

LONELY HOWLING THINGS

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ERROR 404

In any given room I predict which friends and which strangers will die first. I note which ones will marry each other, rob banks, and which ones will reappear in my plot-lines thirty years later. When I stare at myself in the mirror, trying to identify my own end, a nictitating membrane lowers itself over my eyes and stops me. When I heard that you died ten days after graduation I looked for you online. I went to the usual places: profiles, search bars and the Herald Sun. The obituaries didn't list your birth or death date, only that you were "joyful and beloved." They didn't report that you tunneled into your computer screen after school, just that you had "big plans." A month later I forgot your last name and a year later I went digging again, curious for fossils, but the pages were gone.

Every now and again, when I roam the web at 3 a.m., curved over my desk, my protein bars and thermos flask beside me, the aluminum stars hanging in my window, craning and reforming into constellations millennia before we notice the patterns, I mistake you for a chat room ghost. Your screen name stands in silence on the screen. You join conversations to listen, then you wander off into the terabytes, the Amazon wish-lists and the Minecraft planets, the pixelated wastelands.

I'd like to tell your family that memory, these days, is an infinite physical space never fully erased but preserved in the deep files, running through the bloodstream of databases, racing stocks, and rocket launchers. ERROR 404 just means you're somewhere else.

Happy in the Dark

I once bought a diamond on a narrow street to give to the girl I loved. Cecelia and I had been living together for six months in an ant hole of an apartment down on 25th street, and life after a boarding school childhood was full of freedom. I was an actor then, in my early twenties, circulating the small stages in New York, and playing Hamlet for God's sake. She of course, was playing Ophelia. I had been rehearsing so long, reading so deeply that the infamous Mr. H. had all but climbed inside my body and made me a little crazy. I was heading home from rehearsal, muttering my lines into the foggy November air, turtled into my coat, when I turned onto 23rd street and a short little man in a sheepskin jacket asked me if I wanted to buy something special. His station wagon was wedged in the alley between a corner deli and a velvet-curtained store where you could buy love poetry. He popped the hood for me and revealed a scramble of what I assumed were stolen objects. Never one to judge, I smiled at him and picked over his wide selection of junk.

He produced a square velvet box. He pried it open. Inside was a diamond ring, the stone so tiny it could fit under my fingernail. It caught the light and a halo of color erupted around it. I saw the diamond and I saw Cecelia's face. I saw her face, I saw her mind, I saw the great empty nights in the city that unwound around us like star-filled mysteries. I saw the future, and she was there.

Opening night was in a few days' time and rehearsals had become seamless. The entire cast, all local actors and wandering weirdos, kept saying to each other "this is going to be big,"

“everything is going to change.” The lit-up times, the gods on cable wire flying machines, the house lights boy casting the long stage light on Cecelia and I, it all felt like a big moment leading up to something. So when the ring showed up, the man in the sheepskin coat telling me that the moment was now, I knew this was the time to propose. It felt like a sign from the gods.

Instead of reciting my lines, I began reciting a proposal, getting into character as my romantic self.

Cecelia and I had met six months ago at a casting call for a TV commercial and afterwards ran into each other everywhere. It was as though we were attached by a long invisible string. I would show up for a gig and there was Cecelia in her thick black coat, lines memorized. “Put these two together” directors always said. The chemistry between us was undeniable from the start. She was just mysterious enough, only half answering my questions, that it kept reeling me in. She had the serene oval face of a silent film star.

Cecelia and I shared a small, gray apartment where we stuffed all our costumes stolen from sets, books and collection of vinyl. During the week we orbited around cast parties, anniversary dinners, shows and the dusty back-stage rooms and food platters, the drinks and interesting people. But at home, in the tiny little space we shared, that was where we truly came alive. We played endless acting games. We were capable of summoning forth hundreds of characters, like they were floating just below our surfaces; parts of ourselves that we hadn’t realized were there until just that moment. I was convinced that we were mirror images of one another, exactly the same. I’d been telling her to bring her parents round for an old fashioned breakfast and family assessment, but the timing never worked out. To be honest, I didn’t even remember their names, she hadn’t mentioned them in ages.

As we prepared for our opening night, Hamlet and Ophelia paced our apartment, making dinner in our kitchen, falling asleep in the unkempt bed. At night I'd wake up to her constantly repeating her lines. She was like a sleepwalker, I couldn't get her to stop. Cecelia began practicing her singing lines out the window in the blue morning, stretching into vocal exercises and waking up all the birds in the city. The pressure was mounting, and we were excited. Everywhere we stood, we blocked ourselves as if a silent audience were watching.

I practically kicked down the door to our apartment. Cecelia was standing in front of a mirror practicing one of her pantomime exercises. Sometimes she would unravel an imaginary orange peel, or play an entire Chopin nocturne, pinkies trembling on the black keys. In this one she wrapped an imaginary present, pretending to fold down the wrapping paper, pull and cut tape from a dispenser, tie a bow, press her thumb down on the knot, and curl the edges with a pair of scissors. Her pale, musical fingers wove something out of nothing. She dropped her imaginary scissors in surprise and spun around to greet me.

"Sorry I missed rehearsal," she called lazily, "I guess I got lost on the way from bed to the front door." She lounged in an oversized t-shirt, underwear and tube socks, her thick black hair piled onto her head. I saw her standing there and any speech or plan evaporated. "Virgil? What are you --?" she faltered as I involuntarily dropped to one knee. And then I blurted it all out in half-gibberish.

"I know we haven't known each other long, but...and we fit each other like wall paper fits a building...we know each other better than anyone...so will you marry me?"

It was like a film on fast forward. I still can't remember all the things I said to her, but I remember telling her that looking at her was like looking at a mirror image of myself. When I was done, the pause was long and silent, like someone had stopped the reel of our romance to

examine the still frame closely, the translucent black shapes of two lovers standing in their New York apartment in the deep brown film strip.

Cecelia was standing there in the window, looking down at me and I realized I was still in full costume, my hair slicked back, my loose shirt billowing in the breeze from the open window. I looked so vampiric I might have been offering eternity.

“But...why? I don’t understand...” She seemed confused by my blurting everything out. She was looking for the words to tell me no. My stomach dropped and my face burned.

“Why are you asking me this, Virgil?”

“*Why?*”

“Yeah, what’s this all about?”

“I –uh—I was just joking.” I stood up and backed into the kitchen. I pulled a beer out of the refrigerator.

“You were just joking,” said Cecelia flatly.

“Yeah, I mean come on.” I chipped open the can. “How could you marry me? I’m a full blooded Martian. It would never work.” As always, my first instinct was to bring us back to the acting games we played. She stared at me, looking me up and down like I was a long-division problem with too many decimals. But after I put a beer in her hands she shrugged, turned away and said, “Well yeah, we’re from entirely different worlds. What do we know about each other really?”

“Less than we think,” I agreed.

“I mean there may be some kind of Martian law forbidding our union. We wouldn’t want the whole Martian army descending on New York, would we?”

“No way. In fact, on Mars I was considered a delinquent Martian,” I improvised. “My Martian parents didn’t know what to do with me, so they put me in a shuttle and launched me off to Earth. Of all the Martians to share an apartment with, you sure picked an unreliable one.” Cecelia perched on the floral striped couch and listened in amusement. Her eyes fell down to the ring that was still hanging off my index fingertip.

“Maybe you should return the ring then,” she said gently.

“You keep it. You don’t have to wear it on your ring finger. It’s just another piece of jewelry right?” She shook her head with a soft smile.

“Martian rings are poisonous for humans. I couldn’t keep that.” We both looked at the little silver circle. What did most people do with rings in this situation? “You know I’m not such a great human either, Virgil. You dodged a laser beam in my opinion. It’s not like a human and a Martian could have children or anything.”

As I looked around the cluttered floor, the pictures on the wall, the scramble of our lives, it all looked a little less shiny. Was I crazy to think Cecelia would want to be here with me forever? I always thought our togetherness was leading to a great big life, but with the two of us standing there on the cool kitchen tile, minds situated on Mars, life felt smaller.

“So should I catch the next shuttle back to Mars, Cecelia?” playfully, seriously, gesturing out the window.

“Before it’s too late, Virgil,” she said ominously. “Give that ring to a nice Martian girl,” and she passed into the next room.



Rehearsal began early the next morning and all the drowsy actors came through the quiet streets. Cecelia and I got coffee down on the corner before trudging into the theater, which had been transformed into Elsinore, Hamlet’s castle. With dark hangings, imitation marble floors and great

pillars, the ghostly realness of the theater fooled even me. Cecelia and I shared a soft kiss before parting to start work. If she wouldn't be my wife, what would she be? What would I be? My own parents looked like they might have been twins attached at the hip, brown-haired and mousy, and with such a vanilla upbringing of mother plus father equals marriage, I had been deprived of romantic imagination. It wasn't uncommon these days for two people to stay unmarried, or for people to make arrangements, where neither spouse loved the other but enjoyed the financial benefits of a legal union. But what did our arrangement look like?

I jumped into my costume and joined the others on stage. We started with Gertrude and Claudius announcing their marriage. My thoughts and anxieties from the past twenty four hours were playing themselves out on stage. My fingers trembled. Next thing I knew, Ophelia brushed on stage in her long dress, Cecelia all painted up, and Laertes was telling her "he loves you *now*." The symbolism was too much. I entered stage left, and stepping in, I was suddenly blinded by the stage light.

"Hey Pete, can you turn the spot light down a notch, you're burning my eyes out." The long light slid to the left. I squinted to the back of the house. Everyone groaned *Virgil*. Everyone reset after my breaking scene.

"Sorry, Virgil, it was just as bright yesterday," Pete squeaked from the back of the house.

"Yeah well it feels brighter."

"Give him a break, Virgil, just look into the audience," Cecelia muttered, giving act 3 scene III a once-over.

"Alright, places everyone. Quiet on set please!" The director called. I don't remember so many of the faces now that must have been around us. I remember only Cecelia, the dark, empty rows of no one watching, and the big spotlight we stood in.

“And action.”

My throat closed up. The next line was there, I just couldn’t remember it.

“Virgil, you okay buddy?”

We started over twice.

“I’m sorry, I’m really sorry everyone.” In life it’s embarrassing to pretend to be someone else. In theater, it’s embarrassing to be yourself.

“Virgil, you want to take a second? Your understudy can step in while you look over the lines.”

The light was just too blinding.

“*Pete*.” I stepped through the configuration of actors on stage.

“This is going to be big, Virgil!” The spot light beamed down like a giant space ship. “I can feel it!”



After rehearsal Cecelia and I fought through a flurry to get home. Alone again, there was no place to hide. An odd tension settled in. I felt as though I had stepped into a perfect replica of our apartment a hundred million miles away.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Virgil? You were off your game today.” She stood in the bathroom mirror wiping off Ophelia’s bright red lipstick and pale powder. I didn’t answer her and began flipping through my lines furiously, checking all my little notes in the margins, suddenly unable to read my spindly hand-writing. I knew Hamlet himself was supposed to be crazy, but in being Hamlet I had to make the whole play make sense, and after I asked Cecelia to marry me, I had a hard time focusing on anything other than her saying no. Cecelia came into the kitchen and started banging pots and pans around.

“Earth to Mars, I’m making breakfast for dinner, would you like some?” She surveyed my boiling pot of water, which was just sitting there. She turned off the knob and nudged me out of the way with her hip. I watched her poach the eggs, something I still hadn’t mastered. She added a dash of vinegar and cracked the eggs. With the fork she gently created a little whirlpool, trapping the yoke inside the egg white. It was like her pantomime exercises, the gentle motions of her hands and wrists casting a spell. I wrapped an arm around her waist.

“Thank you.” I was grateful for more than dinner, but for her letting me down gently, for making the whole process feel like she was slowly easing out of the relationship, but so slowly that by the time she left, I would hardly feel it. “I’m sorry you do so much cooking all the time.”

“Maybe I’d make a good Martian wife after all.” She set me to work peeling back the skins of a dragon fruit, slicing avocados and a radish, shredding cheese and laying out two plates from our mismatched collection.

“Read me some lines.” Cecelia landed two plates of food onto the table like alien saucers.

“Okay.” I shut my eyes and reached deep inside for Hamlet. I began reciting his dialogue with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. She offered up R and G’s uninspired little replies in reply. Halfway through the scene I blanked. She finished the line for me. The play was sewn into her brain. She could have played every part. I stood up and kicked my chair.

“I’m sorry. You’re stressed. This probably isn’t helping.”

“Your parents were never coming to visit, were they?”

“Hey.” She caught my face in her hands. She did it firmly, but it tamed me for a minute. “Everything is going to be great. I’ve heard you read every line brilliantly.” She bit her lip and I felt like she had climbed inside me and soothed me.

“Now. Let’s find something else that will calm you down.” She gave me a wicked smile and used her magic hands on me instead of empty air. All of me came to life.



We stretched out in bed like sleeping cats. We never made the bed so the time lapse of us was in the sheets. I stroked her hair. That was the first time sex felt like something we used to heal ourselves. It was also the last time. She rolled over and gave me a small smile.

