



# Six Short Stories About Death

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## Contents:

- Mary of the Flowers (p. 1)
- The Death Artist (p. 12)
- The Sound of Nowhere (p. 35)
- The Gilded Palace Hollywood Hotel (p. 53)
- The Parable of Venison (p. 64)
- No Exit (p. 101)

## Mary of the Flowers

When I was a girl, my mother told me God was in the flowers. She kept a garden like a zoo. She said that everything was God, and God was everything, and here we were, alive in God's world. Our task was to look at it, and feel the love of God all around, and know that we were loved. The flowers were here to remind us. I wondered if God hadn't put us here so the flowers could feel the love of God, too.

So I became a gardener. I'd water my roses every morning and sing to them at night. I sang them hymns and Christmas songs. In the winter, I put them inside, and in the spring, I reintroduced them to the sun. God was in all the pretty things, and God was in me, too.

The day they went for Vietnam, God was in the draft call. The day they shot Kennedy, God was in the gun. The day my son came home from Iraq, God was in the American flag draped over his coffin. God was in the banner that read "Mission Accomplished," but His mission is never done. God is indiscriminate and everywhere, and no one seemed allowed to question all his choices. We thump our holy books and pray, and once we feel heard enough for the day, we stop listening to the rest of it.

I am an old woman now. My mother is gone now, too. I listened for God in her breathing tubes. God was in the cigarettes, you know. That's why she never gave them up

until they gave her up. The tattoos of my youth sag on the bushes of my arms, and the portrait of my mother now is warped and stretched with age on my leg.

I make my own fate now.

The day the wave came, I was sitting in my garden. My house wasn't far from the beach and the land around was flat. It came without warning, like the phone call you hope never to receive. God roared up from the ocean and spread over the sky, his great fists crashing down around us. I was far enough that the water only rose up to my knees. It blew out the windows. I ducked and ran to hide on higher ground.

They showed it on the news. The high-rise apartments with their crumbling foundations and the doors ripped off. A woman sailed by on one, calling out to heaven, asking to be saved. God was in the door, they'd say. That's all the salvation anyone gets.

I call myself an angel. I have the wisdom of an angel in me, and the power too, but no one's asked for my opinion. A crew came by to clean up my windows and I mopped the halls clean. My house is old as I am. There wasn't much to save.

My house isn't the story here. The story is the water, how it came in like a warning. The story is the boy, riding on a table, who floated up through the streets that day. He had tattoos like mine. We both had portraits of our mothers. He is the story, and his name is Ben.

The hotel by the beach was the first to be lost. The water came for it, and there was no time and no hope. Nearly everyone there is now dead. Everyone but Ben. He

was out back, smoking at the wooden table, when the water blasted through the walls sideways. He grabbed hold of the only thing he could reach, he said. He doesn't remember much. His head flew forward and hit the table and he breathed in water and salt. The wave rolled through, indiscriminate of where the beach stopped, and carried him up the street on the table. There he lay, ripped and panting in my roses. Every last one had lost its petals. His shirt was torn away and I could see the face of his mother on his chest. She looked like mine used to look. She looked a bit like me.

I took Ben inside that day and laid him upstairs. I waded through the water, pulling the table like a canoe behind me and pushed it stair by stair up to the dry half of the house. I am not strong, but I can be when called upon. Ben was half drowned, his face green and blue where it should be pink and bright. I thumped on him like a holy book and out came water and salt.

"Jesus," he said. His voice was more cough than words. His eyes were wide and blue as he looked around the room.

The power was out and the sun was dying in the sky. It breathed its last red breath through the window and onto Ben's face.

I lit a candle.

"Where am I?" he said. "What is this place?"

My bedroom is a hall of books and a mattress on the floor. I'd left the waterlogged table at the door, and Ben was sideways on the mattress next to the puddle of all he'd inhaled.

"You are with me," I said. "I took you from the flood."

The wave came back to him. I saw it in his eyes. He looked around the room as the sun left the sky behind for another one.

“What’s happening?” he said.

“The flood came,” I said back.

God was in that, too. I put the candle near his face so he might feel the heat. He looked at me, the color coming back into his face. He breathed, and he was alive.

The television wouldn’t turn on. Everything electric was wet and soggy. They hadn’t come to clean the house out yet, and by the time they did, Ben would be gone. I fed him with the food inside the fridge. I swam to it across the kitchen floor. The water was cold and salty and I could only save the things on the top shelf. Some fruit, some vegetables, and half a chicken.

“What happened to the hotel?” Ben said.

“Gone, I reckon,” I said. “All of it.”

I wrung the water out of my skirt and sat on the foot of the bed while he ate. In the candlelight, he looked younger. Just a boy.

Ben had been to prison. He’d just come back into the world, and he wasn’t sure how to be here. All of this, he told me, but he didn’t have to speak. I could read it in the way he ate, the way his hands moved.

“So this is how it ends,” he said.

He knew God was in him. That was why he felt abandoned. God must have been in the heroin. There were marks on his arm. God liked to laugh at him, too.

He fell asleep in my bed that night and I slept on the chair. He offered, he offered, the guilt was on his face. But I told him to sleep. I wanted to care for someone. I haven’t

had much around to tend to, and the roses don't say *Thank you*.

I sat up all night, watching the window. Someone rowed by on a raft, crying that her baby has been lost. I listened to Ben breathe. I waited. There wasn't much I could do right then.

I might have been the only one on Earth who wasn't shocked. I always knew this day would come. Felt it in the weeks leading up. I'd been looking out for it since I was a girl, watching the storm clouds circle, stalking us like prey, waiting to make their move.

The day after the flood, the sun broke clear through the sky. Ben woke up to the light from the window and breathed his first holy breath of the day.

"Where am I?" he said again.

"You're safe," I said. "You don't remember the flood?"

"Are you my mother?" he asked me.

The portrait on his arm winked at me, and I said, "Yes."

"What day is it?" he asked.

"Thursday," I said. "Go back to sleep, son."

"Thank you, mother."

I couldn't return with coffee since the water had been cut. Instead I rearranged the leftovers from his meal the night before.

"Good morning," I said as he opened his eyes for the second time.

"Hello," he said. "Where am I?"

"You're in your mother's house," I said. "You do this, don't you?"

"Do what?"

“Forget things,” I said.

He said, “I don’t know.”

I raised him like my own boy. I told him of the flood, that he’d forgotten who he was in it. I told him his name was Ben. I gave him the name. It was always my favorite. I gave him a history, of how he’d lost me to the drugs. He’d found our God again in prison, and now he was a good strong man.

“Oh,” he said. He squinted at the portrait on his chest and read the name beneath.

“So your name is Mary?” he asked.

It isn’t, but I said Yes.

“And your name is Benjamin,” I said. “You like it when I call you Ben.”

We mopped the floor like mother and son as the water went down through the cracks. They hadn’t come to clear the flood out yet. The water would warp the wood. The floor would roll like the curve of a body, but we made a game of it. We rolled marbles down the hall and watched them rise, up and down, and collide into one another.

When the streets were dry, the sirens came down. We turned out the lights and hid in the living room where they couldn’t see us from the street.

“What is that?” Ben asked.

“Bad people,” I said. “Don’t pay them any mind.”

They assumed the house was dead and they drove on by.

“Tell me about my childhood, mother,” Ben said.



I told him all I knew. I told him God was in the flowers. He said he remembered that, and I wondered if that was true.

We spent the days repainting the cracks in the walls. When the power was back on, we took a hair dryer to the floor. Ben asked where the water had come from. I said it came from God. I taught him about roses. We replanted the ones we could. I told him to tend to the flowers while I went into town for food, but the streets were all still empty, and there was nothing around to eat.

Each morning, he asked me where he was. Each time, I reminded him who his mother was. He believed me, and I didn't lie. He was my child now.

The power never came back on to the neighborhood. The sirens went on by. They announced that we should leave, become refugees in a nearby village, but I told my son the truth: a man never leaves his mother, and he always stays and fights for his home. He believed me, and we went to bed hungry.

"Where am I?" he said in the morning.

My belly was bloated with air.

"You're in your mother's house," I croaked. "You're safe, my Benjamin."

"Your name is Mary," he said.

I said, "Yes."

We spent the days replanting the roses. We hid when the sirens came. Ben was forgetting faster, but with a little reminding, he always knew me. The problem was, you can't eat roses. Our bellies were getting emptier.

We waited for the sirens to die away and one day, I took him out. We went just up the road to another house the wave had hit. It was warped and bloated like our bellies, all the wood was wrong. We went in because the lights were off. Whoever lived there had gone.

We scavenged around for food, but most of it was missing. We found waterlogged bread and a few cans. We ate them on the floor of their kitchen, voracious. We took what we could home.

“Tell me about my childhood, mother,” Ben said as we fell asleep.

I told him he wanted to be a preacher, and then became a soldier. It was in the war he fell on his head. That’s why he couldn’t remember me each morning.

“That’s sad, mother,” he said. “I wish I could remember you.”

“I don’t mind telling you the story,” I said.

I woke up to a knock the next day. Ben opened his eyes into the light of the window.

“Stay, my son,” I said.

I went to the door and the knock came again from downstairs.

“Where am I?” Ben asked.

I told him to be quiet.

“Who are you?” he cried.

“Quiet,” I said. I opened the door. The knock from downstairs came again.

I went to the window and looked outside. There were two men at the door. They knocked and knocked and I pulled the curtains shut.

“Where is this?” Ben cried. I saw the men look up. I quickly ducked behind the curtain.

“Quiet,” I said again. “They’ll hear you.”

“Who are they?” he asked, afraid. “Who are you?”

“Bad men,” I said. “They’ve come to take you away.”

“Away from where?”

“From me, my son.”

“Is your name Mary?”

“Yes,” I said. “Now, quiet.”

The men at the door walked around the side of the house. They tried the backdoor. I heard them come inside.

“Hello?” one of them called.

I looked out to the garden. The roses must have given us away. The house was not deserted, not so long as there was God in the flowers.

I went to Ben and put my hand over his mouth. He spat and bit at me and I clamped it harder.

“Hello?” the voice downstairs said again.

Ben made a sound and I pushed harder. I am not strong, but I can be when called upon.

“Is anyone here?”

Ben stopped making sounds. His head rolled back. His face went blue where it should have been pink and bright.

I looked down, into the face of my son. His eyes glazed over. God was not in them anymore.

I sat in the shaft of light from the window. The house smelled like mildew and rot.

“Hello?” I called back, my voice sounding frail.

“Who’s up there?” they said.

“My name is Mary. Help me,” I said. “I think my son is dead.”

The men downstairs were dressed like firefighters. They ran the wooden stairs, the squelch of water from the carpet coming out in each footfall. They ran until they reached the door of my room. I sat with my head in my hands, huddled at Ben's feet.

"Ma'am," the first one said. "How long have you been in here?"

"Since the flood," I said. "I couldn't leave my garden."

"Your son," they said. "Is he alive?"

"I don't believe so," I said.

They came to his body and thumped him like a holy book and out came nothing this time. They looked to me, their faces pained, and asked what had happened.

"He was a good boy," I said. I kept my head in my hands.

They took his body down the stairs, carefully, one by one. I followed along behind them. My head was bent in prayer.

I asked to lay him in the garden. They said he had to go to the hospital first. They took me with them in the back of the car. One of them looked at the portrait on Ben's arm.

"Is that you?" he said.

I said, "Yes."

The thing you don't know is that the flood came for me. It came for me alone. I was its maker and I called it down, because I knew the truth about God. God was in the flowers and God was in the blood, and God was in the car crashes and God was in the deaths. God was in everything, and he was indiscriminate, and it was time someone taught him a lesson.

I slipped out quietly before they got Ben back to life. He came back, in the end. He told all about me. He remembered now, that my name was never Mary, and his was never Ben, and he was never my son.

I slipped quietly back to my roses. I slogged around in the mud. I pruned the ones that needed it and lay down in the thorns. I lay there, waiting, waiting for the next flood to come. It would not be a wave next time. But soon, a flood would come.

I lay until my stomach was an empty pit. I lay until they came for me. When they tried to drag me out, I lay there still.

“Leave me,” I said. “Leave me here to rot among my roses.”

“Why?” they asked. “What good will it do?”

I closed my eyes and said, “I want to return to my God.”

Food is the holiest thing we can be. Food is our great mother. My body sank into the earth, every memory of me rotted into mud. They bulldozed the house. They threw the roses into the back of a truck and dumped them in a landfill. All was lost until, one day, the rain came. The sun came after. There, sprouting up from every gap in the garbage, winding its way toward the light, was another rose bud. In time, they bloomed. I looked upon the ruins of the world, the world we threw away, and I said: See, now, here is God’s house. Here is heaven. We’ve arrived.

## The Death Artist

A real artist is known by his work, not by his life.

Carolina Deveraux was never a real artist. She was an idol — that is, until her untimely and highly publicized death one summer morning in the swimming pool of her Beverly Hills estate.

All accounts say the last guests had left the party she'd thrown the night before by three in the morning. The coroner put the time of Miss Deveraux's death between four-thirty and six, though her body wasn't discovered until the maid arrived at half-past nine.

The circumstances of Miss Deveraux's death sent shockwaves far beyond the bounds of Hollywood. The leaked photos of the scene sold for millions. It's easy to understand why. A famous beauty face-up and dead-eyed, sporting immaculate hair and nails, dressed in nothing but a diamond necklace and pearl earrings, bullet hole through her head, floating in a swimming pool littered with waterlogged Bible pages and English roses, the water tinted pink from all the blood. When the maid arrived and found the body, the record player was spinning in the dead wax of an autographed *OK Computer* LP. This aesthetic incongruity was the most shocking detail of all.

There were no fingerprints on any of it. There were no signs of a struggle. Not one neighbor had heard a

gunshot. The autopsy showed she overdosed on benzodiazepines and alcohol and died before she was shot. Over a hundred eyewitnesses at her party the night before say there had been no roses or Bible pages in the pool. Miss Deveraux had been in high spirits. Her death was as mysterious as it was opulent.

To this day, the mystery has never been solved. The coroner could not rule whether the death was a homicide or a suicide. The police have no remaining suspects. Only three people ever knew the truth of how she died: Carolina Deveraux, her attorney, and the artist she hired to orchestrate her death.

Perhaps you've heard the strange story of Sean Ogilvy, the disgraced investment banker who was caught embezzling millions of his clients' money. His was set to be the trial of the decade, the jubilee of white-collar crime, until his body was found one morning in the desert in New Mexico, covered in inexplicable circular burn marks and laying snow angel-style on an aluminum disk that was precisely 3.14159 meters in diameter. The rancher who found him couldn't have seen it himself, but aerial surveillance footage of the area showed the aluminum disk was in the center of a shallow rectangular depression in the desert rock whose dimensions took exactly the Golden Ratio. There were no fingerprints, no footprints and no witnesses, save one elderly woman three properties away who swears blind to this day that she saw a green flash at exactly one o'clock in the morning.

The media had a field day. Conspiracy theorists and UFO enthusiasts flocked from all over the world. The sheriff had to post ten officers to barricade the ranch from

all sides but even then, people kept finding their way in. Even the more respectable magazines were questioning whether the handiwork was human.

It was. It was the work of an artist, an artist who was paid handsomely for his creation. Neither the media nor the sheriffs ever learned his name. Sean Ogilvy's life and death passed into legend, and his family was spared the expense and humiliation of his trial. This was by design — at least, it was the likely reason Mr. Ogilvy sought out the artist's help.

But the artist never asked his clients *why*.

His name was Alberto Mortelli. His services were very expensive. He did not advertise, at least, not openly. The few living souls who'd heard of him didn't dare to even whisper his name for fear they'd find themselves involuntarily subjected to his macabre talents. These fears, though shamelessly perpetuated by Mortelli himself, were unfounded. Mr. Mortelli was no murderer. All he did was design, prepare and execute elaborate and noteworthy deaths for those who wanted to go out with a bang.

Why did Carolina Deveraux want to die? This was a secret she took with her to the grave. Why did Sean Ogilvy ask for the extraterrestrial details? Every client is allowed his idiosyncrasies. The *why* was none of Mr. Mortelli's business. His business was to make it into art.

Mr. Mortelli's office was on the second floor of a nondescript hacienda-style building primarily rented out by personal injury lawyers. His secretary was blind. Clients were instructed to use pseudonyms upon arrival



and pay for consultations in cash. To secure his services, clients would include in their wills a donation of precisely \$1,000,000 to any of a dozen shell charities Mr. Mortelli operated.

Before you go moralizing, remember that Mr. Mortelli never murdered anyone. He simply orchestrated the scenes for those already committed to killing themselves. Perhaps he might inflict the odd postmortem wound for artistic effect, but only at the express instruction of the client. He was merely a decorator, a set designer, a curator of aesthetic mortiferous experience. He was an artist, not a killer.

It is not known how many famous deaths Mr. Mortelli was responsible for. There were whispers that the number was as high as two or three hundred in the Los Angeles area alone, but those rumors were spread by people with no real knowledge of Mr. Mortelli's business whatsoever. A full list of Mr. Mortelli's clientele has never been revealed. He promised discretion, and he always delivered.

Though ever the professional, Mr. Mortelli could not help but amuse himself at times by speculating on which wealthy or famous person might be next to seek his services. He had a kind of sixth sense for it. He'd been certain of Carolina Deveraux ever since watching her penultimate feature role as a traveling circus artist haunted by the ghosts of 19th century suffragettes and finding her portrayal of the tortured eccentric just a hair too convincing.

And so it came as no surprise to him when his phone rang one Tuesday morning and the caller announced

himself to be none other than Johnathan Illendorf, heir and de jure CEO of the Illendorf Pharmaceuticals empire, about which the allegations of corruption, bribery, animal cruelty and jury tampering remain unproven in a court of law. In his recent interviews on the matter, Mr. Illendorf had appeared the picture of loyalty to a company increasingly mired in scandal.

