

METRIC



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FORK ME
HUNTING EROS

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ISSUE EIGHT

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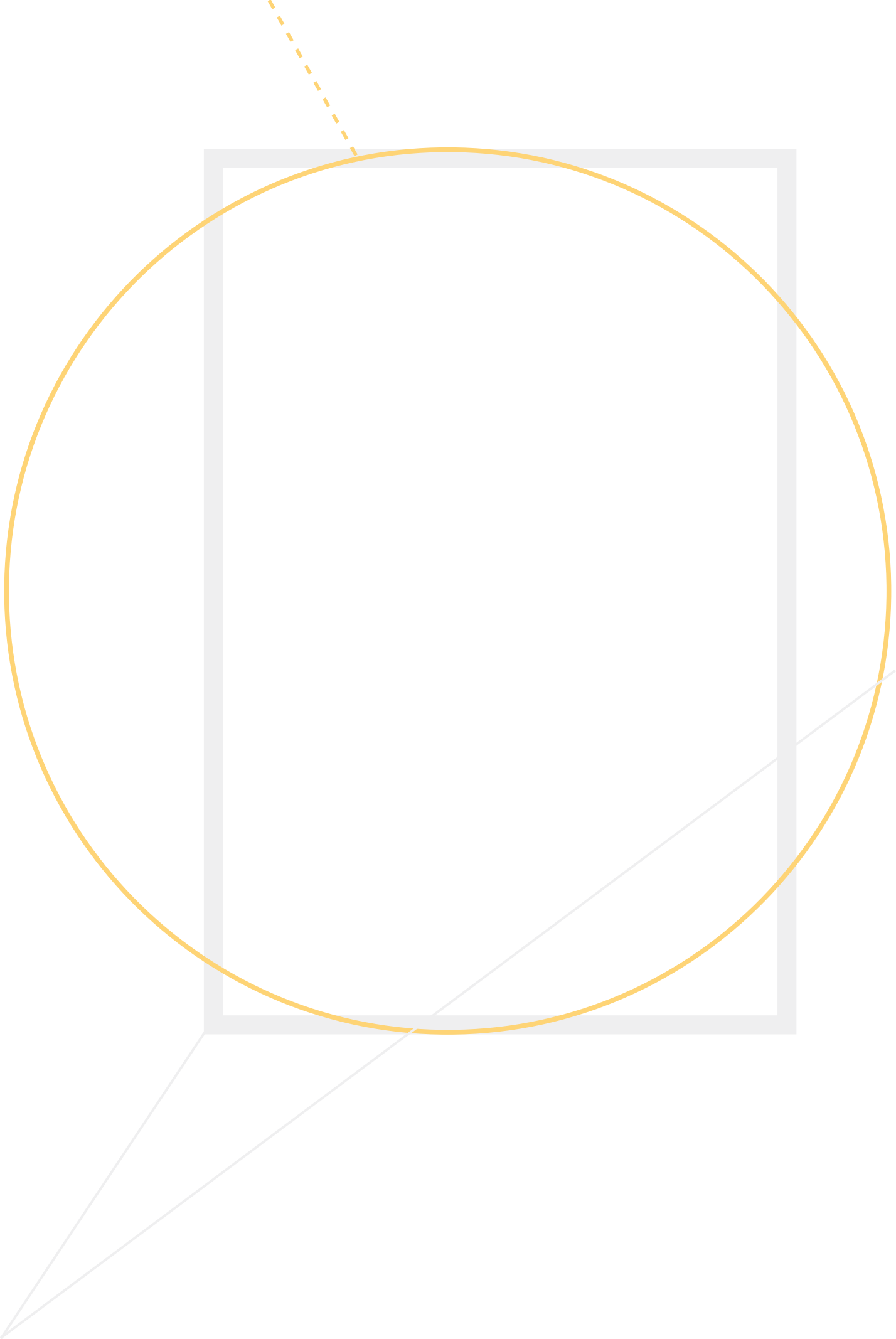
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PROSE