“Relaxed yet?” My whole body felt limp and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

“Worse, I can’t remember *any* lines now.” I pinched her hip. Cecelia and I never cuddled exactly. We lay parallel so our whole bodies lined up. “I just feel like something is blocking me. A week ago I had the entire play inside me. I thought everything was going smoothly. Now it just feels like I’m trying to get out of my body, like nothing inside me will stay still.”

“Don’t get too existential on me. I can’t feel your pain if it’s abstract.”

“You know what abstract pain feels like. Everyone does. Like when you can’t put your problems into words but you go for days feeling like a poor imitation of yourself.” She was silent for a while. She traced her finger around my abdomen.

“Do Martians have existential crises?” murmured Cecelia.

“Of course they do. If the whole world questioned your existence, how would you feel?”

“Maybe I am a Martian then,” she said softly.

“How do you mean?” I asked. She rolled onto her back and examined the ceiling. She draped one hand over her stomach and the other over me.

“I can’t marry you Virgil. Not because I don’t like you, and not because you did anything wrong. I can’t marry you because I’m not even a real person.” The sun had set and the clock began to glow on our bedside table. I reached over her to flip on the lamp.

“I’m sorry, you’re not a person? So much for keeping things concrete.” I laughed a little. She didn’t laugh with me.

“I never told you about how I ended up in New York. Let me tell you now.”



Cecelia and I had met six months ago. Six months previous, before she existed in my world, she awoke in a strange hospital in the middle of the night with a splitting headache. The place was nearly empty except for the drowsy staff sometimes passing through the privacy curtains. The physician on-call informed her she had a pretty severe concussion. A large, blue and purple bruise was blooming across her forehead. She touched it gingerly as if finishing a watercolor of herself. She had several other bruises down the side of her body but no other serious injuries. When she asked how she got there, the doctor told her someone had found her like that on the sidewalk and called an ambulance. There had been no witnesses, no suspicious activity in the area, nothing. It was as if she had fallen out of the sky.

“Sweetheart, can you tell us who the president is?” the nurse asked.

“No.” The nurse scribbled this down.

“That’s fine. Do you remember what year it is?”

“No?” More scribbling.

“Okay, now honey we have you down as a Jane Doe because we couldn’t find any ID on you. What’s your name, dear?” Cecelia started to choke up, because, even this she couldn’t remember. Most everyone has a name, and those who’ve ever gone without one feel weaker and more vulnerable than anyone could imagine. A name is like a small token, a tiny bit of protection that delineates you from the rest of the world.

“Is – is anyone here looking for me?” asked Cecelia.

But no one was looking for Cecelia. When the doctor cleared her for release, all she had was a duffel bag with a few changes of clothes, a ripped up mystery paper back, and some twenties. No ID, no written plans, no indication of where she had come from or where she was going. She was dazed and scared with no place to stay.

The outer signs of her trauma would disappear. The bruise on her forehead would yellow and fade, leaving only a small scar on her hairline. The fingerprint bruises on her shoulder would loosen their grip, but Cecelia's memory never returned, not even in flashes or intuitive feelings. She knew basic things, like how to read and write, or navigate a city. When she grew hungry and glided down a street lined with food trucks, steaming with chicken kabobs and paella, her tongue and her stomach remembered, but anything important, anything deep inside, was washed completely clean. Whole neighborhoods in her brain had suffered a blackout. She didn't even know how old she was. She would stare at her face in the mirror, not recognizing any features. She would pull back her long thick hair into an elastic and look for hours. There remained nothing, no one, no life. It was as though someone had opened her head and scooped a bit out with an ice-cream scooper.

Acting was the easiest thing to do in the wake of her own disappearance. It felt so comforting to go to work each day and be someone. If a director asked her to smile, to say a few lines, to walk over there, to act scared, she could do it. She could do it so well. Nothing was left inside her, no persona weighing her down, keeping her from being some imaginary character. When she read the lines, the entrances and exits, she could feel the soul of some other character passing through her. She could only hope that some semblance of a person would stick.

I asked her if she ever tried to go home, if she ever looked for her parents, looked for her face in the paper. But she didn't. She never did. The intensity of the attack, the finger-print

shaped bruises on her shoulder, it all felt too personal. What if someone she knew had done this to her? What if a family member did it? What if, like a *deus ex machina*, something had come from the sky and struck her down?

She couldn't marry me, she said. She couldn't build a future without a past to build it on.



"I've never told anyone that before." The razor thin moon hung in our window. A billboard shuffled its picture and the street traffic had stilled itself. Everything was silent. We lay in our parallel line, close but never overlapping. She was covered in sweat.

"We can't be the same person, Virgil. You can't see what you think you see. None of it can be real. This is all just one big dream, and I can't seem to wake up."

I ran my fingers through her hair, tracing the outline of a person who suddenly seemed more ghost than human.

"Whoever you were, I love you right now. Isn't that enough?"

"But what happens when one day it all comes back to me? When my entire life reappears full of people I love and places I need to be? Or what if I forget everything again and my brain is a ticking time bomb? What happens if I forget you?"

I didn't have answers for her. We lay there in bed. I turned off the light eventually and listened to her breathe. She fell into a deep sleep, but my eyes didn't close once that night. Cecelia's pallid face was unnaturally serene, like a skating rink at night, glossy and empty. Her hair was pushed up at her neck and her eyelids fluttered. She sweated all night like something essential was leaking out of her. I lay still, as if paralyzed by some greater force, waiting for some wind to blow through the window and sweep us all away.



The next night two of our acting friends, Cameo and Douglass, brought over a bottle of wine. Opening night was the next day and tickets had already sold out. I had been running lines all day, still uneasy. Cameo and Douglas were reassuring, but in a way that only reminds you of the balance beam underneath your feet.

“This is going to be big,” said Douglass.

“This is going to change everything for you two,” said Cameo. They weren’t wrong. Cecelia lit all the lamps in the apartment and wore a small blanket like a shawl. We hadn’t spoken all day, but just moved around the apartment, avoiding one another. Douglass pulled out a few board games. We played Scrabble with only made-up words. You had to give a convincing definition of the word for it to count. We played charades, of course. Couple versus couple, men versus women, love swap. Cecelia’s magic hands spun out scenes that gave her an advantage. When we ran out of wine Cameo and I pretended to pour different things into the drinks for make-believe cocktails. Douglass stirred with a stray pencil. As we drank and played our games, sat on the floor and talked until the night cast shadows in the apartment, I looked at all the pictures on our walls. There were no pictures of our families. The one photograph I had of my mousy parents was stashed in a closet somewhere. There was no trace of a life outside this apartment. Cecelia’s past was empty. She had no one living inside of her. That much I could understand. But what scared me even more, is that whoever lived inside me, my own past, my family, seemed so intangible, so inconsequential, that it barely showed itself on the walls. For so long I thought that Cecelia and I were the same person. It scared me to think that I could have been right all along.

“Hey, what’s this?” Cameo held up the diamond ring for everyone to see. I gulped my drink.

“A poisonous ring from Mars.” Cameo ignored my joke and Douglass came over to get a closer look.

“Are you two...?” and then Cameo realized.

“Oh my God, I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to ruin a proposal, Virgil.” Cameo and Douglass looked back and forth between Cecelia and I, who looked back and forth between our drinks and the floor.

“Well go on, then Virgil, the moment is now!” Douglass hugged me and slapped my back. Cameo rushed to Cecelia and held up the ring to her finger.

“No – I don’t...” I tried to say. Cecelia rubbed her head with a sudden headache.

“No, I’m not marrying him. I’m sorry, there’s just been a big misunderstanding,” Cece piped up. Cameo and Douglass did more looking back and forth. I explained.

“I just bought that ring on the side of the road from some guy. I was probably swindled anyways. It was just...you know, an impulse. You know I can never help myself. I’m not even sure if it’s a genuine diamond. I just assumed.”

“Oh,” said Douglass.

“Well maybe someday,” Cameo winked.

The night ended on an awkward note. Cameo and Douglass had drunk more than Cecelia and I and after some unenthusiastic sitting around, Douglass slapped his armrest and announced that they didn’t want to keep us up too late. We said our goodbyes and promised to get together after opening night.



The curtains drew back and Pete spread the light across the stage. The quiet laughter and pre-show chatter died down and everyone in the audience, dressed up in suits and

jewelry and ornate dresses turned to black figures in the darkness. Each figure sat very still. You can never see the faces of those in the audience, just dark figures wearing big smiles, anonymous people in the dark. Silvery smoke streamed from under the back drop and the watchmen of the night prowled out among the audience. *Hamlet* got underway with no mistakes, no stutters or hesitations. When I looked inside myself for Hamlet, he wasn't there. So I played only myself. I wasn't manic, I wasn't angry, I wasn't clever or waxing on and on, I wasn't secretly in love with my mother and I didn't believe in ghosts. But I was scared. And that seemed to work. Cecelia was the star of the show. No crowd had ever been so convinced by an actress.

Act IV drew to a close and Ophelia's death scene was near. We didn't actually show the scene on stage; Gertrude typically reports it. The rotating set pieces, stage hands, actors stopped moving. In the darkness they looked like statues in a Greek garden. Even the audience turned to stone, so I seemed to be the only living thing in the theater. I stood center stage, sure something had gone wrong. One soft spotlight fell on Cecelia. She no longer wore her costume, but a simple blue dress from her own closet, a coat with silver lining, and held her travelling bag. All makeup was smeared off her face. The spotlight enveloped her as she exited down the stage steps into the audience. She left the theater through the double doors. No one turned around to watch her go. There was a moment of silence.

The stage warmed with light and everyone began moving again. Gertrude came wailing in to tell me about Ophelia's death. We finished the play to hearty applause. We all came out for our final bow, cast members coming out in pairs. But when it was time for me and Cecelia to take one last stroll on stage, Cece never came out. I looked behind the curtain, but she had gone. I went out and bowed to modest applause. I knew I had been one-dimensional, but part of me didn't care.

I made my way home, walking tentatively, not sure what I'd find around each corner, like my crossing the doorstep was the final number to a combination, opening a safe I didn't want to know the contents of. She had exorcized her existence from the apartment. Her clothes, jewelry, atomizers, coat, and shampoo were gone. Even our bed was completely free of her scent, a detail I will always be in awe of. It was as I had imagined her.

The next morning I scanned the review of *Hamlet* in the paper, touting the directorial debut, critiquing my Hamlet, with lots of praise for the supporting cast. The only name that went unmentioned was Cecelia's Ophelia. I tore through every city newspaper I could find, but nowhere in the tiny print did Cecelia exist. None of the other cast members mentioned her and if I ever wanted to discuss Ophelia, "you know, Cecelia, my *girlfriend*?" everyone changed the subject or mysteriously couldn't hear me. I began to go crazy. I left the acting troupe, and would only ever star in television ads, posing in the background, driving a car, or reciting phone numbers and hotlines for customers to call. If anyone looked closely as I mimed conversation, I mouthed my Hamlet lines over and over. When I find myself on day with the same gray weather as the time when I found the diamond on the street, I make excuses to leave whatever I am doing. I find a street-corner theater and shuffle into the back seats where everyone is happy in the dark, and I watch a film with an actress that looks even a little like Cecelia. Maybe one woman had her graceful curved nose, or her black hair, or had some deep kind of sadness about her; Cecelia was both everywhere in my mind and nowhere in my world. I thought about her often. I wondered if her memories ever came back, if that was the reason for her leaving. I surmised that perhaps I had done too much to tie her down. After a blissful six months I had recalled her trauma, and she could no longer pretend to be Cecelia. She was a void, an empty place with no one inside her, and once I saw that, how could I see anything else?

I brought the ring to a jeweler, maybe to sell it. I asked the man at the counter to check if it was genuine. He said he'd call me in a few days, but when the phone rang and rang and rang and rang. I never picked it up.

Coyote Call

The summer after my sophomore year at Bellevue High, things around Bellevue started going missing. It was just little things at first, a sock in the washing machine, lost in the jumble. Then my alarm clock went missing from my night stand. I woke up late, feeling out of synch with the world. Then things started escalating. A stoplight on Verdis Road and Lucille Street went missing, resulting in a small car accident. When the phones in all the phone booths around Bellevue went missing, the town government began to complain of a thief or a vandal, a senile resident yelled about ghosts. But then, all the graffiti downtown erased itself from the bricks as if by magic. No cleaning crew was responsible. The stray female tabby that hung around my family's back garden stopped showing up. A few weeks later, my best friend's father went missing, and I knew the coincidences were over. What do they tell you when you lose something? Retrace your steps. So, naturally, if I were to walk backwards through that summer, I might pick up all the abstract objects that once made my life complete.



I asked Ezra how he felt about his father disappearing. We were sinking into the couches at his house, glaring out at the rain on the porch, the wind chimes swaying, the television turned down low. He responded two weeks later.

