

The Song of the End of the World, Part I

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1. Entity (noun)

en·ti·ty | \ 'en-tə-tē

1a: BEING, EXISTENCE

especially : independent, separate, or self-contained existence

b: the existence of a thing as contrasted with its attributes

2: something that has separate and distinct existence and objective or conceptual reality
(from Merriam-Webster)

2. “That year’s winter troubles were in the rear-view; the failed impeachment of President Clinton had finally concluded, and Columbine was surely a one-off horror. The Summer of 1999 presented no worries, not in any intensity that mattered. May to September was a time to take nothing seriously, to simply enjoy summer days that were vapid and ridiculous, innovative and exciting. Like the long-dead refugees from the Roaring ‘20s, we didn’t know it may never be that good again.”

-Nathan S. Webster

3. “Well, if it were to actually happen... if it were, could be I like... fucking die that day. You know?”

-Ian Smith Owen

4. *I want you to come with me / I want you to come with me / Come with me, come with me*

-My Life With the Thrill Kill Kult

Summer 1949

One wakes up in her huge house. The music coming out of the hole on the floor is Burl Ives' 'On Springfield Mountain', from the 1949 four 10-inch 78-rpm disc release by Columbia Records, 'The Return of the Wayfaring Stranger'.

Tu-rudy-nay, tu-rudy-new, tu-rudy-nay-tu-rudy-new

Tu-rudy-nay, tu-rudy-new, tu-rudy-nay-tu-rudy-new

One lays in bed, face up, legs splayed, arms resting at either side, staring unblinking at one of the white wooden beams holding up the pitched roof above. Every square inch of One's skin is in direct contact with either, a) air, or b) the quilt of the nicely done bed beneath her. The music plays on. One's house consists of a bedroom, the *bureau*, and a kitchen. A corridor connects the bedroom and the kitchen. There is a porch outside the wall parallel to the corridor. The *bureau* is located between the bedroom and the kitchen. Daylight and breeze fill the entire house thanks to One's huge open windows.

Tu-rudy-nay, tu-rudy-new, tu-rudy-nay-tu-rudy-new

Tu-rudy-nay, tu-rudy-new, tu-rudy-nay-tu-rudy-new

One slowly sits up and sees the door of the *bureau* right in front, beyond the end of the bed, maybe 6 paces away. The paint on it is the same off-white as that on the rest of the wooden interior and exterior walls of the house. One gazes to the right at the portion of the *bureau* wall at the right of the door, which meets the exterior wall of the house that is to the right. One stares at it. Then, sits on the edge of the bed for a period of time. One stands and walks on the creaky, aged, grey wooden floor, two paces and a half to the open window. One looks outside, out to the vast expanse of grassy field outside the house. The field's color is pure summer light green. The pure summer light green field extends from the house to the faraway mountains in the distance. They look purple from One's house. One turns, just the head, to the left, and sees the mountains in the distance. Then turns it again, this time slowly back, and follows the purple mountains and their angular snow-capped peaks all the way to the right, to the purple, snow-capped mountains in the distance. One looks up at the sky. The sky's color is pure summer light blue. The outside world is blue and green, with a purple waistband. One extends an arm, the right one, out the

window and holds out a finger – index – and, almost immediately, two chirping blue birds perch on it cheerfully. Their blue is the same as the sky's. Their heads are large and round, with large black eyes and small yellow beaks. They chirp cheerfully and they look at One. One looks at them. They chirp at One. One of them suddenly flies away, the other follows. One retracts the extended finger and brings the extended arm back in and turns to walk. One walks over to the *bureau*.

Th farmer was plowin' his field one day / Rightful-rightful-tilley-fi-day

Th farmer was plowin' his field one day / Th Devil came up to him he did say

With a rightful-la, tilley-fi-day / Rightful-rightful-tilley-fi-day

A new song is playing now. One stops at the bureau's door, and stares at it for a moment. Hands down. Expressionless. One walks then to the left past the hole on the floor to the corridor leading to the kitchen. One walks across the corridor to the kitchen. In the kitchen, then walks to the window beside the front door. And looks through it and past the porch outside to the vast expanse of pure summer light green field outside the house, which extends to the faraway mountains in the distance. The faraway mountains are snow-capped, and look purple from One's house. One turns, just the head, to the left, and sees the mountains in the distance though the length of the empty porch. Then, turns it again, this time to the right, to the purple, snow-capped mountains in the distance. The mountains are visible past the end of the porch to the right. The sky above the mountains is pure summer light blue. The outside world is blue and green, with a purple waistband.

The music keeps playing, the birds keep chirping outside, the sun keeps bathing the whole house with natural light, and the breeze keeps blowing pleasantly about the house.

With a rightful-la-tilley-fi-day / Rightful-rightful-tilley-fi-day

Then, go back to the *bureau*. One walks back through the corridor and past the hole on the floor to the *bureau*. One goes into the *bureau* to brush some teeth. One then washes some face. Then stands on the shower and urinates, grabs the chrome lever shower handle and pulls. Artificial rain! Then sits on the bidet and evacuates. One stands up and regards her making. Caninish. But pachydermically scaled. Clay! Yellow specks, roughly an eighth of an inch in size, sporadically dot the material along its curled length. Gold? One presses down on the material. Picks some up. Holds it. Squeezes a rather thick section. Harder section. Material excretes out furiously from between five contracted fingers. One opens the hand. One looks at the palm.

Clay! One brings the hand to the face and applies material to it. Picks up some more. Grab. Apply. Repeat. One then washes some face. One then looks in the full body mirror. One stares back at the figure reflected on the full-body mirror for another period of time. Hands down. Expressionless. One opens the otherwise empty medicine cabinet and takes out One's toonified multicolor plastic comb and pretends to comb some hair. One puts the comb down. One turns the chrome cold water sink handle counterclockwise. Cold water comes out. One turns around and walks out of the *bureau*.

So, th Devil he hoisted 'er up on his hump / Rightful-rightful-tilley-fi-day

Th Devil he hoisted 'er up on his hump / N' back to earth with her he did jump

With a rightful-la, tilley-fi-day / Rightful-rightful-tilley-fi-day

One walks to the bed. One then turns and walks past the hole on the floor to the corridor and across the corridor to the kitchen. One walks to the front door and stands in front of it. Hands down. Expressionless. The outside world is blue and green, with a purple waistband. One stands in front of the front door looking straight at it, as the music keeps playing, the birds keep chirping outside, the sun keeps bathing the whole house with natural light, and the breeze keeps blowing pleasantly about the house.

One then turns to go back to the bedroom. One walks across the corridor to the bed. One sits on the bed, brings both feet up. Slides over to the center of the bed. Settles back, with legs splayed in front, head on the bed, and arms to the sides. And closes her eyes.

The music keeps playing, the birds keep chirping outside, the sun keeps bathing the whole house with natural light, and the breeze keeps blowing pleasantly about the house.

With a rightful-la, tilley-fi-day / Rightful-rightful-tilley-fi-day

Summer 1999

A guy is standing at the free throw line of an outdoor public basketball court located at the edge of a small suburban park, flanked on the other side by a quiet “small-town urban” street lined with small businesses. Let’s call him ‘Guy One’ for now. Guy One’s got his head down, gazing at his shoes, dribbling the basketball, actually basketball-shoegazing in silence, facing the basket.

Pete’s Fish & Chips, as well as the ageing Lux’s Abbey Theater, Smugsworth Capital Bank and Paco’s House of Burritos (We Also Have Tacos!), are all visible from the court.

Dribble, dribble, dribble.

The season is summer, the year is 1999, the time nine past noon and the atmosphere your typical Midwestern-summer-nine-past-noon scorching. Humidity levels: sub-tropical, too, with virtually no wind. Sweat and dampness: the rule on the surface of your average *sapiens*... *and* cold-drink container of any kind.

Dribble, dribble, dribble, dribble, *dribble*.

While Guy One’s alone in the court, other people are visible, both passing by in their cars and occasionally walking by along the sidewalk on either side of the street. Guy One halts his basketball-shoegazing dribbling and holds the ball with both hands. He looks up at the basket. He shoots. The basketball bounces ungracefully (disgracefully?) off the rim and the backboard’s loud rattling has decreased to almost zero dB by second 3. Guy One makes his way to the ball which has bounced away and just now rolled past the 3-point line, en route to the sideline. The ball crosses the sideline, the ball hits the bleachers. The bleachers are four-row. The bleachers are aluminum. The bleachers are empty.

The bleachers.

Are.

Quiet.

The ball bounces off them, then slowly rolls back to where it came from and comes to a full stop a good 7 inches from Guy One’s immaculately white Air Jordans. Guy One picks up the basketball. His back still facing the basket, Guy One suddenly makes a spinning jump, letting the ball go while still in midair, as his spin angle approached 180 degrees, toward the basket. And

then Guy One lands... and then the ball goes through the rim, *whoosh!* And then the ball bounces away. And then silence.

Silence...

But not for long. From the opposite corner on the far side of the court, some other guy is walking toward Guy One, and all possible courtside, suburban summer aromas have now been replaced by Drakkar Noir. For now, let's call this other 'Guy Two'. Guy Two is dressed, well, not exactly like Guy One.

Guy one and Guy Two: Air Jordans. Guy One white and black, Guy Two red, white, and black.

Guy One: men's athletic, ankle-high white socks;

Guy Two: crew-high black socks.

Guy One: Light blue t-shirt;

Guy Two: white tank top.

Guy One: Black knee-high shorts;

Guy Two: blue with broad white stripe at sides, calf-height shorts.

Guy Two: gold chains. Guy Two: gold caps. Guy Two is what, back in the 90's, was increasingly referred to, racially, as 'Caucasian', as political correctness emanating from the media slowly started creeping its way into everyday life.

Guy Two: Late twenties. Average height and weight. Light skin, light hair, light eyes, light eyebrows. Light eyelashes. Light body hair. Light freckles. Light, washed down, average, mass-produced appearance. Would a beach-ball wanna-be beer gut feel at home as part of an average, mass-produced appearance? Probably. And boy, does Guy Two *have* one? Boy, Guy Two *has* one.

Guy One's features, among them a long oval face with 'strong' chin; mid-sized, deep-set hazel eyes with long, pronounced eyebrows; incipient frown lines, incipient expression line where nose bridge meets brow; incipient crow's feet; medium, recessed ears and long, narrow, slightly aquiline nose with smaller, sharp-angled nostrils; full, classically contoured lips over the strong round chin; full, head of straight, short hair parted midwise; bronze skin tone, 6'2" frame, and mesomorph build, however, contrast sharply with Guy Two's.

Guy One is facing Guy Two as Guy Two approaches. Guy One looks at Guy Two as Guy Two approaches. Guy One slightly smiles the kind of slight, sealed-lip smile which could signify mild, condescending amusement to most people. Guy Two is yelling along to the music, Hip hop, East

Coast, that's emanating loudly from the large, two tape deck, transistorized portable music player that he is holding with one arm over his shoulder:

Guy Two: "Champion gear that I rock! You get your boots knocked! Then attack you like a pit that lock shit DOWN!"

Guy One: "As I come and freaks the sound, hardcore, but giving you more and more, like ding, nah shorty, get you open like six packs."

Guy Two is now just below Guy One's face, looking up: "Killer bees attack, flippin' what! Murder one! Phat tracks aaight?!"

Guy One, taking a step back: "I kick it like a night flite."

Guy Two, taking a step forward: "Word life, I get that ASS raw I'm fulla SPITE!"

Guy One, taking another step back: "Check the method from Bedrock, cause I rock ya head to bed."

Guy Two, taking another step forward: "Just like rocking what? Twin Glocks!! What UP!!!!?????" bearing all caps and raising his palm for a high five, exposing a brillo bush of orange hair over a bread-white armpit.

"How's it going, bro?" Guy One, less energetically, high-fives Guy Two.

"Fuck man! You look like shit! The fuck happened to you? Laugh my ass off, man!"

"Ahh, well. Just kind of a rough night. I guess. That bad, huh?"

Guy Two cocks his head to the side and squints at Guy One, a wide smirk on his face. "Just like, how-do-I-look-like-shit-boss-fuck-you bad."

"Haha," says Guy One. "'How do I look?' 'Like shit, boss.' 'Fuck you.'"

"See?" yells Guy Two, opening his mouth in mock surprise, and Guy One can again evaluate his gold caps. "Just like you! *Ter...*minator! Just in *your* case my good bro, it's more like *Ter-a-TOID*. Right??"

"Jesus, man. You freebasin'? To you it never gets old, does it?" amused.

"The teratoid!!" Guy Two yells out to the sky, arms extended, shrugging.

"What's wrong with different? ISO? Bro did you forget your medication?" asks Guy One.

"Medicate THIS, bro!" Guy Two says as he grabs his crotch and juts out his pelvis toward Guy One.

"Shiet... so how 'bout them Bulls," asks Guy One.

"How 'bout them *who*??" retorts Guy Two, cringing in mock disgust.

So the guys keep talking. After dissecting the Bulls' situation, the lockout season, *that* April game against the Heat; a discussion about how the world might be ending, a discussion about how the world surely IS ending, gays on TV, embassy bombings, Bin Laden – which inexplicably brings them back to the Bulls again, then Clinton and his cigar and how hot, really, Lewinsky – not “Monica”, but *Lewinsky* - might have been, which inexplicably led to a Mr. Submarine sandwiches vs Subway sandwiches discussion and then to Pippen's dismal commercial from 10 years ago but that the honeys in it were fine, leading then to a complete agreement about how surely the only things worth *anything* in the United Center nowadays were the Luvabulls, plus a “How bout ‘em Bulls? Fuck ‘em bulls!! How bout ‘em Bulls? Fuck ‘em bulls!!” couple of cries from Guy Two, Guy One mock-consoling him; then a discussion about which Luvabull might be the hottest which led to the debate about which might have the finest “tits” to which might have the finest “ass” to which might have the finest “abs”, which led to an assertion by Guy Two about how, first of all: Fuck abs; second, how he was really neither a “tit” man or an “ass” man but a “leg” man, and about how the *proof* of that was the physiological reaction he experienced upon beholding a fine pair of legs, which he did not, this physiological reaction, necessarily, get upon beholding a nice pair of “tits” or a nice pair of “ass”... with Guy Two going on to clarify that although he did say “pair of ass”, he really meant a *single* “ass”; that an actual *pair* of asses, side by side, touching even, perhaps, might also provoke in him an extreme, albeit probably less intense, physiological reaction of their own, that he only used the singular - although paired, pun intended, to a pair, he explained - in order to avoid the “es” termination of “asses” and thus conserve his sentence's punctuating, final, monosyllabic “ass”, which in turn conserved the dopeness of his flow, they start playing some one on one.

By now you're surely enough acquainted with the guys to know their names. Guy One's name is Joseph Carey Merrick V. Guy Two's name is Ian Smith Owen.

Summer 1974

One wakes up in her huge house. The music coming out of the hole on the floor is guitarist Jimmy Page's Jake Holmes-inspired piece entitled 'Dazed and Confused', recorded in October 1968 by the blues-and-folk influenced rock music group soon to self-denominate 'Led Zeppelin'. The third verse has just ended and the start of the instrumental break before the guitar solo has just begun.

One lays in bed, face up, legs splayed, arms resting at either side, staring unblinking at the darkness directly above. Every square inch of One's skin is in direct contact with either, a) air, or b) the quilt of the nicely done bed beneath her. It is dark and damp inside the house. One's house consists of a bedroom, the *bureau*, and a kitchen. A corridor connects the bedroom and the kitchen. There is a porch outside the wall parallel to the corridor. The *bureau* is located between the bedroom and the kitchen. Darkness and cool, humid air fill the entire house, thanks to One's huge open windows.

The instrumental break plays on.

One slowly sits up. One can hardly see the door of the *bureau* directly in front, beyond the end of the bed, maybe 6 paces away. One gazes to the right at the portion of the *bureau* wall at the right of the door, which meets the exterior wall of the house that is to the right. One stares at it. Then, sits on the edge of the bed for a period of time.

The music plays on.

One stands and walks on the creaky, aged, grey wooden floor, two paces and a half to the open window. One looks outside. It is dark and drizzling. One looks out to the vast expanse of grassy field outside the house. The field's color is dark grey. The dark grey field extends from the house to the hardly visible faraway mountains in the distance. They look black from One's house. One turns, just the head, to the left and sees the black mountains in the distance. Then turns it again, this time slowly back, and follows the black mountains and their angular peaks all the way to the right, to the black mountains in the distance. One looks up at the sky. The sky's color is dark grey. The outside world is dark grey, with a black waistband. One extends an arm, the right one, out the window and holds out a finger – index – and, almost immediately, it starts to

get wet. After some time, her whole hand and arm are wet. One retracts the wet extended finger and brings the extended wet arm back in and turns to walk. One walks over to the *bureau*.

The song which was playing has started to play again from the beginning.

One stops at the bureau's door, stares at it for a moment. Hands down. Expressionless. One walks past the hole on the floor to the corridor leading to the kitchen. One walks across the corridor to the kitchen. In the kitchen, then walks to the window beside the front door. And looks through it and past the porch outside to the vast expanse of grey, wet grassy field outside the house, which extends to the faraway mountains in the distance. The faraway mountains are snow-capped, and look black from One's house. One turns, just the head, to the left, and sees the mountains in the distance though the length of the empty porch. Then, turns it again, this time to the right, to the black, snow-capped mountains in the distance visible past the end of the porch to the right. The sky above the mountains is dark grey. The outside world is grey, with a black waistband.

