face and he walks through her body, fragments of her wisping away like smoke. He assembles his breakfast and eats it alone at the window.

“Hi Mr. Itō...so I think maybe you're on vacation because the shop has been closed for every one of my shifts this month. My mom told me to ask you to just call me when you get back so that I don't wait out in front every morning. So, yeah, I guess just call me when you get back. Oh, this is Kevin by the way. See ya.”

“Mr. Itō, John Robinson again here. I'm getting complaints from the tenants above your store about a smell. I went down to the property yesterday and I could even smell it from the street. People are actually crossing the street to avoid walking in front of my building and, well, we both don't want that. If you could give me a call, or even better, maybe head down to your store to see what that smell is, and get rid of it immediately. Otherwise, we might have to look at the terms and conditions of your rental.”

“Hi, this message is for Mr. Koji Itō. This is Neerav from the Bakshi Funeral Parlor. I'm calling because you're behind on this month's payment plan and you will incur a 5% fee for tardiness. If you can, drop your check off in person as soon as possible, or you can use our online payment system at [www.bakshifuneralparlor.com/payment](http://www.bakshifuneralparlor.com/payment). Have a blessed day.”

“Mr. Itō, I need to stress what a serious matter this is. If you do not remove the smell coming from your store by the end of *today*, I will have a locksmith and cleanup crew vacate the premises and I will file eviction papers. I don't want to do this to you,

Mr. Itō. You and your wife have been easy tenants for a long time. Just please get down here and fix this problem so that we can both get on with our lives.”

*Well now you’ve done it.* She leans against the wall, nervously tapping her foot.  
*We’ll lose the store, all because of you.*

“No, I’ll lose the store.” Koji pulls down a jacket from the coat rack and shuts the door before Yumi can leave with him. “All because of me.”

It was a Sunday a year ago and Koji was making desserts. *Mochi*, *dorayaki*, and *manjū*. He added twice the sugar to the *mochi* and the consistency was wrong, but he read that sugar released serotonin and made people happy. The sugar would also help Yumi put on weight. Dresses hung off her shoulders and if Koji didn’t cinch the fabric around her waist and secure it with a belt, the drooping fabric revealed her breasts. He brushed her hair in bed and brought in the tray of desserts.

“The *mochi* looks off.”

“But the *dorayaki* looks good, doesn’t it? Have a bite.”

“I’m too tired to eat.” She lied across the bed and remained there until the next morning.

The stench starts half a block away. Koji covers his nose with his hand as he approaches the back door and props it open to air out the stock room. He grabs a rag, ties it around his face and heads through stock and his office to the main shop.

The air is thick with fruit flies. There is a persistent white noise—the usual inaudible buzzing of the insects grows loud as they increase in numbers. Beds of

vegetables are rotting. Cucumbers are split open and oozing brown liquid. The romaine lettuce has deteriorated to a brown sludge, and the squashes have taken on gruesome warped shapes. Compost fluid runs down the wooden table legs and begins to compromise their integrity, resulting in the stand taking on a surreal oblique lean.

The mangoes are practically a heap of pits as the maggots have finished their work. They laze on the brown seeds, moving slowly with swollen bodies. The bananas are shrunken, black and firm in bunches. Melons are deformed shrunken heads with white wooly mold in their crevices.

At the front of the store, the meat and seafood stands, once fresh and pink are now both pus colored and shades of dark brown. Even from several feet away, the former flesh is wildly animated.

*The last time I saw our shop it was alive, Koji.*

“It still is.” He looks at the meat stand. The thousand tiny worms traveling through the slabs make the surface of the tables flutter like ocean water. “It’s just a different type of life, Yumi.”

Koji pulls the rag from his face and walks out the front door of the shop. John Robinson calls the cleaning crew and Koji receives the eviction papers that night.

*I pulled my knees into my chest and hit the river like a child being born. I never could dive like you. From there, the water seeped into my lungs. Shh, shh, Ko-Ko, I didn’t even know it was happening.*

He wakes, lurching forward and breathing heavily. One hundred and seventy four nights of this. Koji even found himself reciting it at the brink of sleep when Yumi would begin whispering it in his ear.

*Then I started to sink. I danced with the river in peace, down, down, down until I softly landed in the mud.*

He pulls the sheet tighter around his body and looks into the dark at nothing. The crickets coo outside his open window. He turns over to his side, and looks again at nothing. No Yumi lying with her back to him. No Yumi standing in the doorway or at the window.

“Hello?” Koji perches himself against the headboard and looks around. “Are you there?” Nothing. Where is she? Where does she go at night? Koji lets out a hot breath and relaxes his body into the mattress.

In June, the pills ran through her body. Yumi cooked again but not every day.

“You don’t have to cook, Yumi. Not ever again if you don’t want to,” Koji told her.

“I do it because I know that it’s supposed to make me happy, but it doesn’t. Every time I think, *Maybe today I’ll be myself again*. But I serve the *sashimi* and it doesn’t change anything,” she told the doctor. “Do you ever feel like you don’t want to exist? I don’t want to be dead, but I don’t want to be here either. I just want to be nowhere.” The doctor wrote in his notepad and Yumi watched his hand move across the page.

“Can’t you see this is killing me? My heart feels like a watermelon in my chest when I see you, Yumi. But I can’t touch you, and we can’t have the life we had before. I’m sorry the store is gone, but I needed you, and you weren’t there. Please, Yumi. I need you to leave. Don’t you see?”