"Completely lost." After the disappearance Ezra began living from bed and so if I wanted to hang out I had to go to him. He must have left the bed at some point, because his bed was surrounded by Little Debbie wrappers, but I never saw him do it. He looked bad, kind of like if he rolled over he would die. He used to call me up and talk about everything. We talked about girls at school. When Ezra's dad and his partner, Marco, finally got married, we unpacked that

for ages. I couldn't get a read on him anymore because he refused to talk. Ezra was an open book that had suddenly swung shut.

"We're going to figure this out man. Everything will be okay again." Ezra nodded and looked out into the rain.

"You've never lost anyone, have you, Tillman?" Rain beat against the roof.

"No, and I don't plan on it. We're going to get your dad back, Ezra, and we're all going to live forever." I found in times of trouble, it helped to quote alien movies about distant planets. Everything will be okay as long as there are planets left for us to escape to.



Ezra and his dad were close. Mr. Corazon was like a second father to me. There was nothing wrong with my own father, but as I grew into my teenage years, things changed. My father got frustrated when he was teaching me to drive or when I couldn't show interest in family matters. My family was so wrapped up in my older twin sisters, sports stars who had just gotten into college. They had more important things to do. Whenever I walked the two suburban blocks to Ezra's house, a small but warmly decorated house, Mr. Corazon would, smoking his cigar, invite me into the den where we'd watch the Twilight Zone. He'd have me tell him about my entire day, what I thought of events in the newspaper, and ask me how school was going. He really, truly cared. Ezra was just like him. No topic was off limits. It was my first glimpse of what a warm, close family looked like. Even with Marco in the picture now, Ezra had slowly grown to appreciate his step-father and the three of them had the warmth of lions all bonded together.

"I just don't think I want to go to college. What am I supposed to do there? I don't like reading. My teachers are really good at making me feel like an idiot," I would confess to Mr. Corazon.

Ezra would pour his dad a drink, slyly practicing liquor combos – later in high school he became the class mixologist.

“That’s alright, son.” Mr. Corazon, tall, tan, once muscular, would sip his drink thoughtfully, considering all the things I brought to him. “How would you boys like to go up in the plane?”

Mr. Corazon was a pilot and owned a small red plane that he parked in the back yard. The propeller would spin furiously, blowing the entire forest around the backyard and it looked like the trees were learning how to fly. He would take us up, slowly rising over our winding neighborhood, until all the houses, sprinklers and azaleas became small and we soared over Bellevue, a little satellite suburb to Seattle. You could see sparkling lakes, the patterned buildings and patchwork areas of grass, fields and forest. Our whole world looked tiny.

“Tillman, even if you don’t go to college, don’t get stuck here. There are so many things in this world outside your childhood. The world is bigger than you know. Go and see it.”

So months later when sophomore year drew to a close, and summer opened up in the trees, and little objects around the house started going missing, I would have never predicted what happened next.



On June 2nd, the start of summer, all the neighbors came when they heard. Deputy Drummond’s car sat outside the Corazon house, whirling light like a beacon for the tragedy. I had lost my car keys along with everything else, so I walked towards the scene. The sun was going down and houses began to glow one by one. Friends, family, neighbors and their dogs were all crowded on the lawn. Bellevue is a small satellite suburb and when something happens, everyone feels the impact deep inside them, like an underwater earthquake – mysterious things all rush to the surface. The door hung open to the crowded house and I fought my way through to find Ezra and

Marco at the kitchen table. Everyone was hushed and Deputy Drummond held each of their hands in his meaty, veined ones. Looking at their faces it was as though Drummond was sucking their souls out through their grasped hands. Marco was choking out answers to questions.

“No. No history of mental illness or marital problems,” said Marco.

“And you checked all the lakes, hotels, credit card trails?”

“And the air line? What explanation are they giving for my husband’s disappearance?”

“What do you mean they have no idea what happened?”

“But how could he disappear on a plane that landed safely?”

My heart sank. When Ezra called and asked me to come over, I almost didn’t believe what he was saying, but everything was true. Mr. Corazon was gone. Suicide, accidental death, missing, runaway, we didn’t know.

I looked up at Ezra. He was silent, staring at the scene around him as if he were being gently introduced to an alien colony. Ezra had been closer to his father than any son I could think of. But there, at the kitchen table, with the whole neighborhood arranged like a living crèche, Ezra didn’t even make a face. He only asked:

“What time is it?” The people looked at each other.

Again, calmly: “What time is it?”

“I don’t have the time, son.” I nudged over to Ezra at the table.

“It’s a quarter to eight.” I squeezed his shoulder. “It’s...It’s eight.” Ezra looked up to acknowledge my contribution.

“Well let’s go then,” he said to me, blankly. Marco and the crowd all whispered to each other.

“He’s leaving the house now?” people all whispered to each other. I followed him as we ducked through the hallway lined with family portraits. Ezra grabbed his green army jacket, the one decorated with his father’s army pin. It was a small golden eagle flying north from the breast pocket to the collar. Through the sliding glass door, onto the wet back lawn and the darts board, into Ezra’s car, we breathed the humid air. I patted my pockets where my missing keys should have been.

“Where are we going?” I asked him, bewildered.

“The Laserquest Palace doesn’t close until midnight. Let’s go shoot something.”

“Yeah, okay, but don’t you think your dad might get upset if we go now?” but Ezra was already sifting through all the CDs on the floor of his car.

But for me it felt impossible to leave this moment. Everyone from the neighborhood, all of Ezra’s family was inside or milling around on the lawn, knocking over the garden gnomes and asking each other how Ezra’s father could have disappeared on a transatlantic plane. I imagined an orb of gravity keeping everyone here, but Ezra was eager to go.

“Let me drive, Ezra.” I didn’t trust he wouldn’t fling us off the lake bridge.

And so we did go, because Ezra wanted to and I wanted to what Ezra wanted to do. We drove away before anything could feel real, before any of it could stick. So for the next few hours we left reality behind. We left it behind at the gas station where Nick Colenti sold us lottery scratch-offs even though we were only sixteen. We left realness behind at 90 miles per hour down Verdis, the long road covered by wet trees and their limbs hanging overhead; warp speed through the intersection with the missing traffic light. We rolled down the windows and Ezra hollered out his window like a dog, his long dark hair flapping and his eyes blazing. We left realness behind when we finally arrived at the Laserquest Palace.



For years and years until that moment we used target practice to get out our anger. The Laserquest Palace was the perfect place for it. We came there for years, playing every console game in the arcade and dominating in the spray-painted Laserquest until all our anger disappeared. It was where Ezra and I met in elementary school and we'd been addicted ever since. So now, buckled into Ezra's speeding car we drove out of the past and through the drooping trees into the present, up Lincoln Ave and into the parking lot of the Laserquest Palace. But what we found there was not the happy place of our childhood, but a completely renovated building.

We hadn't been to the Laserquest Palace in a few weeks, definitely not since Mr. Corazon went missing on a Transatlantic plane. The Palace used to be a purple concrete building with vintage gaming consoles that were big and bulking with charming lights and old-fashioned sounds. Then you had your standard riding games, shooting games, all produced within the last ten years. At the back of the lobby was the door to the Laserquest. The maze was fairly simple, so teenagers or kids got really good at hiding really fast. It was a small, lonely place where only locals came, but it was home. But the great big purple glass building with comical towers, gleaming signs and an immaculate new parking lot looked nothing like where Ezra and my friendship began so many years ago. We stood at the front doors and looked up at it, the flashing neon colors reflecting in puddles on the cement. We looked at one another.

"Cool."

We went inside and examined all the renovations. The stained swirly carpets were replaced with marble. All the old vintage games were replaced with brand new ones, flashy and crystalline. All our high scores, the records of total video game domination, countless hours and quarters spent,

gone. There was an elaborate gumball machine that started in one corner of the shiny lobby, looped around the ceiling and rolled out on the opposite end of the room. A Technicolor juke box rippled with light and hummed music neither of us recognized. Even the graffiti we'd scratched into the bathroom stalls had been wiped clean. The Laserquest hadn't disappeared at all, as I might have expected, but it had changed.

After running full-throttle through the Laserquest for three hours we stepped back into parking lot, empty except for a green Sedan and a Prius with marathon stickers covering the bumper. Ezra stopped me. He touched his heart and looked at me, like he had just been shocked to life by an invisible AED.

"My dad's pin is gone." He was horrified. We scoured the parking lot and banged on the Palace Doors. The girl with the dyed black hair working the counter wouldn't open up but just watched us there. The golden eagle was tiny; it could have fallen between cracks, taken shelter on a stair step, or flown south altogether. I stared at him, and my chest began to feel hollow. How many more things would disappear that summer? What would we be left with? What did all this mean? We were silent in the car. Ezra held his face in his hands. He was beginning to crack. We drove back through the groves of the Satellites and with each passing green street sign we could feel the growing pull of the scene at Ezra's house, the magnetized misery that pulled Bellevue in. I stared at the dark path ahead when a small, dark figure darted into the road. I screeched to a halt. There was a light bump and I saw the figure dive down the other side of the street into a deep hill. I parked and got out of the car. I looked down the ravine but it was dark, the figure had gone.

"What the hell was that?" I called back to Ezra.

“Probably just a coyote. My dad said they’re everywhere this summer. Crazy breeding season.”

No one else was on the road. So we pulled over and for a minute listened to the howling in the woods. Coyotes aren’t dangerous things really, because they’re skittish and never run in large packs like wolves do. Mostly they travel alone or with unrelated individuals. They’re lonely howling things hoping some other lonely thing will hear them calling and come running through the night.

We drove back into the satellites of Seattle, the streets of Bellevue, our shady drive of loneliness and radio nights, suburban silence. I dropped Ezra off at his home with his car. People were starting to leave, walking on the sidewalks, arms linked, shoes in hand like they’d just come from a big party, masks of grief all taken out of the dress-up box. I walked home too. My family was eating a late dinner at the kitchen table. My mother and father were talking about something, my two older sisters twisting strands of spaghetti. The unexploding nuclear family sat in happy silence. I had never lost someone close to me. I had both sets of grandparents – they were off sailing around the Caribbean. Everything was completely intact. I skipped dinner and went straight to bed. For the first time that summer I felt a small tear in the seams of summer, relationships and reality slowly coming loose. The crickets that use to hum outside my window had disappeared.



We returned the next day to inspect the Laserquest Palace. It was time to reclaim all the missing objects, to prove to myself that these were all just coincidences. We drifted through the sunlit arcade level, tiny melodies tinkling, the mesmerizing games previewing themselves over and over to no one.

“And you don’t have a lost and found in this place?” I heckled the girl at the counter. She had never seemed less interested in anything asked ever.

“Nope.”

“We lost something kind of important. She chomped on her gum thoughtfully.

“Sorry, kid. But you know, when you lose things you might as well retrace your steps.” I just as easily could have asked her if she had a stop light, my alarm clock, the crickets outside my window, or a middle-aged man stashed in a box out back. I turned to Ezra.

“Wanna retrace our steps?” Ezra didn’t look like he wanted to do anything, but he nodded.

“Lead the way.”

In a dark entrance room you equip yourself with laser guns, chest sensors and hit counters. Then you’re released into the dark sprawl of weird twists, turns, more complex than any rinky-dinky county laser tag. The inside looked like some weird dream we had all had collectively sometime in the past, with staircases, tricks and puzzles, hiding spots and mirror images. People drove from all over the state to compete because the course was so difficult.

We walked back through the Laser Quest, but when we retraced the maze, we also were retracing the mystery. We searched every inch of that polished floor for two weeks, hoping that next time, *next time*, we’d find that pin. But we didn’t find it, and after those two weeks, Ezra got quiet about the whole thing. If we went to the Laserquest, it was my idea. He had given up hope, but I knew we had to keep searching. I saw the signs, I watched the objects disappear. If we wanted Ezra’s father back, we had to follow this mystery to the end of its many hallways. I began having strange dreams about the Laserquest, the vividness of which made me believe I was searching through my sleep to find the answer to the many disappearances in Bellevue. I

began sleepwalking. After especially real dreams I woke up in my car, wearing only my boxers, keys in the ignition, honking the horn and playing with the windshield wipers. My father had to pull me out of the car and shake me conscious. Even in those years when my father and I didn't talk much and we essentially became mysteries to one another, my father asked me if he and my mother were paying me enough attention, if I was stressed about anything. During those kitchen-lit nights my father would pour me half a beer and we'd sit there in silence until I calmed down a bit. After that I wouldn't go back to sleep, but lay on my bedroom floor, lights on, listening to music until the sun rose and I knew I wouldn't be sucked back into dreams of the Laserquest. I think once the sleepwalking started I knew the Laserquest Palace and the disappearances of that summer were connected. The Palace was making Ezra and me crazy. We spent as much as twelve hours in the LED labyrinth, looking for the pin but also looking for ourselves in the darkness. After a long day in the maze we'd drive back and snap at each other over small things. If we weren't in the Palace, we were tense. I was doing my best to be there for him, telling myself *of course he's angry, he's lost his dad, he needs me to stand by him*. I tried to tell him my theory: there's something inside the Laserquest Palace. There's something sucking up everything from Bellevue, one by one and *we're next*.