The music keeps playing, the drizzle keeps falling outside, the damp drizzly night keeps the whole house in darkness, and the cool and humid air fills the house, stagnant.

The bow section is starting again.

Then, go back to the *bureau*. One walks back through the corridor and past the hole on the floor to the *bureau*. One goes into the *bureau* to brush some teeth. One then washes some face. Then stands on the shower and urinates, grabs the chrome lever shower handle and pulls. Artificial rain! Then sits on the bidet and evacuates. One stands up and regards her making. Caninish. But pachydermically scaled. Clay! Yellow specks, roughly an eighth of an inch in size, sporadically dot the material along its curled length. Gold? One presses down on the material. Picks some up. Holds it. Squeezes a rather thick section. Harder section. Material excretes out furiously from between five contracted fingers. One opens the hand. One looks at the palm. Clay! One brings the hand to the face and applies material to it. Picks up some more. Grab. Apply. Repeat. One then washes some face. One then looks in the full-body mirror. One stares back at the figure reflected on the full-body mirror for another period of time. Hands down. Expressionless. One opens the otherwise empty medicine cabinet and takes out One's toonified multicolor plastic comb and pretends to comb some hair. One puts the comb down. One turns the chrome cold water sink handle counterclockwise. Cold water comes out.

One turns around and walks out of the *bureau*.

The music coming from the hole on the floor is still playing. The guitar solo after the bow section of the instrumental break is now starting.

One walks to the bed. One then turns and walks past the hole on the floor to the corridor and across the corridor to the kitchen. One walks to the front door and stands in front of it. Hands down. Expressionless. The outside world is grey, with a black waistband. One stands in front of the front door looking straight at it, as the music keeps playing, the drizzle keeps falling outside, the damp drizzly night keeps the whole house in darkness, and the cool and humid air fills the house, stagnant.

One then turns to go back to the bedroom. One walks across the corridor to the bed. One sits on the bed, brings both feet up. Slides over to the center of the bed in the darkness. Settles back, with legs splayed in front, head on the bed, and arms to the sides. And closes her eyes.

The music keeps playing, the drizzle keeps falling outside, the damp drizzly night keeps the whole house in darkness, and the cool and humid air fills the house, stagnant.

By now, 'How Many More Times' is almost over.

Why don't you please come home

Why don't you please come home

Why don't you please come home

Summer 1999

After scoring and winning the second game 11-5, and thus winning the first match 2-0, and watching Ian get mad, and then offering him a lemon Powerade in consolation and grabbing a grape one for himself, Joseph asks Ian a question:

“So what’s it like? This reaction of yours with chick’s legs?”

Ian’s sweaty face lights up, yet gets all of a sudden very serious. “Ok: So I stop dead in my tracks,” he starts. He stares into the distance, eyes widened. His talk, faster than usual. His tone and manner has adopted an urgent-yet-authorative, quasi-military quality. He continues: “Eyes darting wildly up and down them desperately striving, rushing, to take in every visible square inch since this moment won’t last forever. I’m in a daze of disbelief, awe, bewilderment. A terrible pang of... anticipated loss, self-loathing, self-pity, resignation! At what will most probably end up being yet another unfulfilled reward hits me, BAM! right in here, smack in the middle of the solar plexus, see? Salivary glands start aching, scalp starts aching, hands start trembling. Sweat runs down scalp. Sensory perception, triples. Heart rate, quadruples. *This* fucker? Quintuples. Those two things, man. Those. *Two. Things.* I don’t know. That pair. That dumb, fucking pair. That *functional* pair. An evolutionary marvel, but corrupted by culture, fashion, lust, vanity, thrown foot-first, pun intended into the face of the instinct-laden male. Functional marvels but now thrown in the field of aesthetics, and yes, eyes darting wildly. Right foot, right thigh, left calf, right shin, left foot, right thigh again! Left knee, left upper thigh, right ankle, left knee. Right lower thigh, left calf, right calf, left calf, right calf, left foot, left upper thigh, right knee, repeat. The rest of the world around, a muted blur.”

Joseph, just now finishing his Powerade, simply looks at him, slightly amused. Ian goes on.

“Chest hurts. Balls hurt. Motherfucker utters, ‘Je-sus-fuc-king-mo-ther-hell-damn, godfucking damn-damn-damn-damn-damn... Damn! FUCK! DAMN! Jesus H, fucking *CHRIST!*

Fuuuuccck... My god, Jesus, look at that, Jesus, *look* at that...’ People, staring.”

“Damn”, Joseph mutters.

“Overwhelming. Overwhelming. You know though, right, that this has nothing to do with... normal sex, my relationship to my honey, when I got one, and shit, or anything, right? Which

could not be better! Or could it? Anyway, and it's not about coming up to someone at a bar, not about coming up to someone you see somewhere like that. Has to be a stranger. Total stranger. Someone new. Someone first-time-seen. Nameless, mindless, soulless, just a physical object, just an entity, just bone, flesh and skin, just another animal, another hairless animal under the sun. Speaking of, the more daylight the better. The more exposed legs the better. If she's walking, better. If glistening due to perspiration or sebum, better. If among the midtown dwellers of the bell curve regarding skin pigmentation, better. Outliers only welcome in selected cases. If the flesh slightly rattles, in the right places, upon impact at every step, better. If muscles discernible at work underneath at every step, better. If no eye contact, better. Cellulite, less welcome. Tiny little hairs more welcome. Wrinkled sags, far less welcome. Contact redness from just having had them crossed during a two hour lecture, more welcome. Scars if not too feisty or extroverted, welcome. Tattoos, less welcome. Aaggh! Hopefully she's not some ultra-fast-walking-can't-hold-it-in-much-longer-Speedy Gonzalez-type bitch, too. Now. Legs have to have shape to them, you know? Shape? S-H-A-P-E, shape. 'Three-dimensionality'. Thick without being fat. Cause fat kills shape, normally. Mesomorphs usually the winners. Some endomorphs. Not obese bitches of course. Rarely skinny bitches though. Proportions! Slightly longer lower leg than thigh. Slightly longer thigh than lower leg. Both work. So many fucking variations. So many shapes. Or skinny chicks with smooth, low-muscled-toned, thin thighs but then juxtaposed with *angular, thick, emmuscled lower leg*, fuckers *thicker* than those thighs. Low calf and Soleus insertions evening out the leg. Oh yeah. Fetishes. Let's talk *fetishes*. You throw in some tall shoes, wedges, pumps, call 'em the fuck you want. What they do, they bring the leg closer to you, see? Closer to eye-level. Put them up on freaking pedestals. Like all of a sudden, now they're objects. Like fucking art? Art! Priceless articles! On public display. Shiet. It has all been visual and from proper, well-mannered, respectful distance up 'til now. Gotta admit I have no idea what will happen the day I actually act out what I usually just dream about, kneeling on the floor just in front of a pair these idols, just as when I was toddling about at fucking *three*, planting my big, trembly, sweaty, richly innervated say right palm, on the back of her knee; my other big, trembly, sweaty, richly innervated left palm, a foot or so above the other, planted right where thigh becomes cheek, then run the popliteal palm down, curving convexly down along thick, round calves, down slowly to meet her grab-worthy, sufficiently-thicker-than-will-allow-the-tips-of-my-thumb-and-middle-finger-to-touch-going-around-it-part-of-the-lower-leg-just-

below-the-calf-and-just-above-the-ankle, you know, then down the ankle to the base of the foot, my femoral palm then going for the whole ride, sliding down along the back-of-thigh to feast in dermis thanks to ample, indifferent, sweet-smelling, friction-easing clear sebum from the cat while at the same time taking in the tenderness of that primeval layer of subcutaneous fat, the primeval cushion that deliciously rounds the rough edges off of all subjacent muscularity, you know? Starting with both heads of her glorious Gastrocnemius, her single double-peeking Soleus, all the way down to, ah, connect, with the ... Calcaneal."

"The tendon."

"Right. Then my tarsal hand, back upstairs, this time planting it just above the patella -- on the front this time of the leg -- to take in some fine, scrumptious Vastus Medialis. Then, time to hear the sound of healthy meat. Giving that fleshy lower thigh right, you know, above the knee, you know? A single loud solid slap. '*SMACK!*' Then do it again. Three times is enough. Cause this all needs to be processed and appreciated internally also, you know?"

"So, you're looking forward to this... casual ... encounter. Happening. Someday." Joseph lays down the empty Powerade plastic bottle and stands, picking up the basketball and resting it against his side under his arm.

"You know, planting eyes on... the one. You know? That one female walking by with her naked legs on full display and I just won't fucking resist and will actually carry that shit out. And that she'd be cool with it? Fuuuuckk. *That* would bring the odds of that actually happening down to like literally *zero*."

"But you're looking forward to that, though. Right?"

"Don't know. Actually. You know?"

"Why not?"

"Well..."

"What?"

"Shit man."

"*What?*"

"Well, if it were to *actually* happen... if it were, could be I like... fucking *die* that day. You know?" Ian is looking at Joseph straight in the eye. He tosses his empty Powerade bottle behind his back. It hits the chain link fence that separates the court from the park, then noisily falls on court's concrete and bounces a few times only to roll back and come to a stop against the back of

Ian's Air Jordans. A few seconds later, his stern expression relaxes. His eyes narrow slightly as his upper lip pulls back to reveal his gumline and then a wide, cap-studded smile. He starts laughing.

Joseph smiles, then laughs too. "I bet bro." He drops the ball from his side and catches it against his thigh before it hits the ground. "I bet."

Summer 1999

Joseph had always liked how the streets in Miami Vice looked at night. Always slick, the darks darker, with color splashes and rays everywhere you looked. After the nice little small hours summer rain that kindly just doused him, this is just how South Cicero Avenue looked like. With perhaps, replace some of that pink neon with universal suburban incandescent orange. The cool night air smelled fresh, and competed little with the lingering smell on his fingers and taste on his mouth that reminded him that his recent encounter was real. *Realer even than these empty streets*, he thought. As if to contradict him, as if to claim its own presence in this world in light of such a self-centered assertion from this human, a large toad hopped its way to the center of the sidewalk, and Joseph sidestepped it. Just as dark and shiny as everything else, the toad, he thought. It would be daybreak soon, maybe in a half an hour. While no substances apart from his own -- other than some alcohol, some mixers, some other sodium; various fats, sugars and starches, and, of course, second-person singular saliva -- had crossed his mouth since that last coffee at the office hours ago, he felt surprisingly wakeful and alert. And he attributed this to this nice little walk he had been forced to take. Now back to substances. The taste in his mouth was a combination of... where *was* everybody? Was he, deep down, drunk out of his mind? That familiar, sweet, lightly metallic, ethylic breath that emanated from his lungs with each exhalation was definitely there. He sidestepped again - this time a couple of earthworms twisted about each other like a caduceus. Joseph's tie is stuffed in his grey slacks' left front pocket by his keys. His has-seen-better-days white dress shirt untucked, cuffs and collar unbuttoned, black leather oxfords in dire need of a shine, hair a far cry from his neatly combed usual, mousse long since evaporated, all testament of a long night and of a guy that really just needs to get home, take a preferably cold shower, and get some sleep. But there is no urgency in his walk at all. "Tah, dah... ta-dah da-da dah...", he exteriorizes the melody lingering in his head. He says loudly, "So you want to do something that's a little bit not too Afro-centric-erotic-space-groove-jazz-funk-acid-punk??" He keeps walking down South Cicero. "Dirty little!" he yells, and his footsteps, his breathing, and now his sporadic singing, are the only sounds in the world. But not for long.

Dribble, dribble, dribble, dribble.

Joseph stops.

Dribble, Dribble, dribble, dribble.

Jesus H. Christ. What tha fff..? Is that...?

He walks toward the sound ahead of him and to his right, stepping off the sidewalk and onto the grass, toward the outdoor public basketball court located at the edge of the small suburban park, not far from the street, where he spends half his free time. “Is that fucking Ian?” he wonders out loud.

Dribble, dribble, dribble, dribble. Louder. Joseph catches a whiff of Drakkar Noir.

“Geezuuuuhs..”

He picks up the pace. There. There he is. A pathetic, washed-orange chiaroscuro existence in the middle of the dimly-lit court. Ian beneath his oversized black JORDAN basketball jersey and matching shorts, black ankle-high socks crumpled down at the ankles and black Air Jordans, entrancedly dribbling the basketball, actually basketball-shoegazing in silence, in the center circle, facing side court. The bleachers behind him... are empty.

“Yo!”, Joseph stops at the edge of the court and calls out. “Ian!”

Ian stops dribbling and looks up. “Hey, what up homes? Couldn’t sleep bro... I can’t shut my eyes.”

“They shot the father at his mom’s building seven times?” responded Joseph. “What the fuck, bro! It’s like after midnight or something.”

“*You* what the fuck. The hell you’re coming from, by the way you look like shit again bro. Just like, you know, no sun this time to highlight it.” Ian’s holding the ball with both hands, looking at Joseph. “Just these two broken-ass lamps.”

“Yeah. No shit. Jesus. Yeah, lost my wallet, not like I had any cash on there but no credit card or ATM card. Phone’s dead.”

“You’re fucking nuts, homes.”

“Yeah, anyway. Go home, man. Nice seeing you. I’ll do the same, it’ll be morning soon. Call me tomorrow. Later.” Joseph turns around and starts walking back toward the sidewalk.

“Yo, hold up!” calls Ian.

Joseph looks back and sees Ian scuttling toward him.

“Hold up!” Ian calls again.

Joseph stops. “What’s up?”

Ian says, “Check it out.” He gives Ian the ball and turns and walks back to the other side of the court. Joseph utters a curse under his breath, but follows, letting the basketball drop from his side and bounce away. He follows Ian past the sideline, past the bleachers, and past the fence, by which there’s a sidewalk and a large shrub that Ian disappears behind of, emerging with a medium-sized yellow cooler. “Brewskys pour les broskys.”

“Damn, man...all right, just one beer,” Joseph’s expression does a 180. “Can’t pass up a cold one, you know that. Damn!”

“Knew I’d getcha.” Ian cracks opens both beers, offers one to Joseph, and they sit on the edge of a sidewalk by the bush. Both take long sips, followed by silence. Maybe a full half minute of utter silence. Maybe not surprisingly, it’s Ian who breaks it: “So, are you gonna tell me what you’re really doing out here dressed in trampled office clothes and hell-ass broke in the middle of the night?”

Joseph lets out a chuckle, takes another sip. He exhales long, loud. “Kinda a night I had, man.” He smiles. “Kinda a night.” He takes another sip. Exhales again. He looks over at Ian. Ian’s just looking back at him, attentive, expectant. “Ok,” Joseph starts. “Friday night, working late at the office, trying to figure out Cliff’s cave markings and hieroglyphics to close out the set with his revisions for the architectural for the Kane County Mental Ward project bid set, when I get this SMS.”

“The plot thickens.”

“Yeah.” Joseph takes another sip, and stares back at the darkness of the park. “So it’s this so-so looking Hindu American chick I know who rooms with this half-Polish, half-Native American total hottie I used to go out with and whom I’ve remained hot for to this day. And looking to encore. But she’s like, been avoiding me, right? So she tells me Zuzanna – my half Polish, half Indian, *American* Indian, that is, one -- got back from Minnesota Tuesday night, and that she, Sima, the hindi chick, has been putting in a good word for me these past few days, that I should drop by with a few beers and see what happens, that she just broke up with the asshole back in Minneapolis.”

“Mhmm..”

“So I QSAVE and split, stop by Pappaluccio’s downstairs for a 12-inch Italian...”

“That sounded gay, dude.”

“...then haul ass up to Lincoln Park before the bitch makes plans and scrams; stop at the corner store to buy some ales, I get two six-packs of Goose Island Bourbon County Stouts and head to their place. Joint’s this tiny crowded townhouse sublet, two-bedroom, lots of wood, wallpaper, fabric and incense, incense that’s having a mighty hard time masking out the overpowering funk of an inexistent dog – not that I think the slobs are burning it for that purpose but *anyway* - the hindi and a nondescript Armenian chick share the one room and ZZ’s got the other. So Sima, the so-so hindi, gets the door and she’s all like, “It’s gonna work!”, that she told ZZ I was coming, and that she, ZZ, was cool with it, and that she’s showering right now and getting ready to go out with me. I’m like, is this Sima bitch retarded? I mean, that’s kinda strange, right?”

“Bitch has been avoiding you,” burps Ian, then, more clearly, “yet she’s already made up her mind she’s hitting the downtown with you, *plus*, is so interested in seeing you, that she doesn’t even wait for you to show up. First saying fuck off Joe, and now it’s let’s hot-date, Joe. Yep, hindi’s a retard. She shouldn’t have given her the heads-up –now she’s the one, the Z bitch, the one in control of the situation. And probably disinterested if you ask me.”

“So I drink my porter and the Armenian and Sima got like bathrobes on and these green clay masks or whatever on their faces so they speak really weirdly; some old Alanis Morissette is playing on the radio, Million Dollar Chance of a Lifetime rerun on mute on the TV and all of a sudden ZZ enters stage right. Bro, this chick was looking *fine*!”