*Don’t complicate all of this, Ko-ko. I could have stayed away from you, but I’m here now. I came back for you. And see? She spins and her dress flutters around her ankles. It’s just like old times, before everything. We’re happy again. She caresses his cheek but he just feels cold.*

“Where do you go at night?”

She pulls away. *I don’t go anywhere. I am right here with you.*

“You weren’t here last night.”

*I must have been roaming around the house. I do that sometimes, you know. Now. What would you like for breakfast?*

Koji sets several alarms that night to test his theory of Yumi’s absence. He finds her missing after midnight and before five in the morning. She is not roaming in the garden or lying on the sofa, she is not watching the owls swoop from the porch chair. She does not respond to his calls for her. She is gone. For once since her return, he feels utter relief.

Koji’s resentment toward Yumi begins to grow. She nips at his heels wherever he goes and asks him to pick up groceries for her. She stands at the kitchen counter for hours washing dishes and wiping down counters but fails to notice that everything remains the same. She asks Koji to attend counseling with her, as if that is an option for them. His

patience dwindles when she sets meals in front of him and asks if there is enough miso in the dish. She says that she has been saved. She has come back so that they can pick up from where they were before the sickness nested in her. She cooks and walks and sings the way that she used to, but she refuses to admit that she is dead.

Koji begins going for walks throughout the city where it is acceptable for him to ignore her.

*What would you like for dinner tonight? Let's watch a movie together when we get home. Koji, look! Kittens.* She points at a flyer posted on a telephone pole with a photo of a large cat nursing a dozen kittens. *We should get one! We could use another companion and we have the room. Oh Koji, please?* To the right of the poster, Yumi's face is printed on a missing ad.

Koji isn't interested in the kittens. He looks around at the flyers posted all around them. A violin concert at the symphony. Yumi's face. A room for rent. Yumi's face. Grand opening of the new mall. Yumi's face. When Yumi went missing the wheatpasters posted throughout the night and by morning thousands of flyers lined the city. She's inescapable.

"We don't need a kitten." They turn toward home.

"I'm sorry, *you* want this job?"

"Yes. I am here for a job."

"Aren't you a little old for this job? Don't you have a pension to collect or something?"

“I know that this work is usually for younger kids, but I’d like to learn something new. I also am interested in the particular hours of this work.”

The man raises an eyebrow. “The graveyard shift?”

“Yes, the...graveyard shift.”

“Well, you got working legs and arms?”

“I do.”

“Then you got the job. Congratulations.” Koji lingers for a moment. “So... come back at midnight for your shift.”

“Oh, of course. Thank you, sir.” Koji walks out of the warehouse like he is forty years younger. He is officially a wheatpaster of Sacramento.

*I think you’re having a nervous breakdown, Ko-ko. Please talk to me. The man is right—just live from our savings and be. Remember we would talk about retiring together and—*

“I am officially a wheatpaster of Sacramento.” Koji repeats.

She nudges him while he sleeps during the daytime, but her body goes right through his. In the beginning, she was confused. Now she is angry.

*Koji chan! I came back for you—I came back! And this is how you repay me? You sleep all day, you ignore me, you don’t eat the food that I make for you? You get this foolish job? Koji, if I didn’t know better, I would think you were going crazy. Are you crazy? Is that it?*

He finds it easier to sleep through this than her previous nightly recitations. She begins following him to the warehouse, grabbing at his arms and trying to bring him

home, but once his shift begins at midnight she dissolves into the skyline and doesn't return until morning.

He heaves open the steel door to the warehouse. Last week it was a flyer with enlarged lips. Above the lips read, "Own it. French Kiss Tunnel." The week before, "Revolt...with art. Museum of the British Soldier." The men that are in charge of him wear white tank tops and the hair from their backs spring up over their shoulders. They like Koji. He's punctual and he never asks what the flyers are for or what they mean. They joke to themselves that he doesn't even speak English even though every night he walks in and talks like a Japanese-American born in San Jose. Tonight, they tie up a forty-pound stack of this week's flyers with twine and dump the package next to Koji's feet.

"Like we said before," he sucks on a toothpick. "No hanging on anything privately owned, you know. Like houses or schools, nothing like that. Just stick 'em where they already are. But don't cover up too much of our old stuff."

"He gets it, Daryl. Come back when you're done with that stack, old man. We got more for ya. Now git." For good measure, he makes a shooing motion.

Koji is already halfway out the door. He stands under the light of a streetlamp and looks out at the nothing around him. His body relaxes and he heads down Guadalupe to the construction site to start wheatpasting on the scaffolding.

The men he works for are the type who would come into his shop just before closing and slam down two bombers of lager each on the counter. They're the type who make fun of Koji's eyes and pay with dollar bills. They speak like they're always competing with something louder, even if there's nothing there. Koji never in his life



anticipated being indebted to these men, or even tolerating them. But Koji never in his life anticipated that the sight of his wife would feel like a hole burning through his stomach.

He begins on the corner of Guadalupe. He's down to four seconds a flyer after three weeks of practice. Keeping the brush directly in the wheatpaste instead of his holster cut his previous time, even though it shortens the life of the brush. The more flyers he hangs, the more they give him. The more they give, the more ground he covers during the night, and the farther he gets from Yumi. Maybe one night he will be given so many flyers, that he will paste all the way down Salinas Street, so far down that he will end up out of the city and at Yumi's grave. And when Yumi returns to his bed in the morning, he won't be there. Instead, he will be at her grave lying in her place. He has begun to dread daybreak, knowing that it brings her back from wherever the dusk takes her. He begins to fantasize about a world that is forever dark and full of nothingness.