*A HOLLY GARDEN
IN THE GRAY CASTLE*

Wrapped up and nestled in the square bend of kitchen cabinets, I watch my brother play with his toys through a thin gap in my safety blanket. He's sitting Indian-style on the porch. Between us, the sliding door is open. If it were closed, there would be an unclean crack in the glass that distorts his face. He is plainly engrossed with his swollen hands, and the way they so ascendantly coerce a pair of paint-stripped and die-cast cars into dry, repeated cataclysm. Flecks of spit erupt from his cockled mouth like tiny pearls of lake foam, as he creates wet noise to simulate collision. He's my older brother, but you wouldn't know it. For some reason, his body refuses to release its

great wealth of baby fat. Dimples are set deep into his knuckles and cheeks.

I watch him with a kind of fondness that I don't have or need the words to express. He's always been the ornery one, and I love him for that. He's always been the one with a little extra sand.

Past my big brother, beyond the front porch rail, and a stretch of green lawn, is the garden. And beyond the garden, the dock and the brand new pontoon, the lake, big muddy brown. I wonder how something so dirty still sparkles, but it does, like Mother's diamond ring when she dropped it last week in the soft garden soil, against the odds.

Between the garden and the lake, there's a row of holly shrubs, clipped and pruned to form a long evergreen balustrade. It's high enough to keep the garden secluded from the lake, and shallow enough that, from the back door, you can see the lake at low tide. The house sits at the top of a steep hill, and everything preceding lives in perpendicular limbo until the ebbing edge of water.

The sound of my father's irregular steps startles me. He stops where the carpet meets the tile, to look at me here on the kitchen floor, a profusion of fabric and bright eyes. His toenails are yellow and need to be trimmed. He grunts apathetically, or in spite of me. I won't look him in the eyes anymore. I know better. To look him in the eyes is to inspire the thing inside him that I'm most afraid of. I stare at his scab-covered knees, his feet, his toes, or the floor, but I don't dare look higher. His eyes will take control of my own if I look above his waist, and draw them into a claustrophobic trance that makes me feel sick and vulnerable when it's over. Receding into my blanket, I avoid the temptation entirely. He grunts again. It's his way of laughing so I can't mistake it for acceptance or love. It's hateful. I can hear him take a drink from his glass, an evaporating piece of ice kissing the neck that sounds like a muted bell. He over-exaggerates a breath of content. I cringe and my spine tingles. I don't have to see his eyes to know that he's looking at the lake. He loves the big muddy brown, I think more than he loves my brother and I, and even more than he loves our mother. In fact, I know it's true, because he doesn't hate the lake; he hates us. He loves the new pontoon with all its bright white fiber-

glass and reflective aluminum. Recently, he's taken to drinking himself foolish on the dock, fussing with all the boat's extremities and marveling at it, until it gets too dark to see, or he's too wasted to walk a straight line. Last week, he fell in, because he was too drunk to keep steady on the boardwalk. Mother was smoking on the porch. She saw it happen, and ran barefoot to the water's edge. She dragged him soaking wet onto the lawn and just hollered and yelled until he staggered back up to the house and went to bed. He's still scraped up from raking his shins on the way down.

He mutters something hateful toward my brother. I don't understand it because the words don't dedicate themselves, and because my brother is self-sustained. Father takes another drink and puts his glass down hard on the countertop. I recoil beneath my blanket in response to his heavy-handedness. He puts me on edge. His every movement makes me nervous.

Mother's in the kitchen now, fixing supper. She came in like a cyclone on slender white legs. Father watches her from his seat at the parlor side of the wet bar. I know she can feel his eyes burning tight holes in the side of her skull. I know because I can feel it,

too, when he looks at me the same way, like he's not sure what to make of me. He looks at us like we're unfamiliar, like we're not the family he thought he knew or wanted. He looks at us like we've grown horns from our heads, like our bodies confuse him.

Mother ignores him. I can tell she's keyed up inside. Father's glass is full again. Mother moves around me, as though I'm part of the kitchen's inherent construction. I'm still here on the floor with my blanket, wedged between the cabinets' right angle. She steps over my feet, swinging a hot plate of food high over my head. Her knees look so soft. I'd like to rub the side of my face against them, but she's keyed up and busy with supper. The fragrant heat from the oven is nice on my left cheek, strong with the smell of broiling, over-seasoned chicken.