“No shit.”

“She’s wearing these ultra-short jean cutoffs, above the knee dominatrix-style black vinyl platform boots, a white tank top and a black leather jacket with a pair of giant red wings embroidered on the back, black Phillip Johnson-style glasses and a sort of little girl hairdo with the top of her hair pulled back and the rest shoulder-length. I’m all excited, she’s kind of like suspiciously serious and aloof and paying more attention to finding her keys and cigarettes, right?”

“Shiet.”

“So we hail a cab to West Town where there’s supposed to be, according to her, this amazing rave with this awesome new DJ from Russia, and we stop at a corner outdoor kebab place and she slowly, methodically deals death to hummus, a falafel, like six Kibbeh balls and half a Shawarma while I do all the talking. And she reserved the totality of her dinnertime eye-contact quota for

the Kibbeh balls. I swear to God. And various blank spots on the table. The bottom of her glass, too.”

“Told ya before you even told me.”

“That’s nothing bro. We get to the venue, which is just a few blocks away. The place is an island – the commercial spaces to either side of it are closed, deserted - very few people around except a few guys standing outside the door, no other bars around on the rest of the block. I pay, we go in. The place is fucking packed. There’s a large bar right as you enter, a big square occupying most of the space, so it’s bar on all four sides, and built-in sofas and tables all along the perimeter walls. I say I’ll go get us drinks. I start noticing something’s not right. The rave music is so loud that I had to ask ZZ three time what she wanted and end up having to gesture. She yells back three times and it’s like she’s lip-syncing without the playback. Something’s strange here. The atmosphere. The crowd. Couldn’t quite put my finger on it. I turn to go to the bar and that’s when I finally notice the TV screens and the videos. The dress code here is jeans, boots, loafers with no socks or sneakers, loose plain t-shirts or tight fitting cardigans, and bro, there’s gay porn on the screens.”

“What?? The bitch!!”

“Bitch took me to a gay fucking bar, bro!”

Ian crushes his beer can in disgust, stands up, glaring back at Joseph, “Bitch!!”

“No shit homes, so, and wait, that’s not all. I just order two rum and cokes, pay with a twenty, keep the change, get back to where I last saw her, she’s nowhere to be seen. I look around with the two drinks in my hands, making my way across the frenetic fags, I’m holding the two highballs against my chest now, all of a sudden I see her, talking with some guys. I make my way over and I guess she said what’s up and takes one of the drinks and starts lip-syncing introductions to each of the four clowns. For some reason I’m guessing these have to be some of her Spanish friends she’s often talked about, and if it’s them they supposedly don’t speak a word of English. Not that it matters. Bro, long story short, all of a sudden she takes off with the shortest of the four, I mean with the platforms she’s a full head taller than the shrimp, he’s got this flattened Mediterranean afro that looks like some kind of inverted pyramidal mushroom over his stubbled Neanderthal face, chubby, double jointed, but one - if he’s who I think he is - of only two straight guys in the fucking place, me being the other. Yep, the other three are gay, or at least I just saw two of them kissing and one of the two is holding the remaining one’s hand.”

Ian's been saying "no fucking way, bro, no fucking way... no *fucking* way, bro, no fucking way," over and over in a low, bitter monotone for the last minute now. Joseph pauses to accept another beer, which Ian cracks open while continuing his background monologue. Joseph takes a sip and continues, "I eventually make my way over to the railing overlooking the main floor a level below, behind the bar area, this practically warehouse-size main rave dance floor with an at least five-story roof, high lateral walls with several stories of windows on them but they're all boarded up, and at the far end, the stage, and this quote unquote *famous* fucking DJ with his hand up, in the *fucking* air, and jumping up and down... bro, there had to be thousands of people there."

"Of queers you mean."

"She's jumping up and down with the twerp down there. He's shaking his head to the fucking rhythm, I guess, hitting her face with his greasy fucking mess of a mop of hair, and she seems to be loving it. You have no idea, man. By now, guys are starting to notice my single status, bro, guys are fucking hitting on me!"

"Queer bastards," Ian gnashes his teeth.

"They're fucking worse than us! We wouldn't hit on a chick like that ever, man. They're classless, over-the-top."

"You're starting to sound like you *into* that bro! Eeeeehhh! Terry the merry!! Eeeeehhh!!"

"Fuck you, man. So I gotta pull out an escape plan before one of 'em starts to want to pull out something else out of me, right? Or worse? So I execute: I rush the front door."

Ian laughs as he cracks open a new can of beer. "Messed up, man."

"Yeah, I somehow get to the door in one piece, bust it open, and who do I bump into?"

"Cliché, bro, overused trope, like in a B-ass movie!"

"Except it's true. The girl from Kinko's I've told you about. The one and only Almengor Almengor."

"Oh yeeaaaah! Nothing like being saved by an angel! You lucky mofo, bro! Tell me something went down! You didn't chicken out?"

Joseph was shaking his head. The night was still dark and crisp. Cool. Quiet. He noticed a toad in the grass, some ten feet in front of them. He said, "No way was I going to miss that chance. I mean we've been wanting to get a room for weeks now. Chick's flirty as hell, but she won't give up her number, right? I say, 'Heeeey girl, what's UPP!!', she's all with it, she's like 'What are

you doing here' and shit, all busting my balls, like mock surprised but in her classy discreet way, you know? Classy chick. She looks like an older Lacey Chabert."

"Lacey who?"

"Chabert, you know, Claudia Salinger. Party of Five?"

"Oh. I don't got no sisters bro, you know, and my mom doesn't watch that."

"Whatever, dude. Fine show and this B's finer. She's, wait, I forgot to mention she's with a friend, right?"

"Chick?"

"Yeah."

"No way! Whaient you call, man?"

"Dunno, anyway, they're both wearing short jean skirts and pumps, Almengor yellow, her friend black; Almengor white blouse, her friend blue with light blue polka dots, both with long brown hair and big colorful plastic hoop earrings."

"What did the girlfriend look like?" asks Ian as he crushes another beer, tosses it at the toad, misses by six feet.

"You'da dug her. Sort of like a black latina version of Nancy Olsen from The Facts of Life.

Ian: "Habla espaniol. A black Felice Schachter. Cool."

"More mulatto than black, maybe. Anyway, so I'm like you wanna hang out, but lets bounce, and they're like sure, let's hang out but we wanna GO BACK IN, homes!!"

"FUCK!" Ian yells.

"Keep it down bro!" Joseph chugs down the last of his beer. He hears another can being opened: *T-SHHKK*. He grabs the new beer Ian's handing to him. Joseph shugs down some more.

"Bitches, man... so what the fuck did you do, bro?"

"What the fuck *could* I do? There's only so much you can argue in a situation like that... B's like their guys straight but they won't be diggin' a homophobic bro, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess so," said Ian.

"So I don't argue *too* much. We go back in. Some gays are happy to see me again - I hope not figuratively - when they see me back, till they see my new company: a couple of 115-pound, vulva-equipped, gay-joint-grade human shields, man."

"Still tripping on what the odds must have been that you ran into that chick, man."

“I was ecstatic, for sure. Order drinks again, this time three rum and cokes. They want to go up close to the stage. I’m like ‘oh, fuck.’ We make our way to the stage through the crowd. I manage the foray sandwiched between the two chicks with Almengor in front of me and her friend right behind me. Worst experience of my life. Shields turned out not to be worth a half a fuck as fags still manage to walk up to me and say things like, ‘You’re such a beautiful boy’, and, ‘I want the meat in that sandwich’. And, ‘Marry me?’ Can you believe those fucking guys? I just buried my face in Almengor’s hair, furiously trying to remember some warm, safe place where as a child I’d hide, you know, holding her hand, drink in the other, her friend grabbing me by my belt.”

“Watch OUT bro! Sounds to me like you were actually *enjoying* that, eehh?? Careful, bro!!”

“Shiet. So we get to the front just by the stage. But I guess even to this pair of gay lovers I’m with, watching these gays jumping up and down and grinding against one another got old pretty quickly. And we’re literally spitting on each other’s faces from yelling to each other to try to make small talk and we still don’t hear anything. So now they want to scram, and believe me, I second. I’d already identified an escape route minutes ago. There’s an exit to the right of the stage and this time I lead the way, leaving my unfinished drink by a speaker and grabbing hold of them both. Surprisingly, the sort of corridor to the exit door is clear of queers.”

“Hey. That rhymed.”

“Door leads to another corridor, running sort of parallel to the back of the stage. Very grey and dimly lit, sort of a utility corridor with lots of pipes and MEP running along it overhead. We’re like so how the fuck do we get back outside, right? We walk along it looking for another exit to an alley or something. Nothing, it just keeps going. The other way around is no good either since it’s a dead end. Finally we come up to there’s a grey door with no signs or anything, on the right side. Leads to a stair. It only goes down. The sound of the rave is still audible but muted, volume getting lower with each step. The chicks want to turn back. I mean, there’s no lights going down along that stair. I’m like fuck it. Ok, let’s go back. We get back to the exit door, but now there’s no fucking way to open it. Exit only fire fucking door. So it’s the dark stair or else, right? Her friend bangs on the door and yells for someone to open but of course no one’s hearing us.”

“Damn.” Ian takes another sip from his beer, looks out into the darkness ahead of him.

“Her friend’s starting to freak out but we get back to the dark stair going down and they lend me their cell phones and with mine too I sort of make a sort of flashlight holding the three phones in front of me and we go down the stairs. I think had we been drunker that shit would have been more fun. So downstairs, we get to this vast, dark room with a very, low rectangular-grid, acoustical tile ceiling. There’s a faint white line by the floor by what looks to be a wall maybe 40 feet ahead of us. I’m thinking, ‘another fucking door’. As we approach we can hear activity, voices, beyond the door. Sounds, clangs, orders being barked. There’s boxes everywhere around us. There’s boxes of cans of tomato sauce and a few boxes of flour and pasta around us. We get to the door and I pull it open. Before us is an ultra-well-lit, HUGE state-of-the-art commercial kitchen filled with chefs, cooks and assistants in white chef uniforms busily stirring, sautéing, frying, baking, skimming, slicing, flipping, washing, sprinkling, boiling, salting, breading, kneading...”

“DAMN.”

Joseph takes another sip. The toad has started over to the crumpled can Ian threw at it. Bumps against it. “We cross the kitchen looking for an exit. Everyone seems so busy no one seems to notice us. I even grabbed a piece of garlic bread from a bunch an assistant was spreading butter on and he didn’t even notice. One thing’s for sure, I’d never, ever seen a kitchen that big. After what seemed like ages we reach the door waiters keep coming in and out of. They don’t mind us either as we step through it and into a warmly lit, elegant dining room that oddly seems kind of too small for the kitchen servicing it. One of those understated-jazz-piano-amenitized, hushed conversation, very expensive with white tablecloths and seven forks and knives on each side of the four progressively smaller plates and eight different wine glasses on each place. Beige carpeting. Dark purple carpeting. Stuck-up, ceiling-scraping-tip-of-nose waiters with the white rectangular spotless napkin draped over their tuxedoed forearm and flowers and candles on each table. And it’s packed. There’s people by the door waiting to be seated. The good news is we finally find a way out. There whole far wall of the place is a curved curtain wall that leads onto an interior court, sort of between buildings. But there’s a sort of reception going on there – formal one, too. Like a pre-wedding reception or something. There’s waiters going around offering everyone champagne and of course they offer us, too; each girl grabs one and I grab two, immediately down one. We keep making our way across this mass of smiling faces, botox or otherwise, artificially tanned or otherwise, tuxes, dresses, five hundred-dollar hairdos, pearls,

diamonds, gold and the occasional Cuban habano. Waiters passing around Hors D'oeuvres also appear. By the time we reach the street we've each had our share of Shrimps in Phyllo Cups, Rustic Tuscan Pepper Bruschettas, Bacon-Encased Water Chestnuts, Titicaca-Style Deviled Eggs, Garbanzo-Stuffed Mini Peppers, Sweet Pea Pesto Crostinis, Arctic Meatballs with Chimichurri, Apple-Gouda Pigs in a Blanket and Greek Olive Tapenades and I'm not making these up – the waiters had freaking nametags with the name of their appetizer on it – I mean, I'm literally talking, 'Hi, My Name Is fucking Sausage Wonton Star' - this all set against a lively festive New Orleans-style jazz backdrop." Joseph chugs down some more of his beer, burps loudly.

"Free dinner, homes. Free music. Awesome, any hotties?" says Ian, and chugs down some more of his beer and burps, too.

"You'da made friends bro."

"Word."

"Anyway, we're onto the street once again and I already got a light buzz. Don't know about the girls. They look like they can hold their own. Out here, the 16-foot-wide sidewalk is packed, too, with your typical Heart-of-the-Loop Chicago crowd of jaunters, tourists – out of town, out of county, out of state or otherwise – families, Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, cops, hoodlums, groups of debutantes, dudes wearing oversize Flavor Flav-style clothing, grungers, hipsters, hookers and pimps, plus your regular, decent, been-happily-married-for-thirty-years *Playbill*-clutching nicely dressed couple every once in a while. And us, I guess."

"A tall, handsome, alpha-male type with however deep-seated identity issues, and two hot broads in miniskirts and pumps. Yo, so, describe 'em legs, man!"

"You'da had one of your episodes, bro. Skin, muscle, fat, bone structure, two pair. You'da died."

"I wanna fucking die bro, I wanna fucking die right fucking now, bro."

"You're scaring me, dude. So, so now there's this old guy standing before us in the middle of the sidewalk with one of those signs they wear with straps over their shoulders that's got signs on the front and the back, gesturing for us to go down a flight of stairs on the side of an oriental food store – this old guy actually has some real-ass looking Old-Chinese-wise-man white mustache and beard – and the sign on him reads, "GET RAMMED BY OUR RAMEN!! \$3.99 -- CHEAP!!!", so we decide to go share one but mostly it's just to go get sake."

"Don't make me puke, bro."

“So we go down, we go in, I bump my head on I can’t remember how many of those red Chinese hanging paper lamp ball things, sit at the first empty table we see – orange formica, of course - and order a bowl of the Extra Spicy Sriracha Spicy Ramen Noodles Soup, and three sakes. Regardless of the crowds outside there’s only like four or five other tables with people on them here. The music’s very low-volume old Loudness, believe it or not. So it was kind of hot, no pun intended, sharing the ramen with these chicks, as we refused the waitress’ offer of extra bowls, and all ate from the same big one, heads and faces all against each others’. So I put it on Cliff’s Amex – it was like seventeen dollars - and we go back out on the street, which is not that chillier, then Almengor says, ‘Why don’t we see if the Ramen’s kitchen leads somewhere else too?’ To which I say, ‘Er, I’m not sure that’s such a great idea’, but her friend’s all like ‘Yes, let’s do it’, and they’re running back and down the stairs again before you can say ‘two crazy bitches’. So we’re back at the restaurant and these two chicks just rush the kitchen, there’s a fat Chinese dude washing some dishes, he keeps telling them something in Chinese over his shoulder and is all serious but never stops scrubbing, these chicks are completely ignoring him and find a door and go through it, fall and almost land on their faces since just behind the door is a perversely placed foot-and-a-half-tall Van Dyke Step, it was quite funny actually how they fell, and her friend broke the heel off her left pump; after helping them up and the Chinese guy’s voice is in the background now we cross a short dark corridor and hear some voices behind a bead curtain at the end of the corridor, go through it and we’re in a dilapidated messy sort of living room slash kitchen slash barrack with an at least 12-strong family in it, all ages and genders present, half eating noodles, a quarter maybe noticing our incursion at all, an eighth maybe start to bust our balls over our incursion...”

“These chicks she-males?” Ian burped.

“No! Man... when’s Lacey Chabert ever looked like a she-male?”

“You never know, bro.”

“That was random, bro. So this place smells like noodles, man, at... like... an... overpowering level; we cross the space to a stair in the corner and Lacey I mean Almengor leading the way and her friend who’s now walking sexier with a sort of erotic limp after losing her heel, behind her, and me, rearguarding, actually rearguard-reargazing in silence if you’ll allow.” Joseph tilts the beer again and chugs down a few more fluid ounces of the bitter P.A. Then reverses the motion and before the bottle comes to an almost vertical rest in the clutch of his hand on his knee,

continues. “The stair leads to a small Chinese food mart or something, but it’s closed, all lights off, it’s the store I guess we saw from the street that sits above the ramen place. It’s dark as hell but we still make our way through the aisles, surrounded by jelly cups bags, shrimp chips bags, flour cake bags, sesame seed bags; soy sauce bottles, oyster sauce bottles, curry paste bottles; pho spice packets, spring roll packets, and, of course, noodles. Almengor’s friend grabs a jar of pine nuts, opens it up and inexplicably fills her mouth with a quarter of the jar’s contents. Had said she was hungry as she opened the jar. Now, I’m thinking we’re looking for the front door so we can go back out on the street somehow, right? These bitches were – get this – looking for the restroom. So I said, ‘Bro, can’t you wait till we get the fuck out of here and find a McDonald’s or something?’; still munching, the friend says something unintelligible as she starts to pull down her skirt, Almengor rushing to stop her, pulling it back up; I’m wondering if I should just find and crack open a bottle of Baijiu or some shit.” Both men drink some more of their beer, starting and stopping at exactly the same time, as if rehearsed. “So anyway these lunatics start to freak out that maybe some of the Chinese have followed us here from their cave and with torches and with portable ancient Chinese torturing devices and stuff; the friend grabs a small bottle of sweet and sour sauce and throws it on the floor, breaking it, saying, ‘This! We need to find a door that says *this!*’, while starting to write on the floor with the tip of her heel-less shoe ‘为了安全’, broad shoestrokes, then falls on her knees and starts to desperately use her hands and fingers, too; Almengor’s nodding this whole time, and if this will please the bitches I start looking for a door that says fucking ‘为了安全’, find one that instead says ‘傻瓜走了’, grab the girls and run for it. They’re screaming, ‘They’re coming, they’re coming,’ Almengor’s friend managing to limp-run, scream that, and lick the sweet-and-sour sauce off her fingers all at the same time. Must have licked some serious ultra-small-glass-splinters, too.”