The scaffolding is thick with flyers. There are hundreds pasted on top of each other and they're flitting like scabs. Koji pulls a handful to the ground to make room for tonight's flyer when Yumi appears. It isn't the translucent Yumi, it isn't the Yumi that's indistinguishable from steam, it's a real-life, solid Yumi. She sits in their kitchen chair and looks off to the side.

#### MISSING: YUMI ITŌ

It isn't the same Yumi that's in his head while he sleeps and at his heels during the day. He slops some wheatpaste over her cheek and rolls up tonight's flyer.

He eats his breakfast in silence. She stands in the doorway staring. Occasionally she opens her mouth with the intention of speaking, then closes it once more and crosses her arms. They haven't spoken in days. She calls it the "silent treatment" and Koji calls it "ignoring his dead wife." He turns toward the doorway, eyes down on the tile floor. One house slipper is planted to the ground and the other is missing, along with half of her foot. It looks like her body when she dissolves, but she has no intention of disappearing. When she notices him staring at her foot she turns and limps into the living room, yelling over her shoulder, *Happy now?*

The wheatpasting job at first brought him escape and relief, but now has become a reminder of what his life has become. He spends his days asleep and avoiding his dead wife who is slowly fading into air. She has since lost her left foot and half of her head of hair, and her left arm is almost completely translucent. But his nights, albeit absent from death, are mundane, monotonous and lonely. He begins thinking of death for himself, but not a predatory death like that of salmon and beefsteaks. He wants the death of iceberg lettuce, or a leek—withering painlessly into nothing. Decomposing into the ground and staying there forever. He pastes tonight's flyer on a telephone pole.

Maybe one day his knees will give out. Maybe one night he will be mugged and killed. He has nothing to offer—just some wheatpaste, flyers, and a haunting ghost. Maybe one night he will see a coyote and have a heart attack. He carries on pasting and praying for an angry drunk—a racist, even—with a loose mouth and handgun. Hell, even a Swiss army knife would do.

The flyers go up as they should. Eighty pounds and four thousand new affixtures to the city walls. He tosses the flyer twine into his trash bin by the street, and his eyes strain against the growing light as he looks up at the steps of his home. He prays once again for death, and waits one moment. Another moment. He uses his arms to pull his worn legs up each step, and unlocks the door. Yumi is waiting in the entryway.

Yumi is only torso now. She floats in mid-air from room to room.

*What have you done to us, Koji? We were supposed to be happy. I brought us back together and you're ruining it all. Do you even know what our shop has become? Have you seen it lately? Everything that we've worked for has been handed over to a rich white man now calling it his own. And these dishes! When did you turn into such a pig?*

Koji wakes at three in the afternoon. Water boils, four waffles, squashed persimmon, instant coffee. He sits by the window but the people walking by don't have faces. He picks the waffle up in his hands and folds it in half like a sandwich. Orange pulp spills from the sides and down his knuckles. He takes a bite and licks his palm.

*Look what you've become.*

His afternoons pass more slowly than ever before. He tries to sleep as late as possible to avoid the daylight with Yumi. She is now a floating neck and head, but her voice persists. He tosses his plate in the sink on the mound of dishes and walks out the door. He approaches their old shop. It's been renamed "The Johnson Family Market." Koji steps inside and walks through the aisles. The produce corpses that he left are not there anymore, but when he gets close to the walls he can still smell the decomposing

melons. Air conditioning has been installed. The *nori* sheets have been moved to the “ethnic” section.

At midnight Koji enters the warehouse. Tonight’s flyers are advertising the city’s new chain hardware store: “Don’t know the difference between a Phillips and a flat head? We promise that we won’t screw you over!” He picks up the twined package of flyers and a bucket of wheatpaste.

“Those arms still working, old man?” Koji nods. “Then you’ll take two packs tonight. Sector 5 needs to be covered ‘cause that little dweeb called in sick. From Salinas down to the river.”

“Down to the river.”

“You heard me, down to the river.” Daryl laughs and his gut shakes over his bald eagle belt buckle. He points a finger at Koji, looks at his partner and says, “This guy. I’m telling ya.”

The wind picks up as Koji works south toward the water.

*We found her body in the Sacramento River. There was no evidence of foul play.* *We’re sorry for your loss.* He says it out loud this time: “We found her body in the Sacramento River. There was no evidence of foul play. We’re sorry for your loss. Me too. I was sorry for my loss, too.” He rolls out a flyer on the side of a building overlooking the Tower Bridge and the water beneath it. “We found her body in the Sacramento River. There was no evidence of foul play. We’re sorry for your loss. We found her body in the Sacramento River. We’re sorry for your loss. We’re sorry for your loss.” He repeats this as he works down the hill and until he arrives at the base of the bridge. “We’re sorry for your loss.”

Koji drops the package of flyers at the edge of the bridge and the street. He walks to the center and looks out over the water. Is this what she saw? Is this where she stood? The wind is whipping at his face and he can feel his heart beat in his fingers.

“Do you ever feel like you don’t want to exist? I don’t want to be dead, but I don’t want to be here either. I just want to be nowhere.” Why didn’t he do something? Why didn’t the doctor do something? They knew all along. They both knew.

He climbs over the railing and grips at the edge.

“I’m sorry Yumi. It was my fault. I should have done something. It was my fault.”