Mr. Mortelli had had his doubts about that. Now, his suspicions had proved correct.

Whether it was a guilty conscience or simply the desire to escape an unflattering media frenzy once and for all that drove Mr. Illendorf to seek Mr. Mortelli's services, Mr. Mortelli could not say. The *why* was not his business.

On the phone, Mr. Illendorf's voice sounded higher and more anxious than it had on television. He asked to schedule a meeting at Mr. Mortelli's earliest convenience, which happened to be the following Thursday at two (though of course he would not say so to Mr. Illendorf, the earlier part of Mr. Mortelli's day would be spent arranging for a prominent advertising executive to be found hanged from the smiling crescent moon in the backdrop of Disneyland's It's a Small World ride). It was agreed that Mr. Illendorf would give the name Theodore Geisel the secretary. To Mr. Mortelli's surprise, Mr. Illendorf insisted on paying the full \$1,000,000 upfront.

"Are you sure, sir?" he asked. "Once the payment has been made, it is non-refundable."

"I'm sure," said Mr. Illendorf.

It was not Mr. Mortelli's practice to ask *why*. The money was wired to the Cayman Island's bank account of the Institute for American Melodrama, one of Mr. Mortelli's numerous charities, and arrived on Monday

morning as Mr. Illendorf had promised. Mr. Mortelli found it odd that his client was in such a hurry to secure the deal, but nothing about the payment was amiss, and so their Thursday meeting was to continue as planned.

The Thursday in question dawned bright and warm. Mr. Mortelli returned to his office at noon to take his lunch at his desk while life in Anaheim ground to a halt at the shocking scene and ensuing police barricade at Disneyland. At two o'clock exactly, the bell chimed above the door to Mr. Mortelli's office as Johnathan Illendorf entered. He cleared his throat.

"Um," he said uncomfortably, "I'm, uh, Theodore Geisel. Here to see Mister... Mortelli?"

The voice was anxious and halting.

"Follow the door to your right," the secretary said. "He is expecting you."

"Sure," the awkward voice replied.

Mr. Mortelli frowned. Mr. Illendorf sounded not at all well. There was a nasal quality to his voice Mr. Mortelli hadn't heard as strongly over the phone. When his shadow appeared at the door, he looked shrunken and skinny.

"You may come in, Mr. Geisel," Mr. Mortelli said and stood to greet his client.

The door opened to reveal a boy in his teens, dressed in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans, with tousled, surfer-blond hair and a beard that was scarcely stronger than peach fuzz.

"Who are you?" Mr. Mortelli said.

The boy closed the door behind himself.

“Theodore Geisel...?” answered the boy, casting a glance back towards the secretary. Looking back at Mr. Mortelli he continued, “We spoke on the phone...? You told me to come in on Thursday at two... so, now?”

He spoke each sentence like a question.

“But,” Mr. Mortelli spluttered, “But you’re not — ”

“Johnathan Illendorf,” the boy said quietly, “Junior.” He looked sheepish. “Here.”

The boy pulled out his wallet handed Mr. Mortelli his driver’s license. It was newly-issued. JOHNATHAN CHARLES ILLENDORF JR., it read. He had just recently turned sixteen. Mr. Mortelli checked the photo against the boy’s face and handed it back.

“And you are seeking my services?” Mortelli asked.

“Yes,” said John Illendorf Jr.

“But you’re... you’re sixteen,” Mortelli pressed.

“Yes,” repeated the client. “I am.”

Mr. Mortelli opened his mouth to speak, then shut it. He didn’t know what to say. For the first time in his long career, he’d almost asked a client *why*.

“My services have never been sought by a minor before,” Mr. Mortelli said, truthfully.

“Most minors don’t have the money that I do,” answered John Illendorf Jr., equally truthfully. “I hope you don’t mind my paying upfront. I don’t have a will and writing one now would arouse suspicion.”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Mortelli. His head was fuzzy. He sat down as though this might clear it.

“Can I sit down?” asked John Illendorf Jr.

“Of course,” Mr. Mortelli said. Then, “Mr. Illendorf — ”

“Call me Junior,” said Junior.

“Junior,” Mr. Mortelli started. “Mr. Illendorf,” he corrected himself, “I am not sure I can provide you the services you’re seeking.”

“What?” barked Junior, “Why not?”

“Well, because you’re legally a child. In the eyes of the law, you don’t hold full personhood. To facilitate you in doing this, even to conspire to do so, would be highly illegal.”

“And your services are usually legal, are they?” Junior shot back.

“No,” Mr. Mortelli answered. “They are not. But they aren’t entirely unethical.”

Junior’s face went white. “So,” he began. He opened his mouth. He closed it. He opened it again, this time with his eyes narrowed. “So you think, if I can withstand two more years of this, of their insanity and cruelty and evil, you think two more years would make it ethical for me to hire you?”

Mr. Mortelli frowned and fell into silence. He could not say that he had an answer to that question. Junior, looking impatient, changed tactics.

“Come on,” he tried, “You want unethical? Talk about my family. They’re as guilty as everyone says. Guiltier than that. They’ve tampered with lawmakers and juries, hell I’m pretty sure they’ve killed people to keep the truth from coming out. They’ve lied and cheated and stolen to save themselves and they’ve done it so far. What you see in the news — that isn’t even half of it. They’re cruel. They’re narcissists. They are pure evil. They don’t care about the threats. They’ve got the government in their pocket. They’ve got the courts. They’ve got the media. Nothing sticks to them. They think they have me, they

think everything they did to me would beat me into submission, but it hasn't. I don't belong to them. I never will. And now I get to teach them a lesson they won't ever, ever forget."

Mr. Mortelli gave a long-suffering sigh. "That may be, but —"

"We get to teach them a lesson," Junior said. He raised his eyebrows at Mortelli.

"Besides," Junior added with a smirk, "I wired seven figures to your fake charity in the Caymans. You're contractually obligated to follow through now. If you don't, I think the Los Angeles County Sheriffs would be fascinated to go through all these filing cabinets."

He gestured to the locked drawers behind Mr. Mortelli's head.

"They'd need a warrant, of course, but I'm sure Carolina Deveraux's attorney could get them that. And my father knows the Ogilvy family well."

Mortelli's face hardened and he looked up sharply. The little brat. How could he know? Mortelli's clientele list was an absolute secret. But of course, he thought, Junior didn't really know. The boy was a cocky bastard just like his family. He was bluffing.

He was bluffing, and Mortelli's own reaction to it had just given the game away. Junior's smirk widened.

"So," he went on, "Shall we get to business?"

Mr. Mortelli's head swam. A child? Growing close to an adult, maybe, but certainly not one yet. His mind couldn't be said to be entirely his own. Surely, to orchestrate this boy's death was unconscionable. But what was the alternative? Shutter his business and flee the country? Turn himself in and expose not only his own

business but ruin the sacrosanct privacy and dignity of his late clientele?

“Mr. Mortelli,” Junior sing-songed, waving his hand in front of the artist’s face. “Shall we get to business?”

Mortelli fixed Junior with a long stare. He could see no way out. Finally, accepting defeat for the time being, he nodded.

“Great.” Junior clapped his hands. “Here’s what I had in mind.”

The privacy of a client’s initial ideas for their own demise are of course to be guarded with the utmost care. Like the first draft of a great drama, they are not meant to be viewed by the public. To let outsiders be privy to the plans at this delicate, nascent stage would inhibit the creative process that plays out between client and death artist. Only the finale is meant to be on display.

At the end of their hour together, Mr. Mortelli agreed to meet Junior twice more over the coming weeks to workshop the death scene. The death itself was scheduled for December the 21st, the Winter Solstice, and, by design, the year’s final Illendorf Pharmaceuticals shareholder meeting. Mr. Mortelli bid Junior farewell and watched the boy leave through the office door.

“Why don’t you leave early today,” he said to his secretary. “I’m taking the rest of the day off.”

His secretary nodded politely and packed up her things. She felt around for her walking stick, rose and left the room.

When the door closed behind her, Mr. Mortelli sank to the floor. Surely he couldn’t do it, could he? The boy

was still a child! Mr. Mortelli couldn't even bring his mind to call the boy anything other than "the boy." Yes, he knew that children felt pain and despair, that teen suicide was as prevalent as it was tragic, and that some billionaire families apparently gave their sixteen-year-old children access to upwards of a million dollars, but he could not set the knowledge right in his head. This was the way the world was, but it wasn't the way the world *should* be. He, Mortelli, could not seriously consider following through with it. But what choice did he have?

Mr. Mortelli gripped his knees and let his head fall back against the wall. He was not a religious man, but he felt an urge to pray.

"Please," he said, "If there's anyone up there listening, tell me what to do!"

There was silence. Then, the phone rang.

"Hello?" Mr. Mortelli said, scrambling to answer it on the last ring.

"Is this the office of Mr. Mortelli?" a heavily-accented woman's voice inquired.

"Yes," Mr. Mortelli breathed. "But I'm afraid we are closed for the rest of the day."

"But —" the woman started.

"Please try us again on Monday morning. Thank you!"

Mr. Mortelli hung up the phone. He had never hung up on a prospective client before, not in all his many years of work. What had come over him? He needed fresh air, he decided. He locked the office door behind him and went for a walk.

With the dusty office now behind him and the sun shining overhead, Mr. Mortelli found he did feel better.



He'd been prepared, eager even, to arrange a death for the elder John Illendorf. The younger version was just that — younger — not different in substance. He clearly shared his family's talent for ruthlessly bulldozing anyone who stood in his way. He believed his money entitled him to whatever he wanted. Technically, yes, he was a child, but he was already demonstrating many of the worst features of a grown adult. Mr. Mortelli decided that servicing John Illendorf Junior was no more immoral than any of his work for other clients. If he could live with all of that, he decided, he could live with this.

The next day, Mr. Mortelli refused to take any calls. He instructed his secretary to inform callers that he was out with the flu. He spent the day locked in his office, reading and re-reading his notes on the boy's designs for his death. At noon, he told his secretary to leave early again and packed up. He had a new plan. He would call his bank and find a way to reverse the wire transfer. He'd have them erase all record of it. He'd purge every mention of John Illendorf in his notes. In fact, he'd destroy all of his notes on every last one of them. The world would never know that he was the artist behind some of the most infamous and poetic deaths in American history. His legacy would be nothing but a wisp of smoke, lost in the haze of history.

When Mr. Mortelli got downstairs, he stopped short. His heart jumped into his throat. A police car was idling just outside the entrance to the building, clearly waiting for someone. Mr. Mortelli froze. Could it be? Had the boy called them, believing Mr. Mortelli would change his mind? He shook himself. That was ridiculous. The cop

was likely responding to another call in the neighborhood. Mr. Mortelli was being stupid.

He walked briskly up the sidewalk to his own car and climbed in. He glanced in the rear-view mirror, just to be sure, and his heart jumped again. The cop was watching him like a hawk. Mr. Mortelli started up the car and drove away. At the stop sign, he turned right on a whim and sped down the road and out of sight from the cop. At the next stop sign, he checked his mirror and let out a sigh of relief. He wasn't being followed.

Mr. Mortelli arrived back at his house and went inside quickly. He locked the door and closed all the blinds. A profound sense of unease gripped him. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar. He felt claustrophobic. He strode briskly into the kitchen and poured himself a drink and sipped it as he sank into a leather armchair.

Paranoid. He was being paranoid. The kid's threats were getting to him. *The kid*. He couldn't go through with it. He wouldn't. But his practice. His business. His art. Could he sacrifice it all? If he didn't help the boy, he'd surely find some other way to die. He'd find some other way to die and it wouldn't be nearly as poetic or poignant as Mr. Mortelli could make it. If he, Mortelli, went through with it, he could ensure the boy's death had all the political impact he was hoping for. He could ensure the boy wouldn't die in vain.

Mr. Mortelli took another drink.

Mr. Mortelli's second meeting with Junior was at nine o'clock on Monday morning. The secretary welcomed Mr. Geisel and invited him politely to go on in. Mr.

Mortelli was ready for it this time. He greeted Junior with a handshake and invited him to sit.

“What have you got for me?” Junior Illendorf asked.

After a long, deep breath, Mr. Mortelli explained the updated death scene. Junior nodded as he spoke. When he’d done recounting the details, Mr. Mortelli finished, as he always did, by inviting the client to make comments and alterations so the workshopping could commence.

Junior seemed impressed by Mr. Mortelli’s spin on the initial concept. “But what about...” he began, and so the creative process unfolded. They workshopped the death scene all morning and into the afternoon. By two o’clock, the scene was decided. Mr. Mortelli looked up from his notepad triumphantly. At the eager look on Junior’s face, he faltered.

“Well?” Junior asked. “Tell me!”

Mr. Mortelli found he couldn’t speak. His heart was broken. Junior was a smart kid, his face alight with the eagerness a boy’s face ought to show for life, not for death. But Mr. Mortelli had to speak. That was what was so painful. The scene that he’d created was a masterpiece. It wasn’t only artful and poetic, not only dramatic and cinematic, but poignant. Powerful. Political, even. It was a death not only for the headlines but the history books. He knew he would have to go through with it. As an artist, it was his aesthetic duty to bring this masterful vision into life.

“Well?” Junior pressed.

And so Mr. Mortelli told him, and Junior was stunned.

“It’s perfect,” he said in a hushed whisper. “It’s so simple.”

Mr. Mortelli nodded.

Abruptly, Junior rose and reached for Mr. Mortelli's hand across the desk. "Thank you," the boy said. "Thank you."

Junior stood to leave.

"See you next week?" he said, sounding hopeful.

Mortelli nodded again.

"Okay," Junior said, and smiled shyly at Mr. Mortelli as he left the room.

When the boy had gone, Mr. Mortelli locked his office door. He pressed his knuckles into his eyes. He went to the bathroom and almost vomited. What was happening? He was a professional. He was an artist. The furthest reach of art is bound not by talent, but by nerve. Mr. Mortelli prided himself on being relentless in pursuit of aesthetic perfection. It was more than his job, more than even his craft. This was his *raison d'être*. The death of Johnathan Illendorf Junior would be his masterpiece, and Mr. Mortelli would go out with a bang.

Yet try as he might, the boy remained resolutely just a boy.

Mr. Mortelli broke his cardinal rule of business that night. He researched his client. He found that Junior Illendorf attended a prestigious private school that advertised its mission as "cultivating perfection." He found out that the boy had played soccer as a child. The boy's mother was John Senior's second wife, Amanda. She was the daughter of a wealthy import/export baron many suspected of trafficking drugs, and she'd spent half of Junior's childhood at Betty Ford. He found out that

Junior made music under the stage name “Flightless.” The music he made was melancholy and pulsating and modern. It described itself as “electro-dirge.” It was the kind of music Mr. Mortelli never listened to, but he found himself playing it again and again and again.

He lay awake in bed that night, unable to sleep. He felt older than he’d ever felt before. The world felt heavy. His head pounded to the beat of Junior’s music. In the morning, his eyes looked more sunken than ever. His cheeks seemed hollower than normal. His hair, which long had clung onto some semblance of black, seemed at last to have turned altogether gray.

He resolved it was time to quit the whole damn business. He’d take no more clients. He’d apologize to his secretary. If this unfortunate ordeal was to be his masterpiece, then he would go out with a bang like he’d helped so many to before him. After so many years, after so much exquisite success, it was time for Mr. Mortelli to retire.

On Friday, he broke the news to his secretary. She took it well, and thanked him for having been a kind, albeit mysterious, boss. He instructed her to put a call in to the phone company to disconnect his office number at the end of the month and tell the landlord not to renew his lease. He would take no more clients. His final meeting with Junior was scheduled for the following week.

When he arrived home, Mortelli pulled out his address book and unlocked it. He thumbed through it for Junior’s number. He rehearsed the speech in his head. It would be quick. He wouldn’t give Junior the chance to

speak. “I’m sorry,” he’d say. “I cannot go through with this. I will have my bank return your money. I’ve retired.”

He picked up the phone to dial and saw the message light blinking. With a creeping feeling in his stomach, he pressed play.

“Hi, Mr. Mortelli,” an excited voice said. Mortelli’s stomach flipped over. “It’s Junior,” the message went on, though Mortelli already knew. “I just wanted to thank you again for what you’re doing for me. It’s... it’s the first time in my life an adult has really been there for me.” He laughed a sheepish laugh. “Ironic, isn’t it? I know you’re conflicted about it, and I’m sorry for that, but you’re doing the right thing. You’re going to help me fix the world, and free me from all of this at the same time. You’re a great man. Thank you.”

Click. Dial tone.

Mortelli let the phone fall.

“Lord.” He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his palms together. “If you exist, tell me what to do.”

The dial tone carried on in the background.

A weight had settled into Mr. Mortelli’s heart from the moment he’d first met the boy, an unwelcome weight, storming and thundering like the din of some invading army. It was the weight, he realized, of a question he could never answer. The question, how many lives might he have saved if he’d just asked them all *why*?

Junior’s final meeting came and went in a blur. The scene was finalized. The logistics were probed and explained. As was customary, Mr. Mortelli checked for Junior’s full commitment to the plan, and Junior gave his wholehearted consent.

“Very well,” Mr. Mortelli said with a sigh.

Mr. Mortelli showed Junior the props and scene dressing. He made arrangements for Junior’s initial disguise to be delivered to him before the day arrived. He ran through Junior’s arrival instructions for a final time. When all was said and done, Junior shook Mortelli’s hand and left.

“Is this really it, sir?” Mr. Mortelli’s secretary asked after Junior had left. Mortelli had given her instructions that this was to be her last day.

“I’m afraid so,” Mr. Mortelli said.

He shook her hand and helped her to the door. “I’m an old man. It’s time for the curtain to come down.

After she’d gone, Mr. Mortelli locked up his office for the final time.

On the night of December the 20th, Mr. Mortelli checked into the Hotel de Santo Malverde, in whose ballroom the Illendorf Pharmaceuticals shareholder meeting was to commence the following day. In his suitcase, he’d packed all the props and means he needed to mount the death of the century. For such an artful scene, it was remarkably simple. The best art always is.