"You're a bitch, you know that?" Father mutters, breaking the silence of warm air. I can't see his face. It's hidden by the wet bar that's too high for me to see over from here on the floor. I imagine he's staring into the bottomless, warm bister of his glass. Mother refuses to acknowledge him, but I can sense a bitter tension in the elevated coercion with which she's peeling the ruddy skin from a russet potato.

“You hear me, Glor?” Father asks. This time I know he’s looking right at her, searing cauterized vacuities in her skull. His voice begs for an answer, something he can sink his ostentatious teeth into. The way he shortens her name for the sake of derisive endearment makes my stomach turn.

“I heard you,” she says back. The new exchange taking place in the space above my head makes my heart beat faster. I don’t like the way Father’s voice sounds, like it’s caught on to a trail of blood in the water.

“Answer me when I talk to you, Glor.” His voice softens so we can hear the disdain in it, dripping, provoking.

“I won’t talk to you when you’re like this,” Mother says simply. She doesn’t look at him. She refuses to engage with the hyaline void of Father’s eyes.

There’s a long pause, in which I find it all but impossible to keep from crying, or shouting, or dying, and Mother is still fixing supper like nothing’s happened. There’s an abrupt and sudden discord over my

head, and a flourish of motion that's Mother, in lithe aversion of airborne ice and polished glass.

Mother is yelling. Her voice strains desperately. It breaks and cracks, like Father's glass on the far kitchen wall, now at rest on the floor in pieces. I look at it, a few inches away, through a gap in my blanket, a clear, cusped pulp in a little pool of strong smelling ichorous. Father is standing up. He's in the kitchen now, and he holds a red finger in Mother's face. His face is red, too, all pervaded with liquor and rage. A fat bead of sweat develops on his hairline, becomes too heavy to hold its own weight, and runs a light-reflective rule down the side of his face. Mother's jaw is protruding, and trembling.

I want to scream. I want Father to calm down. I know he will hurt her; I've seen him do it before. Whatever it is, the one thing inside him that I'm so afraid of, I know it's been given to inspiration by something without the capacity to change or settle for anything but to see itself through. It's not given to logic as I know it. This must be why he tells me I'm stupid and good for nothing, because I can't begin to fathom the way he hates us, and how effortlessly justified he ex-

pects it should be. Despite any action I can take, to scream, cry, or cross the kitchen floor and pound my little fists into the flat of his back, nothing will stop him from proving just how much he hates us.

Mother shouts something in his face, so loud that I can't really understand. It's all just noise slathered in white spit. In savage response, Father takes hold of her throat with one hand and begins to beat her. He attacks her face with his fist, as if she's a man the same size as him, and with just as much drunken ill will. They struggle like animals on the tile. He grunts like an overexerted sow and pulls her hair. She screams the way I wish I could. Their bodies shrivel into the floor, and Mother fortunes to break away. Father's big and strong, but he's very drunk, and sloppy.

I look around for my brother. It's only now that I realize he's not on the porch. I hope he's in his room with the door closed. I hope he's too scared to come outside and see this violence for himself, as it sucks all the oxygen from the air.

I feel myself plucked from the floor, like a weed with deep roots. My legs are numb and don't coop-

erate with my brain, or the urgent lead of Mother's hand. She screams my brother's name, to bring him out of whatever recess of the house he's hiding in. He appears in the parlor, misty-eyed and otherwise expressionless. He stares at Mother and I, and then at Father, who's struggling to stand against the rigor of drunken disproportion. Mother calls to my brother again, and extends another hand to take his.

Mother guides us out the back door, down the porch steps, and I can hear Father stumbling in pursuit with toiled groans and heavy feet.

Mother precedes us downhill, toward the big muddy brown. She's kicked off her flimsy shoes, so's to move faster and with less inhibition. I wonder why she's taking us to the water when the garage is uphill.