"You watch too much science-fiction."

But it wasn't long before something convinced Ezra of the Palace's strangeness.

July 4th: We were on a lower level of the game, a wide open dancefloor style room with only a giant smoke machine and colored lights obscuring the path, when Ezra's phone buzzed. A blazing strobe light shuttered and he drew out the phone in slow motion. The caller ID picture was Ezra's father. He lifted it to his face.

“Hello?” static murmured on the other end. “Hello? Dad?” but nothing. The same thing happened day after day. The lower we reached into the Laserquest, the more calls Ezra got, all from his father, ubiquitous static.

“This means he’s alive, Tillman. Maybe he’s trying to come home?” Ezra reasoned. But I knew he was reaching. Too many paranormal phenomenon had happened that summer, and even shuffling through them, frantically looking for the moments when everything went wrong, I knew that Ezra, transformed by depression, couldn’t see what was staring me in the face: that there was something in Bellevue making things disappear.

“Or he’s dead, and he’s trying to make his way back.” Ezra gaped at me.

“Fuck you.”



The day that Mr. Corazon disappeared, Ezra called.

“Tillman,” Ezra’s voice sounded twenty-years older, like his father’s. It was seven in the evening. “Can you come over?”

“Yeah hang on. “Frogs” is on the Sci-Fi channel.”

“I really need you.”

“And this lady needs to get off the island before it’s too late.” I smiled into the phone and waited for Ezra to laugh.

“Please,” he said, softly.

“What’s wrong with you?” I zapped the TV off and looked out the window. People were flooding down the sidewalk.

“My dad is gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean, ‘gone’?” I asked, confused.

Ezra hung up.

And after that phone call things were never similar to what they used to be. You could hear the coyotes call, in the woods, down the road, in the night, getting ready to run.



The town of Bellevue was temporarily overrun by police cars. All the radio signals were sent out: find this man, find the father, the husband, the loving proxy for that awkward boy living down the street. After a month of probing, the flock of cars thinned out, as if they were disappearing too. One day, Mr. Corazon was officially pronounced dead. His whereabouts no longer concerned the police, and the case files were locked up in a storage unit somewhere, where surely all missing persons go to officially die; a symbolic resting place. Ezra didn't give me this update. I found out from some classmates I saw in the drugstore. When I showed up at Ezra's house to bring him a few bags of sugary candy, consolation, Marco met me at the door. "Ezra's not doing well, Tillman. We have a lot of family business to attend to today. He'll call you when he's ready."



What do you do for someone who is officially dead? Does it differ from a definitely dead person? To superimpose Billy Crystal's Miracle Max, what is the distinction between someone who is mostly dead and all dead? The family picked out a casket, chose a plot and ordered a headstone. They lowered the empty box into the ground and decided that was that. But if a man who is supposedly dead comes walking back as if from the underworld, then what do you do about all your life philosophies? I loved Mr. Corazon, but he wasn't my family. I would move on, and mostly feel for Ezra. But Ezra, who had lost his favorite parent, the voice in his head, things would never be the same. That summer when I came to the Corazon house, I always found Ezra sitting in the den. All the lamps were turned on, the curtains drawn, the Twilight Zone was

on, and if Mr. Corazon had a ghost, it was certainly haunting in the den. Ezra sat with his back to me, smoking one of his father's cigars, growing out a wispy adolescent mustache. In the smoke he was slowly becoming his father.



The summer passed slowly in the lit-up landscapes of the Laserquest Palace. I took Ezra to the Laserquest Palace again on the first day of August. I didn't know what else to do. Something was sucking the life out of Bellevue, and as we took the steps and chutes deeper into the Palace, the weird floors and trick hallways, the points of light and weird dream logic, I felt I had to find whatever black hole was lodged deep underground.

We finally made it to the bottom floor. While the higher floors were filled with other lonely teenagers, the lower levels became more difficult. The bottom floor had the feeling of a basement. It was dark and full of holograms that seemed to follow us around the course.

"I wonder what we'll find on this level," I murmured to Ezra. The phone buzzed once again.

It was Ezra's father again.

"Hello?" Mr. Corazon's voice was clear as a bell.

"Dad?" Ezra clutched the phone with two hands. We locked eyes. He put the call on speaker phone. It was just then that I felt something moving around the dark bottom floor.

"It's good to hear your voice son." I kept listening, but drifted away, pulled by whatever lurked nearby.

"Dad, where are you right now?" Ezra's voice broke. Hands clenched involuntarily around my gun, I approached a corner, a dark hallway. The phone conversation voices got quieter.

“A long, long way away,” Mr. Corazon intoned. Stray static.

“But *where*? We’ll come and get you,” Ezra was pleading. I turned the corner, my heart jumping out of my chest. And then I saw it.

“You can’t, son.”

The vacuum whirled its dark mass. I centered my laser gun and saw through the occluded eye everything I had lost that summer. I just wanted my best friend back, I wanted it all back. If I could destroy the black hole, maybe I could save us all.

“Just know that I will always love you and look out for you,” Mr. Corazon’s baritone filled the arena.

I blasted the thing. A great wind blew me back and the thing erupted. It was all hard to see. Then I heard deafening static ring out. Ezra’s phone connection had died. The black hole was dead.

A voice rang cleared its throat over the intercom.

“Attention all questers, we have a new high score! Congrats, Ezra and Tillman! Please return to the lobby to claim your prize.

We went back up. I was sure I had stopped any further disappearance. But Mr. Corazon’s phone call – was he alive somewhere, on a mystery island, or was he calling from the other side of death? If I had waited a moment later, Ezra might have gotten the answers he needed. He might have gotten all the answers he would need for the rest of his life. Instead we were looking into the prize case full of plastic treasures. The girl behind the prize counter with the red visor and thick black lashes rolled her eyes and said “take whatever you want” before wandering over to stare at the blinking ski ball machine. Among all treasures the Palace offered, I stuffed these things into Ezra’s limp arms: a pair of crystal vision glasses, a purple dinosaur, some sticky jell

hands, giant gumballs, a fake gun and a really old CD of songs they played in the laser quest arena.

“You ready, Tillman?” Ezra began heading for the door. I said I was. I was just turning around when a little golden glimmer caught my eyes. A little bald eagle posed in the glass corner. It was Ezra’s pin.

“One sec!” I called. I pointed to the little pin and then chased after him. He was dumping all our junk in the back seat. He looked like a father wearily toting around his child’s toys.

“You’ll never guess what I found Ezra,” I gasped. He ignored this.

“I don’t want to come back here anymore, Tillman.” The sun glinted on the car and we squinted at one another.

“But this is our thing, it’s helping you grieve.”

“It’s making me worse.”

“But what about the pin, that’s what this whole thing was about, you finding a connection to your father. Me proving there’s something supernatural making everything disappear,” I insisted. We were alone in the parking lot. A spot of rainbow oil evaporated on the cement.

“I don’t want the godforsaken pin, alright? I want to move on. Whether or not my dad comes back, I can’t keep feeling like this, like I’m in limbo.” He took the keys out of my hand. “And stop looking over your shoulder to see if I’ll be okay.” He slid into the driver’s seat. I climbed in after him. Ezra gunned the car and we slipped out of the parking lot, zigzagging through the freeway into the coming storm clouds and hordes of rush hour drivers, fast and playful the way Ezra always used to drive, but this time with a little edge to it. We finally came to a halt on the highway and the cars stretched for as far as we could see. Forehead against the glass, I realized that I had lost not just one person but two. My best friend was drifting away. Ezra and I would

never again be as close as we were before that summer because I couldn't connect to him. Grief had changed him into someone else entirely. Maybe it would happen slowly, but soon we wouldn't talk at all. And after all this time I realized that my most trusted friend had disappeared from me with no trace, no warning, no explanation, just the sad fact that as all the drivers turned their headlights homeward through the storm and our car music competed with rain, I had lost something real. I took the eagle as a token. My own missing memento. Now, all alone, I was free to howl at the moon and hope to find some other lonely thing to howl with me.

Underground

Timothy had been playing the video game non-stop for the last 48 hours. In perfect darkness he lay slack in his chair, wearing opaque goggles, ear pieces and an elaborate headset. The only

thing moving in his bedroom was a sleek black fish in the aquarium tank built into the wall. The aquatic light was turned off too. A little white pod was plugged in nearby, blinking a little pink light every so often. The instructions and warning manual lay open at Timothy's feet, where he had tossed them aside.

The Warp!

Welcome to the most advanced gaming system ever! Put on your gear and disappear into any one of our compatible games. This system transports you through space and time into another dimension. Playing our games feels so real!

WARNING: Beware of overuse, please consult your doctor if you have a history of seizures, heart conditions or if you feel faint or dizzy.

Next to the neglected system manual was the box case for the game. It was called "Secret Object," and claimed to be a journey where the player must reclaim an object precious to them, and that the SECRET OBJECT was different for each player.

Timothy was deep inside the video game, in a realistic limestone cave, looking for his missing object. Water droplets coming from the high cavity ceiling. He had come through a tributary tunnel, his boot soles sticking to the bubble-gummy floor, with only his headlamp and flashlight illuminating the tunnel. The title had drawn him in, and after playing the game he was positive that something truly was missing from his life. Whatever that was, he felt a magnetic pull in his chest, leading him deeper into the cave. It was impossible to move quietly. He had been walking for roughly four miles through the cramped spaces and he had the nagging feeling that something was following him. He was alone in the cave, or was supposed to be, but every

half mile he would hear something move, a sliding rock, something large moving in the tunnels bellow. He would halt, check his surroundings, but whatever it was knew to stand still in the darkness. Timothy hopped over boulders and whizzed down chutes in excitement. His arms were thick with muscles. He was ready for anything the game threw at him. He had never been in a cave before, and now here he was. He now reached a giant area with tributary tunnels and a high glittering roof. The game was all so realistic. He felt an ache in his thickly muscled legs that felt so tender and good and the water dripped right down the neck of his shirt like the cave knew when to cool him off. The face of his watch glowed. Forty-eight hours felt like nothing. He felt no hunger, no thirst, no boredom. In the tunnels, shaped like the grey intestines of a giant, he had to go about picking up clues. Every hundred yards Timothy scooped up a glowing abstract object. He rolled it between his palms for a moment, enjoying the rippling light, and then stored it safely in his backpack. In the game, each player is meant to collect objects found deep in the cave. Timothy couldn't figure out what they were good for, but their light was so pleasant and watery that he didn't ask himself questions. He camped by a powerful underground river that rushed through the cave like a main artery. He lay down a tarp, carefully pulled off his muddy boots and changed into clean socks. He zipped himself into a water-wicking sleeping bag, listened to the soothing roar and fell into a black sleep. He had been searching for the SECRET OBJECT for days, but he wasn't frustrated by all the tunnels and turns that seemed to switch directions upon his approach. He felt a great magnetizing force pulling him deeper into the cave. He relaxed his mind and let it spin over all the things that his SECRET OBJECT could be.

The whole cave began to shake. Timothy opened his eyes. A vortex wind blew through the tunnels. Rocks fell from the ceiling. A stalactite overhead gave a deep crack. It began to fall. Timothy cried out and covered his head.

Timothy regained consciousness and returned to his ordinary bedroom, wincing at the stark light in his bedroom. Anna-Lucia was shaking his shoulder.

“It’s time to go to work, Mr. Speller,” Anna-Lucia sighed. Timothy didn’t respond to his live-in nurse. He looked at his hands which were dry and cracking. She had switched the gaming pod off and removed his head set. Anna-Lucia gathered him up in her arms, his atrophied thighs folding over her strong arms, and she sat him back down in his wheelchair. He was thirty-eight years old and had been sitting in his chair his entire life. Anna-Lucia rolled him down the hallway into the kitchen where she had a full plate of hot food waiting for him. He ate quickly, leaving most of it.

She drove him to work on I-70 and played the Classical station like she always did. The surround-sound speakers made talking unnecessary, but the lack of dialogue was normal for them. When she first moved into the adjoining bedroom three years ago he asked her questions and tried to get to know her, sure that their physical proximity must equate to a small amount of emotional intimacy, but she insisted “it’s better if we remain professional.” She dressed him, helped him into the bath tub, and drove him everywhere in silence, so he began to read her moods in the little things that she did – how strong she made the coffee, the music she listened to in the morning, which TV channels she watched.

Timothy rolled his window down and leaned his head outside to smell the air. Spring was coming. She dropped him off in the parking lot outside the front entrance and ID scan. She put in her elaborate hoop earrings, shook her sleek black hair out of its pony tail, put on a faint bit of lip color. She had a small dragon tattoo peeking out on her back. He didn’t know what she did each day, he knew better than to ask, but each morning he liked to watch her routine, and left the car still smelling the perfume she stashed in the dashboard box. She never wore scrubs or anything

that would suggest she was his live-in nurse. He told Jonas, the young guy from the adjacent cubicle island always watching TV on his computer, that Anna-Lucia was his girlfriend so his life looked a little less empty.