He’d used a pseudonym, as was his custom. When he reached his room, he set the suitcase at the foot of the bed and removed his false mustache and spectacles. Now, Alberto Mortelli stood alone with his own reflection.

The boy was due to arrive at dawn. He’d come in through the service entrance in the back, dressed as a bellhop, and keep his head down. The CCTV system was scheduled to malfunction at five o’clock sharp, Mortelli

had seen to it, and rerun clips of empty halls on repeat until seven. That would be more than enough time.

Mortelli donned his plastic gloves, opened his suitcase and pulled out the sparse array of props. First, he extracted the pill bottle that contained the murder weapon: Illendorf Pharmaceuticals' own branded painkiller, the one so hotly contested in court for the number of patients who had allegedly died of accidental overdoses. The dose was calculated exactly. The boy was to take just enough to kill him, but still within the amount Illendorf Pharmaceuticals had infamously encouraged doctors to prescribe. The costuming came out next. It was simple: an American flag the boy was to wear as swaddling clothes. The scene would set itself. At the entrance to the hotel ballroom was a lavish Nativity scene. John Junior was to be found dead in the manger.

It would be a masterpiece.

Mr. Mortelli studied his face in the antique mirror on the wall. His face had grown so lined and gray. Everything about his appearance seemed wilted now. Time had crept up on him slowly and silently. It was time to retire. If there was one thing Mr. Mortelli knew, it was how to stage a grand finale.

Mr. Mortelli's alarm beeped at four thirty the next morning, not that he'd slept a wink. At five, he went to the window and pulled the velvet curtain back a fraction of an inch. His view, as intended, looked down on the hotel's back service entrance. All was still.

For a brief and beautiful moment, Mr. Mortelli thought that the boy would not come. Then, a bellhop



appeared around the corner, sandy blond hair poking out from under the cap. The cameras would be down now.

A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door. Mortelli squeezed his eyes shut, then opened the door and ushered Junior silently inside.

“Did anyone see you?” Mortelli asked in a hushed whisper after he shut the door.

“No.” Junior shook his head. “Is this it? Are we ready to go?”

Mortelli paused and looked at Junior. “Yes,” he said at last, the resignation hanging in his voice.

“Good,” Junior said. “When does it begin?”

“As soon as you are ready,” he replied.

“I’m ready,” Junior said.

Mr. Mortelli inclined his head towards the pill bottle sitting on the table. Junior snatched it, as if worried Mr. Mortelli might change his mind.

“I’ve covered the floor of the water closet in a plastic sheet,” Mr. Mortelli said. “You are to enter the dressing room, remove all of your clothes and place them in the plastic bin beside the door. Then, you are to enter the water closet and close the door behind you. Knock twice to signal me when you’ve done this. I will come lock the door behind you so you cannot exit should the instinct to survive overtake you. You may then swallow the contents of this bottle. I will wait thirty minutes before I unlock the door. By then, you will be at peace.”

“Okay,” Junior said. “Why the plastic?”

“The pills will likely make you vomit, before...” Mr. Mortelli didn’t finish the sentence.

For a moment, nervousness flashed across Junior’s face. Then, it hardened.

“Okay,” he said again. Without another word, he rose and walked into the dressing room. A few moments later, Mr. Mortelli heard the double knock. Before he had the chance to stop himself, Mr. Mortelli strode into the dressing room and locked the door to the water closet. Junior’s bellhop costume was shoved unceremoniously into the plastic bin beside it. Mr. Mortelli took the wadded-up costume and folded it neatly into his suitcase. Twenty-nine minutes were left on the clock.

Mr. Mortelli sat in silence on the velvet ottoman at the foot of the bed and studied his reflection in the mirror. Was this really happening? This, any of it? The curious thing, he thought, about being a true artist is that art becomes your being. There is no line between art and life. All of it, birth to death, could be an act. Who would know the difference? Certainly not the audience. Perhaps, he thought, not even him.

The minutes wore on like a holiday in Tartarus. Not a sound came from the water closet. Perhaps there was a thud like a foot against a door? No, he was imagining it. Slowly, agonizingly, Mr. Mortelli watched his watch tick down. Finally, with the mercifulness of death, the half-hour was up.

Mr. Mortelli knocked softly at the door to the dressing room. Not a sound. He went inside. He knocked softly again at the door to the water closet. Not a sound. He waited. There was nothing. He unlocked the door.

Junior lay naked and crumpled on the floor. There was vomit next to his mouth. Mr. Mortelli checked the pulse. He felt for breath next to the mouth. Upon satisfactory completion of these steps, he stood and went back to the main bedroom.

From the suitcase, Mr. Mortelli extracted the last accessory: a crown of thorns.

The shareholders of Illendorf Pharmaceuticals found the display unnervingly devout. The first dozen or so who filtered in passed it by, either without notice or simply without comment.

“My God,” an elderly woman cried in disgust when she arrived at the ballroom. “Have they no taste?” She shook herself and strode purposefully past it. “Shame on this establishment,” she said.

It was the news of this comment that caused one of the hotel managers to come running up to the ballroom.

“By Jove,” he gasped upon seeing the scene before him. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Where before had stood beautiful life-size Nativity statutes, there now stood a crude and equally life-size cross. Tied to it by the wrists was an incredibly life-like dummy, skinny and frail, dressed in nothing but a tattered linen waist cloth. Upon the dummy’s greying head was placed a crown of thorns. In fact, the dummy was so realistic that the manager almost mistook it for a real live person, except that it plainly wasn’t breathing.

It took another five minutes before anyone realized that it was, in fact, a real dead person. The police were called immediately. The hotel was put into lockdown. The shareholders meeting was forced to be canceled. Guests were instructed to stay where they were until the police arrived to take statements. An emergency medical team arrived and took the body off the cross, but it was no use. The man was obviously dead.

“Who is he?” one of the shareholders whispered.

Another shook his head, not knowing. For a moment, the dead man's face was visible to the gawking onlookers. His eyes were closed and sunken, his cheeks hollow. His hair was gray beneath his crown of thorns. Then the white sheet came down, and the world never saw him again.

John Illendorf Senior had arrived and been turned away by the police. Three floors above him, the younger John Illendorf stirred. His head swam and pounded. There was vomit on his face. He felt as though someone had clubbed him in the head and punched him in the stomach. It was a terrible come-down, to be sure, but he was alive.

When he was able to stand up, he tumbled into the empty dressing room. A T-shirt and jeans were laid out for him. With a roar of anger, he burst into the main room. Mr. Mortelli was nowhere to be seen. The American flag was folded neatly on the table.

A note sat on top of it that read, simply, "Forgive me."

It is a sad but inevitable fact of art that sometimes, one must compromise one's vision. The furthest reaches of aesthetic possibility may live in one's mind and beat in one's heart, but it is not always for the artist to decide when they are to be born.

## The Sound of Nowhere

I'm screaming down the highway at 90 miles an hour, beer in one hand, the other on the wheel, my own ghost sitting next to me in the front seat. You think he'd look just like me, but he doesn't. He's older, fifty-seven he says, and gray. Me, I'm twenty-two, so I know I make it out of this alive. Liver failure is what gets me, he says. I drink too much. He says there's no point in stopping now because the future's been written already, so I finish my beer and chuck the bottle out the window and it smashes on the road back there somewhere.

The cops don't come out here much. It's an old country highway, the kind they don't fully repave when the snow melts, and the interstate is what everybody takes when they have somewhere to be.

But I don't have somewhere to be. I'm going nowhere. It's only when I'm going nowhere that I find what I'm looking for.

"I fucking hate Charlie Daniels," James says at the radio, echoing my thoughts. I call him James because he's an adult. He says when I'm twenty-seven I'll stop going by Jimmy, get sober for a few years, get a boring job and try my hand at getting married. She'll leave me. Good riddance. He won't tell me her name. He says I'll know it when I hear it.

I believe him when he says it, because I can be cryptic like that. Take nowhere, for example. You only know

you're there when you've arrived. That's where I first met James, when he found me pissing by a creek and I thought he was my dad and I thought I was hallucinating until I couldn't help but believe every word he said.

He knew just what to say to convince me about the whole ghost thing. He knew exactly where to find me. He says he was nowhere too when he was my age, pissing in the creek, when he showed up. The future's already written. No point fighting it.

"We got some talking to do, Jimmy," he said to me that first night, walking out of the woods, normal as anything and just a bit transparent.

I turned around slowly. I was drunk.

"Shit, you don't gotta put it away on my account. I've seen it all my life," he said with a jerk of the head at my dick. I nodded and zipped up all the same.

"Listen," he said, "That dog you ran over when you were seventeen never gets found, so don't worry about it."

This was back when I still thought about the dog.

"How'd ya know — "

"Look at me, kid," he said. I looked at him. He looked like my dad.

"You got a scar from cigarette ash on your left nut, you're cheating on your girlfriend and she's cheating on you too. You're gonna break up with her tomorrow after what I told you, and I know that because I'm your ghost."

I stared at him, and through him.

"What?" I was standing in my own piss.

"I'm your ghost," he said again. "Don't worry, you're not dead yet. Look at me. I'm fifty-seven."

He chuckled at himself. "Fifty-seven and dead."

I nodded again like this was making sense.

"It'll make sense eventually," he said. "By the end of the night, you'll believe it and you'll know all you need to know for now. I know that because by the end of this night, I believed it too."

"What?" I said again, letting the word come slowly, chewing it like it was food. "Am I astral projecting?"

"No," he snapped. "That ain't real anyway. Look, don't worry about it yet. The clarity will come. Always does."

"What's more important is," and he got up real close to me so I could feel the cold void where his body would be if he were alive, "You and me, we got a job to do."

"Wassat?" I said with a slur, thinking about the dog again, thinking about the blood leaking from its neck.

"Stop thinking about the damn dog," he said. "The dog's fine. He's dead. The dead are always fine."

"Okay," I said slowly.

"Grab your shit," he said. "We've got a lot to talk about and we can only do it on the move, okay?"

So I picked up the bottle of J.D. and the pack of Camels and I followed my own ghost down the river bank. He walked fast, like he was late for something.

"I am late," he said. "Get it? Ha!"

"Are you reading my mind?" I asked. He glided to a ghastly halt.

"Nah," he said, "Just remembering what I was thinking back when I was you."

"You still remember it?"

"Won't you?"

And as I considered my ghost, age fifty-seven and dead, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, standing half-

translucent on a rock by the creek and looking back at me with a hypnagogic sort of smirk, the pine branch overhead hanging low like it wanted a listen, the clouds passing backwards, clogging up the moonlight, I realized I'd remember everything about this moment until the day I die.

"After you die, too," he said. "Come on, we have to keep moving."

"Where are we going?"

"Nowhere," he said. "Remember that, Jimmy. If you ever need me, go nowhere. Fast."

By the end of that night, I did believe him. I still do. He's shown up maybe a dozen times since, every couple of months, every time I'm going nowhere fast. That's what I do when I need to talk to him: I get in my car and drive until I lose all sense of a destination and then, like he's always been there, James appears lounging in the passenger seat talking shit about whatever's on the radio.

"We nowhere enough yet, James?" I ask.

James turns his translucent head to the window and squints at the forest outside. The moon is paper white and makes him shimmer just a bit.

"Not quite," he says, "But slow it down. We're getting close."

I take my foot off the gas and let the car coast to a mellower pace. It's dark in the forest, but the white of the moon makes the road look like it's flooded with milk. Off to the right, I can just see the glint of the river through the trees, and beyond that, smoke rising from the chimney of someone's cabin.



I shiver. The thing about nowhere is I'm usually alone here.

"Stop," James says.

I don't want to.

"You sure?" I ask.

James nods, casting a glance through my head at the smoke from the cabin.

"This is the spot," he says.

"But that house..." I start.

"This is the spot," he repeats. "Pull off over there. Go over the hill, kill the lights and park."

I crawl the car slowly over the hill until James nods. I park.

"Okay captain," I say, pushing the door open.

"Wait," James says. His gray ghostly hand disappears into my shoulder. "Don't get out yet."

"Why not?" I say. He's weird tonight. Different. Got a serious sort of touch I've never seen on him before, not since the end of that first night right before sunrise.

"You and me, Jimmy" he said to me then, the sky overhead slowly turning from black to black doing its best impression of purple. By then, the bottle was empty, all the Camels were smoked, I was wasted.

"Really, listen," he said. "I know you're fucked. But Jimmy, we have a job to do. I didn't just come back to you for fun. This ain't some ghost of Christmas future shit. I'm not here to teach you a lesson. I'm here the only reason any ghost ends up anywhere, because I got unfinished business, and I got unfinished business because of you."

I swung my head around like a loose baby tooth and looked at him. He was gray and transparent and I could see the prelude to the sunrise through his head.

“Me? What’d I do?”

“It’s what you didn’t do, Jimmy,” he said. “It’s the unfinished business. It’s why I came back. One night, not so different from this, once you know me and you trust me as well as you should, I’m gonna tell you it’s time and then we got a job to do.”

“Whass the job?” I said. I slurred.

“I can’t tell you yet,” James said, looking somber. “I’ll tell you then, and you have to listen carefully, okay? You gotta trust me.”

“I trust you,” I said, because I did. Or I believed him, at least.

“Promise me you’ll trust me.”

I nodded.

“Promise,” he said, and he reached an arm straight through my chest so his incorporeal hand was clutched around my heart.

“Okay,” I said, taking a step back to free my internal organs from his grasp. “I promise.”

The sun came up, and he was gone.

Tonight, I find out, is the night.

I pick up the next beer from the cup holder and James moves as if to grab it from me. His gray hand disappears into it. Makes it colder. I should remember that.

“Don’t drink anymore,” James says, still serious. “Not tonight. And kill the lights.”

“Right.”

We’re plunged into darkness.

“What’s up with you?” I say.

James sinks low in his seat and frowns at the windshield. I imagine he’d be studying his reflection if he had one. He folds his arms and lets out a long, slow

exhale, all that air he doesn't breathe, all that life he doesn't live.

"The thing you find out when you're dead," he says, slowly, as if unearthing the words from under desert sand, "Is that God's a weird dude. Not much of a dude, even. He's more like room tone. Room tone that wants something, and you can't ask why he wants it, you gotta just go with it or everything sounds all wrong forever."

I nod, listening to the silence outside. The slight chirp of whatever's in the trees. The muffled wind from outside the car. I get what he means. It's like the sound of the moon.

"Tonight's the night, Jimmy," James says, with an appraising look at me.

"The night for what?"

"For our mission," James says. "That job we gotta do together."

"Tonight?" I say. I blink.

James nods. "The point of our entire life, kiddo."

"Don't call me kiddo. I'm you."

"Not yet, you're not," says James, and sticks his ghostly finger through my head and out the other side to prove the point.

I sigh.

"So what's the job, James?"

He's looking at me in what I'd imagine he thinks is a wise, fatherly way, but he's me, so he can't pull it off.

"You trust me," he says. It's half a question and half a statement of fact.

I nod.

"You're my own ghost alright," I say.

“But you *trust* me,” he clarifies. “Not just that you believe me. Not just what I say is true. You trust what I ask of you, why I’m asking it.”

I nod.

“You’re not gonna like this,” James says.

“Like what, James?” I’m drunk and annoyed.

“Like what it is I’m about to ask of you,” he says. “Nine rounds out of ten, you’re not gonna do it.”

“Not gonna do *what*?”

James looks back out the window, squinting into the darkness. I get the feeling he doesn’t want to look at me.

“That house back there,” James says, real slow. “It belongs to a man named Wallace Montgomery. He’s not a bad man, but he does something stupid a while from now and it throws everything out of whack.”

“What’d he do?”

James shakes his head. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“James.”

“He goes hunting in the woods next winter and he comes to a crossroads and he picks the path he isn’t supposed to. At the end of it, he finds a nice waterfall he’s never seen before, it’s all frozen solid and picturesque and while he’s standing there staring at it, this prize buck walks out of the trees bold as brass and old Montgomery shoots it.”

“Why’s that stupid?” I ask. “That just sounds lucky.”

“First of all, luck is stupid,” James says. “You wouldn’t think it was any big deal, but everything got thrown off that day. The whole damn world. Took me four or five rounds to figure it out, but that’s the reason.”

“Rounds of what?”

“One question at a time, kid,” James says.

“Don’t call me kid.”

“Jimmy.” James glares at me and I feel my whole body get cold. Don’t piss off the dead. I shut my mouth.

James clears his throat and goes on, “He shot the damn buck but the buck was supposed to show up in front of a hippie from Poland six miles down the river and give him the sign he needed to finish his yearlong spiritual retreat and go back to Columbia and create the vaccine for supermalaria.”

“Supermalaria?” I’m lost as I am nowhere.

“It’s a disease that doesn’t exist yet,” James says. “And in thirty years it’s gonna wipe out practically everybody on the planet.”

I blink.

James doesn’t want to look at me again. He’s got his hands clasped like he’s in church, messing around with his thumbs. “You’re lucky I found out about the buck at all,” he says, “cause now I’ve told you why, you stand a chance of listening to me.”

“I’m listening,” I say. “Montgomery shoots the buck. What’s that got to do with me?”

James exhales.

“You gotta shoot Montgomery.”

“What?”

I stare at James. James stares at me. I smirk, trying to catch him in the joke.

“You want me to shoot some old guy?”

James nods. I scoff, but the look on his face makes everything funny curl up and die in my stomach.

“You really want me to go kill him?”

James rolls his eyes. “You don’t have to kill him,” he says. “You just have to hurt him enough that he won’t be hunting next winter.”

I just stare.

“Just shoot him in the knees or something,” James mumbles. “He’ll be stuck in a wheelchair but he’ll live.”

“The knees?” Words have no meaning anymore. I’m just making noises with my mouth. “You want me to go to that house, knock on the door, and shoot the guy who lives there in the knees?”

“Yep.”