*I never could dive like you. Yumi was just a pair of eyes now, hovering against the sky, looking into Koji. From there, the water seeped into my lungs. Shh, shh, Ko-Ko, I didn’t even know it was happening. Then I started to sink. I danced with the river in peace, down, down, down until I softly landed in the mud.*

Koji wasn’t surprised that the fall only lasted six seconds. Yumi had told him so.

Roger Duckney

Will Munny's face is framed against the pale blue sky. "It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. You take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have."

"Yeah, well, I guess they had it coming."

"We all got it coming, kid."

Roger Duckney fumbles with the remote and plays the scene back again.

"It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. You take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have."

"Yeah, well, I guess they had it coming."

"We all got it coming, kid."

He pauses on Will Munny's face and tosses the remote aside. He rubs the thighs of his Levis then hangs his thumbs in the loopholes. "It's a hell of a thing..." he begins, then lobs his straw hat onto the couch to match Eastwood's costume on screen.

"It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. No. Something's not right." He retrieves the remote and plays the scene back from the beginning. The wind is feathering the ends of Eastwood's cropped hair. The movement is even more noticeable than his lips while he speaks. Roger exits the living room and returns with a fan. He stands next to the television, next to Eastwood, to find the angle from which the wind is blowing. Front right. He sets up the fan by his coffee table and turns it on low. He imagines the air is hot and dusty.

"I'm sweating. I'm hot, but the cool air from the mountains offers a nice breeze." He practices some enunciations, then continues.

“It’s a hell of a thing, killing a man. You take away all he’s got and all he’s ever gonna have.”

He nods. That was a good one. Now less opening of the mouth. Clint’s mouth movement is mostly vertical, no loose lips.

“It’s a hell of a thing, killing a man. It’s a hell of a thing, killing a man. Killing a man. It’s a hell of a thing, killing a man.” He imagines his sidekick leaning against a tree behind him, exhausted and pulling from a bottle. Roger leaves a few seconds for his dialogue, then retorts, “We all got it coming, kid.”

It’s almost midnight. Roger shuts off the movie and the cable news plays while he returns the living room to its natural setting. He has an ottoman to his left that plays his faithful steed, an empty trash barrel which was the inside of a stagecoach, couch cushions arranged into a square was a porch, and a right angle carved out of a piece of pine that his grandfather made for him when he was six. Called it “gun fit for Butch himself.” As a kid, he used to quick draw infants in bassinets at the grocery store and boys tangled in jungle gyms. Now he overthrows the Apaches and sheriffs in town on a nightly basis.

Roger picks up the remote from the floor to turn off the television when scrolling text catches his eye on the bottom of the screen:

“NATIONAL ALERT: ALL BOWLEGGED MEN MUST REGISTER THEMSELVES AT THEIR LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICE. A painless, semi-permanent tattoo indicating registration will be delivered on the citizen’s hand (dorsal). Please remain attentive for further instructions. NATIONAL ALERT: ALL BOWLEGGED MEN...”

Roger unmutes the television and a woman wearing a lab coat sitting next to the news anchor explains further.

“All human infants are actually born bowlegged due to the cramped position of the fetus while in the mother’s womb. Isn’t that interesting? But it’s not until the child’s first year of life when he or she begins to bear weight on their legs when the femur’s angle in the hip socket begins to retract to a slighter degree — approximately a 48 degree angle.”

“Wow, Angela! That is interesting. Is there a way that people can test for bowleggedness at home? I mean, not everyone can calculate the angle of their femurs!” He laughs and adjusts the papers in front of him.

“Absolutely, Ken. To test for bowleggedness, stand up straight with your ankles touching. Do your knees touch each other? No? Do your legs bow out like a set of parentheses?”

Roger looks down.

“Shit.”

The following day during Roger’s lunch break he stands in line at city hall waiting for the electronic board to read his number.

“47.”

Roger is number 89. He looks behind him. The line winds around the corner. Last spring, the national alert called for men and women in their 20s with cholesterols under 150mg/dL. Roger figured that the people would just become research subjects, but instead, they were contained in government-built housing developments for a year and



their blood was gathered every morning to transfuse into those suffering from heart disease. The news reports that they are all doing well, that they have reintegrated into society and have saved hundreds of thousands of lives. But Roger's neighbor who returned six months ago ran in front of a taxi just last week. He couldn't imagine what the government could possibly want with him and his legs.

"Harry, get back here!"

Before Roger can turn around, he feels a rush between his knees. A toddler had viewed the hundred-person line of bowlegs as the ideal tunnel, and runs between their curvatures like a mouse in a wall.

*That's one use for them.*

"48."

A series of clacks like hooves on tile indicate that city security has arrived. They fondle the batons on their holsters and disperse themselves among the twisting line, pulling dozens of men by their elbows out of place while seizing their numbered tickets. Last year, city security policed the developments built for the cholesterol registrants. Roger has since switched out margarine for butter. One security officer slowly walks past and Roger intently stares at the dandruff in the man's hair ahead of him as he mentally attempts to straighten out his legs.

The officer who is now several paces in front of Roger slowly stops and turns. He squints his eyes, then begins walking back toward Roger. Roger holds his breath and shuts his eyes and feels the heat of the man in front of him fade as the man is grasped by the elbow and pulled toward the center of the room. He joins dozens of other men.

"49. 50." The line moves up.

Roger feels a tap on his shoulder.

“What do you think is going on, man? Have you noticed that they’re only taking...”

Roger turns to look at the detainees with city security.