Timothy's room of cubicles may have been relatively dull, but the entire building was a snowy dome shaped construction with installation art pieces and gymnastic sculptures striding around the lawns. Timothy was a legal aid for a video game development company. Each department was a wide-open space, full of laughter and creative work. Only the legal aid annex was dimly lit and quiet, situated on the edge of the building, overlooking the company grounds. His eyes often slid off the legal forms and out the adjacent submarine window where a set of tennis courts and a newly cemented track was visible. "Employees are encouraged to exercise for 30 minutes during the work day" corporate e-mails said. If you didn't swipe your ID badge at the track or courts, you got a reminder e-mail from some administrative office on the other end of the massive building. Timothy got lots of e-mails because no one seemed to remember him. Timothy's life had generally been a window view.

Timothy ate his lunch in the cafeteria as usual. He sat with a few other legal aids. They talked about the weather and the bowling team they were all on. Timothy didn't bowl, so he stared off into the distance and thought about what his SECRET OBJECT in the cave could be. He was missing so many things in life, but what would fulfill him most? Timothy had never been in a cave before, and now he couldn't picture a more beautiful place to spend time.

Jonas slid onto a stool next to Timothy.

"Timothy! Happy Monday, big guy. How's that gaming system working out? Any side effects yet?"

Timothy wiped his mouth. “No, no, all good.” Jonas was pretty young to be working there, but he fell in easily with other people and had a way of creating symbiotic connections. “And I’ve been looking for glitches, but the system looks clean so far. I don’t know, I’ve never really played a lot of games before, not 360 sensory anyways.”

“I’ll tell you, I’ve done some crazy shit inside those games. I know a girl in game design who loans me her new games to test them out. Some of them can really fuck with your head. But if you’re just using it to run around like the rest of us, there’s nothing wrong with that.” Jonas was reassuring, the way that wild friends reassure us we’re perfectly normal.

The cafeteria line moved along and employees served themselves organic meals from glass buffet tables. A light tinkling music played as everyone shuffled in and then back out to work again. People were happy there. Game designers built entire mazes, trampoline castles and zero-gravity arenas, collapsing them over night. No one in the building ever seemed to be mind-numbingly bored and convinced that there was nothing else to find, no ultimate goal or object to pursue. Timothy enjoyed the building, thought the people were fine, but he always came back to his tiny, undecorated cubicle, and waited in silence for the day to be over. He hadn’t been promoted or given a raise in years. Jonas looked at Timothy’s untouched carton of yogurt.

“What, you not hungry?”

“I’ll eat later,” Timothy said. Something behind Timothy caught Jonas’s eye.

“Anyways, I’ve got to run. Lila from character design wants to ask me a few questions about her ‘legal forms,’” he winked. Timothy cracked a smile. “But hey, there’s a company party in the Character Development Department tomorrow. Will you be around?”

Timothy scrambled for any reason not to be there. “I’m actually taking some time off. I won’t be back for a few weeks,” he lied. But in thinking about it, he had never taken a sick day or a

vacation day. Maybe if he put them all together, make up some excuse, he could finally get away.

“Good for you, Timmy, get out of that cubicle hell hole. Going to the seaside or something?”

“Something like that.” Timothy’s only plans were to finally reach the bottom of the cave. He had no interest in beaches or tourist attractions.

“Well hey, say hey to Anna-Lucia for me.” He winked a second time, once too much for conversation.

“Oh yeah, my girlfriend. Yes. I’ll tell her.” He surveyed his tuna sandwich with distaste and tossed it before returning to his cubicle.



Anna-Lucia drove him home. He liked for her to take the back roads in the evening past where the giant white water towers stood like monuments over the wet country-side and the only thing dotting the scenery were standalone convenience stores and a single run down abandoned barn. Rush hour was too overwhelming so late in the day and he liked for them to slide through the peaceful landscape and power lines.

They rolled up the driveway. Timothy’s house sat on a perpetually dewy hill, the massive warehouse lights from an industrial park on the other side. His was the only house for a half-mile in any direction.

“Let’s make dinner, first. Then I’d like you to help plug me into the game again,” said Timothy. He pushed the car door open, expecting her to help him into the chair.

“I actually made some special plans for you tonight.” She had a gleam in her eye that he’d never seen. “I want you to have dinner with my friend Amanda. She’s very nice, and I think you’ll get along.”

“I don’t want to go on a blind date, Anna-Lucia. Come on, help me out of the car.” Anna-Lucia’s eyes twinkled and she relaxed in her seat.

“Well you’re not strapping yourself into that game all night. Come on, let’s get you dressed. She’ll pick you up at seven.”

Amanda ended up being a Ph.D. student at Washington State University, and looked like the last person to ever set foot in a cave. She had strawberry-blonde hair and wore a long pink trench-coat with gold buttons. At the door she looked a little disappointed but smiled brightly. Timothy’s hair was still wet from the shower and slicked awkwardly over his forehead. They ate at a tiny Indian restaurant in town. Timothy had been in a few relationships over the years, but things inevitably went downhill, he spent too much time in bed, he didn’t listen or he wasn’t in the ‘here and now’ as so many put it, the relationships would slowly disintegrate. Since Anna-Lucia moved in he hadn’t felt the need to go on any dates. He played with his fork while Amanda told him about her studies.

“Amanda, have you ever been in a cave?” Timothy cut her off. She’d been trying to ask him about work. She raised a gingery eyebrow.

“No, have you?”

“The thing about caves is that there’s absolutely no light. If you’re a couple miles into a cave and your headlamp or flashlight goes out, it’s over. You’d think nothing could ever live down there, but there’s a whole ecosystem of animals that can survive in that bare environment.”

“Bats, for instance,” she offered with a bemused smile.

“Yeah, if you’re in a cartoon cave. So you’ve got the four cave zones: the entrance, twilight, transition, and deep cave. But there are critters that can survive down on the deepest levels, barely eating, almost never reproducing. Mostly those are cave beetles, salamanders, phantom caves nails, that sort of thing.” The waitress appeared at the table.

“Can I start you off with some appetizers?” The waitress smiled.

“Just a minute please,” Timothy waved her down. Amanda blushed and leaned back in her seat.

“So as I was saying, then you’ve got your underground rivers that disappear into sinkholes. It’s all very underworld down there!” Timothy prattled on about caves and their structures, expressing how amazing it would be to live inside a cave and how it’s really the most serene place to live. Amanda and the waitress shared a look of exasperation. Eventually Amanda managed to order a small tilapia dish with vegetables. Timothy wouldn’t order.

“Are you a cave critter? You don’t need to eat?” Timothy’s eyes lit up. He launched into a long speech about cave nutrients.

Timothy was ruining this date on purpose. Amanda had looked lovely in that aqua dress, but he had become irritable, and couldn’t see any purpose in blind dates or tilapia dishes or in thanking her as she awkwardly helped him through the door of the restaurant.

In the dim lamp past glow of the parking lot he heard the noise again: the same noise that he had heard in the cave. It was a soft groaning sound. He heard it back behind a few parked cars.

“Wait!” He rolled over in that direction, frantically searching.

“God, what now?” he heard Amanda mutter.

“I think something is following me. I’m sure of it. Can’t you hear that noise?” He tapped his left ear and listened.

“You really have a part missing,” Amanda folded her arms and headed back for the car. Silence in the car, nothing new about that, but Timothy didn’t bother reading her body language. He just wanted to go home and play SECRET OBJECT. She dropped him off without saying anything.



“Do you want to talk about it, Mr. Speller?” Anna-Lucia asked back at home. She waited up for him. She was making a pot of black tea.

“I’m George Clooney,” he shrugged, and smiled, “love wasn’t made for me.”

“Well sitting at home every night doesn’t work for you either.”

“When am I ever at home? I’ve gone cave diving and spelunking every night this week. Jonas says he can pass along early versions of new games to me so I never have to buy them.” Anna-Lucia wheeled him into his blue-draped bedroom and sat him upright on his bed. The little white gaming pod sat high on a wall-anchored book shelf, out of reach. Timothy leaned back on his arms while Anna-Lucia fished out his pajamas from the dresser. Timothy slid out of his corduroy jacket and unbuttoned his shirt. Anna-Lucia handed him his pajama shirt to button on himself. She helped him into the pajama bottoms. Timothy hadn’t eaten well in a while and the muscles in his arms had slimmed and disappeared. He was sorry she had to help him with such intimate things, but she was never embarrassed by anything. Her warm body was close to his momentarily while she pulled up the bottoms.

“Anna-Lucia, could you bring the gaming pod down?” Anna-Lucia stopped dressing him. Their faces were a few inches away.

“I think you’ve had enough with the game for one day.” She drew back his covers and got him a glass of water.

“I can’t sleep without it. I need to make some progress on finding my SECRET OBJECT,” he reasoned.

“You can’t sleep because you’re developing an addiction. You need to give that pod back to Jonas.”

“I’m not a child,” he retorted. “You don’t know what’s best for me.” He knew Anna-Lucia meant well, but there was a pounding in his head.

“Then why do you pay me to take care of you?” Anna-Lucia snapped.

“Well maybe I should stop paying you!” Timothy yelled. She stood up to her full height and put her hands on her hips.

“I’ve been meaning to take some time off anyways,” she said softly, eyes narrowed.

“Go then. I’m a grown man. If the world stops turning in your absence, I’ll just have to manage.”

She turned on her heel and left the room. He heard her in the next-door bedroom yanking her giant suitcase off her closet shelf, throw things around and zip the massive zipper. She left the house immediately. Timothy dragged himself across the bed and strained to look between the curtains. Anna-Lucia’s car rolled down the driveway and turned out of sight. *Finally* he thought. All he wanted was to dive back into the cave, and now he finally could. He looked over at the pod, sitting out-of reach on the shelf.

Shit, he thought. His chair was across the room. He hoisted himself up on his skinny arms and shimmied across the bed. He tried to lower himself onto the floor, but he fell on his wrist, painfully. It took him a minute to cross the room and longer to work himself up off the floor and

into the chair. His arms burned with the effort. *Fuck. Shit. Damnit*, Timothy muttered to himself. He hunted through the dark house looking for something long enough to push the gaming pod over the edge of the shelf. Why did he buy a house with high shelves anyway? He finally located a yardstick that would work. He carefully guided the pod over the edge. He tried to aim it into his lap. The pod fell. He scooted over. It dropped onto the floor with a definite crack.

“No, no, no, *no*,” Timothy dropped onto the floor and examined it. There was a fissure along the smooth white plastic shell of the gaming pod, but when he plugged it in the light still flicked on. He breathed a sigh of relief. He put in his ear pieces, donned the headset and snapped the opaque goggles over his gaunt face.

“SECRET OBJECT, here I come.” Timothy dove deep into the crystalline darkness of the game and heard the roar of the underground rivers. His body was muscular and full of energy again. Inside his backpack were all the glowing, abstract objects he had collected along the way. He stood in a small gallery, judging each offshoot path. He went splashing through a shallow plane of water and into the left-most passageway that sloped downwards. He heard the eerie groaning noise every now and again, but whatever it was, it hadn’t bothered him yet, so he ignored it. The pounding in his brain was no match for the nocturnes in his radio, which were so beautiful his brainwaves were surely flowing in time. Timothy followed the passage into the heart of the cave. It was a relief to be in the chilly, beautiful cave once again. He turned a corner and up ahead, outside the tunnel, he saw a beautiful blue glow. The minerals in the walls sparkled in the lit cave and he knew he had finally reached the object. He began running towards it. He would finally learn what had been missing inside him all his life. For the first time in years Timothy broke into a silly grin.

Then a great big sludgy thing closed around his neck. His windpipe closed off. The great thing dragged him backward, pulling him across the rubble. He scratched and pulled at the thing, but its great sticky hands weren't bothered by his assaults. He tried to lift himself out of the game. All you had to do was clap your hands four times. Timothy clapped, but nothing happened. He yelled and yelled "let me out!" But the invisible exit had sealed itself. Timothy was trapped inside the game.

The monster, which seemed to be made of thick black sludge and boulder muscles dragged him into its lair. In the wobbling light of his head lamp he made out great big eyes and a gaping mouth. It groaned as it moved. It threw Timothy up against the rocky back wall. Timothy dove away, looking for any little place to hide, but the enclave had no extra boulders or escape routes. He was forced to face the great big fear. It cocked its head, examining him, thinking of all the ways to eat him. Timothy felt for a rock and threw it at the monster. The rock sunk into the sludge and the monster licked its lips. It advanced on him, raising a great sludgy hand. Timothy closed his eyes. But nothing struck him. Timothy opened his eyes. The monster had stopped and was looking over its shoulder. Instead of eating him alive it was now leaving the lair, slipping out of sight. Its groans grew soft in the distance.