“Bro, what does ‘为了安全’ stand for?”

“*To safety*,” Joseph says and chugs down some more of his beer.

“To safety,” repeats Ian. “And what about ‘傻瓜走了’?”

“Translates loosely to ‘*Begone, fools*’.”

Ian ponders this as he slowly takes another sip, staring at the empty, dark expanse of grass before him.

Joseph continues. "So we reach the door and push it open, all three of us ramming against it, no pun intended, at more or less the same time. We bust into a well-lit service hallway that leads to what looks like a parking garage, but it's in its final stages of construction, not yet done, the parking garage, very few workers on site. The smell of curing concrete is all over the place. We slow our pace back down again and the girls are laughing, they're on each other's faces, I'm like, so what do you crazy bitches want to do now, right? So..."

"You actually said that?" Ian interrupts.

"Nah. I said, like..."

Ian interrupts again. "So what do you crazy *ASS* bitches wanna fuck up next, homes!" The men high-five.

"...nah," said Joseph. "I said, 'Let's go get a drink.'"

"Oooo."

"So now we cross the floor slab to a retaining wall that's flanked on the one side by a plywood partition and it's got a computer-printed eight-and-a-half by eleven paper sign taped to it that says, "TO LOBBY" with big Arial bold letters and a big grey arrow pointing to the floor."

"Portrait?"

"Landscape."

"Cool."

"So we take the door, leads to a set of service elevators, none working, now the friend's saying she needs a new pair of shoes. Whining and whining, tiny orange-red sweet and sour sauce splashes and stains still drying all over and around her sexy fat lips. Now if this will make the bitch shut up I'm game, right? *Get the bitch shoes!*"

"Word."

"So I say 'I got your back'. So, we take the exit stair to the lobby, ends up not really being the lobby but leads to yet another corridor that leads to yet another fire exit that leads to an alley. Remember now, Almengor's friend is still walking her sexiest look-at-me-pa-no-left-pump-heel walk.

We go back and up one floor and this time the corridor does lead to a huge, John Portmanesque, busy urban lobby, A/C and marble and carpet and brass and suits and pearls and lipstick-stained highball glasses, and the dim whiff of remote frituras and sushi and the harder tang of a hundred twenty thousand after-dinner red meat belches and Cool Water and DK for Men and Santos Sport

intermingled with Acqua de Miele and Sonia Rykiel and Zaharoff and Lolita Lempicka and freaking Ming Shu Fleur Rare; now back to the shoes -- the bitch's fixated on these pair of freaking cowboy boots on the storefront of one of the boutiques on the street side, to the left of the revolving doors at the other end of the gargantuan atrium, these black, grey and turquoise faux snake skin cowboy boots and I put 'em on Cliff's Amex and say 'My god, these will soon be puked on.' She dumps her black pumps in a large black passing-by janitorette's small white trash tank, or was it in a small white passing-by janitor's large black trash tank? But she dumps both the broken no-heel pump and the good pump either way, and then Almengor says let's get some dirty martinis. So we hang out in the dim light of the brown-marble-and-gold-clad, what seems like a half-a- football-field-long, white-shirted and cuffed and vested bartender-tended lobby bar. I end up paying for eight dry martinis, of which I drink two, Almengor half of one, her friend three; then orders and spills a fourth one, gulps down the whole of what's left of Almengor's, olive and all, and they're not of the seedless variety, then lashes out at the bartender for the spilled martini, saying that *he* did it, demanding a new one, all this considering the poor fucker was not even in the vicinity back when she spilled the drink all over my lap, olive and all. I put it all on Cliff's Amex." Joseph takes another sip, staring ahead into the darkness.

"Seedless fucking olives, man."

"No shit bro."

The two men stare together into the dark expanse of grass and parkland landscape of interspersed buckeyes, honey locusts, sugar maples and white oaks. The sky above the trees' silhouettes, maybe now a slight degree lighter than a minute ago. Dark bluer. Ian notices that another large toad is in front of them, maybe 5 feet away - and probably been sitting with them for quite over a few minutes now. He squirts some spit at it through the gap between his two central incisors, regards twin white projectiles miss it by about a foot on each side. He tilts the bottle home once again. Brew rushes indifferently down his throat.

Continues Joseph: "But of course, these two bitches ain't through yet."

"Plus, I'm still waiting for the part where you finally BANG this motherfucker. Or BOTH those motherfuckers. Fucking POV threesome, dude!!"

"Shut up bro. So they're advertising some venue called Bourbon on the Loop. Supposed to be taking place somewhere on the fifty-second floor. We hit the elevator, it's a WASP senior couple, their afroed-teenage-apparently-grandson with the Geto Boys t-shirt, two other bitches

nowhere as hot as the two I'm with, except maybe more sober, and, inexplicably, the janitor from before. But in street clothes. Turns out he was small white after. The proud flaunter, confirmed, of a large black... trash can. Bitch Almengor friend even bitchily demands can she have them back. He just keeps staring up at the red letters then ascending numbers on the digital indicator. The kid's music - *Dawn 2 Dusk*, track two of the Geto Boys' sixth studio album entitled *Da Good da Bad & da Ugly* - "

"I know that shit man..."

"blaring through his earphones and with sound waves even insulated by his 'fro still almost drowns out the *Music-by-Musak* instrumental version of Kris Kross' *Arthur's Theme (Best That You Can Do)* released in August, 1981, that the hotel P.A. system is treating us with."

"You mean Chris Cross, right? *Christopher Cross*?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"Yeah, so." Joseph accepts another beer from Ian. "So we're the second-to-last ones to get off – the janitor stayed in – and as soon as the doors open we're in fucking, like, there's thousands of people walking around and the whole floor - this Bourbon on the Loop thing - seems to be they got like the bars and restaurants you would find on Bourbon Street, N.E.? They got them here. Like, this is just what I needed, right?" He takes a sip. "A place where these bitches can finally let their hair down, relax, and maybe order another twenty thousand drinks before finally burning the entire building down?"

"Hey. Just put it on Cliff's Amex."

"Just what I need after a hard day of work. So I *lose* the bitches, I literally go AWOL on the clowns, go out on my own, exploring; get inside this quasi-blues bar called The Abroad Frances Thighs – they make some out-of-this-fucking-world fucking spicy fried chicken, bro, you should definitely try it, I later learned - and treat myself to a bourbon. Take a fucking *servilleta* from the bar and wipe my face up. Shit. Feel like a new man already. All by myself without nobody, grab myself one of the few empty tables, just my Wild Turkey and I, and I bask in the twelve-bar tempo of the live band's ultra-extended cover of Muddy Waters' You Shook Me, and, you know, relax, think 'bout ol' times, ponder. Ponder. But sure enough, mid solo, 15 minutes later, guess who come storming in, all laughs and smiles?"

"The two bitches."

"They're not alone, bro."

"The janitor?"

"They're hand-in-hand on each side of some Asian dude... some grinning, middle-aged, spectacled, Armani-clad, tan, clean-cut, full-head-of-hair, got-Jacksons-flying-out-his-pockets Asian dude just slightly taller than them." Joseph finishes his beer.

"But you got Cliff's Amex, bro." Ian cracks open a new beer, hands it to Joseph.

"Jesus." Joseph drinks down maybe a third of the beer, continues: "So these bitches and the Asian dude, you guessed it. They're heading directly toward me's and Wild T.'s table. I mean. 1974 bitches come equipped with radar or some shit?" Joseph tilts the bottle in his favor once again, downs it to its half-mark. "They come up and introduce him, I guess the guy turns out he's Japanese, his name's Taro, we shake hands, they occupy all three remaining seats on our table. Now, of course, they order drinks. Thankfully, the japster says they're on him. I say sure, hit me with another dubya-T on the rocks. By now I'm slightly buzzing. The waiter comes back with my Turk, his Perrier and two humongous Hurricanes. Fuck, bro. As these bitches start sucking on those fat ass straws, bro. I say it's time I make a fucking move, man. What else could I do now? So I ask her to dance. You know, to break the ice. A lively blues rock country tune is playing now and a few dunces are dancing so I say fuck it. I'll be camouflaged. She said yes, of course. She'd already started looking at me kind of more like I remember her doing from Kinko's. So I'm guessing I'm on a roll. Her friend's going on about some "cajun" cuisine course she took, to the jap, their faces inches from each other and I can clearly see how she's spitting all over his face with every word. She says, 'Poutine!?! Poutine?!? Poutine?!?!?!' spitting exactly six times and the dude can't stop beaming, dude's relishing it, dude's basking in it; by now it's like waaaaay after midnight, I guess. So we get to the dance floor, a new band's taking the stage, they label themselves a "genreless" band, and that they're there tonight solely doing covers for us nice folks. It's all blokes except for the singer, this freaking spectacular, hotter than shit at-least-6-foot-tall miniskirt-wearing she-devil bodied shaved-headed angel face."

"No shit. What're her feet wearing?"

"Shiny red strappy vinyl 5-inch platform wedge sandals."

"Fuck!!!"

"Olive-green Cons."

"*Fuck* you!!!"

“So anyway they start playing and she’s on the mic and says, ‘So you want to do something that’s a little bit not too Afro-centric-erotic-space-groove-jazz-funk-acid-punk,’ and I was the only reaction, I say, “YEEEEAAHH!!! WOOOHOOOO!! LAY IT ON ME, BABY!!” I look down at Almengor and she’s looking back at me like she’s about to break the 50-pound glass Hurricane goblet on my forehead, with the half a Hurricane and small palm tree still in it. I look back at the singer and she’s looking straight back at me, and she says, ‘Come on, what do *you* want? Come on, baby.’ I look back at Almengor. I actually see smoke coming out her ears. The singer looks at Almengor now, grinning subtly: ‘It’s all about power, baby, you know what I’m saying? It’s all about sleepwalking through this endless night.’ I’m entranced. Almengor drops the 50-pound Hurricane goblet, on my foot, mind you, Hurricane now flooding the dance floor, orange *rodaja* even surfing a wave toward the stage and she storms off, arms crossed, back to the table. I catch up with her and grab her by her arm and spin her around, and now we’re face to face, our gazes connect, and we mutually say to each other in time with the singer: ‘You want me to make you feel like you ain’t never felt before, baby?’ The ensuing French kiss was epic, bro.”

“Yousa fucking bastard, bro,” Ian laughs.

“So now all I gotta do is find a room, right? So we head back to the table and guess what? Our food’s waiting for us, still steaming hot. *But the jap and the friend are nowhere to be seen.* Upon closer inspection, turns out they left a note. Hey, thanks guys, right? It says: ‘Found a room. U DO 2’. Almengor’s like ‘What the fuck?’ and, frankly, I am too. I catch a glimpse of a waiter, a young black guy with no hair and a goatee, say ‘Bro any idea where our friends went?’, and he says, ‘No sir, but it was all taken care of by that gentleman of Asian ascent, and they said they’d leave a note.’ Almengor says, ‘But there’s no room number! Could we at least, like, get this to go then?’, and he says ‘Of course, ma’am,’ and he leans over the table and starts to take the food away and as he’s doing that he pauses and turns to us and says, ‘Uh, sir, ma’am, you might want to take look at this.’ Still leaning, he’s holding a placemat with both hands and looking closely at the center of the table, where there are two chicken wings, but of the variety that are shaped like an “L”, next to each other, oriented the same way, and they each got a short piece of celery perpendicular to the L’s vertical leg, pinned in place with a toothpick, making each small food ensemble a sort of plus sign with a foot on it. As Almengor and I stare at it dumbfounded, the waiter goes on: ‘Looks to me like it says ‘77’ in Japanese, sir, ma’am.’ Almengor and I simultaneously turn away from the food art to look squarely at him. He turns his head to look

back up at me, and alternatingly at Almengor, who's standing on the other side of the table. 'Uh, I took a year of Japanese in high school'. Almengor and I keep regarding him and we say at the same time: 'We see.' We look back at each other. She looks like she's about to spit a laugh out on the back of the guy's head, who's still leaning over the table and looking at me. I say, 'Soo.. which is room seventy-seven?' To which the guy says he has no fucking clue. In more polite words." Joseph finishes off his beer.

Ian finishes off his beer. Ian disposes of both empty bottles, digs into the cooler and fetches a pair of new ones, opens them up. They each take a long drink. "So the fuck you do?" asks Ian.

Joseph sighs. "I'm guessing the guy's room is on the 77th floor."

"No shit."

"We grab the food and hail an elevator ride up there. This time there's no one on the elevator. Musik by Muzak's playing Sergio Mendes' Never Gonna Let You Go."

"Ya grab her in the elevator or anything?"

"Nah, man. We're all with like six bags of food, remember. We get to seventy-seven. Get off. Your regular luxury hotel carpeted elevator lobby and corridors lined with rooms on each side. It doesn't take us long to catch the soundwaves of Lionel Richie's 1983 hit, "All Night Long". Along with the dueling voices of Allie's friend and the upstanding Japanese gentleman doing karaoke."

"Just *follow* the music," says Ian. The "follow" was burped.

"Just follow the music," repeats Joseph, sans burp. "We bang on the door, and I'm expecting the guy to be wearing his tie as a headband, but go figure, he's still decently dressed and everything. Almengor's in the back, on a small circular stage, flooded by blue neon and there's a disco ball too, and we come in. He's like 'oh, so you got the message, that's great, come with me,' I glare at him as he leads me to the kitchen and Almengor stays behind with her crazy bitch. Now the J. Geils Band's "Centerfold" comes up, and both the girls are singing it while back here in the kitchen Sushi's offering me sake, which I appreciated. Fuck, I needed to get the edge off. Balls are starting to turn blue."

"Amen, bro," says Ian.

Joseph notices that what he had thought was a toad-sized rock to his left *was* actually a toad, as it suddenly starts hopping away. Holding his beer bottle with both hands, he takes a second to breathe in deeply and take in the night's damp air, and bask in the amazing solitude and darkness

permeating his view of the grass and dispersed trees ahead. He takes another sip from his beer and continues: “So before I can ask the guy if there’s an extra room that A and I can borrow he asks, ‘You like whiskey?’ I say, ‘Sure.’ He points in the vicinity of my crotch, says: ‘Press that blue button.’ I start to look down at my crotch but before I get there there’s this shiny half-dollar-sized blue button in front of me by the edge of the island we’re standing by of which I had not noticed before. Funny, given the kitchen is actually pretty brightly lit, unlike the living room which looks and sounds like a freaking 70’s *discotheque*. Remove everyone. Wait, except two crazy-ass bitches. At first I’m like: like hell I’m gonna touch no fucking blue motherfucking anything, right? The music now blaring from the living room is Cheap Trick’s ‘Four Letter Word’. He urges me, on. He says, ‘Go ahead. It will be fine, as long as you like whiskey. Scotch, actually.’ So I’m there with my index on the button wondering if it’s a bucketful of Old Parr is gonna drop on me from the ceiling or something. I actually look at the ceiling right over me to make sure there’s no threat from above. All I get above me is a lone downlight. Zander, Almengor and her friend are bellowing away in the next room: ‘*Caught in the act, had no alibi, no reason why to let you down, oh...*’” Joseph downs what was left of his beer. “So I press the damn thing. Mechanical noises, a click, and a two-foot-wide section of floor-to-ceiling kitchen cabinetry that’s just beyond the island, by the fridge, slowly starts to rise, revealing an equally wide, well-lit, wood-lined corridor. I’m like what the fuck. I follow him into it, and we go up a flight of stairs that’s at the end of it, to a tall, wooden black door. There’s a beep, then he says something in Japanese, then a click and the door slowly swings open, silently. He steps through the doorway, I follow. We’re in a huge, dimly-lit rectangular room, maybe 50 feet wide by 70 long by 60 high. The air’s noticeably crisper and cooler here. The floor’s black slate, the walls too, no windows, no skylight. The ceiling’s also black slate. This place looks impeccably clean. But at the back wall in front of us, bro...” Joseph trails off.

“What? And how the fuck can that room exist in that suite? Aren’t you in a hotel? Is it a condo hotel kind of deal?” asks Ian.

“Brother, the whole back wall, and remember I’m talking an at least 50 by 60 foot wall, is lined with bottles of Johnny Walker blue.”

“What the fuck? You trippin’, homie?”