“I’m just glad that I’m not one of them,” Roger replies. The men in the center are like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. They’re surrounded by Roger and the rest with no way out. It’s the first time that Roger doesn’t mind not being the hero.

The attention of the two men shift when the front steel doors clang open and the former detainees funnel out into the street. City security dumps handfuls of tickets into barrel trashcans against the side wall.

“What the hell is that about?” An enormous man, at least double Roger’s stature, he thought, with a naked woman riding a cobra tattooed on his neck approaches a city security guard. The man has a peculiar walk about him, and Roger realizes that they must all have this peculiar walk. His femurs are curved like two overripe bananas. The security guard continues down the line looking for more to pull.

“I said, what the hell was that about?”

The city security guard sighs and turns on his heel. The rubber on linoleum pangs between the walls.

“How can I help you, big fella?”

“You heard me, boss.”

“Those men who we pulled? Why, they are exempt from this here registration.”

“Bullshit! Those guys got more curves than the ladies I take to bed. You gotta be shitting me, man.”

“Ain’t about *their* legs. It’s about yours.” He breaks eye contact and slowly looks the man up and down. “Get back in line, sweetie.”

The city security guard shoves past the dissident and centers himself in the room. It’s quiet except for Harry the toddler who quietly hums into the back of his father’s knee.

“This here macaroni-legs wants to know why those fellas are headed back to their abodes but you all ain’t.” He scans the line.

“Any of y’all familiar with John Wayne? Hm? Howsabout Butch Cassidy? I know y’all know him. Billy the Kid?” His pulls his baton from the holster and slaps it against his palm. “Any of those guys we pulled look like ‘em?” He approaches a man several feet in line ahead of Roger and pokes at his chest with the baton.

“Who’d you say looks more like Wayne, hm? You or the African gentleman that left a coupla minutes ago?”

The man wipes his palms against his thighs. His knees shake, but don’t touch.

“Um, well, me, I suppose, sir.”

“That’s right! You! Now, why’s that?”

The man keeps his eyes down on the tile. “Well...”

“Well? Well, ain’t none of us ever seen no black cowboy before, that’s why! Not no Asian cowboy, to boot.” He shoves the baton back into his holster and squeezes one eye shut and puts the other up to a mimed camera, clicking the imaginary shutter. “Look around, fellas! You’re picture perfect. Now giddy up for one hell of a ride.”

Excerpted from *The Natural Man: The History and Makings of the Modern Cowboy*:

## Chapter I

Humans aren't the only ones that know there's no better place to mate than under the infinite Texan sky. By the mid-1800s, the population of bulls and heifers in the south quadrupled and cattle grew wild, natural enemies be damned. Trampled sugarcane left the ground sticky with pulp, and locals complained that cattle would settle down in front of their doors, barricading families inside for days at a time. Ranchers spent double on alfalfa and barley after the bulls pulled up pasture grass during mating season. The air was thick with horseflies feeding on dung.

In the south, a steer went for a coin in your back pocket. Up north, it was a trip to the bank. Quick slice down the dewlap and a Texan family of six had dinner for two weeks, but even chipped hash, corn beef chili, and a two-finger fat steak per day wasn't keeping the cattle out of southern saloon doors. Meanwhile in the north, they were saving steaks for tycoons and a herd of cattle was a sight for sore eyes.

The men who stepped up in Ida, Texas had spines as thick as grizzlies. They knew as well as you and I that no one can provide for their lady and the rest while heifers are ripping their gardens from the root and teething on pine porches. While the family men ate their steer stew, the women of the house scraped gelatinous tissue from the bottom of the cattle pelt and massaged handfuls of rock salt into the surface. The men sat at the fireplace and picked stringy pieces of flesh from their molars with shaving razors and the women soaked hides in watered wood ash to remove the brown and black and white tufts of hair. Johnny Caswell, the town dentist, took it upon himself to make custom boots from the hides brought to him by wives and sisters all across eastern Texas. A man

needed a good horse under him and a hell of a good pair of shoes on his feet if he was going to round those cattle up north to free up some Texan land and bring money back south.

The town was woken at dusk by the sound of southern wind chimes—hammers against horseshoes. The steeds were fitted, the men mounted up, and for the first time in years, citizens of Ida county saw the whites of the cattle eyes.

One may argue that the American cowboy rose out of necessity. The American government never forgot that.

The tattoo itches for three days afterward. The man at the city hall counter with the tattoo gun said no scratching for a week, so Roger balls his hands into a fist to stretch the skin on the back of his hand, then releases. He does this over and over until the purple vascular network between the bony bits of his knuckles protrude in a way that makes him nervous. The tattoo is the number 89 enclosed in a half-drawn circle:

(89)

It's an inch long and Roger notices that people begin to stare.

The first one to disappear is Dick Melby. He worked four cubicles down from Roger at and would microwave haddock on Fridays. At first Roger thought that he was sick, then on vacation. Then as Roger is walking to the water fountain, he passes his boss who looks him up and down, then smirks.

“You’re next, pal.”

That day in his cubicle Roger packs his things. He unpins John Wayne from his corkboard—a still from *Rio Bravo* that he printed out at work—and packs up his volume of *The Natural Man: The History and Makings of the Modern Cowboy*. He shuts down his computer and resets his desk chair to its default height and armrest levels.

At least Roger has time to take his things. Poor Dick had his screensaver slideshow playing photos of his Japanese Bobtail swatting an empty bottle of Zoloft for a week before the IT department reprogrammed his computer.

That night Roger puts on *The Searchers*. Does he really look like John Wayne? The woman at city hall wasn't interested in answering questions.