Timothy moaned. He picked himself up and tried to wipe the stinking sludge off his face and out of his ears.. His pack was lost in the struggle, his watch cracked. He had no food, no water, and examining the opaque reality of the cave, he was trapped. He tiptoed towards the mouth of the lair, but when he reached the end and peeked around for landmarks or a way out, his head lamp died. In caves, darkness is absolute.



Timothy felt his way around the cave, toes and fingers, bruised elbows and faint echoes leading him. He lost track of the time. Hours or days, he couldn't be sure which was which. His watch had shattered in the fight. In the moments where he rested his head on a rock, dug his fingers into the mud, he imagined himself to be a cave beetle. Tiny, living on nothing, in complete serenity. Whenever he heard the groaning he scuttled in the opposite direction. It was the life he always imagined for himself, but now that he couldn't escape this fate, it had become entirely unappealing.



The cave beetle man lived a solitary life in the darkness. He had no hunger, no thirst, no need to reproduce. He had no troubles, no work to do and nothing but the cave monster to fear, and even that he was conditioned to avoid. He stripped off his torn boots and ruined socks, stripped naked and learned to move like an animal across the rocky terrain. He wandered the cave and slept for indeterminable lengths of time. The secret object was only a faint glimmer in the back of his mind. It wasn't safe to cross rivers and any chance of finding it was gone. Whatever was missing from his old life no longer mattered, because his life was entirely changed. Was there anything left to find?

One day in his blind journey his fingers brushed something odd. He picked up the strange thing and felt its surfaces and plastic serrated side. It had a long rubbery spoke and dials. It was his pack radio. He toyed with it, trying to remember what it looked like. It had been turned off, and when he flicked the switch, the tiny red light came on. Timothy hadn't seen light in ages. He wept with happiness. Turning up the dials he put his ear to the speaker and listened to the soft static on the other end. There was no signal, but as time passed he would carry the radio everywhere, always remembering.



The signal had become stronger and he heard a faint of a siciliano on the other end. He fell asleep with the radio on that night, the slow movements luring him to sleep. When he woke, he heard the groaning, close. He started and found a small hiding place. He flicked off the radio. The groaning ceased. He waited a moment, then slowly turned the minuet back on.

A hand closed on his shoulder.

He barked out.

“Relax, it’s just me!” Anna-Lucia was bent over, panting, wearing pants over her shapely legs and full hips, a bandana and a small backpack. “Jesus do you know how long it took to find you?”

Timothy gaped at her form. She was even more beautiful than he remembered.

“What are you doing in here?” His voice was cracked.

“You really thought I wouldn’t find out you’ve been in here for weeks?” She smacked him on the chest. Physical contact felt so much stronger than he’d remembered. Anna-Lucia looked him up and down.

“Why are you naked, Timothy?” She had helped him into baths before, but he knew he must look wild. He hadn’t combed his hair, shaved or brushed his teeth. He had torn parts of his hair out. “My God, how does time work in this place?”

“An hour in real life...one day in the game,” Timothy’s eyes were wild. He reached out and felt her black braided hair. “I’ve been trapped. I couldn’t lift myself out...” Timothy then looked up in horror. “That means you’re stuck too. I broke the game, I broke it and we’re stuck here forever.” He started to smack himself on the head, furious. Anna-Lucia caught his hands and restrained him.

“I called up Jonas. I had a feeling I’d need help. He’s at the house helping me extract you.”

“Why didn’t you just pull the plug?” Timothy asked. That could have solved everything.

“Jonas was worried you’d been in here too long. He thought you might need some help dissociating from the game – if you didn’t want to leave...” They sat down on the slick boulders and Timothy thought about it for a while. He wanted to leave the cave, but he was scared.

“I’m afraid if I go back to the real world, I won’t last there long. My life was empty and pointless. There was nothing for me to find out there.”

“And in here? Is this enough for you?” She asked gently. In many ways the cave was enough for him. He could last down there longer than most people.

“I never found my SECRET OBJECT, the magical object I was always missing.”

“Believe me, Timothy, there are other things to find in life. If you want to quit your job, move to the Bahamas, learn the accordion, you can do it.” Timothy weighed this.

“Only if you come with me.” He reached out and took her hand. He wondered if, as he touched her hand in the game, Anna-Lucia’s body might feel a small tingle up above in real life.

Anna-Lucia smiled at the Cave Beetle Man.

“First let’s bring you back to life.” The whole cave began to shake. “And just one more thing – did you tell Jonas that I’m your girlfriend?”

“Don’t listen to anything Jonas says. Between the two of us, who seems crazier?” Timothy gestured at his wild appearance with a laugh. They gripped hands as their bodies flew upwards.

Strange Loop

Monty turned to the Midnight Spoon hostess in indignation and said, “There has been a mistake.”

“I’m sorry, sir?” She didn’t sound sorry; the sir was tacked on after a tired pause.

“You have made a mistake, there is someone sitting in my booth.” There was a figure occupying the round enclave, Monty’s special spot, past the tables of quiet chatter in the private circular booths decorated with shimmering bead curtains, the man was alone. The silhouette seemed strangely familiar, and yet Monty wasn’t expecting anyone and definitely didn’t know anyone with such an impressive shape to him. “I sit there every night, I won’t sit anywhere else. That is my *booth*. ”

The hostess, a new hire, gathered that this was somehow Monty's booth and assured him there must have been a mistake, and also that she was *sorry*. She tucked the menu under her arm and with Monty in tow they went to investigate.

Monty Crabgrass was a regular there, coming in late at night for a meal and staying to work on his perpetually unfinished novel until the staff filtered out from the kitchen to wipe down the tables with steaming rags. He was a solemn, well dressed sort of man and you could hear all this in his voice over the phone. He wasn't easy to deal with, but at least he was predictable. This was the only place Monty could work. Nothing enhanced his productivity and imagination like Midnight Spoon. It was something about the ambiance, the complex flavors of the broth that brought his memories rushing back to the surface.

Monty beat the waitress to the booth. He pulled back the bead curtain and addressed the shadowy character reclining on the purple couch. Monty gaped at his unwanted guest. He must have been nearly seven feet, emaciated, with dramatic facial features, and a decorative smoking jacket that draped around his bass drum torso. On one of his gargantuan fingers was a silver ring with a plated crest, a small design that reminded Monty who this person was meant to be.

"Oh, that's right," the waitress said brightly, "Stanislav...sorry can't pronounce your last name – was waiting for you. He said you two knew each other."

Monty was the only man in the world who could have recognized him. Stanislav was a character in Monty's novel. The book was set in the future. Stanislav's surname had a hopeless amount of consonants and his editor begged him to reconsider the name, but Monty patiently explained that Stanislav came from a distinguished line of nobility in Transylvania and his cultural heritage was a central part to his identity. Stanislav was an eccentric villain given to wild spending sprees and large feasts. Although he had a penchant for wild costumes, disguises and makeovers he was

always recognizable by a tiny silver ring on his left pinky. Monty had drawn the design on the corner of one of his pages, just to get all the details right. In his novel, Stanislav was an antagonist, popping up and changing his identities as he moved around in the novel. He would occasionally appear in disguise to get in the hero's way or trick him, depending on his mood. Overall Stanislav was an enjoyable villain, if those villains exist, but even Monty wasn't sure he'd want to run into him in real life, his behavior too unpredictable. Stanislav's character was meant to die in the end after accidentally derailing a train of the tracks and into a river. The icy draft of the restaurant made the tiny beads hanging around them sway.

"How did you get in here?!" Monty blanched. Stanislav raised a giant curvy eyebrow.

"Through the front door of course, although it seems to be irreparably broken." He folded his giant fingers on the table. Monty stood, examining Stanislav's every feature: the crooked nose, the flapping smoking jacket. Recognizing this man was like recognizing a long lost twin in the street – instinctive and terrifying. Stanislav examined Monty too, with equal interest and perplexity.

"You are just as I imagined you. How funny. Would you mind pulling back your left ear towards me, friend?" Stanislav asked.

"My left ear?"

"You have a long purple scar on the back of your ear from a perilous gardening incident, do you not?"

Monty stared at him. He pulled back his ear, sure that any moment a giant team of cameras would jump out from behind the beaded curtain, laughing and congratulating him on his new novel, his editor beaming and apologizing, because he "just *had* to." Monty scanned the restaurant. No one was watching them.

“Miraculous,” Stanislav waved over a waiter and ordered the full fondue sampler, lobster, crab ravioli, spinach truffles, raw vegetables, chicken, duck, and sparkling garden broths. “And to drink I’ll have a martini, and let’s see Monty, you drink a....whiskey sour with extra cherries, isn’t that right?” The waiter was a thin blonde boy with a smooth pony tail scribbling furiously on a notepad.

“Yes that’s right, but no – I don’t want anything,” Monty almost shouted. The waiter panned back and forth between them. “How do you know what I drink?” He asked Stanislav.

“Well, old friend, I know *you* better than anyone,” Stanislav broke into a wide grin. The waiter nodded, still confused by the conversation in the booth, and backed out through the bead curtain.

“Listen, is this some big joke? Are you an actor? Did Eddie tell you to dress up like a character in my novel and prank me? He knows I don’t like surprises. Did he pay you?” the man made no reply. “Come on, where are the cameras?” Monty yanked back the bead curtain, checked under the table, but no one was watching them. Around the open table areas steam from black pewter pots of broth curled up towards the embellished ceiling, coated with tiny pieces of reflective glass.

“It’s me Monty. I figured its time that we met.” He waited for Monty to respond. “Sit down.” Monty slid into the circular booth across from Stanislav and studied his face intently. His every feature was just as Monty had imagined him. The spiked hairline, the teeth, the cleft chin, he even smelled like hair oils and gun powder. Monty slipped off his messenger bag and extracted his manuscript. He flew through the pages and found Stanislav’s description.

“This isn’t possible,” whispered Monty, trailing his finger along the words.

“You’re telling me, I was as shocked as you are.”

“I’ve written you....and you’ve come to life?” Monty asked. Stanislav wheezed a laugh.

“Let’s get one thing straight Monty Crabgrass. It was I that wrote *you*. ” Out of a bizarre little satchel Stanislav produced a thick leather journal with many creased pages. “You are the sad, boorish shut-in relative of my main character, Esmerelda Crabgrass.”

“What- my...my cousin?” Monty said. Esmerelda Crabgrass was a few years younger than he, a favorite of the family who spoke three languages and seemed to have an impossible aptitude for everything she tried.

“She’s been travelling in Africa for the past two years, hasn’t she? That’s my doing. I wrote her, I wrote your whole family, and I wrote you. I figured that if I could control the lives of my characters, surely my writer character also had some control over his characters. I stopped by the publishing house to check in with my editor and I saw your name on the receptionist’s list of arranged meetings. I asked about you. Your editor, Eddie, told me that I would find you here. He also gave me a summary of your novel. It’s alright I suppose, but I’m not entirely pleased with my plot line.”

“You’ve got things mixed up. You’re the *villain* in *my* novel. I’m taking this manuscript to my editor tomorrow. It’s finally ready for publication.” Monty puffed out his chest and showed Stanislav the ring-bound stack of pages. “And there’s no way *I’m* made up,” he challenged. Stanislav looked a little put out by this. “I’m fun, but I’d hardly call myself a villain. And I’ll prove that I wrote you. You are Monty Crabgrass, 31, 5’8, 152 pounds, divorced parents, deathly afraid of gas leaks, solemn would-be writer with a girlfriend of one year, not that that’s going to last much longer,” Stanislav rattled off.

“Stanislav, 30, 6’11, 160 pounds, Transylvanian family, magician and con man,” Monty countered. “What do you mean me and my girlfriend won’t last much longer? I brought her home to meet my parents just last week.”

“What day is it? December 5th? I’d say you have a few weeks at most. But let’s not dwell on that. If you’re ready to accept that I’m me and you’re you, and that this situation is happening, I can explain to you why I’m here tonight,” Stanislav said.

“And why is that?” asked Monty

Stanislav leaned in. “I want you to change my ending.” Monty raised a brow and considered his manuscript. “You kill me off! As my life stands I have about a month until that ending comes to fruition. It seems that you, if you really are writing a novel about me, can save me from death.”

“For the last time, just to be clear, I’m writing you and you think you’re writing me, and you want me to change your ending,” Monty clarified, to which Stanislav nodded. Monty rubbed his aching forehead. “I can’t do that. It wouldn’t be right. The story wouldn’t make sense if I just let you run about. You cause too much trouble.”

“Let’s not be difficult Monty. You will change my ending.” Stanislav clenched Monty’s wrist. How strange, Monty thought, he’s strong, he could snap my wrist.

“Absolutely not. No. If you are who you say you are, then nothing good can come of you being here,” Monty said. He sat back, calculating. “Maybe my novel isn’t ready. Maybe I should write you out altogether.”

Stanislav jumped to his feet. The bead curtain shimmered from his movement. Standing, his height was impressive, but it had an other-worldly quality that seemed to cast a larger shadow than the figure it came from.

“If you write me out I’ll disappear forever.” He took hold on Monty’s arm, speaking urgently.