“Right now?”

“I figure it’ll take you a bit to psych yourself up for it, but more or less now, yeah,” James says.

There’s one of those long silences. I can hear myself breathe. I can hear James not breathing. I can hear the quiet trickle of the river far away, hear the breeze through the forest, hear the cool white light of the moon. Room tone.

“No,” I say.

James groans out an exhale and looks up as if praying for patience.

“Jimmy, you have to,” he says.

“Why do I have to?”

“Because if you don’t,” he says, hands up like he’s trying to explain that two plus two is four, “then the whole world’s gonna die.”

“Of supermalaria?”

“Yes.”

“Which doesn’t exist yet.”

“Not yet,” James says, “But it will.”

“And why do I have to go shoot that guy?”

“I told you,” James says, “the buck.”

“Why can’t the Polish guy invent a vaccine without the buck?”

James throws his hands up. “I don’t know,” he says. “He just can’t. You can’t question room tone.”

“He can’t save the world without seeing some fucking deer so I have to shoot an innocent old man?” I ask. Suddenly I’m feeling sober, and I hate it.

“It took me a long time to figure it out too,” James says. “Took a lot of research, a lot of looking at maps and timelines and figuring out who was where when. There was a little headline about the buck, you’d almost certainly miss it. I did in most of the rounds. But then I saw it, and then I saw Yanush Kowalski came out here at the same time for his spiritual retreat, and everyone always said if anyone could’ve stopped supermalaria, it was him.”

“Who the hell is Yanush...”

“You won’t know him yet,” James says. “Listen to me, Jimmy. Life’s weird as all hell. Death’s weirder. Time – forget it. We go around and around and around until we get it right, and right now is your chance to do the right thing. I know it doesn’t make sense to you yet, but you have to trust me.”

It’s my turn to look out the window and sigh. My breath fogs up the glass. My living, real human breath that proves I’m alive and here. And James, what is James? A shadow and nothing else. A cold spot on the map, stuck going around and around, haunting drunk twenty-two-year-olds, telling me to shoot an old man.

“I can’t do it, James,” I say.

He’s silent.

“You told me you trust me,” he says.

I look down at my hands.

“I lied,” I say.

When I look up again, he’s gone.

James doesn’t come back before I give up and drive off. He doesn’t come back when I’m home. He doesn’t come back the next night when I drive myself lost again, or the next, or the one after that.

A few weeks of nightly rides out into nowhere and it’s not feeling as nowhere as it should. I know every possible road around here by now. I know where they lead, what’s at the end of them. I never take the one that goes to Montgomery’s cabin.

The spring turns to summer turns to autumn. When the first snow comes, I convince myself James was just a hallucination. I drink too much. I’ve always been a bit crazy. My dad went on some dumbass quest his brain told him to and he got himself killed. I’m lucky enough I didn’t do the same.

I don’t try to go nowhere anymore, but I still like getting out where no one is around. I pack up my gun and a six pack of pale ale and head out to the river to shoot at empty bottles. The moon’s high and full tonight and the snow’s thick on the ground. Nobody’ll be out doing anything. I’ll have the whole world to myself.

I kill the first beer and set the bottle out on a log. I back as far as I can away ‘til it’s almost lost in the darkness, then I shoot. It shatters with a satisfying noise.

I’m halfway through the second one when I hear a rustling in the trees. I freeze, not sure what creature I’m going to find.



Something emerges through the trees. At first, I think it's some sort of spirit, all robed and hunched and gliding like a dead thing. Like James.

"Who's there?" I bark.

A face looks up at me from a bundle of robes, lit up white in the moonlight.

"Oh, hello," a man's voice says. "Was it you that made the shooting?"

He speaks with a thick Polish accent.

My heart freezes into the snow below my feet.

"Yes," I breathe.

"I see. I won't be bothering you," the man says, "I am just going for a stroll."

He shuffles by me away into the darkness, and I'm still frozen. Finally, some modicum of life courses through my veins and I find my voice again.

"Yanush!" I shout. I sprint through the darkness after the man, catching up with him many yards ahead.

"Yanush," I breathe again, catching his arm.

The man turns, looking alarmed.

"Supermalaria," I gasp. "You have to make the vaccine."

"What are you talking about?" the man says, pulling his arm away from mine.

"You're Yanush Kowalski, aren't you?" I say.

The man shakes his head slowly. "No," he says. "I have no name."

He gives me a Taoist sort of smile.

"But I like that name," he says. "It'd suit me, in another life."

With a wink, the man turns and keeps walking off into the darkness as a curtain of snow falls between us.

Somehow, I know I cannot follow him, cannot press him harder to be Yanush Kowalski, even if he is. I abandon the beers. I've lost my mind. I get back to the car and make my way home like a freight train derailing.

I know there's nothing for it, but I can't help myself. I keep checking the local news for any mention of a Wallace Montgomery shooting a prize buck. The coldest part of the winter blows through and still nothing. The snow starts to melt, and still nothing. Spring pulls itself up from the ground and suddenly, it's been a full year since I last saw James.

A full year without Montgomery, a buck, or any crazy new disease.

It's around then that I check myself in to see a psychiatrist. He listens to me talk for half an hour, then hands me a pamphlet on alcohol-induced paranoid and hallucinations. He helps me get into a treatment program, and I decide to give it a shot. It takes four more years for sobriety to stick.

The one thing James got right is that I'd know her name when I heard it: Shelley Moran. Sweet as molasses and blonde as the sun in July, but the kind of girl who can beat you up with words alone if you cross her. A year in, I ask her to marry me. Miraculously, she says yes. We're all set up for a happy that lasts ever-after, but nothing really does that, does it?

We get a few good years before the fighting really starts, before the cheating kicks off, before the day I come home and all her stuff's moved out, not even a note left behind. By the time the divorce papers are signed, I'm back to drinking myself stupid every night.

Nothing ever quite goes right from there. The jobs come up and fall away like the tide. The girls are pretty but none of them last. I've got life worked out so I can keep on drinking every day, but that's about the only thing I'm steady on.

Drinking, and late night trips out to nowhere.

I found out I can still get nowhere if I walk. There's only so many roads, but your feet can take you anywhere. I'll go out the woods at night and run blind until my knees are about to give out, then just walk and walk until I don't know where I am.

It's a night like that when he finds me, almost like he was looking for me, but I think maybe I was the one looking for him.

He comes up to me sitting on a log by the river and says, "Mind if I join you?"

I look around, half-expecting to see James, but it's just some old man. You don't see many people on a cold night in nowhere. I wasn't expecting company. I'm not sure how to tell him I mind, so I nod and make room on the log.

He offers me a Marlboro from his pack and I take it.

"I don't often run into anyone out here," the man says. "What brings you out so late?"

I shrug and light my cigarette.

"All my life people told me to get lost," I say. "Now I thought I'd humor them and do it."

The old man throws back his head and laughs.

"Ain't that the truth," he says. "You and me both. I got lost and stayed that way."

"You live out here?" I ask.

The old man nods. “Just over the hill,” he says. “I’ve got a cabin. You’re welcome to come in for a drink if you’re getting cold. I was just checking my traps when I saw you.”

I don’t know why I say yes to him. Maybe I know, maybe it’s just the thought of a drink somewhere warm on a cold night. I’ve always been a simple man. He leads me over the hill to his cabin and opens the door.

The kitchen is warmly-lit and I’m grateful for it. It all gets cold and dark when you’re nowhere. Here, at least, I’ve found someone else who knows as much about getting lost as I do. He pours us whiskies and I look idly at the pictures on the wall. Some postcards, a few photographs, a clipping from a hunting magazine that shows him smiling with some kill that’s obscured by a vintage pinup girl.

I shed my coat in the living room.

“What’s your name?” he asks me as I settle into the couch.

“James,” I say. I’m older now. “Yours?”

“Montgomery,” he says. “Wallace Montgomery.”

Staring at me from the wall like Judgment from the heavens is the proud, stuffed head of a prize buck.

The rest of the night is a blur. Look, you can read about it in the news. “Local drunk goes crazy, shoots old man in the knees in his own home.” I run for it just as Montgomery hits the ground, screaming at me, grabbing at his knees where I just shot him with his own gun. I just run and run until I’m nowhere again.

The cops catch up with me and take me into jail. I don’t resist. They charge me with assault. I tell them

about supermalaria and they put me in a psych ward. At night, I pray for James to come back – the real James, the dead one – but it’s just me and the white walls and the room tone.

After a couple years of meds and sobriety, they release me back into the wild. I move into a halfway house. I leave when the sobriety doesn’t stick, but I keep the drinking to myself and try to live as quiet as I can.

My fifty-fifth birthday rolls around, then my fifty-sixth. I know my liver’s in bad shape. I know my end is coming soon. The future’s already written so there’s no point fighting it.

On my fifty-seventh birthday, the first kid gets sick. The doctors have never seen anything like this. The news doesn’t care about it much, not until it’s spreading itself like butter all across New York City leaving a trail of stretchers covered in white sheets. Some crazy flu, just boils you alive and then you’re done. There isn’t a cure, or a vaccine, or anything. The whole world shuts down. Neighbors turn on neighbors. Everyone is dying, all over the world.

I’m lucky, the doctors tell me. Liver failure’s a better way to go than this. I count my blessings and say my prayers while it all gets dark behind my eyes.

Dying’s a long road that leads to nowhere. I see the white light up ahead, see the infinite peace, hear the warm radiating background noise I know can only be God. I’m ready to go. It’s been a hard run. I’m ready to fade into infinity.

But I'm slammed like a car crash right back into my bounds, the shackles of form and contrast. The white lights are headlights on my own car, and I see myself, age twenty, pull off into some ditch and get out of the car. I watch myself stumble drunk towards the river with a bottle of J.D. in one hand. I look down at my own hands and see the wet ground right through them. I'm gray, fifty-seven and dead.

I know now what James meant about rounds. Here, I've just begun another one.

I watch myself, my young self, stumble out through the darkness and start pissing by the creek. I thought I'd have more time, you know, between being dead and being right back here. But God ain't got time for that and there's no point fighting against the rhythm.

I already know what to say. All of it, it's already been written. I tune into the pattern of noise and silence, the sound of nowhere, and everything I need to say is all right there.

I walk up to my young self pissing by the creek and I hear my own voice go, "We got some talking to do, Jimmy."

## The Gilded Palace Hollywood Hotel

The Gilded Palace Hollywood Hotel is a shithole. Even the palm trees hate it here. They've put up framed posters of Marilyn Monroe where the walls are cracking. There's more dried semen on the beds than you'd think, and you'd think there was a lot. If you squint, it might look pretty. Squint and turn your head just right, when the sunset catches the windows and the courtyard looks like gold. But I'm telling you, this place is a nightmare.

The dead girl in the pool doesn't help.

The truth is that she killed herself, but I'm the only one who knows that. I'm the one who knows and I'm not allowed to tell anybody.

The detective asked me a lot of questions. He asked me and he chewed tobacco and he spat it and he asked more questions. And I said I don't know, I don't know, I fell asleep that night. Fell asleep at the reception desk. The gunshot woke me up. When I went outside, she was dead and the shallow end was halfway to red and now the whole pool's pink. They can't drain it because it's evidence.

Pretend this is a mystery. Pretend I just said there's a dead girl in the pool and I didn't say anything else about it. Strawberry blonde hair in a hurricane halo, white Kate Spade one-piece now pink too, chlorine seeping into the

sideways hole through her head. That's what we know so far. That, and the sunglasses are a knock-off. They're evidence too.

Pretend we've got suspects. Four of them.

Suspect number one is Keith, and he's everything you'd think he is by the beer stains on the wife-beater and what used to be a hairline.

Then there's Alameda, but she wasn't named after the town and she'll have you know that for a fact. The pearls are plastic, the nails are acrylic, the blonde is dyed, and the lips, well, God knows where she got those.

Behind door number three, we've got Ricardo. No one believes he's really from Italy, not a soul. No one believes his handbag line will take off. No one believes he's straight. But the way he tells it, he loved her, the girl in the pool.

Keith loved her. Ricardo loved her, loved everything about her. Alameda loved her the most.

Or the second most, after me.

Our fourth subject, ladies and gentlemen, that would be the guy at the reception desk. The night porter. The quiet one, who bites his nails where he just quit smoking. The one who woke up to the gunshot. That would be me.

But I don't know anything. If you asked me, I'd say it was Keith. He knew he'd never have her. It was Ricardo, because murder is dramatic. It was Alameda. She killed her to steal her, because she couldn't be her, because she never had been.

The girl in the pool, she was never her either, but damn, she looked the part.



She was Keith's dream and Ricardo's muse and Alameda's prayer, but to me, her name was Sandra, and that's all I have to say about that. The cigarette holder and the cocaine were all for show. The truest thing about Sandra is that hole in her head, that I loved her, and that she loved me too.

To unravel the mystery, we have to go back to Missouri. 1991, in a trailer park. In a hospital, actually, then a trailer park, and then the trailer park for sixteen years. Daddy beat Mommy, Mommy beat Sandy, and little Sandra Jane was the star of the school play with a black eye. Sandra Jane joined the teen theater group in St. Louis, Sandra Jane grew beautiful, Sandra Jane met a man who made a promise, Sandra Jane went to L.A., and the rest is history. All of it, her whole life, history now.

They all killed her, every last one of them. They promised her and they beat her and they promised her, and all Sandra did was believe them.

There was a raunchy music video. There was one perfume commercial. There were dozens of men. But that, none of that, was Sandra.

Sandra didn't care about Marilyn Monroe or Holly Golightly, and her real voice was deeper than that breathy whisper. Her favorite food was bacon and she drank a whisky sour because she didn't really like whisky. She didn't even like acting, but it had saved her, and she would follow where it led to anywhere but where she was.

Right now, the detective's got us all locked in the hotel. We're not allowed to leave. We're evidence too. The way he sees it, everyone here has a motive. Half the

story's written for you: in the courtyard, with the handgun. That much we don't need to speculate on.

The mystery is how she shot herself from ten feet away. They know already the gun wasn't in her hand.

I sit on my hands because they're sweating. I don't know why. I'm not guilty, but here, now, everyone's guilty.

They call Keith first.

Keith is 40-something, nearly fat, nearly bald. His motive is Lust. Sandra used to dress in front of the open window where he could see her. Half the semen stains on the bed are his. When you've worked here long enough, you can tell.

Keith likes baseball commentary and Budweiser and World of Warcraft. He's everything they chewed up and spat out, and he still calls himself proud. Sandra was everything he wanted and everything he couldn't have. If you asked anyone, he loved her, but he didn't. She was a fantasy and nothing more, and he knew it, and that's why he didn't kill her.

Ricardo goes in next.

He's thirty-three but he'll tell you twenty-six. He's tan enough to pass for Italian, but I've seen his Albuquerque driver's license. The accent is a knock off. His designs are plagiarized. His motive is Greed.

Ricardo likes soap operas and dancing. He's the outsider, unwelcome but exotic enough to be interesting. He likes cocktail parties too, though he doesn't get invited to the ones he wants to be at. Sandra used to model his handbags on the side. She sat naked with a leather tote

pressed over her chest and gave that smile of hers straight to the camera. If you asked anyone, Ricardo loved her, but I've seen him roll his car down that alley where the pretty boys climb in and we all know the truth. Sandra was a pretty face and nothing more, and that's why he didn't kill her.

Alameda goes in third.

If I had to guess, she's in her fifties, but the Botox says a passable thirty-nine. Her motive is Envy. You can see the way she wanted to eat her, would still eat the corpse. Alameda was never as beautiful as she says she was, and she isn't now.

Sandra used to lounge by the pool for her. Lounge with her tits up and her long, long legs crossed with the cigarette holder in one hand and a magazine in the other. She'd do it just for Alameda, just to remind her who was queen and who was a dowager widow. Alameda loved Sandra because she had to love herself. She knew Sandra was everything she wanted, the past she could never rewrite, and that's why she didn't kill her.

I go in last.

When I come out, all three of them are standing by the pool, looking anywhere but at Sandra. The wind blew some of the pink pool water up onto the cement and the grey slab looks better for it.

"It was you," Ricardo says, his eyes on Alameda. I exhale.

"Me?" Alameda gasps, too theatrical to be surprised. "It was Keith! I can see into his room. He jacks off to her

every night, but he couldn't have her, and that's why he shot her."

"Me?" Keith grunts. "It was you, faggot. She was going to out you to the whole world."

"Me?" says Ricardo. "Why would I kill her? Alameda's the one with the real motive. Always so envious. It was her!"

"Why would I kill Sandra?" says Alameda.

"Why would I?" says Keith.

And the answer is obvious. None of them would kill her, because they all needed her. She was the only thing that kept them going.

The faces slowly turn around to me.

"I was working," I say. "I didn't see what happened."

"Working? There's no one here!"

"When's the last time anyone came to this hotel?"

"All you do is watch us on the security footage, pervert. I bet you have a whole cabinet, just tapes on Sandra."

"I bet you're just like Keith."

"I bet you're just like every man."

"You did it, didn't you?"

"No," I say, "It wasn't me. I would never want her dead."

And I can't say the truth, not then and there, because they're lifting Sandra's body out of the pool.

They raise her up, wet hair dripping from the stretcher like the cascade of a neckline. Two officers take a white sheet in each hand and unfurl it. It falls so soft over her body, settles in, the cotton exhales. Then, she's gone.

Sandra is a corpse now.

We watch in silence as they roll her out of sight.

The truth about Sandra is this:

She'd come in drunk every night, toss her hair over her shoulder as the door shut and another car drove away. Every night, a different car. A different smell of cologne. A new handbag, a new pair of shoes, a new necklace. She'd take each one off as soon as she got in the door and drop it in the trash. I'd pretend not to notice. The maid kept most of it when she found it.

The first night, she came up to the desk and slammed her elbows on it. She smiled. She said, "Good morning."

Every night, it was the same. Every morning, it had never happened.