I run as fast as my legs allow. We mangle the garden with our feet. After all, it's Father's pride and joy, and Mother doesn't care anymore. I swerve to avoid the holly shrub, but in my loping cadence, I see Mother does not. She jumps and clears the hedge. In this hurried imminence, I can't give much attention to how incredible it is. It seems almost supernatural, the way her petite body gives so much to the air, and eludes the hedge entirely.

Father is close. He hollers through a dry mouth, words that are angry and unintelligible. Mother's already on the dock as my feet hit the boardwalk. My brother is a few feet ahead. The boardwalk sways in the water, beneath our precipitation, on buoyant Styrofoam blocks coated with lake scum, and I'm scared to fall.

Mother steps aboard the pontoon. She tells my brother to free the rope that keeps the boat from drifting out of the jetty. He does it quickly, and Mother helps him on, and then me, as I crest the dock in a fever. My brother engages the motor like Father taught him, and we pull away from the dock. The big muddy brown takes us into itself, and digests us, like a massive, ninety-mile bowel. Father watches us from the dock in a fit of heaving, flushed and wet. His madness tires once our distance has qualified for security. I can see in his eyes, even from this growing distance, that he's suddenly doubled back on himself. He's remorseful and self-effacing.

"Glor!" His voice doesn't carry. It sounds poorly supplied and underdeveloped, failing to bridge the watery canyon with weighted clarity. He might be crying, but we've gone too far to be sure.

We spend the rest of the afternoon on the big muddy brown, a threesome of mouth-less refugees. The aura of our collective fear has worn off, like a foul smell washed away by steam. I think, with a level of apprehensive certainty, we will return in a shortness of hours. Out here, adrift on an island of fiberglass and aluminum, we are compassed by all the things Father loves, and if we stay among them long enough, maybe these things will erode and effect us, and make us appealing to him. When we get home, maybe he will love us like he loves to drink, or like he loves the pontoon, or the lake, big muddy brown.

AGE OF THE TURTLE

We burned the boats. Going back: impossible. Even now it's difficult to remember the warning signs amid the inevitable astrologic discrepancies: all nine planets fallen out of alignment. Summer Equinox Festival ended a week prior to the journey, we thought there was still time; time to reach shores across the east whale roads. Unsailed, those routes were tumultuous during the calm seasons. But living grew scarce: space and food low, the east had, in theory, a plethora far beyond our dying land. Years theorizing our voyage plotted all possible outcomes: vicious natives, sparse coasts and mountains as empty as our own, the

very edge of the world unrolling into the great black night. It was the edge I feared, the nothingness dropping out through the void around the tower of eternal turtles carrying our word through the emptiness. I've not seen the Lord Turtle, I'm uncertain He exists. There must be some tangible, some tactile matter under the deep black waters that carries our floating soil, buoyant and thin; but I am uncertain. My father once told me below the black, the world starts anew like a city of the dead parallel to the surface. At night they come up from their buried homes to map the land of the living, replication a staple for their survival. "Not our dead. They are remnants of the ancients swallowed by the Turtle in the earthquake of fires." We tell this story often – our voyage east sailed on the wind of its telling – how the Turtle chewed through rock and tree and man, swallowed into the god's belly. That was why we left, to run from the signs. Fire was coming, rumbling signs ran under foot. So we burned the boats, no need or hope for return.

MACK RAINEY'S GAME

Don't you think that somebody who has been shot at six times in six months and found himself almost turned into a blood donor at knifepoint would change his line of work? Especially after the wife threatened to leave because she couldn't take the stress and worry anymore. Well, what can I say? That's the kind of guy I am—I like it on the cutting edge, harder, faster, furious. Whatever you do, don't give me none of that nine-to-five lifestyle with the white-picket fence and the house in the suburbs.

By the way, I'm Mack Rainey, formerly with the Wilderness Tracking and Foraging Division, in asso-

ciation with the UFF and recently assigned to Division A of the WCDD. It was Sunday, late afternoon, and I was sitting on a park bench near Lake Merit, in Oakland, California, watching female joggers and wondering when the street weirdo on the bench next to mine was going to graduate from pocket pool to a real flash job.