“Now you and I both know that we’re both capable of changing each other’s endings. I came here to ask nicely. But if you make me disappear, then as your writer, you disappear too.”

Monty glared up at Stanislav, ripping his arm loose.

“We’ll have to see.” Just then the waiter came into the bead curtain to deliver a wide tray of raw meats and vegetables, a helper carrying the pot and broth. Month pushed out of the booth before the waiter could explain each dish. He ran out of the restaurant and into the cold night air, searching for his car, racing home to rewrite his story.

At home Monty flipped on a few lamps, blasted his space heater and lifted his cat off his writing desk. He opened his laptop and began editing. To prevent Stanislav from making any big changes to his life, Monty typed out that Stanislav had broken both hands, so he could no longer type. Punching each key was like sticking a needle in a voodoo doll. He wrote that Stanislav was stuck in the house and couldn’t leave. But it wasn’t long before Stanislav started making counter moves. The next morning random fires began starting on his kitchen stove. He scrambled to put them out. Even with broken hands, Stanislav must have gotten someone else to do his writing for him. Monty was scrambling around his kitchen in his disheveled work clothes, trying to put them out with a tiny extinguisher he kept under the sink. Monty would have alerted the police about these attacks, but he knew that if he suggested some fictional character was on the other side of the town, writing calamitous situations to terrorize him, he knew nothing would be done. Free speech and all that. By mid-day, his groceries mysteriously vanished from his pantry and freezer and when he tried to go out and buy some more, he found that his foot couldn’t get through the front door. In his ear Monty could hear the scratching of a pencil. He had never noticed this before, maybe because Stanislav mostly wrote about his cousin Esmerelda, but now Stanislav’s undivided attention was locked on him. Of course, neither Monty nor Stanislav could do fatal harm to the other without eliminating themselves, but their attacks continued over the next day, until Monty was ragged, starving, and incapable of sleep, fearful that a more sinister attack would catch him while he slept.

Instead of sleeping, he stayed up in his unadorned two-bedroom apartment, racing back and forth between his laptop and his coffee machine, making pungent cups of house blend and erasing Stanislav's name from every page. As he deleted the traces of Stanislav he looked around his apartment, the unused bedroom that had never been slept in, his mediocre bachelor's degree hanging above the desk, a small framed portrait of him and his girlfriend seated on his parent's couch. The photo was a bit stiff. His girlfriend had been a little uncomfortable meeting the family and the whole weekend hadn't left him with a strong feeling that she had bonded with his parents. He had his fluffy white cat, and only a couple friends, but when he was deep into writing his novel, he began ignoring calls and saw less of everyone. His editor greeted him with a slight sigh or a professional smile, and always seemed eager to end their meetings right on the hour, no later. His life had hit a doldrums, as Stanislav suggested. He was the periphery to someone else's story, no more. Monty came to the very last 'Stanislav' in his novel. He pictured his villain lying in a bed somewhere, feverish and fading into nothing, barely holding onto his existence. His phone rang. He flew across the room.

"Hello?"

"So you still haven't erased me," Stanislav wheezed. "Does this mean you've changed your mind or are you just trying to torture me?" Monty gripped the marble counter, rubbing his aching ribs.

"You sound awful.

"You sound worse. I'm alive. But I guess you realized you need me. Is that empty apartment of yours starting to look unsatisfying?"

"I could leave you like this. I'm guessing you barely have to the strength to do anything, let alone write me out of existence."

“But it has occurred to you that our little kerfuffle could benefit us both.” Monty hadn’t thought about this. But what could a villain ever do for him?

“I foresee only disaster,” Monty intoned. “I know you. If I let you run free you’ll go on crime sprees or kidnap children. And if that weren’t bad enough, what if something you do gets back to me? I don’t want to be responsible for the trouble you cause in this world. And why would I let you write out my plot line? You’d torture me like you’re torturing me right now. Let me be clear: no one but me controls my life. What if one day you decide to write me a disaster? What if you feel like killing off my family to ‘strengthen my character’ or to cripple me in a freak accident?”

“Monty dearest, would you like to know how you die?” Stanislav asked. Monty took in a sharp breath. “I can tell you, you know.” He waited. “Or not. All I’m saying is that if you wrote me a happy life, I could do the same for you. Do you want to be a billionaire?”

Monty refused to answer. He walked to his sofa and sank face-down into the cushions, breathing in the fine particles of dust.

“Would you like to be immortal or marry the reincarnation of Marilyn Monroe? This can all be arranged. Think of the happily-ever-after’s. Put my name back in your story. Give me a little extra strength. I can make it so your novel does well.”

“It’s already going to do well. My editor said so,” Monty said.

“I’m sure he did. But you’ve already missed your meeting with him. Hasn’t called to check up on you? I can see the reviews for your work now: ‘wow, that was really something,’ or ‘the best book in the sales bin.’

Monty looked over at his manuscript, sitting in the light of his two-pronged desk lamp, full of doubt. In the past day he had scribbled over the pristine pages, torn things out, spilled coffee all

over it. His editor hadn't called or e-mailed. It was possible he had lost all interest in Monty's book and figured Monty had given up.

"What we have here is a strange loop, an Escher tessellation, a chicken and an egg," the wheezing voice crawled inside Monty's brain and made him shudder.

"That's ridiculous, eggs were around long before chickens" Monty argued.

"Both of us need to keep writing for one another. It's the only way to make this situation work. If you want to negotiate, you'll let me leave my home." With that, Stanislav hung up the phone.

Monty crossed the room, dragging his toes along the rug, and pressed his forehead up against the cold window and looked out over the city, thinking.

When the sun finally rose he found he could step outside his front door and into the grey and cream hallway. He dropped into a bakery to pick up several loaves of sugar powdered bread, the kind with shining crusts. He ate them quickly and felt his strength return a little. He found Stanislav sitting on a street-side bench, watching cars race and examining the slant of the road that curved around a blue glass office building. Monty approached him and sat down, knowing that Stanislav must have written their meeting. He felt weaker, less sure that he was the first person to write Stanislav and not the other way around. Monty had no grand imagination, no exceptional talent, yet he found small successes here and there, no doubt thanks to Stanislav. "Are you ready to re-write?" Stanislav raised his dark brows. Monty pulled out a crumpled notepad and a small, silver pen. Stanislav did the same. Monty scribbled down the title of his new book.

Stanislav.

The Geometry of You

At fourteen, Dominique was a platonic friend who felt no apprehension at calling me late at night or letting me copy off her math tests, all of which were filled with dreamlike geometry. She chewed cinnamon gum with perfect teeth and when she stretched, her copper hair spilled onto my desk in double-math. I called her over spring break to ask her to see *Platoon* with me, but as she answered, she and her boyfriend swerved their car around a deer and drove into a lake. He survived, but her death set off a chain of reincarnations.

I saw her again at eighteen. This time she was a colt-boned ballerina, listed on the playbill as “Dominique Joseph.” She made my head pirouette, but when I looked her up again she was untraceable. The third time I saw her was even briefer. I was twenty-one and we passed in a street fair under dark weather. She was now a full-faced Korean woman with soulful eyes, carrying a portfolio and wearing a nametag. Our eyes met but she kept walking down the street until she had all but turned from color into black and white.

It took me a few times to put things together. Occasionally my apartment phone would ring at 4 a.m. and I’d hear her tired voice, but every time the power would give out, her voice would turn

to static or she would apologize, for she had called the wrong number. I tried to rationalize my way out of these events but there was no ignoring the fact she was very much alive in some form or another. In every city I pass through I look up “Dominique Joseph” in a phone book, only to find that the woman I was asking for had recently died or dissolved into nowhere. I have been unable to grieve the original Dominique’s death for my belief that each of these fateful women had disappeared moments after leaving me, or had been transported into the body of another woman vectored my way, and that my phone call had started it all. A string of unhelpful therapists refused to draw conclusions in hopes that I would solve the problem myself or reason that all this had been a fabulous misunderstanding. Textbooks on Buddhism proved more helpful, the neat text ensuring me that my predicament was not a delusion or a bad dream but something cultural. I spent my formative years under library lamp-light, deep in urban legends, myths and the dreamy recollections of her geometry, confident that someday, I would catch her for good.

Now at twenty-five I had begun my trip into Paris on the underground Metro, meaning to take the concierge position at Hotel Napoleon. Rolling suitcase in hand, I picked one of two remaining seats in the crowded steel car. We barreled into the tunnel, window lights flashing. I slid on my Walkman earphones and sank into my seat for the sixty minute ride. At the next stop, a woman got on. She spotted the seat next to me and took it. Her bags were tagged: Dominique Joseph. Reincarnation many-times removed. I sat up straight. As she settled in I assessed her reflection in the car window. This time she had relaxed black hair parted down the center and skin made with the warmth of Egyptian spices. She dressed smartly; a white linen blouse that fell over her perfect shoulders, woven trousers and leather shoes. An obsidian charm hung from her neck on a fine gold chain. She twisted it with healthy, unpainted fingernails. She relaxed her left

knee next to my right and her fingers drummed a sonata on the seat. She was the most beautiful reincarnation yet. We glanced at one another, smiled, and the Metro lurched. We passed gates with numbers that went backwards, forwards, changed to symbols, and then disappeared altogether, exchanging passengers. As with every reincarnation, I knew this woman's life was swiftly coming to a close, and our mutual entrapment on a high-speed rail gave me little comfort. All I could think to do was try to make conversation. We both held our tickets in our lap and I noticed her ticket number was exactly the same as mine. A glitch in the massive railway system that connected Europe.

"Sorry, but we have the same Metro ticket? I thought they were all supposed to be unique?" She shifted in her seat to compare them.

"Maybe we've won a prize." She twirled it between index and middle fingers. We exchanged names: Dominique and Gerard. We made comfortable small talk that my brain didn't fully process, about the books we were both reading, the weather. I might have told her a joke. On the fifty-ninth minute, the Metro came to a smooth stop at my gate. No train wreck. I wiped sweat from underneath my collar. We both rose, and then laughed in surprise at having the same stop. "The same ticket, the same stop," she wondered aloud, "I feel like this should be some kind of metaphor." I loved metaphors. I clenched my suitcase handles and followed her out.

"Let me buy you some coffee. If you're not headed anywhere," I qualified. I stepped around her in a subtle attempt to guide her away from the train tracks.

"Sure, I just have to be somewhere by five."

So I had at least a few hours before I lost her again. Maybe I could give her my number or the hotel address and she could find me again? We mirrored each other's smile. We stepped onto the landing, but on the fifty-ninth second of the fifty-ninth minute of that supernatural hour, a swarm

of travelers in forbidding work clothing, eyes frantic, was running through the station. I knew that our time was up. Dominique was swept away in the crowd and I tried to follow, but the opposite flow of traffic forcibly pushed me back nearly half a mile. She looked back at me in apology before she was swept out of sight. My fifth incarnate should be arriving anywhere between next week and two years. Rough math of course. My stomach twinged at the wait. I left the steaming station and walked two blocks through the city snow and found Hotel Napoleon on a street corner with no street signs. True to its name, the building was dark and weathered from the years, its revolutionary-era architecture imposing. It would have looked like a fortress, but surrounded by street corners full of modern boutiques, shopping bags and pedestrians in bright winter coats, it looked a little forgotten. From the outside, I counted fifteen stories. On the inside, there were fifty. All of them spiraled clockwise around the building with a heavenly chandelier in the center. A soothing piano played from nowhere. I spent a long morning touring the hotel with the owner, a salt-and-peppered Argentinian with the glare of PTSD in his black eyes. As we climbed the stairs, he recounted the night that Napoleon Bonaparte and his first wife, Joséphine de Beauharnais, had stayed in the master suite on the eve of his revolution. The staff lined the hotel like living suits of armor and floated about the halls as if they had been reincarnated hundreds of times. Maybe they were reincarnated soldiers from the Napoleonic wars? I let my imagination run wild as I passed the afternoon becoming familiar with all fifty floors. The candy striped wallpaper and the dark restaurant were part of the original structure, but the rest was renovated with laundry rooms, silver kitchens, and an indoor pool complete with exercise equipment and synthetic tropical plants that made the winter outside seem very far away. After the tour I moved into my dimly-lit apartment on the base floor and put on my

conciierge uniform. It seemed like forever since I saw Dominique on the Metro. I tucked the ticket in my dresser.

At the welcome desk I learned the computer systems that looked at least a decade old. I would have to update them when I got the chance. When I looked up from the blue glow of the computer screen, a woman was standing there: Dominique.

The chances of us ending up in the same place struck me. None of the reincarnates and I had ever intersected twice on the grid. We start at 0,0, and our slopes always take us far away. This Dominique had wheeled around mid-grid, upside down and backwards like a function. When did those numbers every really happen in nature? This was my chance. Something was wrong though; she was staring off in the distance, unaware that I stood right behind the desk.

“Dominique!”

She gave me an absent, polite smile but didn’t meet my gaze.