I learned everything there was to learn. I studied as she lectured. She liked the guitarist, she hated the director, the banker was just for the drugs, and she didn't even like the drugs. She loved Kurt Cobain and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and white sun dresses, and lying. She lied as much as she could, she said. Mostly about herself. She was her favorite invention.

She asked me if I'd ever been to India. She asked me if I'd ever been to Greece. She asked me what my favorite movie was, and she forgot every night what I answered. Hers was *The Breakfast Club*.

Every night, she came in, took her shoes off, and threw something away. Every night, she leaned on the reception desk and looked at me. Every morning, we were strangers. She'd stride past me like an autumn breeze, out into the parking lot, out into another car, away from me. Every night, she'd come back. Sometimes she was

laughing, sometimes she was crying, but every night, she came home to me.

That was Sandra, carried by the wind. No one who met her ever believed in her, but they used her to believe in themselves. She was a dream, all our dream, and we woke up with a hole through the head.

We never even kissed, because that would make it real — not once, not until the night she put the gun on the reception desk.

She told me about the dream she had. She'd been having it for years. They're by the beach, her, and whoever she loves that day. Everyone's together, and the sun is shining, and the water's so blue you can taste it. The ocean pulls back, tucks into itself like a bedsheet and folds over and over and the beach stretches on ahead for another mile. And there, on the sand, is everything you could ever dream. Jewels and gold and wine and roses, as far as the eye can see, buried in the sand. Everyone around her is staring at the shine of it, but she looks at the ocean. And she knows what no one else does: that a wave is coming. The greatest wave there's ever been. It's coming to drown them all, and no one sees it. She's screaming at them, but they can't hear her. She says, this will all be destroyed. Everything you want, every beautiful thing, it's going to crash on our heads and we're all going to die. She's the only one who knows.

She says, "Get to higher ground," and they don't listen.

She says, "We're all going to die here," and they don't listen.

This is the dream she had.

Then she put the gun on the desk. She knew about the gun. She knew where we kept it. She remembered what I told her. She knew better than anyone, that the gun was the only dream left.

She threw away a pair of earrings, set her handbag on the desk and took out the gun. She walked upstairs, put on her swimsuit, folded up her sunglasses, and came back.

Then she said, "Take a shot."

I refused and I begged and I pleaded. I gave her options. I encouraged her dreams. I told her things about her, things she'd forgotten. I sang her the song from *The Breakfast Club*. I offered to take her out for Indian food. I offered to take her to Greece, to the room upstairs and anywhere. Another world, even, I would've found one for her.

But she found one, and the door that led there was a bullet hole. And when she said this was what she wanted, who was I to refuse her?

I asked for one thing. I asked to know that this was real. I asked to kiss her.

And she let me kiss her. I kissed her, and then I shot her in the head for her.

That's the honest truth. I threw the gun in the pool, I threw up in the toilet, and I pretended to sleep at my desk. All of it, she asked me to. I'll never tell a soul, not one, but you.

The other story goes like this: a beautiful girl comes to the Gilded Palace Hollywood Hotel, the last decrepit shell of old California gold, where no one's seen an honest

view in years and you feel it in the walls the mirage can't hold much longer.

She comes to the hotel and she meets the night porter. He's a sad, lonely boy with no friends and no one to talk to. She talks to him. She befriends him when she's drunk. He believes in love, still. He believes this is what it is. He believes, because he is a fool, that she loves him. That things are possible. That the courtyard looks like gold at sunset, and that dreams come true, because out of anything in this world, she loves him.

But then she tells him she's engaged. She's in love. Not with the guitarist, not with the director, not with the banker or the club owner or the record producer. She's in love with a bartender up the road, the place where she gets drunk every night before she comes back here. She's in love, and they're getting married, and they're leaving L.A. together. They're going to India, to Greece, to anywhere.

And the poor boy at reception can't handle it. The world's come crumbling down, like it always would, like it always has been. There never was a mystery. She doesn't love him, and he can't handle it, and he takes the security gun and walks her out to the pool and shoots her in the head.

That's the other story, the one they tell. The one they arrested me for. The one they tried me on. The one that sent me to prison.

The gun was behind the counter. It was for security. Every gift she wore was in the trash. She got shot from ten feet away, and she was wearing her white bathing suit and sunglasses in the middle of the night. She died by the sea



that she loved, in a pool that was only a cheap imitation,  
in a world imitating itself.

This is what we know.

This is the story, and these are the facts.

Her name was Sandra Jane.

You can believe me, and you can believe them, and  
you can choose which story to tell. Who killed Sandra  
Jane? I did. We all did. She killed herself. That's the truth.

The dream's over. They drained the pool.

The mystery is solved now, and you can all go home.

## The Parable of Venison

### One.

The interview goes like this:

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever sits me down and looks at me in a wise, fatherly way. He steeples his fingers and leans over the table and says, “You think you have what it takes?”

Yes, sir, I do. My résumé speaks for itself, but they always want you to do the talking.

He says, “You think you can sell like we do?”

Yes, sir.

“Because this isn’t a regular brand.”

No, sir.

“You’re not just selling some dinky little sofa. You’re selling an entire lifestyle. The P. J. Holt lifestyle, you know what I’m saying?”

I know what he’s saying because everyone’s saying it, but I just nod like *Yes, sir*.

“Okay,” he says, “Sell me this pen.”

This one?

He nods. It’s blue and plastic, about six inches long, and, well, it’s a pen.

“Sell me this pen.”

I look at the thing for a minute. My résumé’s sitting on the table like the ugly girl at a party. The past is never enough for these people. They think they’re doing

something new, but everything's a lifestyle if you sell it right.

I say, "Last week I had to deposit this check. The last check from my last job. You know, take it in and sign the back, and I looked everywhere for a pen. Couldn't find one."

This is all true, by the way. The best way to lie is to be honest.

"I went through my whole desk, every shelf in my kitchen, my bathroom, nothing. Entire apartment, no pen. No pencil. Not even a sharpie. Which was inconvenient, you know, but more than that, it was tragic."

I sigh like I'm talking about a death.

"I don't own a single pen. No paper either. If I want to write a letter, I gotta type it. How awful is that? And even then I don't have a printer. I have to email it. Put it on your Facebook. And that'd be fine, you could read it, problem solved. We live in a world now where you don't even need to own a goddamn pen. Everything's digital."

I hold the pen up like it's a sword. Get that *Mightier than* thing going. Make it feel like war. You know what I mean.

"You have no need for this pen, except if you need to sign a check. But that's gonna be digital too soon. And you know what? That makes me mad. That makes me furious, because I see it happening everywhere. All around me, everyone's on a smart phone. Everyone's checking Facebook instead of living their lives. I sent my mom an email for her birthday. My own mother. It's sick. It makes me so sick that I want to go down to the drugstore and buy a pack of ballpoints just so I can feel like a man, because

that's what a pen is these days. We're all so stuck in technology that having a single pen is a sign of resistance. Having a pen means you're holding onto your roots. It means you stand for something. It means you care about the kind of person you are and you're not willing to get washed out by the rest of our sick society and that, my friend, is why you need this pen."

I look him dead in the eye and say, "That is why you need this pen."

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever leans back and looks at me.

"That's what they teach you at Stanford, huh?" he says. "They give you a class on this shit?"

"No, sir," I say. "We hardly used pens. Everything was digital."

When I start the next Monday, there's a fifty pack of ballpoints on my desk.

## **Two.**

Welcome to the P. J. Holt lifestyle. Est. 1951, when everyone started caring about their lifestyle instead of their lives. It's sixty-some years later and no one's bothered to find out what the P. J. stands for. We don't sell light bulbs, we sell light. We don't sell furniture, we sell home. We made you in our image, if you think about it, but you don't.

You just buy it.

We just sell it.

That's the circle of life, and the thing about a circle is it doesn't let you out. That's why they invented Nirvana, but even Buddhists need lights. That's where we come in.

Everything we sell is a metaphor. A knock-off designed to leave enough of that antique *je ne sais quoi* to evoke a mood. Scented candles. Distressed wood. You know it's all a lie, but you still want to be a part of it, because it's expensive and pretty and it makes you feel real.

And all of this is really just a parable. The parable of that snake that eats itself. A metaphor for putting your head up your ass.

My dad says, "You spend your whole life hating grown-ups and then you are one."

I say, "We're all eating our own shit and handing out prizes for flavor."

The point is, the future is just recycling the past after enough people forget about it.

I'll tell you my story, and it's a true story, but I'm letting you know now that it won't get you anywhere. It's all just a metaphor for a metaphor for a metaphor. At the end of the day, you're still dead on the sidewalk and someone's playing "Smooth Criminal" while your blood leaks into the storm drain.

Figuratively, for the most part.

### Three.

I'm the guy in a knock-off suit who buys your drinks at the bar. I'm the guy who's charming but doesn't win you over. I'm the guy who never calls back, and you don't want me to. If I did, it'd be an insult.

Tonight's girl is named, I don't know. She's a redhead so she thinks she's kinky. She fucks with the lights on and I can look at her. Guys like me, we watch women like TV. Girls like this are pay per view, and no one's really sure

where it starts being prostitution. But I'm good with being a customer. Everything's prostitution if you think about it, but you don't. That's why I'm good at my job.

Tomorrow night, it'll be the blonde who's just a little bit fat. The next day, a skinny Korean.

My suit is just an extension of my personality. I'm too cheap to treat you right, but I know how to make a good impression. I'm selling a lifestyle.

The thing about my life is the Buddhists got it wrong. Money is happiness. Sex is happiness. That's the P. J. Holt lifestyle, we sell happiness. Yes, you can buy it now. You can buy salvation if you've got enough faith.

This girl's all, *Oh God, Oh God, Oh God.*

Oh me, I know.

What you learn about God is however much he loves you, he loves everyone else more. You're never enough for him, so you spend your life compensating. The redhead, the fat blonde, the Korean, they all know what they're getting into before they get into it. I'm yesterday's compensation. I won't be here in the morning, and then the cycle starts all over and I still don't change my suit.

What are you drinking? Two of those.

What's your name? I don't care.

It's not that they fall for it. They know. They do it anyway. Nobody's lying to anyone here. It's all informed consent. I'd pass out waivers but I don't need to. Really, who started it: the one fucking or the one getting fucked?

The thing about a circle is it doesn't start anywhere. That's what they teach you in the Girl Scouts. A circle is round, it has no end. Eternal love. Eternal salvation.

Angel was a Girl Scout before she found Michael Jackson, but we haven't gotten there yet.

#### Four.

Tonight there's an invader at the bar. This tall guy with dreadlocks, and he's white so you know he had to really try for them. He's got Birkenstocks too. One of those striped ponchos. A seagull tattoo on his neck. Hemp. His looks says prophet, says wandering minstrel, poverty by choice. He's selling a lifestyle too, but he doesn't think about it like that.

He probably still believes in Nirvana.

There's also a knockout brunette in a fuchsia cocktail dress. I slide into the stool next to her and order a gin. I don't look at her. I let my suit do the talking, and she can't stop noticing me.

Blaine, the bartender, he knows the drill. I finish my drink and he says, "Can I get you two anything else?"

The brunette notices me some more.

She laughs and says, "Oh, we're not..."

But we are, and we know it. We're already in the circle, and it goes around and around.

I look at her like I just saw her. Like it starts here.

I chuckle and say, "What are you drinking?"

It's always a Cosmo. Growing up, I didn't think people still drank those. I thought that was just on *Sex and the City*, but life really is *Sex and the City* for girls like this and I'm Mr. Medium. Nobody ends up with me, but I still get five minutes an episode.

We're talking about work, and I let my brain shut off. I'm good at my job. I don't even have to hear her to know when to laugh. I'm just far enough away that I can see her

tits and her eyes, and then there's dreadlocks in the distance. I laugh.

She says, "What?"

I look at her. Mr. Nirvana is sitting just down the bar with a hard cider.

The brunette gives me this look. "I said, I think what's happening in Syria is really sad."

Why would you say that?

She blinks at me, and then the perfectly tailored fuchsia dress and the heart shaped ass inside it are walking away with the drink I just bought them, and I'm left staring down the bar at Birkenstocks.

Mr. Nirvana nods at me and his dreadlocks quiver ominously.

And to me and dreadlocks, Blaine says, "Can I get you two anything else?"

I say, "That was just strike one. I get two more this inning."

Mr. Nirvana's bouncing his head like he's grooving to our conversation. Blaine looks over my shoulder at some blondes and gives me the I Dare You face. I check them out in the mirror.

"Think I can bag at least one of those?"

Blaine says, "Five bucks says you can't."

"Let's make it more interesting," I say. "I get one, and you cover our tab. You buy my dinner."

Mr. Nirvana isn't grooving anymore.

Blaine says, "You're on."

And then Mr. Nirvana's in the stool next to me with his hand on my shoulder like he's trying to teach me something. I can see his seagull. Up close, it looks like it's missing an eye.



Mr. Nirvana, he says, "Hey man."

Guys like this are always calling you man.

He says, "You shouldn't look at it that way. Women aren't possessions."

Everything's a possession. You just sell it back when you're done.

"Well, think about it," I say. "I buy them drinks, they come home with me. It's all bought and paid for."

He says, "Oh man. You gotta get away from all of that."

"What, sex?"

"Money," he says "When I was sleeping down at the pier, you know, that was the best time in my life. Having nothing really teaches you how to live. You try living for a year with nothing to your name and you'll see the world differently, man. Money can't buy happiness."

I hear your "Can't Buy Me Love" bullshit. If you were a Beatle you'd be Ringo.

By the time he's done saving me, the blondes are gone, and Blaine says, "Can I get you two anything else?"

## **Five.**

The meeting goes like this:

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever is having an absolute aneurism. A complete brain tumor. Not in the literal sense, but literally dying right now, you'd better believe it.

The real problem is that when you sell someone their lifestyle, you're responsible for all of it. Depression, drama, death. It doesn't matter if the house is just ugly or the neighbors are just awful, because we sell home, not furniture. We sell light, so darkness is our fault.

So even if *you're* the idiot who put the wrong kind of bulb in *your* Limited Edition Luminescent Faux-Crystal Father Christmas Statuette, so even if the plastic-coated electrical wire painted dark-green to match the Christmas tree only burned to a crisp because of *your* mistake, so even if it's *your* off-white and eggshell blue accented living room walls, *your* house, *your* belongings all collapsing down in a blazing inferno, it's *our* responsibility. Suddenly it's a failure of the entire P. J. Holt lifestyle.

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever is getting calls to go on talk shows while they play clips of a sad, photogenic family huddled outside the ruins of their house. The ruins of their lifestyle. The Esteemed Mr. Whoever is having a real hemorrhoid over this. A positive HIV test. You know, dying.

All that really happened is someone's house burned down. The P. J. Holt lifestyle needs to be saved, so they look to me, the talking head. It's all so ironic that it has to be marketing.

I ask, "Did the statuette burn down too?"

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever says, "What?"

I ask, "When the house burned down, did the Limited Edition Faux-Crystal Father Christmas Statuette burn down too?"

His beard hair got singed a bit, but No. The faux-crystal isn't flammable.

I tell him, "What we need is a tear-jerker. Like cancer kids. We need to show how the family's come together to get past this tragedy. We need to remind people of the real meaning of Christmas. Make everyone who ever thought

they needed a house feel shallow. We need to show how this is an opportunity.”

I look him dead in the eyes and say, “And then, we close with a picture of them gathered around the Faux-Crystal Father Christmas Statuette. The P. J. Holt Lifestyle lives on. It brings people together. It brings you home, even when you don’t have one.”

Some people would kill for a tragedy like this.

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever, he’s back to life now. I’m a miracle worker. I’m Jesus, he says, or, you know, whatever.

And I think, if all I had was a fake-crystal Santa, I wouldn’t be feeling much like Christmas. If my house burned down, I’d pretty much die with it.

If this office burned down, would the whole world die with it?

Definitely not.

We’ve got the market now, but if we go down, there will be a hundred companies selling a hundred lifestyles to take our place. The circle would start right back up again and no one would miss us a bit. The whole thing about God is that everyone has one.

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever keeps talking and there’s a little fleck of steak sauce on the corner of his mouth. I’m staring into a projected photo of this newly homeless family on the wall.

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever says, “Why couldn’t it have been a statue of Jesus instead?”

And then my head gets all “Can’t Buy Me Love” and all I can think about is Mr. Nirvana and his

dreadlocks. *Having nothing really teaches you how to live.* I turn him off. It's my job to teach you how to live.

It's not guilt that I'm feeling, not by a long shot. It's more like jealousy. More like competition.

I've got the whole kit and caboodle, but it won't be long before they switch the kit out on us. Right now it's a charcoal gray suit, but some guys actually wear hemp. P. J. Holt sells your idea of heaven, so these guys go looking for hell. And they like it.

I'm having an epiphany here. An absolute moment. A positive whatever.

I can see it now:

Sitting on the sidewalk instead of a couch. Up and down with the sun, no light bulbs. You're buying a lifestyle, but it's one I didn't sell you.

But that's the thing about God. He's always still up there. You're either with him or you're against him, but you'll never be rid of him. You're only a sinner because someone's a saint.

And suddenly, being God isn't good enough. Suddenly, I want to be Lucifer too.

I want everyone to know we're all playing the same game, and I want everyone to know I'm winning it.

## Six.

There's these two guys playing checkers under the pier. Out of a possible eight, there are five and a half limbs between them. Everyone has a backpack like this is all a camping trip.

I found a guitar in my closet that's missing a string. I've got an old pair of jeans and some sandals. A plaid shirt. I'm doing my best to look all Nirvana, you know, the

Buddhist thing and the Kurt Cobain thing. Nobody's asked me what I'm doing here yet, so I try to look busy. I play: High E, High E, High E, B. I look soulful.

If anyone asks, my name is Venison Beam: Prophet and Wandering Minstrel.