“I trip you not. The whole wall’s this rectangular grid with what seem to be well over a couple thousand cubicles, with unopened bottles of whiskey in them, on display. Some of the bottles are

missing, like there are random empty spaces on the grid. But most are there. Maybe 20 percent are missing. And where there's no bottle, that space is dark. Where there *is* a bottle, the bottle's lit from below. So like each whiskey bottle gives off its own glow. Matter of fact, the amber glow of those thousand-plus bottles is the only lighting inside that room."

"Fuck Almengor!! Figuratively!! And literally too!!"*****

"Yeah man.. so anyway. The door shuts tight behind us, like the door of a vault, and I don't give a shit, I'm in pure awe. Now everything's completely silent, just the Japanese guy's and my own breathing is all you can hear. He gestures for me to follow and walks to the center of the room and I follow. He says, 'This is where I like to come when I want to get away from it all.' I'm still speechless. He says, 'Feel like a drink?' I said, 'Yes, sure. What is this? How can this be here? How did you build this? How many bottles is that? How much did this cost??' He just smiled back at me. He said, 'Can you take a step back, please?' I looked at the floor, and noticed that I was standing right over a quarter-inch wide gap on the floor, which I then realized actually went on to form a 2-foot by 2-foot square on the floor, with an inch-in-diameter hole in the center of it. I took a step back. He uttered a word, a different one than before, again in Japanese, and the square section of floor slowly raised from the floor, accompanied by a mechanical whirring, and clicked in place at about 2 feet from the floor. Another word in Japanese and two smaller, foot-on-each-side squares raised from the floor, to a height of about a foot and a quarter, at opposite sides of the table, so that an imaginary line connecting them would be perpendicular to the side walls. He says, 'Please take a seat. This next part's not mechanical.' I sit on the cube to the left side of the "table". He walks to the left corner toward a floor-to-ceiling metal ladder I had not seen was there. The ladder's built-in to an assemblage on rails running parallel to the back wall, maybe a foot in front of it, and he easily pulls it across manually to about just before the middle, and starts to climb it. He climbs up to maybe about two-thirds the wall's height and chooses a bottle, taking it with his right hand. The instant he removed the bottle from the shelf, the light on that cell turned off. He climbs down with it, just holding on to the left rail of the ladder with the one hand as he clutches the bottle with his right against his chest. Once down he walks back to the "table". He offers me the bottle, and says, 'You do the honors, my friend.' As I'm opening that thing of beauty, he reaches below the "table" and produces two glasses. I'm guessing there's a kind of niche on the side of the cube over on his side. The glasses, very minimalistic, round, three-and-a-half-inch in diameter and with a perhaps one full-inch-thick bottom. He puts his right

pinky finger in the small hole on the center of the “table” and pulls up a square, inch-thick slab whose edges I hadn’t seen yet, revealing another stainless steel hatch. He lays the slab on the floor, leaning against the side of the cube facing the back wall to his right, and slides open the stainless steel hatch, which recesses away underneath the table’s surface, revealing nine 2-inch cubes of ice that are laid out neatly in a nine-square-grid pattern, about a quarter inch from each other. He takes an intricately-engraved golden ice tong that’s tucked to the side of the aperture and chooses an ice cube, the center one on the line closest to me, and drops it carefully in my glass. He chooses a second ice cube, this time the center one on the line closest to “the wall”, and drops it in his glass. He puts the tong away, closes the stainless steel hatch, then puts the center tile with the hole in it back in place, and says, ‘Pour’. I pour his first. Very slowly. As I’m approaching three-quarters of the height of the ice cube with the whiskey he says, ‘That’s good’. I pour mine the same way I did his. I close the bottle and set it on the “table”, to my left. He said, ‘If you don’t mind, please put it on the floor.’ So I did. I set it against the cube-table, facing “the wall”. He says, ‘Salud,’ holding out his glass toward me. I say, ‘Salud,’ and we clink glasses. We each then draw our glass to our nose and take in the glorious aroma. Then we both take a sip from our glasses, and for what seemed like a full minute after that first sip, sit there in silence. He eventually draws the glass to his mouth and takes another sip. I do the same, looking at “the wall”. He breaks the silence. He smiles and says, ‘This place was slightly brighter when I started.’”

Joseph looks back at Ian and notices he’s attentively listening to him. He’s pressing his bottle’s rim to his lips. Joseph goes on. “I say, ‘It used to be the whole wall was filled with bottles, right?’ He says, ‘Yes.’ I say, ‘Why don’t you replace them?’ He looks back at the wall. He says, ‘You only get one chance at, one glimpse at, perception, perspective...existence. Have you, just one chance at being alive. Wouldn’t it be a shame that you’d speed through life, and not have the chance to experience something truly extraordinary to you? I’m not talking about drugs or questionable or unsafe sex practices. Or the extreme so-called sports. I’m not talking about hurting yourself or others in any way. I’m talking the real deal. To me, the real deal is this room.’ He takes another sip, I follow suit.”

Ian takes a sip from his beer.

“He goes on: ‘The real deal. To come here, regard the wall, sit at the center of the room, like we’re doing right now, in utter silence, utter solitude, and enjoy a single glass of my favorite

whiskey, with a single two-inch by two-inch by two-inch cube of ice in it.’ I took another sip. After a while I asked him, ‘How long have you been doing this?’ He said, ‘Oh... about a year?’ A minute passed by, maybe two. We just kept enjoying the last of our whiskeys. I insisted, ‘Why don’t you replenish the wall?’ He smiled and said, ‘Don’t you think that’s enough?’ I reflexively look back at the wall. After about three seconds, I respond, ‘Good point.’ Then, ‘So, may I ask, what’s the plan?’ He said, ‘No plan. Just keep on living. Keep coming here. Keep drinking. And the day they’re all done, they’re all done, I’ll be all done, it’ll... be all done. And that will be fine.’ We continue on in silence for a few minutes. Soon we’re sitting with glasses empty except for a couple of small and extremely beveled, shiny ice cubes, just contemplating. Then out of nowhere he takes off his glasses, looks at his wristwatch for two seconds, then presses a button on it, and the watch’s dial lights up. Never taking his eyes off it, he says, smiling, ‘Looks like the girls are having a good time.’ The light given off by his watch lights up his face and eyes, the specular reflections on his features and contrasting hard shadows from the bottom-up lighting rendering him an almost completely different man. He keeps looking at the screen of his watch, smiling, slightly shaking his head, and he let out a small chuckle. ‘Ah, girls will be girls, eh?’ He looks briefly at me, then back at the watch. ‘The ladies,’ he says, still smiling and looking at his watch. He finally lay his wrist back down and the light turns off, and he puts his glasses back on, and turns to me. ‘We should probably go back downstairs to them, eh? Refill?’ So we refilled our glasses with ice cube and Blue, and went back downstairs to the kitchen.”

Joseph chugged the last of his beer, lay the bottle down in front of him. Ian was just engrossedly staring back at Joseph, his own beer bottle empty, too, dangling from his index finger which he had stuck inside the neck. Joseph continued:

“And it was almost overwhelming, you know? The contrast was. Between the tranquility upstairs and the loud music downstairs and the city lights alive, beyond the curtain wall in the kitchen and living room and which seemingly surrounded the entire suite. The music’s now Joan Jett and the Blackhearts ‘I Love Rock and Roll’. The freaking lunatics are still dancing with each other on that little stage, doused in black light this time. Each with a half-empty champagne flute in her hand. Us with our whiskeys, of course. Soon as they see us they’re like, ‘Hey, where were you guys? We’re hungry! You got anything to eat!?’ to which our host replied, ‘Sure, we can... grill some Japanese Burgers.’ And they’re like ‘Yay!! Japanese burgers!!’ and storm the kitchen. So dude just smiles and shakes his head and follows, and looks back at me and says, ‘The ladies’.

I say, ‘Yeah, bro. I know.’ I’m just mildly buzzing by now, I’m just cool as a cucumber, just sippin’ my whiskey, my Johnnie Blue, you know?”

Ian forays into the cooler once again, extracting two fresh beers. Each man pops his beer open and tilts in his favor once again.

“So. Long story short, he gets the grill going out on the balcony - big, brick-floored balcony - he’s got some smoochfest-approved soft warm lighting out there and actual firewood piled up by the grill, and the “Japanese Burgers”, turn out to be like these grayish-pink 10 ounce patties’ which of course this couple of maniacs didn’t even let my man finish grilling before they were grabbing ‘em and putting ‘em on buns and drowning them in ketchup and stuffing their faces up with them. We sat down at a beerhall-style table with running benches on each side he’s got over by the railing, and Thing One and Thing Two here both washing down those ketchup-flooded burgers with Johnnie Red – yeah, they had asked what we were drinking and we said scotch and they said we want some too and the fucker gave them Johnnie Red... motherfucker gave them *Johnnie Red*, bro...”

Both men laughed.

“...I shit you not, from a sticky half-empty bottle in the kitchen by the stove, no less, next to the fucking cooking oil... and they’re by now starting to slur like motherfuckers, these two. So as they’re stuffing their faces - I swear Almengor’s friend’s got ketchup not just on her chin and cheek and the tip of her nose but on the *bridge* of her fucking nose too and she keeps scratching her left eyelid with her burger hand, with the knuckle of her index finger, scratching a small, dark, paisley-shaped spot on her eyelid that I’m guessing is also ketchup but it doesn’t go away but in doing so she inadvertently smears her whole eyebrow with the half-eaten burger in her hand so yet more ketchup and more grease and more juice from the burger on her face, and Almengor, who’s sitting to my left, asks, ‘So how are Japanese Burgers different from, like, American Burgers?’ and looks at Taro who’s sitting facing her, next to her friend. Friend who, I now notice - she’s right in front of me - is all of a sudden seeming to finally be running out of gas, with eyelids at half-mast, lost look, and some reeeaaal sloooow chewing. At half-speed, she takes another kilometric drink from her whiskey, as Taro responds: ‘Well,’ he says. ‘They are, pretty much, the same. Same basic concept. Only there’s no meat.’ Even the friend, no longer chewing, has turned her head, in slo-mo, to listen. ‘I use, basically, seafood.’ ‘*Seafood?*’ Asks Almengor. I say: ‘Um, but, I’m afraid these don’t *really* taste like your regular Filet-O-Fish much

at all, my man.’ To which Taro says, ‘They’ll never taste like that, my friend. That’s junk food. This isn’t junk food.’ Taro at this point has got our undivided attention. He keeps munching away happily, pairs of Almengor and myself reflected back to us on the surface of his glasses. Almengor says, ‘So... what. These are like *gourmet* or something?’ Taro says, ‘You bet.’ Almengor: ‘So... what kind of *fish* is it? Is it like tuna or something?’ Taro smiles and says, ‘Yes, some tuna. Sure.’ Silence as he munches away, by himself. Almengor: ‘Oh, so you buy them at like a specialty Asian food place or something?’ Taro says, ‘No, I make them myself.’ Almengor: ‘How?’ She drags out the ‘how’. Taro: ‘Depends. On like, you know, what I’ve had to eat that week. You guys are in luck. I always grind the seafood on Fridays at daybreak, and make the patties Friday evenings. It’s actually all I eat on weekends. These burgers. A way to save money.’ Taro takes another bite, chews rapidly for two seconds, swallows part of what’s in his mouth, continues with mouth half-full: ‘I make my own sushi too. So throughout the week, I put any leftover sushi or sashimi in a big plastic freezer bag, for the patties. The salmon, I buy whole and gut them right here at home. All the organs and stuff go into the bag too. Plus every good burger needs some grease. That’s the only part I do get at the specialty store. I use whale blubber for that.’ He finished off the last of his ‘burger’. Almengor’s friend was the first to break the silence. The eruption of puke that that woman hurled at me was epic. And the yell that went with it... bitch seemed like she was center stage at a death metal karaoke or something. Like she was the lead singer of Possessed or something. I mean her utterings echoed across the Chicago night. I mean they must have heard that shit in the Western Suburbs. I mean, did you hear it? Anyway, she starts to try to get up, hurls once more, this time on the table, Taro’s gotten up and is trying to help her up, and patting her on her back, as if *that’s* gonna be what placates the onslaught; Almengor’s got up too, I’m still in shock and I look down at the barf on canvas, by ‘canvas’ meaning my white shirt, I’m now proudly displaying for all to see. Linda here bellows again and again and with each bellow another quart of puke shoots out, now landing on the table and anyone who’s near. Almengor’s left leg is not spared, neither is Taro’s right hand or the Pukemeister’s own glass of whiskey. Eventually she sort of starts to pass out and Taro says - the fucker’s smiling - ‘Looks like Mara-san’s had one too many.’ I look at the chick. She has adopted a yellowish sheen. I’m about to hurl myself from the nauseous fumes rising up from both the bitch *and* my shirt. I asked him for the bathroom and he shows me one next to the front door,

where I take my shirt off and spend like 10 minutes washing. On the sink. I do a pretty good job, believe me.”

“No shit, maaaaan.” The ‘maaaaaan’ was in belch mode. “But ever heard of ironing?” Ian finishes the rest of his beer and tosses it at yet another toad, who just showed up. He hits a tree instead, of course.

“I leave it there, drying, draped on the towel bar, open the door to call out to Taro if I can borrow a t-shirt. He points back and says ‘Right there,’ and I guess he’d already left a t-shirt neatly folded on the floor by the bathroom door. It’s a Lollapalooza ’97 concert t-shirt, looks brand new. ‘Thanks man! You go?’ I say as I put it on. ‘No. Just helped Perry out a little with that last one.’ ‘You fucking know Perry *Farrell*?’ As expected, Taro just smiled. ‘You fucking know Perry Farrell,’ I say matter-of-factly, slightly smiling, shaking my head, as we walk back to Almengor sitting cross-legged by the limp, motionless body on the floor and now I’m helping Almengor and Taro carry this limp sack of dumb weight over to a sofa or something, they’re taking care of the torso, one holding each arm, and I got the legs.”

“Oooh yeah.”

“Actually, I got the black, grey and turquoise faux snake skin cowboy boots I put on Cliff’s Amex and I look at them and say ‘My god, these were soon indeed puked on.’ Almengor says, ‘Wait! You got a bathtub? Wouldn’t that be better than a sofa? Maybe put her in it, fill it up with cold water and see if that revives her?’ I say, ‘Yes, I’ve seen them do that. You fill it to the brim and hold her down in case she floats, then when she breathes in, the water up her nostrils will give’er a good burn and she’ll wake up.’ I pump my fist when I say ‘good’. Almengor glares at me. Taro says, ‘What she needs is to lay down for a while, somewhere soft and warm. Let’s go back to the kitchen.’ So we carry this lifeless lump of meat over to the kitchen, head thrown back, hair mopping the floor, or rather streaking the floor with this lines of vomit, and he leads us over to the far side where he’s got, we soon learn, a pizza oven. I mean a real pizzeria-style brick hearth with chimney and all. He says, ‘Let’s set her down right here.’ Taro and Almengor gently set their half of the body down, I just drop the legs. Kaboom. It ended up sounding much louder than I expected. Almengor shoots me a look like she’s going to like strangle me right then and there. “Mara-san” convulses once and gives out a tired, real bassy, low howl, finished out by a short but surprisingly loud burp. We all then see twin lines of what I guessed was bile starting to run down each nostril, down each cheek, to the floor. ‘So what do you think?’ asks Taro. ‘My very own

pizza oven right here at home. Cool, huh?’ ‘Sheesh, Taro, I don’t know,’ says Almengor. ‘If it’s Japanese Pizza you’re making, IIIIIIIII *don’t* know.’ Taro smiled. ‘Let me fix you guys some drinks.’ And he went back into the living room. Almengor and I sit at the kitchen island on these high, white, Eero Saarinen-designed bar stools he’s got by the island. Almengor says, ‘Joseph? Shouldn’t we be calling it a night? What *time* is it, anyway?’”

The quiet night air is broken by the sound of Ian loudly burping. “You good bro?” He asks. Joseph finishes his beer. “I’m good. For another beer.” Ian brings out fresh brews. Each man cracks his open and takes long drinks.

“So what then?” Asked Ian.

“So I say, ‘What do you plan on doing with her? Leave her here?’ She says, ‘Hell no. Are you nuts? This guy could be a serial killer for all we know.’ I say, ‘Taro? Naah.’ She says, ‘I don’t care. I’m not leaving her here.’ I say, ‘Isn’t there like a homeless shelter down the block we can drop her off at? Thought I saw one on the way here.’ And, quick as cat, she grabbed my balls.”

“The fuck? She take them out?”

“No, dumbass. But she’s really grabbing them. Grabbing my crotch with her right hand. Looks at me in mock reproach, slightly smiling, says, ‘You want me to *squeeze*, you fucker?’ I said, ‘What? Well. Depends. How hard?’”

Ian laughed.

“She said, ‘This hard?’ And motherfucking squeezed. I’m like, ‘Ouch, wait, no no no no no no no!!! Stop!!!’ She eases her grip. Not for a second has she broken eye contact with me this whole time. She asks, ‘Promise you’ll be nice? To her?’ I said, ‘Yes, yes. I do. I do. Nice. I’ll be nice.’ She let go. I got up and pulled my sack a couple of times to ease the pain. I mean she did go easy, obviously. But still.”

“Jump on your heels a couple times. Like they teach you to do in karate as a kid after an accidental kick to the jewels,” Ian said.