“Sorry to be a bother ma'am, but what is this registration for exactly?”

She pushed two sheets of paper in front of him.

“The security officers mentioned that we look like cowboys?”

“Sign here, here, and here. Next window for the identification markings. Have a nice day.”

John Wayne is galloping away from the Comanche camp, Debbie gripping at his waist from behind. Roger practices shutting one eye and squinting the other, then tipping his hat like Wayne does. He rocks back and forth on the ottoman, hands gripping invisible reins. “Let's go home, Debbie.”

Roger begins to think that the registration isn't anything like the last one. What if they were looking for cowboys? He has been practicing since his grandfather carved his pine gun. He could walk, and talk, and ride like the best of them. After all, John Wayne is

an American hero. He got the most close ups out of everyone in his movies. The only difference between them is that his legs hang straight like two railroad tracks.

Excerpted from *A Brief History of Deformity*:

Genu varum, colloquially known as bowleggedness or bandiness is a physical deformity. There are several possible causes of this defect:

Rickets. Rickets is a disorder that is caused by a vitamin D, phosphate, or calcium deficiency. It softens and weakens the bones resulting in defective mineralization and ultimately bone curvature.

Infancy. All infants are born with genu varum but grow out of the condition by age three.

Blount's disease. Tibial deformity cause by obesity, short stature, or early walking effects on the growth plate. No apparent genetic factor.

Improper healing. Broken bones or fractures that are not allowed to set correctly often will recalcify at incorrect angles.

Forced bone resetting. Uncommon in modern society. Seen mostly in 19<sup>th</sup> century America during the "cowboy" movement wherein men sat for upwards twelve hours on horseback forcing their femurs to adopt to the curvature of the horse.

The city is divided. At the grocery store, a grown man throws an apple at Roger and yells, "Go back to Oklahoma!" Then an elderly woman looks down at his legs, mutters "Oh, dear," and has the grocery clerk put his groceries on her tab. She then hands him a pamphlet that reads, "Where will you spend eternity?" arched over a man on

horseback. Beneath it, “The gift of labor is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” He politely folds the booklet and places it in his grocery bag.

Dick Melby is old news. Over the past two weeks, the mailman, the deli clerk, and even the man who reads the lottery numbers on channel seven are all replaced with men and women of sound skeletal frames. The morning news makes sure to balance their reports on the thriving meat industry, the need for cattle herders and farmers, and the bowlegged registration.

“Luckily, thousands of men have complied with new governmental regulations and have stepped up during this crucial time for an extremely important job in America. Isn’t that right, Ken?” The anchorwoman looks to her counterpart and smiles.

“Next up: are your children sexting in made up languages?”

Bankers, history teachers, botanists, CEOs, homemakers, professional golfers are sent to El Paso and San Antonio, Durango, Elko, and Dodge City. Men who don’t even own a pair of sneakers are fitted for cowboy boots by men with calloused knuckles and melanomas on their noses. They trade in slacks and sweats for Wrangler’s and the city security keep their blazers and gold watches for poker nights.

“God made your legs like this for a reason,” they are told.

“Y’all are finally given the chance to live up to your civic duty,” they are told.

“Shut up and get on that horse.”

Data analysts team up with medical researchers to provide the government with an approximate percentage of white males with bowlegged deformities in America. The number turns into a quota to be met that is displayed as a permanent banner on the bottom of television screens—a red bar that progressively inches to the right to indicate



progress toward the goal. The National Registration Network updates the numbers nightly, but as enthusiasm grows, they began updating the numbers every twelve hours, then six, then finally every hour. Citizens watch and cheer as the percentage of registrants jump by even one, and it soon becomes a children's game to sit on stoops and watch for the bowlegged men. Zero points if they already have the tattoo on their left hand. Zero points for a bowlegged Korean man or African-American man or Indian. Zero points for a bowlegged woman. But one, fat, point for every noodle legged-man without the tattoo. With a loud holler, the lurking city security can register the man within minutes. Who needs hopscotch when you can have your hard work displayed on the television and your mother will make you a celebratory roast?

Roger thinks back to standing in line a month ago at city hall. The apprehension and the dread. He smiles. How wrong he was. This is entirely different from the cholesterol registration. How often does one's dream become fulfilled through governmental obligation? He can't believe his luck.

Roger doesn't mind the people who eye his hands and follow him through the streets hoping for him to be their one, fat, point. In fact, with so much attention, he begins to comb his hair over his left ear like Henry Fonda.

While the children rest, city security wait for potential registrants to pass by.

"Sir?"

Roger holds his left hand up to the guard.

He looks briefly disappointed. "Number 89. You're any day now."

"When exactly —"

A lanky red haired-man turns the corner and spots the guard. He momentarily hesitates, then turns on his heel back in the direction that he came from.

“— You! Back up against the wall. Stand as you normally would.” The guard pulls a retracting tape measure from his holster, situated between the handgun and the pepper spray and drops down to his knees in front of the shaking man. He measures the space between the man’s kneecaps with precision and refers to his hand guide. He then measures between the feet, from hip to hip, and the length of the femur.

“Please, officer. I’m terribly allergic to any animal with hair or fur. I think it’s the dandruff underneath. Makes me break out in hives and my eyes swell as big as tennis balls—”

“Very close call, sir. Very close. What’s your name?”

“Alan.” Alan begins to scratch at the backs of his arms.

“Alan what?”