It was a clear autumn day, typical Bay Area Indian summer, traffic was relatively light—the last big earthquake took out a freeway exit and the city never bothered to build another one—and pigeons were swooping in from a ledge on the building across the street, crapping on a taxi that was waiting by the sidewalk for a fare. God I love the fall.

I had planned to be in San Diego for the weekend but a last-minute assignment changed all that—I'd be reporting for work with the WCDD first thing in the morning. Not too many people are familiar with the good ol' WCDD, which is real fine by me; in fact, that's how I like it. Low-profile operation. There are two main divisions and three secondary divisions within the WCDD that concentrate on specific classifications of sex perverts, garden-variety weirdoes and druggie types. I'm in the coastal division—we run surveillance, intervention, and arrest operations from Port-

land to San Diego but never more than ten miles in from the coastline. I'm not sure which mastermind at central command dreamt up the jurisdiction boundaries. But, hey! It's not in my fricking job description to get my feathers flapped up over that kind of horse-shit.

Anyway, I was looking to practice up a little before reporting to my new job, so I struck up a conversation with the street weirdo who was sitting on the bench next to mine. I had him pegged as a sex pervert right from the start. The kind that watches the female joggers and sneaks his hand down his pants. And he looked like he hadn't been close to a razor in two weeks and his clothes were filthy and when I'd first sat down I thought I smelled marijuana. He said his name was Joe. For all I knew he was probably already in the computer, although for a pervert and dooper he was reasonably coherent.

I said to him, "Nice view of the lady joggers, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah, sure, pal," he answered but didn't look at me.

"Come here often?"

"For a few years."

"You like it here?" I continued.

"Everybody likes it here—it's the lake."

“My cousin says Oakland sucks,” I said. “He says it’s just Detroit in drag.”

“My cousin just got locked up in rehab last week.”

“No kidding? What was his thing?”

“Anything—everything.”

“I get it ...”

Then we didn’t say anything for what seemed like a minute. Two really well-built blondes pranced by us on the joggers’ path—the one nearest me had striking blue eyes. I glanced over to see if Joe was going to pull it out. But he didn’t move a muscle. Then he started in talking about how bad the Raiders sucked and how they were traitors for ever leaving Oakland in the first place. “LA really stinks, man, I hate that town,” he complained. Then he said something about the ducks on the lake.

I tuned the guy out and started thinking about how I had wound up here in Oakland in the first place. Like I already said, I was a wilderness tracker and forest foraging specialist, one of the best. If I do say so myself. A little over a year ago I was working for the UFF, tracking a rouge band of homosexual backpackers through the Sierras—the sonofabitches left a trail of banana peels and apple cores wide enough to follow on a moonless night during dust fallout from meteor

impact. Then, just as I was closing in, the bearded freaks spotted me and took off running through an off-limits wildlife preserve.

Well, hell's bells, what was I supposed to do? Department policy on hot pursuits through areas such as these has become damned strict in the last several years, gung-ho young officers looking to make a name for themselves have damaged too much native foliage. Anyway, the perps are still at large, although I was of course still keeping a sharp eye out—thought maybe they'd show up at Yosemite, rock climbing El Capitan or something. What a fricking world.

A week later I get a call from my cousin Jimmy up in Washington State. He works for the CBC and lives on one of the islands just off Seattle—I forget the name—and, anyway, he invites me to come up and stay in his new beach house. Jimmy was doing pretty well—I think the wife inherited money, from a great uncle or maybe her stepfather. The house was on a small knoll that overlooked a long sandy beach and on sunny days it was all right. The view that is. The house was a little too modern for my taste. I would have gone with more of a Martha's Vineyard look.

Anyway, while I was staying at Jimmy's I somehow got involved with a case the CBC was working

on, concerning a pair of middle-aged women, lesbians actually, who were dumping hundreds of gallons of hazardous chemicals in a ditch in their backyard.

And while all this was going on, my wife—we had been separated for over a year—took off with some skinny Puerto Rican, a bartender at the Coconut Lounge in Reno. And if that wasn't enough, while I was assisting with the case of the two lesbians, I made the acquaintance of a real moron named Fred Hinklemeyer. He had been with the CID for almost twenty years. I took an immediate and distinct disliking to him and I think he hated me worse than I hated him. Then to make things worse, he was getting transferred to the WCDD team, the same division that I would be joining much sooner than I realized.