“I know! You went to karate too? I did *not* know that that oriental solution to ball pain was universal, man!”

“You bet it is!” responded Ian.

“So I said ‘Let’s have the nightcap he offered and go. I’ll go find Taro. The fuck is he.’ And went back into the living room and he’s nowhere in sight. He’s not at the balcony either. I start calling his name. ‘Taro, Taro! Yo, whiskey brother!’ I’m not in the mood to start exploring, so I

go back to the kitchen. ‘Yo, this dude either ditched us, or went for a shit... and fell asleep at the can or some shit. Let’s get the fuck out of here.’ ‘You do realize,’ says Almengor, ‘that in order to even *think* about leaving... we need to get Mara to walk, don’t you?’ I say, ‘Good luck with that.’ She says, ‘Then we stay right here.’ I’m like, ‘Look, we take her home, ok? You got a car, by the way? Back near that gay bar we met at?’ Almengor: ‘Actually, yes I do.’ Me: ‘Perfect. So we carry, er, *Mara* downstairs, hail a cab to your car, take her home, you drop me off, you go home, and it’s all dandy and merry.’ Almengor: ‘You mean to tell me we’re gonna take her down to the lobby, looking like *this*?’ She jut her upturned hand in her friend’s direction as she said, ‘this’. So hard her cheek shook a little.”

“Ass cheek?” Ian asks.

“You’re so predictable, dude. So she’s looking at me all pissed off, arm extended, palm upturned, pointing at her friend’s road kill of a face. Me: ‘Wanna roll her inside a rug or something?’

Well, she goes apeshit, even reaches out for a kitchen knife, I catch her arm in time, avoid a tragedy, hug her tight. And I’m laughing. ‘Course we won’t do that, right? Let’s get her a little washed up and maybe find a kimono or something and dress her up real nice with it and no one will have any questions.’ When I said the word ‘kimono’ her face lit up. She opens her hand and the knife hits the floor. So we did that – we carried the bitch to an upstairs bathroom, stripped her...”

“You stripped her, dude??”

“*We* did, and I wasn’t looking.”

“Beaver or cleaver?”

“Cleaver.”

“All *right!*” said Ian. Both men grab new beers, open and chug.

Joseph: “You’d have dug that.”

Ian: “I’d have *what??* Shieett.”

Joseph in effeminate sinsong: “I only have eyes for Almengor.”

“You got that faggy voice *down*, bro. I heard WMAQ-TV’s looking for a gay anchor. Your big chance.”

“So,” continued Joseph. “*Fuck* you. So.” He takes another sip from his bottle of beer.

Almengor bathes this chick from head to toe, in the bathtub, then we carry her out, lay her on what I’m assuming is Taro’s California King...”

“Aren’t most of those guys like, vertically challenged?” Asks Ian.

“Yo, my man Taro’s on the right side of that Japanese-male-height bell curve my friend.

Remember I said he’s slightly taller than those chicks. Or who knows, he likes to have some real estate south of his feet to feel more cuddly, who the fuck cares. Anyway, we lay her on the bed and Almengor’s freaking eager as hell. She dries her up with a towel, rubs some almond oil she found somewhere in the bathroom all over her body, front and back...”

“What?? Bro, you bust your zipper? I’m ready to bust *my* zipper right now, bro.”

“I swear to fucking god, man. So back to PG-13: she goes off into the walk-in-closet and says, like, ‘it’s heeereee.’ She says it like that little girl in Poltergeist would. I walk over thinking ‘now, what the fuck did this bitch find,’ and, inside the walk-in-closet, there’s like this like shrine of some sort and, inside a man-sized display case, of the kind with lights inside and everything, there’s this god damn kimono. There actually *IS* a fucking kimono in the house. Fucking Taro. I look over at Almengor’s ecstatic face and firmly say: ‘No, we are *not*.’ She just elbowed me out of the way saying ‘Oh, yes, we are,’ she actually *sings* those words out, as if we were inside a freaking musical, and up and opens the display case, starts taking down the kimono. ‘Couldn’t Taro’s great-grandma or whatever at least have chosen a less conspicuous color??’ I ask. So she dresses this bitch up in the kimono, including the sash, the wood sandals and white socks, gets me to find some flour in the kitchen – we assumed that other than Japanese Burgers Taro’s got to every once in a while also like make some entrail tempura fried in whale lard or some shit – and she powders up the bitch’s face with the flour. She then also does the bitch’s hair and sprays it jet black with Taro’s Hair Club for Men black scalp concealer spray; then the mascara and the false eyelashes, and the lipstick and the blush. The bitch looks primed up for an open-coffin burial...” Joseph takes another sip from his beer, sets it back down. “...in Kyoto.”

“So Operation Remove Geisha Clown Corpse from Building is underway,” said Ian.

“You nailed it. So we’re carrying her out, we get her through the front door and this time around I got the head side. We go through the door, and we’re a few steps down the corridor when Almengor stops and shouts, ‘Your shirt!’ And I stop immediately and let go of the arms and the bitch’s head hits the floor with a loud thud, and I run toward the closing door and dive to get my hand in the gap in the doorway before it closes shut and I swear I got the tips of my fingers in on time, bro. We’re talking Pete Rose ain’t got shit on my dive, man. I get up, go in, get in the bathroom, shirt’s still wet, of course, but fuck it. I take off the Lollapalooza t-shirt and neatly fold

it and set it on the toilet seat. I'm tempted to write "THANKS FOR EVERYTHING" on the mirror like with a bar of soap but then thought that would be kind of weird, but I was about to anyway, but then Almengor called out, 'Joseph! Let's go!' and I took off. While we did stop at the fifty second floor just to see if the festival kept going – it wasn't, the place looked like a deserted war zone – we cross the lobby carrying this Kyoto funeral attraction home, and fucking security stopped us all like, 'Hey, where you guys taking Mr. Shindo's kimono.' And I look at the security guy and I'm like 'Bro, it was either a) this; b) the rug; c) a barfed-up dress and cowboy boots; or d) a naked, glistening, oiled-up bitch carried across your fine hotel's lobby' and the guy says, I swear, 'I'll go with 'D'.' Meanwhile the other guy's insisting we return the kimono and we end up making a deal with them to let us remove the damn thing inside the cab, hand it over to them, plus a folded-up fifty Almengor produced, and they'll return it, so as to not have to carry the bitch all the way back up again. So I hail a cab and we put the bitch in the back seat and remove the godforsaken costume, and now the bitch's fully naked other than that thick layer of flour on her face and neck, the mascara, the false eyelashes, the lipstick, and the blush. Almengor hands the eccentrically-hued garment through the window over to the one guy, along with the gash, the socks, and the wood sandals, and we're off. So of course the cabbie turns out to be an immigrant. Not Armenian, not Rastafari, but Haitian. A Phil Collins-loving Haitian, to be more specific. A Sussudio-by-Phil-Collins-loving Hatian, to be even *more* specific. Damn shit's on repeat."

"I like Sussudio..." Ian.

"I know, but.." Joseph takes another chug.

"Bro, so you're sitting on the back seat next to Allie and with this passed-out, *naked* bitch, what? In between the two of you? Or have you got her laying down across your laps?" asked Ian, in between sips of his warming beer.

"Laps, yep," responded Joseph. "Initially we just propped her in between the two of us but she barfed up a half quart of radioactive-yellow bile on the cab's floor and back seat AC vent – the guy did not notice at all, the music was that loud, he just keeps on bobbing his head to the beat -- so we just lay her down across our laps. Face down, in accordance with Almengor's request, lest she might 'go the way that Bonzo did.' Which actually would have been awesome, now that I think of it."

"Die like Bonzo," Ian said.

“Die like Bonzo,” Joseph repeated, and the men toasted.

After a few seconds of quiet contemplation by both men, Ian asked, “You get the leg side?”

“Actually, I did, bro.” responded Joseph.

“Mother FUCKER!!!” yelled Ian. There was no echo.

“You’d have stuffed you face wit it, bro.”

“No fucking shit.”

“Anyway, cabbie takes us back to this parking garage some three blocks from Fags-R-US. Six-seventy. I put it on Cliff’s Amex. We carry the bitch out the cab, Port-Au-Prince drives off, and we’re like, ok, and Almengor says, ‘you wait here with her while I get the car.’ So we lay the bitch on its side on a grassy area by the garage exit, and I wait for Almengor to return. There was no one in sight. The night just then began to become the epitome of deserted.”

“Just kinda like now,” Ian said.

“Totally. So after a minute I can actually hear the faraway sound from her turning on the ignition, and the ensuing purr is a work of art. I’m thinking, ‘sports coupe’. I wasn’t wrong. She emerges from the parking facility at the wheel of a brand-new Prelude.”

“’98 Prelude? A hundred and ninety-five horsepower VTEC engine right there. We’re talking 156 foot-pounds of torque at 5,250 rpm. Manual?” asks Ian.

“Yep.”

“Red?”

“You fucking got it, bro. Red ’98 Prelude. So I’m thinking, getting this bitch in the back seat’s gonna be like, not even with Vaseline are you gonna achieve that, so, just imagine what it must have been like to prop her on shotgun then somehow get my ass back on the back seat. Plus her seat needs to be reclined so there’s no more hurling, plus she needs to be face down – in accordance with Almengor’s instructions, lest she might...”

“Go the way that Bonzo did,” interrupted Ian, and the men toast again.

Joseph continues. “We put the seat belt on her and everything. Not that it made much of a difference, but. So I sit in the back behind Almengor, and this bitch’s face-down head is to my right. And we’re off to the Western Suburbs.”

“Where she live at?”

“Lille. Four Lakes Village, to be exact.”

“Fuck.”

“Yep,” said Joseph after tilting some more ale his way. “So. Long story short...”

“Seriously, dude?” interrupts Ian.

Continues Joseph, “The jaunt to the ‘burbs was surreal. Bro, literally, like we were the only car on the tollway.”

“The fuck?”

“Yeah. No gridlock for once. She’s got My Life With the Thrill Kill Kult’s ‘13 Above the Night’ blasting off the stereo. ‘The Velvet Edge’. And for some reason, when her right hand’s not on the steering wheel or on the stick shift, it’s on the Prelude’s handbreak lever. I get some funny thoughts, you know? She’s like blabbering away and her thumb’s like all slowly rubbing that release button. And she sort of has to lean a little toward the chick to do that, too. And of course her hand’s rubbing against her ass. I’m long past wood now bro, I’m fucking wet!”

“Me too?” Ian chugs some more beer.

“Every once in a while Almengor turns to look to see if the bitch’s still there. I mean, as if the bitch was gonna suddenly dematerialize or something. As if I’d be so lucky. There she is, motionless, skin glistening with sweat, sweat-glistened skin and the approaching and receding tollway lamps’ light documenting her anatomy’s 23-year-old bronze-hued three-dimensionality. She’s actually kinda hot, I suddenly think.”

Ian suddenly interrupts: “Dude, did you, ah, get laid? I mean, did you FUCK either of them or didn’t you, it’s probably almost fucking dawn, the god-damn sun’s probably gonna come before you do, are you getting to the punchline, you delayed-gratification Harold Robbins-wannabe prime-candidate-for-a-procrastination-support-group-whose-motto-is ‘why fuck today if you can fuck tomorrow, if it ever comes’, and-if-it-does-come-it’s-gonna-be-eons-before-you-do crazy motherfucker???” He took a long drink off his bottle, belched “Jesus H. Fucking Christ”, spat at a nearby toad that was staring at him, missed.

“Hold on.” Joseph says this as Denzel would say it. In slight singsong, with emphasis on the ‘hold’. “So we get to Four Lakes and she uses the chick’s card to get in. And, long story short...” Joseph pauses, looks back at Ian, appreciates the full hostility of his glare, continues: “...long story short we somehow get the bitch to the her building’s lobby. There is no one around, man. Like, ok, I know there’s no one on the road, but there’s *no one* around this place, indoors, either. The lighting is sparse, mostly fluorescent tube lighting. For the first time today I will say it, ‘cause for the first time today I felt it: place was downright eerie. And here comes the

fucked-up part, man. So we call the elevator, same low, greenish-greyish-yellow, fluorescent lights inside the surprisingly small cabin. So the way we... if we kept carrying her like me on the ankles and she holding her wrists, her ass would be sweeping the elevator floor due to the close-quarters situation. So the way we propped her up was upright as best we could against the cabin's back wall, veneer, and with Almengor's pressing against her with her back, pinning her to the back wall."

"To the *veneer* back wall."

"Yep. Same color as the bitch, too. So Almengor, legs thrust forward, heels of her pumps pinned to the floor so as to in turn pin the bitch hard enough against the wall with her back so she wouldn't drop to the floor; the bitch, a whiteface, deadily silent, glistening sack of bones, flesh, guts? Very little bile, and quite a few liters of air inside that pretty skull." Joseph chugs down the final, warmest part of his beer, and sets the bottle down. "I press '4', the bitch's floor, Almengor had previously informed me, and also lean back. Directly against the veneer, me. Then guess what happened."

Ian sighs, shakes his head, turns to reach inside the cooler for two fresh beers, cracks both open with his teeth, hands one to Joseph, takes a chug off his and watches Joseph take a chug off his own. After a second sigh and an unintelligible belch, he says, "Beats the fuck out of me, bro."

"The elevator stops on the first floor. We look at each other. We're like, *what the fuck?* I seriously started to freak out, man. It took a painfully long amount of time for the elevator to finally stop, another painfully long time for the doors to open." Joseph takes another drink.

"When they do..." Joseph drinks down some more beer "...in comes this... this chick, right? She's what? Like she looks thirty but her skin much younger? Dude, this chick was *strange*. Like, I don't know. She came in the elevator, not a 'hello', not a 'hey'; I said 'hey', she didn't say anything. Just walked in, to the back, to the left of Almengor, no eye contact, nothing, completely oblivious of the naked bitch pinned against the elevator's veneer back wall by another bitch."

"What made her strange?" asked Ian.

Joseph just shakes his head lightly, staring down at the greenish-grey grass in front of him in the darkness. "I know. I know. I don't know. I can't really put my finger on it. By the way, she's... incredibly good looking. Dark, thick eyebrows. Big eyes. I think dark grey. Grey hair."

"What?"

“Yeah. Grey hair. Skin like much younger than you’d expect from her gaze. She exudes this... and she’s just like staring right ahead, cool as fuck... she exudes this... *totality* about her. She’s holding something in her hand, a cigarette-pack-sized-and-shaped box that’s not a cell phone. Just a small black matte box. Oh, almost forgot. She’s at least a head taller than me. This bitch is like, *really* fucking tall.”

“No way. But other than the face, she hot? Bod, legs, tits, ass?” asks Ian.

“You know... and she’s wearing like a faded-pink Member’s Only jacket. Looks vintage. Like early 80’s? Underneath that a short leather skirt. Burgundy. Yeah. Yeah, she was hot. You’d love the legs. She’s fucking barefoot. Did I mention that?”

“Fuck no, man. You had not mentioned that. Athletic legs? Thick? Any hair? What’s the knee-joint to calf to thigh proportion?”

“Dude. I didn’t have my fucking *scale* with me, you know? But yeah, dude. And there was a strange funk about her, too. Like she smelled slightly like... beef.”

Both men burst out laughing.

“Where’s the beef??” cries out Ian mockingly.

“Yeah. Like these weird “earth” bitches that come into the classroom smelling like incense? *Vanilla* incense?”

“Bro that shit don’t exist. They don’t got vanilla in the orient.”

“And but there was another aroma about her that I can’t quite place. Like a certain burnt smell. Like a certain spice. A certain burnt spice.”

Ian: “Maybe the bitch was cooking, you know? And burned shit? And is going up to her girlfriend’s in the 9th floor for more eggs, vanilla, spices, burgers and a bong hit. That’s why she’s barefoot. It’s just up 8 floors to her BFF’s. She wasn’t expecting to see you two clowns, even less see you two clowns with the limp dead body of a naked bitch squashed against the wall. And the guy like ‘Heys’ you. I would not have answered fuck either. Heck, the bitch was probably scared frozen at the sight of you two fucking killers. You killed that girl in cold blood. Probably right then and there going up to the roof to throw the bitch ass from the top of the building. I would have said squat too. Stared straight ahead like she did. And the black cigarette-sized black matte box in her hand, maybe it’s some sort of designer minimalistic keychain. Maybe Mies designed keychains too. Maybe the lighter she uses to light her stove

with is by Mies too, and is exactly the same shape, size, color and texture as the keychain. Just fire comes out of it. Instead of fucking keys. Case solved”

“I don’t know, man,” Joseph said, dragging out the ‘I’. I was there. Sure didn’t seem like your basic chick just going up to her neighbor’s for sugar. Or salt or matches or freaking conditioner, Maxi Pads. I was there. There was a strangeness about her. But let me tell you, too: I was hot for that troll. Sexy, *sexy* bitch.”

Ian laughed. “So did you fucking screw all three of ‘em already??”

“Nah, man. Our floor came up. We carried the bitch out - not the strange, hot, burnt spice ‘n’ beef ‘n’ vanilla-smelling, barefoot, grey-haired towering hottie but our limp, glistening, whitefaced, false-eyelashed, passed-out bitch – and the elevator door shut behind us and that was the last I saw of her.”

“What floor was she going to anyway?” Ian asked.