“Yes, Dominique Joseph. I made my reservation last week; I’d like to check in.” I stared at her as she rifled through her leather purse and pulled out her ID. She handed it to me. It was definitely her.

“We met on the train,” I reminded her. She ignored this and rummaged through her purse for something, tucking her hair behind her ear. The owner appeared over my shoulder and prompted me forward. I scrolled through the system in disbelief. Master suite, check in date: December 22nd 1997, check out date: December 24th 1997.

“Yes, yes of course. Just one moment.” What was wrong with her? Had she forgotten me already? Her license proved this was no identical twin. Was she mentally disturbed? Suffering from brain damage? Was she joking? I looked up at her. She seemed perfectly lucid, and yet there was no recognition in her face. I settled her check in fee.

“Here you are, Dom,” I said softly. I handed her a tiny golden key, almost too small for my fingers. She thanked me and a bellboy rolled her bags into the elevator shaft with her.

“You ought to call her *Ms. Joseph*,” the owner said. “And don’t splutter at patrons.”

I had to speak to her. She was only staying for three days, so I was on a time crunch. I tried to get her attention, but on each attempt she’d reintroduce herself, as if she had no recollection of meeting me on the Metro or even at the front desk. She was always busy, rushing off in woven slacks, talking to someone on her cell phone. When I did speak to her, she heard me as though from far away. This mystery was not one I had seen before in my complicated past with supernatural things. I would have to take a delicate approach. After all, my own sanity was hanging in the balance, and one does not walk away from this situation without changing completely.

I took this opportunity to get to know the woman I was in love with as if through a one-way mirror. I hadn’t known her for eleven years – I could only imagine how different Dominique was now. I was there at the desk to wish her a good morning. I was there to hand her fresh towels when she went swimming. I was there to seat her in the restaurant and bring her food. To my pleasure, she always ate alone. She had exquisite taste; I could only imagine the flavor of her tongue after years of such beautiful food. For breakfast, she took grapefruit and pure black coffee, the steam curling in spirals. She spent lunchtime out of the hotel, and I wondered where she might be. For dinner she came back looking exhausted but fulfilled by the city, and asked to sit in the smoking section, not because she smoked, but because she loved the smell. I brought her *belon* oysters, braised duck, wines, mango sauces and salads that looked like wildflowers, and each time she looked up at me, her eyes watering from the haze, and thanked me without recognition.

When she left the hotel on her second day, I cleaned her room. Napoleon's master suite was at the top of the spiral on the fiftieth floor, the only door with a small brass knocker and no doorknob, just a keyhole. The room was luxurious. The king-sized bedspread was embroidered with gold threads into a gleaming atlas. Paris looked conquerable from the window. I navigated the room without touching anything, not wanting to disturb her perfect balance.

It was here that I wondered how well I really knew Dominique, now that I had so many answers within reach. Was she the same after all these years? Or had so many reincarnations diluted her? I looked for her deep secrets, but the longer I looked, the more fantastical she seemed. Her wardrobe door hung open, and with one fingertip I touched a silk sleeve. I scrubbed her bathroom and restocked plush towels and mollusk-shaped soaps. In her bathroom she had a store of bath oils and shimmering medicines, one of them a vial of solid gold that looked to contain the essence of youth. I found her journal on the bed, bound in red leather, but when I opened it, it was full of some pure, elegiac language I couldn't understand or even recognize; the running script of an impenetrable mind. I flicked through her paperback mystery novels, her maps and schedules, circled under today's date: lunch with G.

I came to her drawing pad last. A brain equally leveled on both the left and right sides showed itself on every page. Her hand was bold and had such depth I thought my tracing finger would fall through the illustration. There was one still life, a bowl of fruit in a sunny window, that gave off the faint scent of strawberries. Another sketch of a seaside filled my lungs with salty air. I thought back to Dominique's flawless geometry in high school. Among her drawings I found a recent sketch of a man, a man that looked exactly like me. The pencil had me in street fair, hands in my pockets with storm clouds approaching from behind. I felt as though I had followed my black and white woman down the road and learned that she was still real. Was she remembering

me? What was her subconscious telling her? From outside the building I heard police sirens and froze, forgetting that I was guilty of nothing. Still, I felt someone ought to come for me. I took the picture from the spiral binding and fled the room. I started to wonder if I was the crazy one.

On Christmas Eve, the biggest snowstorm of the century hit Paris and left the city under a glaze of ice. The Airport was flooded, flights delayed. A strain of power-outages hit the hotel. The metro froze beneath us like a giant petrified snake and inside Hotel Napoleon the elevators hung in midair. The tinkling music died in the cold, leaving only the howling wind. The lobby crowded with a hoard of patrons trying to extend their stays. All the systems were down, and the job of the staff became crowd control. Men and women leaned over the counters and waved their credit cards in the faces of the attendants.

The staff distributed candles to every room. The restaurant downstairs rationed out water bottles and cucumber sandwiches and passed out all the refrigerated food and fruit. Children happily chewed on hunks of butter cookie dough and leftover cakes while the adults ate their modest sandwiches. The heat too had shut off, and the breath of the crowd rose like the smoke from a battlefield. We distributed extra wool blankets. In all of the rush, I hadn't once seen Dominique.

At 11:59 that night, I was undressing for bed, laying straight my belt and smoothing out my pant legs. As soon as the power came back on, Dominique would be gone, but there was nothing left I could do. I dug through my nightstand and found my metro ticket, the identical number that connected me to Dominique. I had just flopped onto my bed when I got a call from Dominique. It was late, and in her old restless manner, she asked for more candles for her suite. I hesitated, but hearing that ghostly voice calling my telephone, I promised myself that this would be the last time I'd seek her out. Too tired to put on my concierge uniform, I wrapped myself in my robe,

tucking my magic ticket into my pocket. I tapped my feet into my loafers and headed for the storage room. I collected her candles from a bottom compartment and lit my own for the journey. The elevators were paralyzed, so I took the staircase, hardly feeling the stair flights that flew under my feet.

I glided down the hall. The room numbers gleamed in the candlelight as I passed. A vase of roses on a table had turned to stone. I came to the end of the hall and clicked the brass knocker quietly. The door cracked open.

What peered out of the room was invariably my own face. I jumped backwards. He slipped out and shut the door quietly behind him. It was me, but different somehow. The same narrow chin, deep-set eyes, blunt nose, he smoothed his dark hair compulsively over his temple, but it was a sharper me, a darker one with something in the eyes I didn't like, cut from darker lines like a near perfect illustration let off the page.

“Dom’s inside.”

He waited for me to say something. He seemed to be debating what to do with me.

“You can have the night. She’ll recognize you with me gone, but you’re staying in this hotel. Don’t leave.” His voice rang with threat. He swiped my candle and strode off down the hallway before I could speak, passing the fluorescent light of the ice machine. He turned the corner and disappeared. In the darkness I bent over, sick to my stomach. My very own reincarnate. The door cracked open again, and Dominique appeared in a nightgown that blended into her skin. Her hair was relaxed, tucked behind her perfect, unpierced ears.

“Will you come to bed already?” She rubbed her eyes and reached out a hand blindly. I nodded. What could I say in this moment? Half of me was here, the other half running around Paris. She pressed her hand to my chest. In the room I was suddenly aware of how very high up

we were, Paris a spectacular frozen sculpture below us. I was hyper sensitive to the glacial city lights, the artificial colors of lit windows, the smoke of our breath and the cool silk bedspread beneath us. I had never kissed Dom until now, but she tasted like the cinnamon gum that lit my brain on fire in double-math. At once I felt like I was discovering new territory but also that my other half had been here at least a thousand times before. Maybe it was because I felt mentally and physically outside my body, but I pulled away from her. I slid to the corner of the bed and mumbled an apology. I rubbed my eyes and reached down to feel the carpet, looking for reality in the polyester blend between my fingers

“It’s okay, it happens to everyone...” she said.

“What? No, it’s not that. I’m just feeling...scatterbrained.” She left me alone for a few minutes. Her toes rested against my side. I held them.

“How long have we known each other, Dominique?” I asked.

She cleared her throat. “We met on the train.”

“I had a childhood friend *just* like you. Have I told you that?” I eyed the black duffle bag that my other half had left behind in the corner of the room. They must have been interacting for days, but I didn’t know what he had told her about me. About himself. It was very confusing to think of myself as two different people.

“I had a friend like you too. Same name and everything, it’s funny. He was scatterbrained all the time too.” I turned around. I couldn’t see her face in the darkness.

“You had a friend named Gerard? What happened to him?”

“I can’t remember, but let me ask you something.” She tucked her legs under herself and looked out the window. “Do you believe in reincarnation?” She began to describe how she would

always run into men with my same name – how she felt oddly attracted to them but could never explain why. They looked nothing like each other but all reminded her of her childhood friend.

“And that didn’t drive you crazy?” I asked.

“For a little while. I thought I was trapped in the *Twilight Zone*, but after I did a little digging, I realized: this is why there’s Nirvana,” she explained.

“I never really cared for grunge,” I joked.

She laughed. “Not the band. Nirvana is the freedom from the endless cycle of reincarnation. Reincarnation isn’t just about living forever or being reborn as an animal. We always answer for things we did in past lives, that’s Karma – but if we don’t love or hate anything in unequal measure, we can transcend everything. You move past whatever you did wrong in a past life... but I’m talking myself into a knot, you might as well find it in a dictionary.”

I told her I’d like to live forever but she disagreed.

“I’d just hate to think that there were dozens of me and no personal progress you know? It’s hard enough to be a whole entire person, but to constantly change into someone else; you’d feel scatterbrained *all* the time. With all the bad things happening to you, you’d think you were answering for something you didn’t do. Anyways, there’s probably no connection to my friend Gerard. People everywhere have identical names. I’m just tossing around half-formed theories here.”

“Huh.”

“There was a story in the paper the other day – how an Indian woman lost her teenage son and the next day an iguana walked through the door. And this woman, she started crying

because she thought her son had been reborn. She let it live in her house and fed it; she loved that iguana even though...well maybe it was her son – who am I to say?”

I lay back on the bed. I imagined Dominique reborn as a fish – a plant – a man – a coral reef – a supernova. Whether or not reincarnation was real – my infatuation with Dominique made me see her everywhere, in every woman. She was taking over my life. I needed balance. I needed *Nirvana*. I didn’t want to end up wilting away as someone’s forgotten houseplant because I couldn’t get my life in order. I fell asleep with one foot hanging off the bed and didn’t dream all night, even though Dominique was tracing those sublime circles around my abdomen. When the Christmas sun rose we were still in a tangled sleep. I woke first. My every muscle was limp. We had kicked off the heavy bedspread and pale light was streaming in. The storm had passed overnight. The city was tentatively rising below us. I nudged Dominique awake.

“Good morning,” she said. She stretched like a cat and her toes ran down my shin. I hugged her closer. We stayed like that for a moment and I breathed in the scent of our overheated bodies, after which I rose and slowly went about the room recollecting myself. Shirt, cold water to the face, last night’s conversation, the sting of cinnamon, *Nirvana*. We didn’t say much, but I told her I needed to run some errands. I promised to meet her for lunch after she checked out of the hotel. I forced myself not to kiss her.

My reincarnate was waiting outside, leaning against the wall. He had found a clean white shirt and his jacket collar turned up around his face. He was the picture of health and vigor. He looked me over, putting together my night.

“You look awful.” For a moment I considered attacking him. Standing there, I didn’t like the look of myself. But he was vital to my happy ending. I told him to meet Dom for lunch and then I got away as quick as possible.

“What? No goodbye?” he called. It can’t be healthy to look into one’s soul for more than a few minutes. I took the stairs, feeling a change inside me with each flight. I returned to my apartment on the bottom floor and showered. My body felt half as full as the night before. I dressed slowly into my concierge uniform.

Dominique strode through the lobby and to the desk. I let another employee handle her checkout and ducked into the glass elevator. In my ascent I took one last look at her as she walked through the lobby. For a moment I felt the urge to jam all the buttons, to fly from the elevator, but I instead I watched as she wheeled through the revolving doors and into the bright and icy Christmas morning, heading towards a café three blocks down, going to meet her one true love, the empty chair where my other body, my other soul would sit. They would laugh, order coffee, their eyes would water in the cold and they would carry on with their lives. I would stay here, away from it all. In the years after I would see her less often. I would stop actively looking and keep my head down. Any and all traces of her would slowly diminish, until I no longer saw in her face. There would be rows of nametags laid out for a convention, hers among them. I would see a Dominique staring out at me from a portrait in a gallery or her name called over an intercom, her name rolling in movie credits as an extra, her initials littered in books. This would happen slowly until every trace of her became two-dimensional, theoretical, sounds and suggestions from my subconscious, disappearing into the nothingness of my everyday life. I would not look for her, I would only pray I had actually moved on with my own life, pray that I had truly changed, that I was not just a reincarnation of my former self, drifting through the streets or gliding along by a black lake, spotting a deer in the road, or slamming the brakes with a deafening screech.