Another numb-nuts loser whom I found myself thrown in with, Harry Frankenlotter, was an NFS agent who flew out to Washington to investigate a possible connection between the lesbians' dumpsite and a big case he was working on in Idaho. But it seemed real unlikely to me—the Idaho case involved Neo-Nazis for chrissake, and what kind of upstanding Neo-Nazi would conspire to dump chemicals with a pair of lesbians? Well, of course, my having pointed this fact out to Inspector Frankenlotter went over like

the proverbial turd in the old Christmas punchbowl. He became huffy, red faced and curt. Using big words that were loaded with double meanings. You know what they say, the mediocre jerk-offs always have the biggest egos ... oh, yeah.

In any event, it turned out that the lesbian dumpsite fell under state jurisdiction and not federal and so Frankenlotter had to back off quick—much to my personal satisfaction—and so it was down to just Fred Hinklemeyer and me. Hinklemeyer was about as sharp as a marble—not the slickest dick in the bizz—and subsequently I outsmarted him and in the process tricked a confession out of the two lesbians—we also bagged them on a local charge involving the fact that the chemicals they had dumped had found their way into a nearby pond. The end results of that boondoggle were hordes of five-legged frogs hopping all over the fricking place.

Anyway, after the mess at my cousin Jimmy's cleared up, I got offered a job with the WCDD. A big-shot special agent from Oregon, a one Captain Fellersbach, had sat in on the case and watched developments from the sidelines. Apparently he liked my style. Yeah, baby!

“Really liked the way you grilled the confession

out of those two lesbians. You showed me something on that one, Rainey, really some topflight work,” he said, slapping me vigorously on the back. “Maybe you’d like to come work for us, down in Division A of the WCDD?” he added, showing me a big corn-fed smile.

Hells bells, the next thing I knew they had me teaching classes on field tracking and non-indigenous detection techniques at the academy in Brookshire. But the problem was it was old hat for me. What I really enjoyed most was getting out on cases, even though the teaching paid well and I had a young secretary built like nobody’s business. And she got a big kick out of it when I told her how I had busted the two lesbians.

Meanwhile, my old buddy and ex-partner Fritz Hammerfinger knew I was going south on the teaching job and so he put in a call to Special Enforcement Division of the WCDD, a unit that works in conjunction with the Feds whenever cases extend outside of normal jurisdictions.

These guys are a pretty regular bunch, federal enforcement types who like to hire people out of specialty bureaus like the WCDD Training Division. Well, Jeezus H. Christ, I applied and was accepted and here

I am. The bucks are good and so are the benefits, except I don't get a hot secretary anymore. Although that's probably just as well. Tina, the secretary at the tracking and detection school, was beginning to drop hints about how she wanted a real relationship—but we wouldn't have lasted for long. The only real problem I have now is dealing with some of the Feds here in Oakland—I don't think sensitivity and political correctness training will help.

But my work is interesting. Locating, identifying, and tracking weirdos, sex perverts, and druggies is always a challenge, plus I work with an elite group, made up mostly of PD detectives, great guys, and a few ex-FBI men—they're the ones with the cobs up their asses—and there's a few quasi-civilian types, all topflight. Now and then a couple of CDDI prima donnas will drift into a case, sniff around a little, make a few field notes before heading to some fricking seminar in a fancy hotel in Frisco. And sometimes the DEA people get in on the druggie cases, and these are folks who really know their business, and they know how the connections are made between the big international terrorist types and the common drug users on the street. It's all one big family.

Occasionally we'll get help from the Bureau of

Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, you know, the boys who made a name for themselves down in Waco, Texas. I always wondered how they grouped booze, guns and tobacco under a single umbrella, but, hey, once again, it's not in my job description to figure that one. Anyway, the ATTF is probably the biggest bunch of overpaid idiots in the business. My pal Nick Diangelo-Nacio says that most of them couldn't crack a case if they had the Pope as an eyewitness. The ATTF used to be a low-profile outfit until they did their thing in Waco.