“She didn’t press any button when she came in, bro. Beats the fuck out of me.”

“Jesus.”

“*Now* do you understand me? No eye contact. But it’s as if we *were* making eye contact. I’ve felt strangeness before, from the unfathomable, dead serious, cold, dark, terrifying look of a strange woman making eye contact with you. But in this case, we did not make eye contact.”

“Far out.”

“So we enter her apartment, the limp bitch’s, with her card. Almengor’s all like let’s tuck her in bed and I’m like no, bitch, we’re getting the FUCK out of here. So we lay her down face down, so as to not go the way Bonzo did, on the beige-carpeted floor right next to the storage room, then think better of it and decide to sit her on the floor, back against the wall, legs straight ahead, perpendicular to the length of the short corridor just before the open kitchen and the living-dining. She won’t stay straight up against the wall, but sort of leans forward, so we end up carrying her to the living-dining sofa and sit her down, and now it’s just her head that slightly leans forward and Almengor says ‘that will do’. When she turns away I cross Mara’s legs. But the way that real men do: foot on opposite knee and tibia parallel to the ground. I tilt her head to the side slightly and pose her arms and hands in a rap gesture but they won’t stay up. I turn my attention to the fridge and of course it’s a fucking mess. But almost hidden by all kinds of leftovers and junk food there’s the tip of what I recognize as a bottle of Goldschläger. So we do a shot each and take

the bottle with us along with a half-eaten nacho pot pie for the ride back home. Almengor dropped the Pyrex with the nachos on our way out the building, though, so..."

"What? You left?"

"Indeed, my good bro."

"So when are you getting laid, bro? Man, you had a room all to yourselves. What am I saying, a full apartment! Two girls!!"

"Guess what, man, nah, we just drove back to Fifth City taking swigs from the Goldschläger."

"Jesus. Ok, so we've established you're a pussy. That's it: instead of getting yourself some pussy, you instead *became* one. Bravo. Now, why the fuck are you on foot?"

"So. We take the driveway, roads, and exits necessary to get us to the tollway, to get us back home. We crank Zeppelin up, *How Many More Times* to be exact, and we're yelling and singing along with Plant, and all of a sudden she yells over the music: 'So. Call it a night?' I yell back, 'Why?' Plant keeps wailing by himself in the background. She yells, 'I really do need to get back home. My shift starts at seven thirty A.M.' Me: 'Are you close to anyone who'd make copies at seven-thirty A.M.?' She answers, 'No.' I yell back, 'Cause I needed to ask, cause if you had said you were, I would have said, 'You got some loser friends, bro.' She yells, 'Hey.' She yells, 'So you're Cicero, right?' Me: "I guess. But wait. You sure you wanna drive back to Fifth City on your own, at this time, along these creepy empty streets?" Almengor: 'But what do we do?' Plant: 'Ain't no need to hide, ain't no need to run, 'cause I've got you in the sights of my...' Me: Waits for Plant to finish screaming 'gun'. Plant: Finishes screaming 'gun'. Me again: 'Like... let's just drive to your place, you get home and I take the car back to my place, and I'll return it tomorrow. Noon, tops.' She gave me this look, but, I guess, ultimately realized that she'd much rather just get home ASAP and not have to drive six miles on her sorry, defenseless own back to her house, and so she said 'sure.' That her sister would drive her to work, no prob."

"Tell me how that baby under the hood responded when you CRANKED the RPM's mofo! Wait. Did you fucking CRASH that bastard??"

"Not exactly. So for some reason the music now is *Caught In A Mosh* by Anthrax, and she cranks that shit up loud. We're singing along with Joey, and we're laughing our asses off cause we're like yelling the lyrics out at each other's faces like at inches from each other, and we're like totally spitting each other's face up."

“Stomp stomp stomp! The idiot convention!” Word, dude!!

“Yeah, we’re laughing and shit, and she’s even got her hand not on the emergency break but on my...”

“Dick?” Ian interrupted.

“No, man, it’s ‘thigh.’”

“Yawn.”

“Hold on,” Joseph, like Denzel, again. “So we get there. We get to her house and she parks in front by the curb, and I’m like ‘this is good-night kiss time, better not blow it.’ So I go with her up to the porch. And I’ll make a long story short.”

Ian rolls his eyes, says, “Whatever, dude.”

“Right by her front door, man: Smoochfest. Fucking smoochfest. Now I’m full redwood mode. She’s full Niagara mode, if you know what I mean. Our tongues, down each other’s throats - ok, not mine, mine’s a shorty, my tongue’s one – bro, what the hell did that bitch do to my mouth, man. Damn!!”

“I know what you’re talking about, my man.” Ian high-fives Joe. “Some bitches will do that.”

“Yeah, man! So then my fucking tree’s like almost reaching my sternum – a first – and I say, ‘baby, rub my tip off like you do your Prelude.’ And guess what? Bitch’s smart. She knew just what the FUCK I was talking about.” Joseph raises up his shirt. “See?” He’s showing Ian his belly, where just above his navel there’s an inch-long horizontal gash. “That’s her fucking right thumb manicured nail, left a souvenir for me to show off and to appreciate and admire.”

“Can’t see a thing, bro, too dark. But I believe ya.”

“Look.” Joseph raises his shirt higher.

Ian leans over and takes a closer look. “Oh yeah,” he says. “Cat’s got ‘em *sharp* motherfuckers. Haha!”

“Fucking word. And yours truly’s...” -- Joseph is holding up his left index finger and his right middle finger – “...yours truly’s...” -- he now sniffs hard on his left index finger and closes his puckered mouth around his right middle finger and yanks it quickly back out, producing a loud pop, continues – “fingers are up her pussy and up her ass, respectively.”

“Atta mutha-fucking boy. Finally! At least finger-fucking! Now which would you say is better? The pique of the pink or the stink of the stink?” asks Ian.

“Both are, like, awesome?? Right??”

“Word, bro.” The men high-five again. Ian smells his hand.

“So,” continues Joseph. “So after maybe 15 minutes of this, she’s like, ‘You better go.’ I’m like, ‘Ok.’ I pull my fingers out, and take a few steps back. I blow her a kiss. She just smiled at me and...”

“Gave you a Vegemite sandwich?” Ian interrupts.

“Nah, man. She turned to find her keys and open her door. I just look at her. She’s beautiful, in the twilight. Still diligently on her yellow pumps, jean skirt and white blouse, and she looks as fresh as ever. She looks like she’s just *now* going out the house to go out, not in to turn in. She turns around a last time and says, ‘Good night. Call me. Don’t forget to get my car back here before noon.’ I’m like, you bet. Hey. You’re beautiful.’ She just smiles again. And says, ‘I had a good time. Good night, Joseph.’ I said, ‘Good night, Almengor.’ And she closed the door. I must have stood right there on that porch staring at that front door for about a minute. Then I sighed and turned to leave. The red Prelude looked fucking amazing under the streetlights, bro. *Red Prelude, here we go!* I said to myself. *Red Barchetta? Fuck that. Red Prelude’s the shit, Mr. Pratt,* I said to myself. I reach in my pocket for the key, and I... don’t feel no key. I look in my other pocket. No key. I rub both ass cheeks and my left pec desperately looking for it. And then it suddenly dawns on me. Almengor never gave me the fucking key!! I run to the car to see if by any chance a door’s open. No dice. I reach for my cell phone to call her, phone’s dead! I run back to the house to the front door, knock, no response. I’m not gonna ring the motherfucking doorbell at that time. I don’t wanna wake up her entire nuclear and extended fucking family, you know, which probably includes that crazy aunt with the damn AK, right? I make my way to the side of the house, tap on the window pane of what I think should be a living room, two times. Then two more times. Nothing. She’s gone, probably upstairs somewhere. Jerking off. Joewood in her pussy. Joewood in her tushy. Joewood. On her *mind*.” Joseph takes a long chug off his beer. “Soooooooo, two feet? *Hellooooo* transport. And then, of course, fate not missing a beat, a light rain starts to fall, right out of motherfucking nowhere.”

“I’d break *both* legs before I even *think* of even *considering* a hike like that, at this hour no less, brother. Keep my *choices* easy,” said Ian.

“It wasn’t too bad, man,” sighs Joseph. “The desolated wee hours urban landscape was beautiful.” Joseph takes another sip off his beer, looks at Ian. “I’ve always liked how the streets in Miami Vice look at night. Always slick, the darks darker, with color splashes and rays

everywhere you look. And after that nice little wee hours summer rain that kindly just doused me, well, that's just how South Cicero Avenue looked like. Maybe, you know, replace some of that pink neon with universal suburban incandescent orange. And the cool night air smelled fresh, too. But it couldn't hold a candle to the sweet smell on my fingers. And the even sweeter taste in my mouth. Both of which reminded me that, yep, my recent encounter was real. Oh, yeah, you bet, bro..." Joseph finishes his beer, sets the bottle down on the ground, absently sticking his right pinky finger down the empty bottle's neck, staring at the empty bottle, making circles with the base of the bottle on the ground. "...realer even than those empty streets." He keeps playing with the bottle. "Damn," he says. A toad enters his field of view as he's contemplating the bottle. "Got any more of those brewskys, bro?" asks Joseph without taking his eyes off of the shiny brown glass. He eventually glances back over at Ian and immediately gets the feeling that his friend has not been listening to him for minutes. "Yo, bro?" said Joseph. Nothing. Ian just seems to be staring at something ahead of him, transfixed. Eyebrows slightly raised, lips lightly parted. "Yo, what's up?" Joseph says this smiling widely, maybe a little too wide. "Bro?" he asks again. Joseph's smile now becomes even wider. He has not taken his eyes off Ian for even a second. He snorted. He keeps looking at Ian, smiling widely. There's just enough daylight now to well enough appreciate Joseph's glazed-over, bloodshot eyes and dilated pupils; his dark stubble from almost 24 hours without shaving; deep, dark, purplish-grey bags under his eyes; dismantled-for-his-standards hair; greasy, open-pored skin; blackhead-colonized nose, wrinkled clothes, saggy socks, dirty shoes. He keeps grinning ever widely at Ian, exposing ever deeper crow's feet around his eyes, exposing ever yellower, plaque-ridden teeth projecting from red, swollen gums, as he keeps saying to Ian, 'Hey, bro? What's up? Hey, bro?' A decadent, humid, musky aroma, seemingly equal parts vanilla disinfectant, charred nutmeg and ground beef, all on steroids, suddenly impregnates the air around them.

Summer 1999

One wakes up in her huge house. The music coming out of the hole on the floor is My Life With The Thrill Kill Kult's 'Dementia 66 (The Ballad of Lucy Western)', from the 1993 digipack CD release by Interscope Records, '13 Above the Night'.

I want you to come with me / I want you to come with me / Come with me, come with me

One lays in bed, face up, legs splayed, arms resting at either side, staring unblinking at the impenetrable fog directly above. Every square inch of One's skin is in direct contact with either, a) fog, or b) the quilt of the nicely done bed beneath her. It is hazy inside the house. One's house consists of a bedroom, the *bureau*, and a kitchen. A corridor connects the bedroom and the kitchen. There is a porch outside the wall parallel to the corridor. The *bureau* is located between the bedroom and the kitchen. Fog and cool, humid air fill the entire house, thanks to One's huge open windows.

The song *Dirty Little Secrets* has just begun.

One slowly sits up. One cannot see the door of the *bureau* directly in front, beyond the end of the bed, maybe 6 paces away. One gazes to the right at thick fog, where the portion of the *bureau* wall at the right of the door would be, which meets the exterior wall of the house that is to the right. One stares at thick grey fog. Then, sits on the edge of the bed for a period of time.

So you want to do something that's a little bit not too Afro-centric-erotic-space-groove-jazz-funk-acid-punk?

One stands and walks on the creaky, aged, grey wooden floor, two paces and a half to the open window. One looks outside. It is light grey and foggy. One looks out to the heavy fog outside the house. The fog's color is light grey. The light grey fog extends from everywhere to the invisible faraway mountains in the distance? They would look purple from One's house. Or, maybe, black. One turns, just the head, to the left and sees the light greyiness of the fog extending to the purple or black mountains in the distance. Then turns it again, this time slowly back, and follows the impenetrable grey fog all the way to the right, to the impenetrable grey fog directly in contact with each eye. One looks up at grey fog. The fog's color is light grey. The outside world is light grey, with an inexistent waistband. One extends an arm, the right one, out the window

and holds out a finger – index – and, almost immediately, it's no longer there. After some time, her whole hand and arm are not there anymore. One retracts the disappeared extended finger and brings the disappeared extended arm back in and as she does they each slowly reappear and she turns to walk. One walks over to the *bureau*.

The song which was playing has started to play again from the beginning. *So you want to do something that's a little bit not too Afro-centric-erotic-space-groove-jazz-funk-acid-punk?*

One stops at the bureau's hardly-visible door, stares at it a moment. Hands down.

Expressionless. One walks past the hole on the floor to the corridor leading to the kitchen. One walks across the corridor to the kitchen. In the kitchen, then walks to the window beside the front door. And looks through it and past the porch outside to the vast expanse of light grey fog outside the house, which extends to the faraway mountains in the distance? The faraway mountains are snow-capped? One turns, just the head, to the left, and sees heavy, light grey fog though the length of the empty porch. Then, turns it again, this time to the right, to the heavy, light grey fog to the right. The sky above the mountains is blue? Black? The outside world is light grey, with an inexistent waistband.

The music keeps playing, the fog keeps hanging outside, the damp foggy night keeps the whole house in a light grey haze, and the warm and humid air fills the house, stagnant.

Visions sweep away the tears and knots that bound our paper souls

Then, go back to the *bureau*. One walks back through the corridor and past the hole on the floor to the *bureau*. One goes into the *bureau* to brush some teeth. One then washes some face. Then stands on the shower and urinates, grabs the chrome lever shower handle and pulls. Artificial rain! Then sits on the bidet and evacuates. One stands up and regards her making. Caninish. But pachydermically scaled. Clay! Yellow specks, roughly an eighth of an inch in size, sporadically dot the material along its curled length. Gold? One presses down on the material. Picks some up. Holds it. Squeezes a rather thick section. Harder section. Material excretes out furiously from between five contracted fingers. One opens the hand. One looks at the palm. Clay! One brings the hand to the face and applies material to it. Picks up some more. Grab. Apply. Repeat. One then washes some face. One then stands in front of the full-body mirror. One stares back at the light grey fog for another period of time. Hands down. Expressionless. One opens the otherwise empty medicine cabinet and takes out One's toonified multicolor plastic

comb and pretends to comb some hair. One puts the comb down. One turns the chrome cold water sink handle counterclockwise. Cold water comes out.

One turns around and walks out of the *bureau*.

The music coming from the hole on the floor is still playing. The Velvet Edge is starting again.

You're wasting your time trying to help those who cannot be saved / Have you completely forgotten your true mission? / You are under a spell which has made you forget everything

One walks to the bed. One then turns and walks past the hole on the floor to the corridor and across the corridor to the kitchen. One walks to the front door and stands in front of it. Hands down. Expressionless. The outside world is light grey, with an inexistent waistband. One stands in front of the front door looking straight at it, as the music keeps playing, the fog keeps hanging outside, the damp foggy night keeps the whole house in a light grey haze, and the warm and humid air fills the house, stagnant.

You're wasting your time trying to help those who cannot be saved / Have you completely forgotten your true mission? / You are under a spell which has made you forget everything

One then walks toward the door and opens it. She steps through it to the porch and across its width to the steps leading down to the ground. Then, descends the eight steps down to the ground. The grass is cool and moist under her feet. All she can see is the same light grey haze in front of her as she's done since she woke up and she walks deeper into it, and with each long step the music that had intensely permeated every empty space around her previously is now progressively thinner and thinner. She keeps walking forward, steady pace, arms at her side. Looking straight ahead, at impenetrable grey fog, at light grey impenetrable fog. She walks for a period of time and keeps walking as the heavy fog starts to gradually recede. The heavy fog slowly starts allowing the world to reveal itself before her. A shadowless landscape of diffuse light starts to materialize. A large, dark olive-green toad crosses her path a few feet ahead of her. She walks for another period of time and keeps walking as the ground turns black and hard for the length of a few steps. Colder. Then cool, moist grass again. The fog is now light and the shadowless landscape of diffuse light is clearer. She sees a strange, shiny creature with a red shell you can see inside of. It is still. Its eyes are incredibly round, and lightly touch the ground. Another one, this time longer and black, appears a distance behind it. One keeps walking. More of these shelled creatures appear to her left side, as do sticks jutting out from the ground, with round, glowing yellow orbs beneath them. She starts to see trees start to appear to her right as she

walks. Further to her right, she sees what look like houses, but made for very small inhabitants, lined up one after the other. More of those colorful strange creatures with the round eyes on the ground come one after the other along the small houses as she walks. Straight ahead, there are no mountains in the distance. The sky is starting to become an intense electric blue where the mountains would be. She keeps walking. The grass is still cool and moist at her feet. More and more of the small houses keep appearing with every step, as so do the static colorful odd shell creatures with the eyes that lightly touch the dark ground. Straight ahead, now huge tall grey rectangular walls in the distance. They look like giant closets, in the distance. They remind her of the snow-capped mountains. But these are also similar, in an unfathomable way, to a house. Around her, all kinds of sticks jutting out of the ground, strings between them in all directions, markings on the ground and on sticks and on some houses and on some of the giant walls, flat faces on walls, huge flat faces on walls and more markings, more colorful shells with the two eyes on the dark ground, more tall grey cabinets and houses for small inhabitants and some trees and but glowing orbs hanging from sticks and all colors and shapes and textures that are just suddenly there, appearing everywhere, with every step.