I'm watching a one-armed guy get kinged, and then this kid is talking to me. He's got half his head shaved and a denim backpack with a peace sign on it. There's a safety pin through his eyebrow. It's amazing what people can do with office supplies if you let them get creative.

He says, "I haven't seen you around here before."

I look out across the ocean and say, "I'm not from around here."

It's not totally a lie. I live in a luxury one-bedroom six miles away but I'm looking at the same ocean.

"Welcome," he says. "What's your name?"

Venison. Venison Beam.

He hugs me instead of shaking my hand.

And I think, this is the only place in the world where your name can be Venison and no one will question it. I don't even have to play the guitar. You buy the lifestyle.

"Let me show you around," Safety Pin says.

Safety Pin walks me up the parking lot and I can't tell how many of these kids are the real deal. Most guys you see on the street, you can pretty much tell how they got there. Schizophrenia, meth, Vietnam. You get the story just by looking at them. Some of those guys are here. The ones playing checkers. The skinny guy tanned to the color of a pork chop yelling at himself by the palm trees. But some of these guys are just kids. Pound puppies. They look like clones of Mr. Nirvana. Dirty hair. Hemp. They look like me now.

Safety Pin says he's living like this by choice, and I think: *Whose?* But I like the smugness in it. The commodification of poverty. Safety Pin's getting the whole *These real homeless guys would get a house in the suburbs if they could* thing going, but he's above all of that.

A ways down the beach, there's this blue thing sparkling. You'd almost mistake it for the ocean, if the ocean were made of Lycra and shaped like an hourglass. There's a whole bunch of red hair on top of it, the kind of red you only get from cheap dye. The whole effect looks kind of like a mermaid. A mermaid going, head twitch, two step, head twitch, two step.

Safety Pin says, "That's Angel. She's schizo."

And the mermaid goes, *walk, walk, walk, arms up, turn right, turn left, walk, walk, walk.*

I say, "Why is she doing the 'Thriller' dance?"

Safety Pin says, "Angel thinks she's trapped in a Michael Jackson video."

Michael Jackson is dead.

Safety Pin says, "Don't ever, ever tell her that."

### **Seven.**

I stand under the pier and watch her. Curly red hair bouncing, blue Lycra unitard sparkling. I didn't know you could still get unitards, but the past is in fashion these days. I watch her less like television and more like a musical. I watch her until she grabs her thighs and lumber-walks up the beach, back the beach, then turns and: Claws up. *Hiss.*

Thriller's over. We survived.

No one on the sidewalk is even looking at her, like they're all so totally used to this. She sees me watching and waves.

"Was I good?" she says.

And I think, Michael Jackson is dead.

"That was great," I say.

"I'm Angel."

She jogs over to me. Everything's bouncing in the Lycra suit. Nobody's hair should be that color.

"I'm Venison," I say for the second time, "Venison Beam. I'm a folk singer."

This is my identity now. I have the guitar. You get the idea.

"Oh. Cool. I'm a backup dancer," she says.

I wonder if either of us is lying. I wonder where the line is between delusion and identity.

"Well, Michael Jackson is a perfectionist," I say, for something to say.

I look at her and all I can think is, Michael Jackson is dead. So totally dead. His coffin is rotting, that's how dead he is.

"Oh, I know," she gushes, "I should probably get back to rehearsing. Nice to meet you."

Was it?

The mermaid walks away. *Two step, head twitch, two step, head twitch.* I see Safety Pin with his half-shaved, half-sunburnt head. The checkers players with their not enough legs. And I realize I'm not as good at my job as I think I am. I can't sell this lifestyle. I can't be Venison Beam. I'm going to be sick and I have to get out of here. I have a home to get back to. I have the faux-Christmas

crisis. I should never listen to a white guy with dreadlocks ever again.

I sit on the corner and strum my guitar like I care. There's a bus in ten minutes. I'm sitting on the sidewalk instead of a couch, go Buddha. And then there's a shadow over me. I look up and a bald guy slows his Mercedes down and hands me five dollars.

He says, "Best of luck."

This guy who'd punch anyone in the throat who got between him and closing a deal. Who'd be the loudest guy at the bar. He'd run his Mercedes over a kid's bicycle and just check the hood for dents.

I know this guy. I'm ten years south of being this guy.

And this guy's handing me five bucks and sad smiling and saying, *Best of luck*. The five is sweaty and wrinkled and it's mine now.

*Best of luck.*

It's like the clouds open and everything's choir boys and fairy dust. The Mercedes is pulling away and the guy's looking anywhere but at me, and I have five dollars in my hand. It was all so fast, so awkward, you'd almost mistake it for normal. But this, this is something else.

This is better than sex.

This is salvation.

### **Eight.**

It's not the money that I'm into, it's the pity.

When you're on the street, everyone assumes they have it better than you. It's the opposite of real life. You stand on a corner with a cardboard sign and everyone else



feels secure about themselves. You're bringing them joy in a way.

And the best part is, I'm not even homeless.

It's two weeks later and I'm an addict. I find excuses to leave work early. That's just a day gig. My real calling is to stand on a freeway exit with a sign saying I'm a Vietnam vet. The way I see it, anyone stupid enough to think I was even alive for Vietnam deserves to give me five dollars.

Most of them drive right by and the ones who stop don't even read my sign. They see cardboard and they know what to do. It's programmed into the feedback loop. The circle jerk of life.

Here's a dollar.

Best of luck.

This is better than sex.

The thing is, everyone gives me money because they really want to see me do well. They really hope things turn up for me. See me at the bar and you'd pray they find prostate cancer on my next physical. On the street, all of the sudden I've had it hard enough. I deserve better. I deserve this dollar. They all smile, and then they go home and feel grateful for what they have. They feel charitable. They feel holy.

Amen.

The ones who don't, the ones who scream at me to get a job — what they don't know is that I've got one.

They go home and pat themselves on the back because they won the game and I lost. They sit on their couches and watch their TV shows about people who

have it better than they do. What they don't know is that I sold them that couch. The Louis XVI-knock off chandelier with gilded leaf inlay, I sold them that too. I sold their entire lifestyle. I made them in the P. J. Holt image.

My face is sunburnt and peeling and I haven't been to the bar all week. Sex isn't happiness like pity is happiness.

The weeks roll by. I let my beard grow out. Buy some safety pins. Money isn't happiness like saving people is happiness.

The months roll by. I get a strap for my guitar. I don't even have to play it, you still get the idea. Fooling people is happiness.

At work, they just wonder how I'm getting so tan. I tell them, put olive oil on your skin at the beach. I don't say I do it and no one ever asks, so it's not a lie.

The idea is that if you want perfect skin, it's going to be painful. You want a perfect body, you have to lift a lot of heavy things and sweat it out at the gym. You want a girl to go home with you, you have to buy her a lot of drinks and compliment her on everything that makes her average.

My dad says, "Everybody's nailed to something."

I say, "Everybody has a price tag."

The point being: sacrifice is just a transaction.

## **Nine.**

On the first day of summer, I stop by the homeless shelter straight after work. All you have to do is be a homeless guy in a suit and everyone thinks you're a hero. You're selling them hope. The volunteer lady, she asks if I just had an interview.

I say, "Sure."

She asks what the job was.

I see a flash of red hair, and I say: "Backup dancer for Michael Jackson."

I can tell she doesn't have the heart to tell me he's dead. Everyone already assumes you're crazy, so it's okay to give them a show. You have to indulge people when you're selling a lifestyle.

The redhead from the beach is here, standing by the window, and I'm in my suit. I'm homed in on my target for the night and the circle starts up again.

She doesn't notice me.

She's staring out the window, mouthing the words to "Billie Jean" and doing a little two-step.

And then I remember, her name is Angel.

Angel shimmies to the right, and I start walking over. I know this gig and I'm good at my job.

Angel mouths, "The kid is not my son," and tosses her hair and I stop walking.

She shimmies to the left, and I don't know what to say. Billie Jean is not her lover, this much we know, but the rest is drawing a blank. Nothing. Empty. Just her. I don't care about my suit, or my job, or anything.

I want her.

Her name is Angel and I remember it. Every bad love song was written about her. Like when you drive too close to the median and you see the cars coming the other way, I want her the way you almost want them to hit you.

I walk towards her and a foot hits me in the stomach. Some skinny guy with a messed up leg is baring half a mouth of teeth at me.

“Don’t interrupt Angel when she’s rehearsing,” he says.

Lest we incur the wrath of Michael.

I sit down, but I can’t stop wanting her. People always tell me, be careful what you do. Two step. Shimmy shimmy. Red hair. I want her.

“Billie Jean” fades out and Angel gets quieter and quieter, and then she stands, legs apart, jazz hands out, head bent in prayer. She looks up and nobody claps. The foot guy releases me.

And I just stand there.

Angel takes her headphones off, and I don’t say anything. My suit was the wrong move. I should have gone all Nirvana. I should have brought my guitar. I should have brought my cardboard. I’m not good at this.

Angel turns around and everything is red hair and brown eyes, and I’m thinking, one or the other of those colors has to be fake. It’s definitely the hair, but I don’t care. Fire engine red is my new favorite color.

Angel walks away from the window and then she smiles and says “Venison.”

Venison?

And I’m thinking I should go kill her a deer until I remember that Venison is me.

**Ten.**

Angel says nobody sleeps in the shelter because it’s more dangerous than the street. I nod like *What do I know?* No one will hurt Angel on my watch. I have

something to fight for now. All of the sudden, things matter to me.

Tonight's Lycra unitard is red and gold and patterned with diamonds. It makes her look like a circus.

"How's your backup dancing going?" I ask.

Angel shouldn't back up anything. She should be the star of every show. Everything should be fire engine red, and I'm mad at the world for having other colors in it.

She says, "It's hard."

Because Michael Jackson is dead? But I don't say that. If she says he's alive, he's alive.

"It's hard having to sing and dance all the time," she says, "Sometimes I just want to sit down. But Michael always wants us to rehearse."

You'd never think this girl was crazy. I'm telling you, she's too beautiful to call beautiful. You'd call her ugly, that's how beautiful she is.

"You're really good at it though," I say.

She stamps her foot and huffs at me.

What did I do wrong? When did I stop being good at this?

Angel says, "I would be if he'd let me!"

Then she looks around all afraid like there might be someone listening.

"The thing is," she whispers, "He doesn't know what he wants. He keeps changing the song. Every day, it's a different one. There's all new choreography to memorize."

We're almost back to the beach now. Someone's playing checkers by the pier. I want to take the rest of their limbs and give them to Angel in a bouquet.

I ask, "What happens when he gets to the end of every song he's ever written?"

Angel shrugs and says, "He'll write another."

Sitting on the sand in my suit and her unitard, we could be any happy couple. I'm a business man. She's a contortionist.

The thing about falling in love is it makes you okay with being a sideshow to everyone else.

### **Eleven.**

At work, I change my desktop background to fire engine red. I learn to play a song on the guitar. Everyone forgot about the Christmas fiasco and we sold them some more life. I clock out at five and two-step to the door.

Summer's in full swing and I meet Angel by the pier. She says Michael changed the song again and she needs a white hat. He isn't usually so specific, but you know, the King is a perfectionist.

This is when Angel tells me about being a Girl Scout, but that was all before she met Michael. She holds my hand and tells me she likes my suit.

She's not crazy, not really.

I'm not so sure this isn't all just one big Michael Jackson music video. This. You know, life. He's the King of Pop and we are his subjects. Going around and around in Never Never Land, singing the same songs, wearing the same clothes. Everyone's trying to nail the same moves and the King always does it better.

Angel says she isn't schizophrenic, not even close, it's just that nobody knows what to call her.

The thrift store is full of hemp and plaid shirts. Angel walks past them like they're not even there, and I follow her hair to the back of the store. There's a row of hats on the wall. Those James Joyce caps. Cowboy hats. A sombrero stamped with a logo for cheap tequila. Angel moves the brim of the sombrero aside and there it is, buried underneath the rest. A white fedora with a black ribbon above the brim.

Angel says, "That one."

I take the hat and set it on her head like a crown. Princess of Pop. Everyone in the world, bow down.

We take the hat to the register and I pay for it with the crumpled bills from my Vietnam sign. Angel kisses me on the cheek. If money will make her kiss me, I want all the money in the world.

We're halfway out the door when I realize Angel isn't next to me anymore. She's standing off to the side, shivering and looking at something on the wall.

"Angel?" I say.

On the wall is a mannequin on a pedestal. The face is white and blank. It's wearing a red old school military jacket with gold rope stitching across the front. Black pants. Shiny black shoes. I didn't know mannequins had feet.

Angel is crying. She holds her white hat to her chest and sniffs while the mannequin looks at nothing.

"What do you want?" she says.

"Angel, I just wanted to know what's wrong," I say, but she doesn't notice me.

"Why can't you let me go?" she says. She's yelling now and the store clerk is looking.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I back towards the door and Angel advances on the mannequin.

“I spend every day slaving away for you, and you won’t let me have any peace,” she screams. The store clerk is coming over. I put a hand on Angel’s shoulder and she shivers again.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

Before I have a chance to stop her, she rushes at the mannequin and punches it through the waist. Right in the center of the gold embroidery. The thin plastic caves in and makes the fabric dent.

“You need to leave,” the store clerk says.

I’m all, “Angel. Angel. What’s wrong? Calm down. Angel,” but she can’t stop crying. She hugs me and cries into my shoulder. I can feel the brim of the hat on my leg.

“Sir, the two of you need to leave,” the clerk says.

I pull Angel towards the door and she just screams louder.

“I hate you!” she says and spits at the mannequin.

“Out. Now,” the clerk says and pushes her into me. We stumble towards the door.

Just before we’re through it, I realize the mannequin is wearing a single white glove. A sign at the base says “Vintage Michael Jackson Costume.”

I sit on the sidewalk while Angel hiccups against my shoulder. I stroke her hair and my fingers get stuck in a garish red knot.

“It was just a costume,” I say. “It’s not really him.”

Michael Jackson is dead.

“A costume?” she says. I nod and my chin hits her scalp.



“A Halloween costume, so people can try to dress like him,” I say. “That wasn’t really him.”

“But he was staring at me,” she says.

She turns the hat over in her hands and sets it down at her feet.

“It wasn’t really him,” I say, “Just an imposter.”

“Are you sure?” she asks.

I’m sure.

I tell her Michael wouldn’t ignore her like that. Angel starts crying again and I hold her tighter.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I was being silly.”

I shake my head until I’m lost in curls and the smell of beach. Sand, salt, cocaine, anything, it all smells like Angel so I don’t care.

She wipes her eyes with a Lycra sleeve and tries to smile. I keep my arms around her and tell her we can sit here as long as she wants. I tell her Billie Jean is not my lover, but Angel is, and she smiles.

I ask her what song Michael wants her to work on now, and she tells me it’s “Smooth Criminal.”

I’m going to learn every word to that song if it kills me.

After enough time, an elderly man walks by and hands us a dollar. That guy, he’s starting with the man in the mirror. You know, Be the change you want to see. Gandhi and stuff. Nirvana. I’m on radio Angel now. I see King Michael at the heart of everything.

It’s all the Kingdom of Pop.

Suddenly I want to get kicked out of everywhere. I want to fall from grace again and again. I want to show God up. I get the idea. I get why people hate couches and light bulbs. The first step to killing the P. J. Holt lifestyle

is to stop buying it, but that's not enough. You're still in the loop, but you're running it backwards. Eventually, you get back to people like me. Eventually, you get back to God, and this time you know what to look for.

It's not Nirvana we're after here, folks. It's not salvation. It's damnation. It's telling the world go to on without us. Let us rot. We'll rot at you. It's telling God we don't need to be loved. It's refusing to compensate. Letting the holes get bigger. Burning up the wires until you melt Father Christmas. Until you burn down the house. Until you burn down everything.

Hand me a dollar and I'll light it on fire.

Give me sympathy and I'll laugh in your face.

Angel says, "The only way out of the music video is if we kill Michael Jackson."

Michael Jackson is dead. Like, so dead.

But so what?

I'm having another thing right now. Absolute moment. Epiphany. Meaning of life thing:

It all comes down to Michael Jackson. You know, as a metaphor.

I'll bring him back just so I can kill him again. I'll keep killing him, because the circle keeps going around and I might as well do something. I'm not sure who's more delusional, Angel or my boss. At least Angel knows she's stuck in the feedback loop. The Esteemed Mr. Whoever thinks he started it.

Even God prays to God. There's no way out.

So the best you can do is tell God to shove it. Cry for the Romans. Shit on the cross. Call sacrifice a vacation.

What I'm saying is, Angel's not crazy. She's just telling the truth with a different vocabulary. The Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of Pop, it's all killing Michael Jackson when he's already dead. It's thriller night either way.

I tell Angel, "Let's do it."

There's three dollars and twenty-six cents in the hat. That should be enough to get started.

**Twelve.**

I don't tell Angel, but I have a car. It's a silver BMW and there's a racquetball bag in the backseat. My phone hooks up to the Bluetooth automatically. I don't have any Michael Jackson on my iPod.

The problem with my car is it doesn't fit the scene. It doesn't evoke the right mood. If anything, we need a wagon. A graffiti-covered caboose. A couple of mules. Angel and me, we're wandering prophets again, heralding salvation by killing the king.

I say, "I think we need to steal a car."

Angel says, "I know a guy."

It's a basement apartment with a sticker on the door that reads: *Willie Nelson for President*.

I watch Venison tap the sticker and say, "This. This is a revolution I could get behind."

I'm not sure if I'm him or I'm me.

Angel just chews on her fingernail and looks at the window, so I grab her hand.

The door creaks open and a hooked nose pokes through the crack. Somewhere below it there must be a mouth, but it's shrouded in shadow.

The nose says, "What do you want?"

Angel's floating brown eyes swivel back to the door.

"Angel says you can help us?" I say like it's a question. "She says you have a skill we might find useful?"

The nose draws back and says, "I have many skills. With which do you desire help?"

I pull Angel close to me and she just blinks at the door.

"Temporary automotive larceny," I say, and the door swings open.