“Alan Carmichael, sir. Oh God, it’s not my fault, officer. My mother smoked a pack a day while she was pregnant with me. I can’t help it!”

The officer types into his tablet. “Alan Carmichael, your name has been added to the reserves list. If there is a shortage of cowboys, you’ll be next in line.”

“Oh God, oh Jesus...”

“I suggest that you begin preparing your family.”

The guard clips the measuring tape back into his holster and continues down the block. A woman with a young child yells, “Shame!” at the officer as he passes. The child whisks a handful of dandelions through the air and the florets float upward. Alan claws at

his neck with such force that it turns purple. He locks eyes with Roger, and the two men go their separate ways.

That night, Roger dreams he is sleeping under the stars in Monument Valley. Across town, Alan Carmichael is hospitalized for an ulcer.

“You think I am brave because I carry a gun. Well, your fathers are much braver because they carry responsibility, for you, your brothers, your sisters, and your mothers. And this responsibility is like a big rock that weighs a ton.” O’Reilly picks at a strip of dried beef in his fingers. “It bends and it twists them until finally it buries them under the ground.” Roger rewinds the scene. “And this responsibility is like a big rock that weighs a ton.” He pauses on O’Reilly holding the strip of beef. Thirty-seven years of Westerns. How could he have missed this?

Roger returns from the grocery store and begins to unload the items into his pantry. He heaves a 40-lb bag of dried beans onto the counter. A dozen packs of turkey jerky next to the tinned tomatoes and peaches and corn. Eighteen pounds of bright red beef replace the phyllo dough and vegetable pizzas in the freezer. The yogurt goes down the sink and the cereal into the trash. If he is going to be America’s next best cowboy, he is going to have to eat like one.

A week later, city security arrives on Roger’s doorstep and his suitcases are already lined along the walls of his front hall. He has made his bed with fresh sheets, thawed out the freezer, aired out the washing machine and unplugged his appliances. The

knocking continues as he watches what might be his last Western for some time. Roger doesn't anticipate televisions where he's going. Cowboys don't do that.

"Ready? OK, when we get outside and we get to the horses, whatever happens, just remember one thing... hey, wait a minute."

"What?"

"You didn't see Lefors out there, did you?"

"Lefors? No."

"Oh, good. For a moment there I thought we were in trouble." Then Butch and the Kid run out of hiding. Shots fire. Freeze frame.

The knocking continues more forcefully. "Mr. Duckney, open up!"

"Yeah, coming! Just one minute!" Roger shoots over the television with his pine gun and furrows his brows like Paul Newman. "For a moment there I thought we were in trouble." He takes a breath, then straightens and tucks his gun into the back of his pants. This is it. It's happening.

He walks to the front door and pulls it open to find four city security guards.

"Hand."

Roger extends his left hand and one guard checks the tattoo against his electronic records. He then holds his device up to Roger's face to verify his entry with facial recognition. Roger smiles.

"Don't do that."

The device confirms his record and the guard turns to the others. "He's good. Take him in."

Roger nods and turns to grab his suitcases as one guard corrals his arms and handcuffs him. He pulls Roger backwards down his front steps, the front door open and suitcases waiting.

“Sir, sir! This is highly unnecessary. I am going willingly! Also, my suitcases—”

“Oh, buddy. Didn’t anyone tell you? Where you’re going, you won’t need ‘em.”

## Chapter II

The American cowboy boot as we know it has evolved over the years from its earliest influence of 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish horseback fashion. The Americans needed footwear that could rough time, distance, and terrain. It had to allow men to sleep under the stars and manifest their destinies. The Spaniards offered just the basics, so as Americans do, they took it up a notch.

The American cowboy boot is made of 100% raw cowhide leather. For the audacious man, perhaps something more exotic like alligator, stingray, or ostrich. The leather protects the American man from rattlesnakes, scorpions, and venomous spiders on the range. Decorative stitching on the leather shaft of the boot allows for identification and distinction of the cowboy. The late and great Artie Paloosa, first cattle herder from Ida County, had turquoise lassos stitched into the outer ankle of his rawhides. They’ve been preserved and displayed at the National American Man Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The infamous Johnnie Caswell, known on the range as Johnnie Cas, had a red and gold cocked Vaquero on his left boot. Thing is still mounted up on the wall over the cell he died in at St. Joseph’s county jail.

The modern cowboy boot rises to mid-calf length to keep the prairie dust and critters out. It also protects the American cowboy's lower leg from razor wire and brush. The length steadies the foot during long passages cross-country, and keeps the boot on during long periods of walking in the event that the cowboy's horse is lame.

Rounded steel toes protect the cowboy from horses or cattle stomping about. It allows the man to have the equivalent strength and durability of a horseshoe and puts man and animal on a level playing field.

The low, angled heel of the boot keeps the cowboy's foot from slipping through the stirrups in the event that the cowboy loses balance, control of the horse, or is being thrown from the animal. Additionally, the treadless soles allow for a quick release from the stirrup in the case of emergency. The heel must be no taller than one inch—otherwise, the American cowboy will be wearing a shoe fit for a cowgirl.

Lastly, the boot has no laces. You think the American cowboy has got time for that?

The van has no windows and the air is hot and thick. Roger can't think of any famous westerns beginning like this.