The world is kaleidoscopic and heterogeneous, with a disintegrated waistband.

She keeps walking, looking straight ahead. In the distance, one of the giant closets stands taller than all the rest. It is black. Beyond it, in the distance, rests an interminable bronze sea.

She becomes aware of the two little apes that have appeared in front of her. They must have taken some quilts, taken them from some tiny bed, since most of their bodies are oddly covered by them. The first one is closer to her, running toward her. The second is close behind. But the second one seems more cautious. She stops mid-stride. Left leg forward, right leg behind, hands down.

Expressionless.

The first little ape is now in front of her, arms extended, palms open, and walks toward her. The little ape gets closer and touches her leg with both palms of his hands. It then clamps around her leg with both arms and legs. It grinds its face, gums and teeth on it. It tries to climb up further, but slips and falls down to the ground instead. It gets up immediately and takes two steps to One's other leg, and starts to take off the quilt that covers his hips and thighs and also then clamps both arms and legs around One's leg, and rubs its nose and chin and lips and gums and teeth and

tongue on it. It shoots a clear, foamy liquid from its mouth onto One's leg, repeatedly. And rubs its entire face on it again: nose, forehead, cheekbones, lips, tongue, chin, cheeks, temples.

One stands in front of the electric blue sky in the distance, the black tower defiantly against it, the interminable bronze sea beyond it, the tall grey buildings framed by it. She sees all kinds of sticks jutting out of the ground, dark strings between them in all directions, white and yellow and multicolor markings on the ground and on sticks and on some houses and on some of the giant walls, flat faces on walls; huge flat faces on walls and more markings, more colorful shells with the two eyes resting lightly on the dark ground; more tall grey cabinets and houses for small inhabitants and some trees and but glowing orbs hanging from sticks and all colors and shapes and textures that are just suddenly there, everywhere around, anywhere around, omnipresent.

The world is kaleidoscopic and heterogeneous, with a disintegrated waistband.

The little ape is now static and has not moved in a while, its quilts at its ankles, clamped onto One's right leg. The second little ape is yelling at the first one. The second little ape looks up at her, then tries prying the first little ape off her leg. It eventually succeeds. They both fall to the ground in front of her. The second little ape is holding the first little ape and shaking it and yelling at it. But mostly looking up at her.

One stands before them, hands down, expressionless; the world is kaleidoscopic and heterogeneous, with a disintegrated waistband.

One turns around. And walks back.

Around her, all kinds of sticks jutting out of the ground, dark strings between them in all directions, white and yellow and multicolor markings on the ground and on sticks and on some houses and on some of the giant walls, flat faces on walls, huge flat faces on walls and more markings, more colorful shells with the two eyes resting lightly on the dark ground, more tall grey cabinets and houses for small inhabitants and some trees and but glowing orbs hanging from sticks and all colors and shapes and textures that are just suddenly there, appearing everywhere, with every step. The grass is still cool and moist at her feet. She keeps walking. A light fog starts to materialize, attempting to blur the world's heterogeneity ever again. Less and less of the shiny, colorful, shelled creatures with the two eyes resting lightly on the dark ground and of the small houses and huge ape faces on flat surfaces are visible. The fog is now much thicker. *Have you completely forgotten your true mission? You are under a spell which has made you forget everything.* A large olive-green toad sits on the grass to her right, facing away from her. The

music just now starts to become again a part of the world. It gets louder and louder with each step. It is almost impossible to see now through the heavy grey fog. One keeps walking. *Have you completely forgotten your true mission?* Nothing is visible but the grey fog now, as the music is all-encompassing now, conquering every available space. One's left foot rises to climb the first of the eight steps up to her porch. She climbs the rest of the steps without ever slowing her pace. She comes up to her open front door discernible in the fog and with deepening fog beyond it, and walks back into her house, to the all-encompassing music that fills every available space and the visually impenetrable fog inside the house and everywhere around. One turns around, and closes the door.

One then turns to go back to the bedroom. One walks across the corridor to the bed. One sits on the bed, brings both feet up. Slides over to the center of the bed in the impenetrable fog. Settles back, with legs splayed in front, head on the bed, and arms to the sides. And closes her eyes.

The music keeps playing, the fog keeps hanging outside, the damp foggy night keeps the whole house in a light grey haze, and the warm and humid air fills the house, stagnant.

You're wasting your time trying to help those who cannot be saved / Have you completely forgotten your true mission? / You are under a spell which has made you forget everything

The Song of the End of the World

“Yes, sir. Yes, you could say that.”

“And then what happened?”

“I saw this ... we, I should say. Saw this... woman, walking toward us.”

“Walking in the park towards you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And?”

“Well... it was the... weirdest thing I ever saw in my life. Sir.”

“Yeah, ok, so... you say she’s tall this chick. Like, freakishly tall, is what you’ve said, right? But what’s that? Can you elaborate? Seven foot? Seven-six?”

“More.”

“Eight?”

“Sir, Ian’s slightly shorter than me. When he stood before her, she was at least... three times his height, sir. I don’t know. Really the strangest... thing I ever saw.”

“So what? Nine feet? No one’s ever been nine feet. Not even Wadlow was that tall.”

“Sir... pardon me? But I... I, ah... said three *times* his height. Ian’s not, uh, three feet tall. To put it in perspective, sir, we were roughly at eye-level with her knees.”

“Ok. Anything else? She donning anything? What’s she look like.”

“Sir. The weird thing is... she didn’t look like a tall... a giant, er, *giantess*, whatever you want to call... an abnormally tall woman. These women, I mean... all the women over 7 feet I’ve ever seen on the internet, or documentaries, or even the few very tall women I may have seen in person two or three times in my life... I mean before this, of course... well... their proportions are... different. Than... regular-sized women. This one, she actually looked like... like a... girl... of a regular height, but scaled up? She looked like a ... if you’ll excuse me sir, a, the shape of a fit, attractive, 5-foot-6 or 5-foot-9, ah... woman... that you took and uniformly scaled up from that height something like three times. So what is that?”

“Around sixteen and a half, seventeen feet.”

“Right. I guess. I know it sounds... uniform scale by a factor... like we do in CAD drafting. Just like we do in AutoCAD. Where we insert blocks and specify either an X factor, Y, or Z factor, or just uniform scale up where the shape is kept in proportion to the original shape but made bigger or smaller... in this case bigger. But proportionally. Her head, maybe a seventh or an eighth her total height... that’s the weirdest part, that she looked like a normal, nice-bodied girl but just bigger, ah... impossibly big. Ah... Fit. She looked fit. Very, very kind on the eyes if you don’t mind my saying so, sir. Only that... so tall... big... Ah...”

“Ok.”

“...”

“...”

“As she approached there was also this smell... a very particular smell I’m not sure I ever smelled before. Somehow, however, it seemed... oddly familiar. The smell was like... that of... if you took raw meat and... nutmeg. Burnt. Nutmeg, ah... raw meat and burnt nutmeg in a busy public restroom someone had just sprayed vanilla Lysol in. Yeah. Ah... I guess that’s the best way I can describe it.”

“Charred nutmeg, ammonia, vanilla, raw beef.”

“Right.”

“Ok. Other than her height. What else.”

“Ok. Other things. For example, like... ok. Like, no hair. Like not even a baby. Just like, totally bald. Not shaved. Just no hair. Smooth. Her scalp. Her skin tone, like a sheeny kind of a creamy color. You know, ah, condensed milk? *That* color. But sheeny. Beautiful. The face was... perfect. The eyes were weird in that they looked huge. Yes, as I said, the entirety of her is scaled up, but even then, the eyes are still disproportionately big even within her scaled-up context. Maybe if you... took them out, maybe the size of softballs? Or maybe bigger? Anyway, but beautiful. It’s hard to explain. Like she still looked proportioned. Eye color a strange kind of black. Nose pointy straight. Sharp, strong nose. Refined. Very shapely, thick lips. But sharp-angled. Pointy chin. Unusually pointy actually. I mean, rounded but pointy. Ears, thin but very elaborate. Like a person with ears that are thin, close to the head and elaborately shaped. And very translucent. Another extremely... odd feature? Extremely thick, gray eyebrows. Very well defined edges, furry. Beautiful, too. But strange. The color was silver, actually. Like fish-

shaped. Like the silhouette of a fish. I'm talking about the eyebrows. Like two furry, silver fish facing one another. Not silverfish the insect. Two fish. Like from the sea."

"Gotcha."

"Ok..."

"..."

"..."

"What did she have on?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Nothing."

"Primary, secondary sex characteristics you could plainly see?"

"Now that you mention it, sir, quite small breasts and... I did check. Ah, no... ah..."

"Vulva?"

"Right. No... line or anything. Just... clear."

"Anything else?"

"She walked on tip-toe, sir."

"Tip toe? How do you mean?"

"Well, sir, that exactly. My mother used to have a hairdresser who would come over to the house every so often. She used to bring her daughter along. The little girl walked around like that, too. This reminded me of that. She did so until about seven or eight I guess. She walked on the balls of her feet, I guess is what it really was. But it was like they were locked in that position. The woman's. Her soles were at like a 45 degree angle from the ground. She didn't seem though to be making any special effort at all to walk. Like it was second nature. Like... no, actually. Like she was born like that or something."

"Wow."

"Yes. Nonetheless, sir, she... her movements were fluid, normal. Again, as if she were the size of an average person. Not any slower or awkward at all as could be expected from someone that... big. As far as agility. But, for example, she did have... very athletic legs, and I guess since gravity stays a constant regardless of you having more mass than normal, the way her flesh moved slightly, along with her walking, that did seem to be slightly slower, that movement. Just

slightly. And perfect posture too, not slumped or leaning at all in any way. Her walk was... confident. Purposeful.”

“Nothing else on her, no jewelry, keys, weapons, money, anything?”

“No sir. Nothing.”

“What about markings, patches, skin art, prosthetics, devices?”

“No, nothing at all.”

“Did you... communicate with her at all. Either you or, ah, Mr. Smith? Talk to her?”

“No, sir. Well. Ian was... saying things, but I guess mostly talking to himself, sir. But no, she just kept looking straight ahead. She didn’t make a sound.”

“What was her demeanor like, was she smiling, was she... happy, angry, sad, confused? Did she seem lost, afraid?”

“She seemed... aloof. Sir. Expressionless. Actually, maybe a very subtle smirk, going along with a very subtle frown. But like those were not expressions but actually how she naturally was? Like that’s just how she is? Like she was born like that? She just kept looking straight ahead, the whole time, even when Ian went over to her.”

“So tell me about that part. Tell me exactly what went on. What the... interaction was.”

“Well sir, he went over and stood in front of...”

“Wait. Start from the beginning. And give me details. You were shooting the breeze, you and Mr. Smith, by the basketball court at the park east of Laramie, when what happened? Go ahead.”

“Ian saw her first. I was talking. My jaw must have dropped some. She was... just... walking seemingly toward something really far away, behind us. There were lots of toads just hopping along as she walked, at her feet. Ian, excuse me sir, but, he said, uh, ‘What the fucking fuck’. And, ‘Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.’ Sir. Pardon me, sir. But he just kept repeating, uh, those exact words, sir. And all of a sudden he has gotten up and is walking toward this... woman. She’s maybe thirty feet from us. In front of us. Ian keeps going toward her. Sir, by now it’s just unreal, just how surreal this is with Ian close to her, the difference in size, the fact that she looks like a normal woman but scaled-up. Just right there in front of you, *existing*. Ah...”

“Go on.”

“Well, he has stood in front of her, maybe 15 feet before her. So actually almost as far away from her as she is tall. He looks straight ahead at, I’m guessing, her legs, then up at her face, then back at her legs again and then back up at her face again. He says: ‘Hey’. She says nothing. She

stops. Stays there balanced, perfectly, static, on the balls of her feet. I had never seen that expression before on his face. His face and body language, all of a sudden filled with graveness, focus and resolve. He got closer to her, and closer, hands outstretched in front of him. ‘I, ah, yelled to him, I said, don’t touch her, don’t touch her.’ He just kept going, like on a mission...”

“Go on.”

“I’m now maybe standing six feet from them. Up close she’s even more amazing. Beautiful, but just made so much larger. Up close is that I noticed the sheen on her skin, and that on her forearms, she’s got these little short, silver hairs. I mean not like fur or anything, you can see the skin, the dermis, perfectly, but she’s got these tiny little hairs. Evenly spaced. Her lower legs too. Short silver hairs. And again, her face. Just... out of this world beautiful. Is ‘gorgeous’ more of a superlative, as a word, than ‘beautiful’? But it doesn’t come close either. I had never seen anything like that. Like everything was the perfect size, shape, location, so that the harmony achieved was, like... maybe a balance that genetics alone have not yet in the history of man come up with. *That*, in itself, made her strange. Scary... in a way. Just... it’s very hard to describe. The features were also like exaggerated somewhat, but that was... a good thing.”

“Ok. And what happened next?”

“He gets to her, hugs her left leg...”

“Hugs it?”

“Yeah, I mean, yes, sir. Hugs it with both arms and legs. Squirms and moves in a weird way, like trying to rub himself on her, also his whole face, pressing against her skin, rubbing against it, desperately, crazily. No reaction on her part. His hands grabbing at her flesh as best he could, trying to grip, squeeze. Rub? But harshly? He starts patting it, hard, too, the leg, first with one hand, then both hands, and that is when he fell to the ground, on his back, by her foot.”

“Hold on. He fell, you say. What height? Did he hurt himself? In any way? Maybe hit his head?”

“No, he fell on his back. He was kind of hunched over when he fell.”

“How high?”

“Not so high. His face was around the level of her mid-thigh. So four, five feet maybe?”

“Ok. Then what.”

“He gets up immediately, as if nothing had happened, climbs the right leg then, rubs his face in it, starts foaming at the mouth and spitting on her skin, smashing and rubbing his face on it. Then

with one hand he starts to take off his shorts. He manages to do so, but to do that he had to let go, stop clamping her leg with his legs. Thankfully his underwear was still on. He tries to take those off too, but instead his whole body starts shaking, as he's holding on to her legs just with his arms. Suddenly he stops moving. I just hear heavy breathing on his part."

"I thought you said he wasn't moving."

"Well, he's static, except for the breathing, sir."

"Ok. What then?"

"I called out to him. I said, 'Ian, Ian, you ok?' But no answer. She's still looking ahead of her, completely indifferent to the situation, with that slight smirk on her face. I try to yank him back down, but the grip he's got with his arms is amazing. After a maybe a half a minute I'm able to, ah, unclamp him, if you will. Take him down."

"Did you touch the..."

"No, sir. I did not touch her. Well, not my exposed skin. The sole of my shoe did touch her shin, as I pushed against her skin with my leg as I was prying him off her. Up so close to her, that smell I mentioned was overwhelming, by the way, sir. Made it almost difficult to breath."

"Ok."

"..."

"Did you leave any marks, with your shoe?"

"On her?"

"Ah... yes. Any marks?"

"No, which surprised me, actually. The skin seem very tough. Tough but smooth, and with these relatively sparse, thick, straight, silver little hairs. Like almost made out of that plastic gel material that you can scrape a knife blade on and it's unfazed? Like that, sort of."

"Ok. Did *he* leave any marks?"

"Nothing. At least none that I could plainly see"

"Ok."

"..."

"Ok, so what happened then?"

"Ian's on the ground and not responding. His eyes are open but he's not with me. He looks straight ahead. In this case at the electric blue early morning sky, as I got him lying on the ground, face up. Looking right past me. I yell at him and shake him, no response. He's got

this... euphoric look on his face. Wide eyes. This slight, relaxed grin. I looked back up at her, she hasn't moved. I look back at Ian. Yell at him again, shake him, nothing. Just that detached, satisfied, peaceful half-smile on his face and eyes at half-mast. All of a sudden she's turning around and she starts to walk away. Right back the way she came. The toads that were all around us, now following her, hopping about around her, as she strides off."

"Did you attempt to follow her? See where she might go?"

"No. Just sat there beside him in awe and looking at her walking away, just... I mean, kind of in shock... in awe at the surreal development... phenomenon. What had just happened. This sixteen-foot, out-of-this-world beautiful... entity... I shouldn't really keep calling her 'woman', although, of course, she has woman form... but so... yes. No, I didn't... *couldn't* follow. Just kept looking at her walking away, miniaturizing trees along her way, watching her deliberate, balls-of-her-feet stride as she got further and further away. I lost sight of her when she was eventually enveloped by the light mist that had formed in the distance. I do wonder where... something like that would go to."

"Okay. I think we're done here."

"Ok."

"Thank you, Mr. Merrick."

"You're welcome, sir."

"..."

"Ah, sir? How's he doing? If I may ask?"

"He's fine. He's in good hands. Under observation."

"Ok."

"Ok."

"..."

"Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Sure, sir. Thank you."

"Mr. Merrick."

Summer 2024

Ian wakes up in his huge house.

--The End--