A small man stands behind it, holding a false nose up on the end of a stick.

"Angel," he says, "How are you getting on? How's Michael?"

She shivers and twists the Smooth Criminal hat around in her hands.

"That's what we're here for," she says. "We're going to find him and kill him."

The man looks at me like this is all my fault, or Venison's, and I slowly meet his gaze. I give him a look that I hope says, *Michael Jackson is dead*.

He nods, and I read the hidden message in it. Michael Jackson is dead. This is our cult.

"Well," the man says, "Come on in and have a sit down!"

He double-bolts the door behind us and we settle ourselves on a magenta futon across from a poster of Simon Cowell. He puts the false nose on a stand by the window.

"I just love Simon," the man says.

"Who doesn't?" I ask and he breaks into a broad grin. Angel's back to chewing her fingernail.

“Well, I know Angel, who might you be?”

Venison. Venison Beam. I ditched the guitar so I’m just a prophet today.

The man, he doesn’t ask for more than that. The hemp sold itself.

He pulls the front of his shirt out where there might be suspenders if this were the 1940s and says, “Welp, Harold Rule is the name, stealing cars is the game.”

He hands me a business card. It reads: *How to keep an idiot busy: Turn over.* And on the other side: *How to keep an idiot busy: Turn over.* I put it in my pocket.

“What kind of buggy are you jonesing for?” he asks.

Angel shrugs and takes her fingernail out of her mouth. “I don’t think the type is that important,” she says.

I’m eyeing Our Lord and Savior Simon Cowell above her head. If it came down to being ruled by Simon Cowell or Michael Jackson, I’m pretty sure I’d kill myself.

“We need to go unnoticed,” I say, “We need to pass in the kinds of areas Michael might be. Wealthy, but not flashy.”

Harold’s mouth moves like he’s chewing something and he smacks his lips a couple of times. The poster of Simon Cowell is where the television might be. I wonder if Harold just watches that at night.

Harold sucks his teeth and nods slowly.

“Alrighty,” he says, “Alrighty, cats.”

He stands and strolls over to the window, pushes the blinds apart and peers out. He pulls back and the blinds snap back together and the room is somehow darker.

Harold says, “BMW five series Gran Turismo, Glacier Silver or Callisto Gray, two or three years old but no older.”

Angel stares at the light not coming through the window and sniffs.

“Where are we going to find something like that?” she says.

I look from the flecks of skin on her scalp to Simon Cowell on the wall to Harold’s fake nose.

This is the line between delusion and identity. We lie by telling the truth.

I say, “I think I know where one might be.”

### **Thirteen.**

Stealing your own car isn’t the problem. It’s making it look stolen.

We meet Harold the next day on the road that leads to my apartment. Harold doesn’t know what he’s onto, and maybe that’s why he does it wrong. The car he goes for is parked in the next lot down from mine. Same model. Same color. There’s a racquetball bag in the backseat.

He surveys the car, walking around and around. Me and Angel, we huddle in the shadow of the cars across the alley. We hold each other while he works.

Harold leans in and tries the handle of the car. It’s locked. He tries it again, harder this time. The car insists on remaining locked.

Harold looks at us and shrugs.

The alarm blares.

Angel jumps against me and I hold her tight. Harold scurries across the alley to meet us in a huddle under the awning.

“What was that?” I say.

“That there’s a car alarm,” Harold says.

“You don’t have anything to stop it?” I ask.

Harold’s face falls.

“No,” he says. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Why not?”

“Well it’s not like I’ve ever done this before.”

“What?” I say. “You said you were an expert car thief.”

“I did not,” Harold says, grabbing where the straps of his suspenders would be but aren’t.

“I said, Harold Rule is the name, stealing cars is the game.”

“Then why did you agree to help us?”

Harold shrugs.

“Seemed like a nice way to spend an afternoon. I don’t get out much, you see...”

I walk away. On second thought, I take Angel with me.

“Wait here,” I tell her.

“Where are you going?”

We’re standing just behind my apartment building, right behind my car. I look from the racquetball bag in the backseat to the courtyard to the general direction of my door.

“I’m breaking in,” I say.

I turn and walk and just as I get out of reach, Angel runs up and grabs my hand. It burns in hers. It burns like the sun burns the Earth.

“Be careful,” she says. She says it with her eyes. The color changes just for me. I nod. What I mean is, I will.

With Angel’s fear in me, this is a break in. I walk to my door. I pull the keys from my pocket. I breathe. I turn the lock. Smooth criminal.

The car keys, they're already on my house keys. What I need is something for Angel. Something to make her look the part. I've got my suit, but I opt for a different lifestyle. Polo shirt. Salmon-colored shorts. Loafers.

There's a blue dress hanging in my closet. Some girl left it months ago. I grab that too, for Angel. I kept it for her. It's always been for her.

I shut the door softly and walk through the courtyard holding the blue dress in my arms. Angel cocks her head at me. I fish around in my pocket for the car keys.

"I brought you this," I say. "For when we get to Michael's house. We have to dress the part."

She takes the dress and touches the fabric. She slips it on over her Lycra. I'd cry if I could, that's how beautiful she is.

Then she kisses me. She kisses me, and it's the first time I've ever been kissed. The first time anyone's really kissed anyone, and Angel is kissing Venison Beam. She pulls back, grins, and walks away. I stand, half-dead, alive for the first time, until I remember to unlock the car.

Then we drive to Hollywood.

We don't have a gun. We don't have a plan. The ocean roars in a lilting kind of way. I tell Angel to check the iPod for Michael Jackson. I've bought every album. I bought them for her. She says she doesn't want to hear his voice today, so I sing her the only country song I know.

In the middle of downtown LA, we stop. The light's red. Like gravity stopping us from flying.

There's an outdoor bar on the left. I can see it because I have the window down. There's a little group of men in polo shirts drinking beer at a table outside. Their watches



dance in the light. One of them laughs at a joke another told. The other, the joke teller, he catches my eye. And I'm staring into the eyes of the Esteemed Mr. Whoever.

I feel sweat on my neck. He approaches the car.

"Well, hey there!" he says.

He does what I can only describe as clapping me on the shoulder. With the other hand, he holds an empty plastic cup.

"I'm... sorry," I say, "Do I know you?"

His head turns to Angel. I sweat some more.

"Is this your wife?"

"Maybe," I say, "Who are you?"

"Don't be a moron," he says. "What, don't know me without the suit?"

I blink.

"You've been working for me for the last six months."

"Oh," I say with a forced chuckle, willing the light to turn green. "You're thinking of my brother. I'm Venison. Venison Beam."

Prophet, wandering minstrel, Michael Jackson assassin, lover of earth's only Angel.

"Oh."

He takes his hand away. He didn't know I have a brother. Neither did I.

Mercifully, the light begins its slow ascent downwards to Go.

I grab the change on my dashboard. Three dollars and twenty-six cents. The bills are sweaty too. I put it in his beer cup.

"Best of luck," I say, and we drive away.

**Fourteen.**

The traffic is slow, like it wants to die. I don't know how to get to Michael Jackson's house, but in the end, that's not what does it.

My dad says, "You can worry about the future all you want, but it will still kick you in the nuts."

I don't know what I say. It hasn't happened yet.

Halfway to Hollywood the road is blocked. I swear I can hear "Billie Jean." Angel tenses and looks around.

"What's happening?" she says.

I shake my head like *I don't know*, and I don't.

There's a crowd ahead of us, swaying and walking with candles and roses. They chant some Gregorian hymn and it still sounds like "Billie Jean."

I roll the window down.

It is "Billie Jean."

Suddenly, I remember the date. It's the 25th of June. Christmas Solstice. The date rotates around like a backup dancer, spinning into something in my mind.

Michael.

Today's the day the King of Pop went six feet under. These are his subjects, carrying on the memory like Good Friday, mourning the loss of their lord.

We park at the back. I turn the car off and we climb out. My loafers are sweaty. Angel's Lycra dances like the ocean. Like light.

We join the pilgrimage to Never Never Land. A sea of black shoes and single white gloves guides us up the sloping hill as the crowd chants in unison that Billie Jean is not anyone's lover, not here, and the kid is no one's son.

An old guy in a black hat carries a mirror over his shoulder. Finger painted across it in loud, black paint, it says: *I'm starting with the...*

Angel, it's like she knows.

We fall into step with them. Right, left. The song's changed. Arms up. Two step, head twitch, two step, claws, fighting for our lives. We know the song, we know the dance.

The explosion is the unexpected part.

Just across the road, the big house with palm trees and bay windows has descended into a rectangle of fire. Everyone hits the ground as shrapnel screams through the air. The mirror that we're starting with, it's broken now, shattered at my feet. The sky darkens as the smoke cloud looms over the street. The house is beyond salvaging. The culprit, they'll come to find out, was the electrical wiring on the Limited Edition Luminescent Rose Quartz Summer Solstice Display. It was never the lightbulb's fault.

Remember how this is all a metaphor?

The only thing in my pocket is a ballpoint pen.

The thing that's sticking out of Angel, straight into her chest like an index finger trying to teach her a lesson, that's a piece of the rose quartz sun god.

The blood isn't a metaphor, it's actual blood.

### **Fifteen.**

Angel's heart thinks it's pumping blood to her body but it's actually giving life to the sidewalk.

Me, I'm not there anymore.

It looks like me in the little pieces of the broken mirror, standing over her, mouth open, watching her bleed. It looks like me, bending over her, cradling her in my arms.

It sounds like me, screaming. It must. I'm not sure. I've never heard me scream before.

The crowd around us isn't singing. They're just watching. Watching in this circle. A speaker plays "Smooth Criminal" and no one's bothered to turn it off.

The pen in my pocket, it's blue. It's plastic. It's holy. It's deadly. It's still a pen, but also, more. I pull it out. There's nothing I can do with it. I look at my neck in the piece of broken mirror. I put the pen to my own throat. Angel, she's not there anymore either. I imagine pushing. Punching a hole like piercing an ear. I imagine drawing a seagull on my neck.

Angel coughs a little bit of blood and I'm all there again. I'm there, in the blood. I'm with her, lying on the sidewalk.

She's dying. That is what she's doing right now.

There are cell phones out and smoke clouds and maybe someone's talking, but I don't hear it. I hear the little rattle of Angel's breath, up and down, rhythmic. The last backup dance. The star of the show.

She reaches for me and I reach back. The song is slowing down.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

“Angel,” I say.

Angel, Angel, Angel. It has always been for her.

She looks at me like she’s dying.

I don’t have the heart to say it, but I don’t have the heart to say anything else.

I cradle her head in my lap and I say, “Michael...”

But I can’t. My hands are wet with her blood. Everything is red, but the Smooth Criminal hat is white.

Her eyes are getting further from me now. The sunshine leaks out of them. The brown is still brown, but it’s not a color anymore. Her blood, it’s darker than I imagined. It’s not fire engine red.

“Angel,” I start again. “Michael Jackson is...”

Her mouth opens. It’s barely a whisper, so faint I don’t know if I heard it or not.

She says, “Dead, I know.”

**Sixteen.**

And now, so is she.

The circle stopped. I got off the train. I walk by the bar and catch my reflection in the windows. Blaine quit. The girls are still pretty. None of them are angels.

I sit down by the pier, strumming the hymns of the Kingdom of Pop on the five unbroken strings of my guitar. I sing into the ocean, but it can’t hear me. Someone’s playing checkers. Someone gets kinged.

They look at me. They say: *That's Venison. He's schizo.*

What they don't know is, I don't sing alone. The clouds open, the sun shines, Angel sings with me. The clouds close, the night falls, she sings with me. We're fighting for our lives, her and me, inside this night.

Claws up.

Michael Jackson is dead.

She sings with me.

## No Exit

I tilt my chin up high in search of air someone hasn't just exhaled. The mild oxygen deprivation is part of the appeal. Between a thousand bodies I could be anyone. I am anyone. The who and what, it doesn't matter here. What we are is dancing.

There above the DJ booth, she swings: Sylvia, like starlight. Her hair tonight is silver. Glittering rhinestones line the sides of her face, her breasts and hips are encased in what looks like a shining white oil spill. Her left knee is hooked over the bar as she swings, one foot clasped in her long-nailed fingers, the other leg pointing like an arrow towards the ceiling.

With the music, she rocks back, forth, back, and on the next swing forward releases her captive foot and sails up in an arc of light. With the rest of the crowd, my eyes are on her flying like a crane against the ceiling. The show is always best from in the pit. Just as she takes off, she flips a golden coin high up in the air. She turns over once, twice, until in a perfectly-choreographed finale she lands with her neck in a noose. Her delicate chin slips through the golden rope, jutting forward. Her eyes are closed. Her lips are softly smiling.

She makes a sound like a frantic horse. No matter how many times you practice, you can't stop the noise. Her neck snaps with a nauseating crack. No matter how many you've seen, your gut still reacts like a human.

Sylvia's head wilts to the right. On the other side of the noose, her body convulses as the shockwaves of sudden death roll through her. Down on the ground, we hold our breath. The bass line thunders. The noose slowly rotates so she hangs like a porcelain dancer in a music box. Then the twitching stops, and we erupt.

As the stage hand lowers the noose to the ground, the crowd can barely get back enough to allow her body room to touch down. Everyone is screaming their applause.

Really, she deserves it.

Her lifeless toes reach the ground and the rest of her crumples. Fox can barely hold the crowd back as he rushes over to scoop her up. He takes the noose from off her neck and cradles her torso in his arms. Sylvia's head hangs off her shoulders all wrong like a loose baby tooth. With one hand, Fox holds her straight. With the other, he removes a small glass vile from his shirt pocket. I'm at the edge of the circle around them, on hand just in case. This batch of Pranax looks almost golden. Fox uncorks the vile and takes out a syringe, fills it up with Pranax and jabs it into Sylvia's throat.

The back of her neck glows warm and red as her bones re-seal themselves. The nerve endings all reattach and wire back up and her body jerks a little. Fox holds her steady. Out in the crowd, we silently count.

Four, three, two, one.

With a gasp of regained life, Sylvia opens her eyes. She lets out a cough and Fox sits her upright. The golden coin descends in the middle of the crowd and she catches it in her outstretched palm, her face still a daze.

The crowd erupts again.



Sylvia takes a ragged breath, but she doesn't get long to recover. The crowd rushes in to lift her up, hoisting her onto our shoulders, floating her like a prize across the room. She holds the coin aloft, still regaining her consciousness but utterly triumphant.

It might be the most spectacular suicide any of us has seen. One of these days, I worry Fox won't bring her back. She's starting to outshine him.

Next to this, Fox's show is the best. Each of them has their forte — Sylvia has nooses, Ludo drowns, Greg has knives and Fox has fire. No one can throw a suicide like the Arcana — that's what they call them. Ludo's aren't much of a show and Greg's are a bit predictable, but Fox and Sylvia, they've made it art.

Last week was Greg's turn, dressed head to toe in black like always, spinning daggers and swords in a great flash all around him. He juggled them, let one of the daggers graze his cheek and licked his blood from the blade with a wink at the nearest pretty girl. Four knives he was throwing, then five, then six, and when Ludo passed him a seventh he tossed them all in the air in a glorious arc and caught them one at a time straight in the chest, like raindrops. The blood spurting from his arteries soaked half the crowd and his body crumpled to the stage. The crowd went wild. They love it every time. I know people who refuse to wash his blood off their clothes, that's how much they like it. Ludo dosed his arm with Pranax and then Greg was on his feet again to a wall of thunderous cheers.

Pranax isn't strictly legal, not for recreation, but nothing in this club is legal either. Not the parties, not the drugs, and certainly not the suicides.

Mine was no performance, or at least, not at first and not by choice. It was nothing glamorous, just a good old fashioned bullet to the head. I made sure to hide where I wouldn't easily be found, on the seedy side of town, in a cellar down an alley. But the brick walls made the gunshot echo and the echo made the store clerk upstairs jump and the clerk made the frantic hospital call and the emergency team came with their gurney and their needle and their Pranax and there I was, alive again and kicking. They fined me \$1400 for the inconvenience to public services and I spent my first two nights of resurrection in jail.

That was in the early days, when only the first generation of Pranax was out and you only had 72 hours to get to a corpse before it would stay dead. But then they fine-tuned it, and then it could work on a dead thing for years, and then all bets were off. They had to excavate and cremate every coffin in the cemeteries to stop drunk kids from digging up the graves to bring the dead back to life.

"The past should stay in the past," they said, and reanimating anyone dead longer than a week became illegal. This was after some neo-Nazis jabbed Pranax into Hitler's skull and a band of Polish punks reanimated and armed half of Auschwitz and set them on a path for revenge. It was almost World War II all over again before the Interpol came down on them and everyone started regulating Pranax stricter than cocaine.

After the first time they brought me back, I tried again, you know, drowning so I'd get stuck at the bottom of the lake. But two days in, I didn't stay there. My leg slipped through the weight strapped to my ankle and when I washed up on shore, there I was alive again, coughing out the cyanobacteria and walking with a permanent limp. That cost me two weeks in jail and half my bank account.

I didn't try again after that. I got back on the trolley to the center of town and decided it wasn't worth fighting this anymore. The show would go on, would keep going on, whether or not I wanted it to so I might as well decide to want it.

At a bartending gig in a dark, sticky dive I first met Fox and he slid me his business card. I knew right away not to trust him, but everything about him was so theatrical I couldn't take my eyes away. His business card was charcoal black with metallic gold lettering across the front. "Fox: King of Wands," it read. Across the background, so faint you could almost miss it, the card read, "Arcana." On the flip side, there was no contact information. No address. Just four words, "Saints. Every Saturday. Midnight."

Saints is a secret club on the outskirts of town, built in the ruins of an old cathedral. Half the roof is missing, and on clear nights the lights shine up into the inky void of eternity. I'd heard of it by rumor but never been inside. Most people don't know the address, and even if you find it, you have to give the password to get anywhere near it. But Fox took a liking to me at the bar and he let me in on the secret.