They drive for four days. The guards switch shifts every five hours and feed the detainees jerky, canned pinto beans, and Spam. At least the food feels familiar. When the back doors to the van are opened, the men squint, momentarily blinded by the sun. When one man attempts to escape, the guards knot all the men together on one length of rope. They sit in a circle in the dirt and eat with their wrists wedged together. Two men are grossly overweight—one in the thighs and hips, and the other in the gut. Roger wonders

for the first time if horses have a weight maximum. One man has a bony, protruding nose like a scavenger. Another has a practically vulgar receding hairline, and another more gums than teeth. The last man is well over seventy and blind in one eye.

When they arrive at the internment facility the men strip naked and are handed new clothing. They are an identical army of dark wash jeans and thick, pale yellow collared shirts with mother of pearl snap fasteners. The boots are pleather and mass-produced with the logo “OBSOLES” imprinted into the side.

“Why am I not surprised?” The man next to Roger is shaking his head and pulling the boots on. The men look around at each other uneasy by their sudden likeness. Roger’s doubts from the van ride begin to dissipate. They might look like cowboy replicas, but at least they are cowboys. The doors swing open.

What walks in can only be described as a Real American Cowboy. His jeans are worn from wear and sun. His white shirt is misted in dust and his forearms are the color of mud. A silver and red oyster shell bolo tie hangs from his neck and a knife is nestled into a dark leather holster on his hip. On his feet are two cobra skin cowboy boots. Roger knows this because the head and neck of the cobras are extending from the toe of the boot, erect and staring at the men before them.

“Well ain’t this a bunch between the hay and the grass.” He licks his front teeth and sucks at his saliva. “I’m here to get y’all blue bellies up on one of the broncs out yonder. Grab yourselves one of them hats and meet me in the paddock. And I don’t wanna see none of y’all beating the devil around the stump. You’re here to become cowboys—not a bunch of alfalfa desperados.” He scans the room, licks his teeth, aims at the spittoon, and is gone.

Roger eagerly tucks his shirt into the waistband of his jeans and plucks a straw hat from the bench.

“Hey, amigo!” The man with the vulture nose grabs Roger’s shoulder. “Your hat’s on backwards.”

### Chapter III

The American cowboy rides a stock horse, or a cow pony. A stock horse is one that is small and agile and intuitive to cattle herding. Stock horses generally have a small frame with a formidable build and heavily muscled hindquarters. Common breeds include: American Quarter, American Paint, Appaloosa, Carolina Marsh Tacky, Arabian, Morgan, and Mustang.

The traditional stock horse is an average of 17 hands—that is, 68 inches from the ground to its withers—and 1,075 pounds. They typically live 25-30 years, but expect about 10 of those years to be dedicated to training while green, then retirement to pasture.

Stock horses are ideal for cattle wrangling for three reasons:

- 1.) Cow sense. Stock horses have innate abilities to read and react to cattle. Like an experienced cowboy, the stock horse can predict the next move of a steer/cow and present outstanding acts of cutting. Stock horses are bred to cut cattle, while other breeds of horse chase cattle; chasing cattle is an offensive action and counterproductive to the cowboy.
- 2.) Speed. The American Quarter Horse, the most widely used stock horse in America, is named for the fact that it is the fastest horse bred to run a quarter mile. While stock horses do have the capacity to herd cattle for hundreds of miles, they must also possess the ability to spring to action immediately. The



stock horse is the fastest horse in the world to reach top speed from idleness — a trait necessary for cutting cattle.

- 3.) Turning. The heavily muscled hindquarters of the stock horse allow this breed to both turn and stop on a dime. No other horse has ever come close to the abilities of the stock horse when it comes to changing directions and speeds at a moment's notice.

The thing is larger than Roger had expected. Its nostrils are the size of Dixie cups and it seems more interested in crab grass than Roger or cattle. The Real American Cowboy had instructed them to choose a horse and bring it into the barn, but never explained how one should motivate a horse to follow him to the barn. Roger looks around at his peers. Some are nudging into the horse's shoulder, others are speaking with them, the rest are also looking around for a clue about how to do it. Roger takes his straw hat off to let his face get some sun. Every great cowboy was somewhere between the shades of pinto beans and mud.

"Roger Duckney?" A familiar voice yells from across the paddock.

What once was fair Irish skin and starched polos is now a disheveled and sunburned vagrant. His arms are caked in weeks of grime and the skin on his neck is raw and peeling onto his shirt. His face looks like it has been burned so many times over that the skin is disfigured into lumps and scar tissue.

"Dick Melby. Well I'll be." Roger looks up at Dick who is sitting high up on a grey horse.

“Gotta say Roge, knew it was just a lick of time before I saw you out here.

How’ve you been?”

“Well, I’ve been preparing for this, mostly.” Roger squints and shields his face from the sun.

“Were you trying to hide out or get one of those underground surgeries I heard about?”

“Uh, neither.”

Dick laughs and waves a fly away from his horse’s mane.

“Hey, Dick, I gotta ask. What the hell got a hold of you?”

“What do you mean?” Dick loosens his reins to let the horse shake flies from its head.

“You look...” Roger shrugs.

“What, you came here thinking this was a damn walk in the park, Roge? This isn’t some country vacation that you win off a granola box. There are no days off here, man. You herd, you cut, you lead them to slaughter, you eat some airtights, you do it over again.” Dick sits upright in the saddle and gathers his reins. “I ride for thirteen hours a day. I’m going to do this until I die. And so are you.”

The only sound between them is the eastern wind blowing at their identical yellow shirts. Roger really looks around for the first time. “You take away all he’s got and all he’s ever gonna have.”

“Damn right, they did.” Dick pulls off his straw hat and wipes the sweat from his temple.

“We all got it coming, kid.”