“This week it’s *periwinkle*,” he said. “I expect to see you there. Keep my card on you if you have any trouble.”

At half-past ten on Saturday, I took the trolley to the last stop and walked until I reached the end of the last road. From there, it was twenty minutes through the forest until you got to the base of the hill. The trees parted and I saw it for the first time, high up on the ridge, the mossy stone walls wet with moonlight, spotlights tilting up to illuminate the nothingness above.

I walked up the curving path until I ran into a locked iron gate, almost invisible against the darkness of the hill. I tried the handle and a shock ran through my hand. There was no one else around. I pulled Fox’s card from my pocket and turned it over, looking for clues. Nothing.

“Periwinkle?” I tried saying aloud to the nobody present.

To my surprise, the lock clicked open and the iron gate swung forward for me to pass.

That night was the first time I watched Fox die.

Against the drumming of the bass line remixed with ancient chanting, barefoot in flowing brown robes and carrying a wooden staff, he walked across a bed of hot coals stretched out along the dance floor. When he reached the very center, a bucket of kerosene poured like a river from the ceiling and Fox and the coals went up in flames. He danced like this was all a ritual, danced until his body couldn’t take it anymore. His screams were perfectly tuned to the pounding of the music until at last, they stopped, and his body fell. Greg was on duty that night. He sprinted up to Fox, stuck him in the wrist with a syringe full of Pranax, and Fox shot up like a newborn

deer. He shook himself and the burns fell away from his fresh skin, like autumn leaves.

“Give it up for the King of Wands,” Greg’s voice boomed over the crowd, and the crowd gave it up.

I stood in the back, clutching my drink like a Bible, aghast at what I’d just seen. The cheers were even more deafening than the music.

Here on the hill in the dark hall of Saints, people kill themselves for fun. You get used to it after the first few, but there’s always a part of you that stays in shock and horror. That’s what keeps the spectacle alive, what makes it so addictive.

It wasn’t long until Fox got me a job tending bar at Saints. I got friendly with all of them: Fox and Sylvia, Greg and Ludo, got to know their quirks and their idiosyncrasies, their dreams and fears and flaws. People open up to you when they think they can trust you, and they think they can trust you when you get them drunk.

Sylvia never drinks at a show, but Greg does. When he was drunk was when he told me about Fox getting jealous of Sylvia.

“One of these days,” Greg said, “I swear he’s not gonna bring her back. Gonna fake like the Pranax is expired. Gonna take everyone’s pity for himself.”

Saints is a world completely its own, where the rules don’t apply and life and death get tossed around like dice for fun, but any world that’s peopled has to obey human nature, and jealousy seems wired into ours.

At the end of the night, as Sylvia packs up her bag, Fox and Ludo come to find me at the bar.

“What a show, eh, Sid?” Fox says, clapping me on the shoulder as I pour him his usual. “Our Queen of Coins sure knows how to fire up a crowd.”

I nod and slide the drink across the bar to him, then get to work on Ludo’s. Fox always comes first.

“It’s the subtlety of the coin toss that always gets me,” Ludo says. “There’s a real art to that. The simplicity.”

Ludo’s sincere, the kind of sincere that makes you feel less despair at the world.

Fox swallows his whisky in one gulp. “That, and you can’t really kill yourself with a coin so she had to find some way to merit the name.”

Ludo is the King of Cups. He locks himself in a glass cage in a whirlpool of red wine and drinks it from a golden chalice while he drowns. Once he’s gone, the glass shatters and the wine spills out like a tidal wave across the crowd. People love it.

But they just don’t love it like they love Sylvia.

“What’s your take, then?” Fox asks me, then slides his empty glass back. “Another.”

“On what? The coin toss?” I say. I finish Ludo’s drink and pour Fox another whisky.

“On the whole show,” Fox says, eyeing me in a way that tells me lying won’t get me anywhere. I get the feeling I know where he’s going with this, and I wish he wouldn’t.

“It’s a spectacle, every time,” I say, “Everyone seems to love it.”

“You think Sylvia’s the best one, then?” he says.

I equivocate as best I can.

“You all have your unique flair,” I say, looking at Fox, looking at Ludo. “The real show is all four of you. The way each performance plays off the others, the way all the

elements come together. It takes all of you to make it work.”

I’m bullshitting, and I know it, and Fox knows it. He eyes me hard for a moment, then smiles.

“Ah, you’re right,” he says. “I’ve just been worried about her leaving us, finding somewhere better to go.”

“She wouldn’t do that,” Ludo says. Bullshit again. He and I both know Sylvia wants to leave. She wants to have a baby, and you can’t have a baby if you’re dying every other week.

“I hope you’re right,” Fox says as he gets up. With a dark look at Ludo, he says, “For your sake, I hope you’re right.”

I stare at his back as he crosses the empty floor back to the front door and the sun starts to creep up in the sky overhead.

Ludo frowns at me. “What did he mean, *for my sake?*”

The Arcana don’t associate publicly outside the club. Every now and then, one of them will swing by my house for a drink, but we try to keep the rest of our lives separate. I know Greg and Fox meet up sometimes to shoot pool. As for Sylvia and Ludo, well, it’s not polite to speculate, but all of us know it. They keep it hush-hush. We all do. Saints is a world all to itself, and we like that way.

Out in the real world, life’s nothing magical and death’s not a show, if you can even call it death anymore. It’s more like purgatory, a brief void before a forceable rebirth back to a world where you work and you shit and you sleep and you carry on. The trolley rolls back and forth, grinding on around and around forever. That’s

what makes Saints such a miracle. Whether it's heaven or it's hell, it ain't purgatory.

My day job is a trolley mechanic. I grease the wheels and keep the world running smooth along its tracks from the edge of town to the center and back again. They dress me in a charcoal gray uniform that makes me look like a storm cloud ready to rain. When a trolley derails or a light burns out, they send me in to make things right. It's not a bad gig. It's just a gig. I stomach it until the sun goes down again on Friday and I make the pilgrimage back up to Saints.

Tonight is raining, which is just as well because Ludo is on stage. They try to time him with the rain so it'll wash away some of the wine stains. You don't dress nice at Saints. If you don't end up covered in blood or wine, you'll at least be drenched in sweat.

I'm at the back slinging shot after shot when I see something unusual.

Sylvia stumbles up to the bar, her makeup all a mess, a grin like a waxing moon plastered on her face at just the wrong angle.

"Sid!" she yells as she flings herself into a stool. "Give us a gin."

"I've got six cocktails to make first, Syl," I say. "What's with you?"

Her head teeters forward like she's about to fall, then she inhales and pulls herself up, grinning again. A raindrop smacks her in the forehead and she just smiles wider.

"Is's raining," she says with a slur.



The lights dim and the music shifts, and Ludo's about to go on stage. Behind the curtain, they must be filling up the glass box with pinot noir.

"I thought you were on duty tonight," I bark over the music. I'm taking my time on these cocktails, trying to avoid serving her until she forgets about it.

Sylvia hiccups.

"Fox asked to switch," she says, elongating the S' sounds on *Fox* and *switch*. "Says he needs next week off. Family commitment."

My stomach tightens. Fox does not have a family.

"Who's on duty for you, then, next week?" I ask. Fox always covers Sylvia. What is he playing at?

Sylvia shrugs. "Ludo'll do it," she says, hiccuping. "Lodu...dudo, Ludo will do any-thing I want."

She punctuates each syllable by walking her fingers towards me over the bar. She tries to grab for the tequila next to my hand and I pull it away from her. She pouts.

"I think you've had enough, Syl," I say. "Why don't you go watch the show?"

As if on cue to rescue us both, the curtain goes up, and there's Ludo suspended in his great cube of wine. He spins and flips through the water like a dolphin as he swigs from the glass, but there's only so much dancing he can do before his body gives into instinct and starts gasping for air that won't come. No matter how much you practice, you can't always override your instincts.

Now comes the grim part of the show: Ludo's struggling, gasping, his throat taugth while his face chokes for oxygen. The beat pounds, pounds, pounds while Ludo's fist pounds on the glass. His eyes roll back. His fist drops. The music swells and the glass cracks in

two, spilling a wave of pinot all over the crowd while Ludo's body drifts unceremoniously to the edge of the stage.

The crowd shouts and cheers, opening their mouths to drink in the wine as the wave crashes over the dance floor. Ludo's body just lays there.

Where's Fox? He should be on stage by now. Ludo's got to be standing upright by the next drop. I stare around, squinting through the wine-stained crowd, but there's no sign of Fox anywhere. The DJ takes his headphones off and rushes to the stage.

Where the hell is Fox?

"Pranax!" The DJ shouts. "Does anyone have Pranax?"

Only the performers are allowed to bring it into the club, but we keep an emergency supply behind the bar. Sylvia isn't at the bar anymore. She's careening like a derailed trolley car through the crowd up to the stage, crying Ludo's name.

"Greg!" I scream, waving him down from across the club.

I grab out the first aid kit and wave it at him. He runs up to the bar and I shove the emergency vial of Pranax in his hand. In a flash, he sprints to the stage, pulls out a syringe and jams it into Ludo's neck. The rain pours in through the open ceiling. The crowd isn't cheering anymore. They're staring, wet with water and wine, as Greg empties the syringe and Ludo coughs his way back to life.

Sylvia's grabbing at Ludo's chest while he breathes in deep and shaky. Greg whips around to stare at me across

the club, holding up the empty syringe, both of us silently asking the same thing: *What the hell is Fox playing at?*

Greg tries to get the crowd back to normal, but the mood's been broken for the night. We only lost an extra minute that Ludo was dead, but that minute was all it took to make his death just a bit too real for everyone. Some people keep on dancing, but Saints empties out at a record early hour that night. By two, we send the DJ home.

There's a gap in the rain and Greg wanders over to me. I shake my head at him in disbelief.

"Did he say anything to you?" Greg asks, meaning Fox.

"Of course not," I say. "You?"

"No. Where the fuck is he?"

We both just shrug. At the other end of the empty floor, Ludo and Sylvia are wrapped up in a blanket. Saints seems so much smaller when it's empty.

"Something's not right," I say.

Greg reaches past me to grab a bottle of rum, and I let him.

"Fox has always been worthy of his name," Greg says, taking a drink from the bottle. He passes it to me. "I don't have a good feeling about this."

"Where do you think he is?" I ask.

Greg shakes his head. "If I knew," he says, "I'd go there and kill him."

"That's not much of a threat anymore," I say.

Back at work on Monday morning, I worry a bit about Saints. Something's off, I know it. I knew from the first time I met him not to trust Fox, and I have a sinking

feeling my dreamy little world at Saints isn't going to last much longer.

When an inbound 9 am trolley breaks down, my suspicions get confirmed. On my way up to the controller, I catch sight of a line of posters someone's stuck up in the windows.

"The Flying Fox," they read. "Only at Mercutio's."

There's an image of a red fox hanging from a burning noose against a dark wall of brick. I groan. That asshole. There's only one thing this can mean. I tear one of the flyers down, fold it up and put it in my pocket. Inside the trolley car, some kid is trying to beatbox while the disgruntled commuters look down at their watches and wait.

The next day, I'm microwaving dinner while the news drones on about recession and there's a knock at my door. I open it, and to my surprise, Sylvia's standing there.

"Hey," she says, "Can I come in?"

I nod and lead her into the kitchen.

"How's Ludo?" I ask.

Sylvia sighs.

"He's a bit embarrassed about all that," she says. "Pretty pissed at Fox. What was he playing at, just leaving him there to stay dead? It could've ruined the whole show if you and Greg hadn't stepped in."

"Fox doesn't think about anyone but himself," I say. "You know that."

Sylvia snorts. "Yeah," she says. "I did know that. He's the one who got me to drink that night, you know?"

I shake my head. The depths he'll sink to. I can't say I'm surprised.

“Have you heard anything from him?” Sylvia asks.

“No,” I say, but then I remember. “But I did see this.”

I pull out the flyer and hand it to her.

“The Flying Fox,” she reads aloud. “That jackass. He’s stealing my act.” She crumples up the flyer and throws it at my trash can. “Where the hell is Mercutio’s? I’ve never heard of it.”

“I have,” I say. “Way at the south end of town, it’s an old sugar plant. Huge venue. I’ve never known them to do suicides, at least, not any good ones. Their thing is murders.”

Sylvia shudders.

“I hate murders,” she says. “They’re just fear and violence. You can’t plan any artistry if you don’t know you’re gonna die. If there’s no flair, it’s just death, and what’s the point of that?”

I shake my head because I don’t know anymore either.

“You know...” Sylvia trails off. She looks down. “I’ve been thinking...”

“About getting out of the game?” I supply into her silence. She looks up at me and nods.

“You’re a better artist than Fox,” I say. “You know that, right?”

Sylvia smirks. She’ll never say she agrees, but she agrees.

“What will you do next?” I ask.

Sylvia shrugs and takes an apple from the bowl. “I don’t know,” she says. “Maybe I’ll let Ludo get me pregnant. I’d like to have a baby.”

I laugh. “And do you want to have a baby with him?”

“A baby’s a baby,” Sylvia says, studying the apple intently. “The father isn’t the point.”

“You really want to bring a baby into all this?” I gesture around at my crummy apartment, at the screech of the endless trolleys running back and forth outside the window, at the endless circle of life and death.

Sylvia scoffs. “Well, we can’t get out of it, so we might as well keep life going.”

She bites into the apple with a smile.

Saturday night at Saints rolls around and the sky is clear and black. On a night like this, you can almost see a star when all the lights go out. The newly-minted Flying Fox is hanging himself somewhere across town, but the three remaining Arcana have a special treat in store for the crowd here tonight.

Ludo and Sylvia told Greg their plans to leave earlier this week, and Greg took it as well as he could.

“He’s an arrogant bastard, I know, but we just can’t do it the same without Fox,” Greg said. “It’s time for the Arcana to come to a close.”

The owners of Saints won’t have trouble finding a new show. The world is full of shows and people begging to perform them, and you couldn’t ask for a better venue to set the mood than here.

Tonight, I’m on duty for once. Most nights I work the bar, but I always like Saints better when I get to be in the crowd. Here, I’m nothing and nobody. I’m just dancing. I’ve got three vials of Pranax in my pocket and I’ve made sure there’s extra backstage. There won’t be any mistakes tonight.

When the clock strikes midnight, that's when it begins. Greg comes on stage under a thin, blue spotlight, his bald head lit up like the Earth from space. He's naked and painted green, holding out an apple with his head bent low.

Ludo and Sylvia enter from opposite sides. Sylvia's done her hair up long and gold like the birth of Venus; her breasts and hips are wrapped in plastic leaves. Ludo's hair hangs long and he's let his beard come in a bit for this; his waist wrapped in plastic leaves too. The music shifts to an electrified waltz, and they dance and spin around the stage while Greg stands motionless in the center. The crowd is transfixed. They've never seen this one before. Finally, just as the music hits a crescendo, Sylvia leaps away from Ludo and spins up to Greg, taking the apple from his hand. She holds it aloft like a holy relic. She takes a luxurious bite.

The spotlights become blacklights and a dozen hungry snakes drop from the ceiling. The crowd shrieks and pulls away from the stage. Sylvia, Greg and Ludo, they don't even blink. They've died so many times, nothing can scare them but instincts. Ludo is the first to go. The snake coils back, then lashes up and bites him in the neck. He crumples as his blood drips onto the stage. Sylvia goes next, first a bite to her leg, then a snake wraps around her abdomen while another bites her throat open. Greg stands strong as a tree in the center, stoic and proud while three snakes wind their way up around his body and strangle him to death. He falls to the stage and the snakes writhe over them all.

"Back, you devils!" tonight's DJ booms, and canisters of smoke rain down on the stage. Whatever's in it, the

snakes don't like it, and they slither away behind the curtain where the handler's waiting to lock them back in their cages.

The three artists, the greatest suicide performers of their generation, lay in a crumpled heap as the lights go black.

"And so, life began," the DJ says.

That's my cue to rush to the stage and administer my Pranax in the darkness.

"This was the beginning..." the DJ says.

Ludo gasps back to life first, then Sylvia, wiping the blood from her neck. Strangulation takes a bit longer to heal than a snake bite, so Greg is the last to come up. I check Greg's pulse, he gives me a thumbs up, and I dart back off the stage to watch.

"...of a dance that has no end," the DJ finishes.

The stage hand rolls out a hundred red apples and the lights beam back up.

"The show must always go on!"

The bass drops, the performers bow, and the crowd cheers louder than I've ever heard them. Grabbing one of the apples is the next cool thing. It's all anyone will be talking about for weeks. *Did you get an apple? Did you see it? Were you there?*

After the performance, we meet up backstage and Greg claps me on the shoulder.

"You did good," he says. "Let's get you a drink for once."

Sylvia gives me a hug and Ludo pats me on the back. I smile at them all, feeling bittersweet.



“I’m gonna miss you guys,” I say. “Saints has been a real trip.”

Sylvia pours us all a round of gin and raises a glass.

“To death,” she says, “And life again! This is the last time I’ll be drinking for a while.”

We clink our glasses in toast and knock back the gin. Sylvia and Ludo say their goodbyes, Sylvia blowing kisses to the old stone walls of the cathedral, and then it’s just me and Greg left under a statue of Jesus.

“Think they had Pranax back then?” Greg asks, eyeing Jesus on the cross.

“Must’ve been,” I say. The music’s still bumping outside, but for once, I don’t feel much like dancing.

As if reading my mind, Greg says, “What do we do now?”

I put my glass down and look around the dim room. There’s most of a ceiling in here, but through a crack in the stones I can see the night sky and a single star winking at us.

“Well,” I say. “There’s still an emergency stash of Pranax back here. You wanna kill me?”

Greg laughs.

“Sure,” he says. “How do you want to go?”

I throw my arms open.

“Surprise me,” I say.

Greg’s always a bit predictable. He takes ten paces across the room, pulls a dagger from his pocket, and runs screaming at me like a banshee.