Hell, I'll bet you never knew that they headed up the investigation of President Kennedy's affair with Marilyn Monroe. They had footage of the two of them getting it on in the back of a limo, but word is Hoover managed to bootleg the film over to the FBI—it was a jurisdictional thing—and he had it made into a stag movie that only the FBI guys got to watch, during private parties and so on.

Anyway, back to what I was saying, there's a reason the Feds decided to team up with the Oakland PD in order to form the Central Branch of the WCDD. It had a lot to do with the fact that most of the ATTF and DEA guys weren't from the Bay Area and couldn't tell the difference between a Polk Street fairly and a Berke-

ley cross dresser. The DEA men are a little smarter. They like to tell stories about catching drug lords out in Istanbul or strip-searching female mules coming in from Columbia and Peru. Larry Haddenborough, with the overseas watchdog unit, tells a story about how a really hot Columbian chick came into San Diego International so stuffed with cocaine packets she looked four months pregnant. “Yeah,” he said, “and then they gave her one of their special “brown bombers” and twenty minutes later she drops a pile of cocaine filled rubbers the size of a kickball.” I’ll tell you people, bottom line, you got to be real street smart to work on the drug enforcement cases. And I’ll also tell you this, the standard-issue Fed is a Wendell W. Wasp Republican from Fort Wayne, Indiana. In contrast, out here in Oakland the PD is full of hotheaded Hispanics, blacks, a few chinks, and the rest Scotch-Irish bruisers, who are in the 90- to100-IQ range.

In any event, back to Lake Merit and Joe the sex pervert who was sitting on the bench next to mine. Another bevy of buxom females had just passed on the jogging path, and I said to Joe, “So, what do you think of that herd of beauties?”

“Women aren’t a part of my life anymore,” he answered, without looking at me. You know those

idiots at the CRCC would have grilled this guy for three hours before they got him to admit something like that, and I finessed it out of him with a little chitchat. Jesus, I'm good. Just then a jetliner roared overhead, a big 749. Joe suddenly stood up and looked over at me and said, "Which airline was that?"

I thought about the question for a moment and said, "Shit, I dunno, couldn't possibly recognize it from here, sport."

"The pilot brought that one in way too low, man, it's against regulations. He scared the shit of all the ducks. Look at 'em," he said, pointing out toward the rippled waters of Lake Merit. I strained my eyes, shading them from the afternoon sun that was polishing the surface of the water. I couldn't see any ducks.

"I can't see any ducks," I protested.

"Of course you can't, 'because they've all scattered for cover in the rushes."

Time to go, I said to myself and started walking away.

"Are you going to report that jetliner?" he asked, brow knitted as if he were truly concerned.

"Ah, actually, no—I have a meeting first thing tomorrow and I need to get my ass going," I answered, placing my right hand on my revolver holster under-

neath my jacket. He gave me an odd look and sat back down on the bench. Another group of joggers went by, and I got in my car and drove to my apartment.

The next morning at eight, I arrived at the WCDD building on 10th Avenue in downtown Oakland. It was a 1970s variety of artless modern architecture, too angular and flat on top. Rather than having an armed guard holding a M-16, with a 45 on his waste, like all the stinking third-world countries, there's a lousy red and white metal sign that reads:

RESTRICTED ZONE

Authorized personnel only.

After climbing a long set of stairs and making my way through a maze of corridors, I came to the end of a corridor and a double set of heavy steel doors. A small sign read: WCDD Division A. There was an electronic keycard scanner beside the door, housed in a stainless steel cabinet. After running my card through, a red light above the door stopped blinking and a blue one started; then there were mechanical sounds and a heavy clunk, followed by a computer voice saying, "You are cleared for entry, Agent Rainey."

I opened the door and walked about five paces to a reception desk. As I approached, I saw the profile of a young female secretary who was typing at a com-

puter keyboard. She looked up and smiled and said, “Good morning Agent Rainey, how are you today?”

Oh my gawd, I said to myself, it’s Tina, from the Tracking and Detection Academy.

“Tina, gosh, what a crazy surprise this is. How on earth did you get assigned down here, to the WCDD of all things?” I asked, fashioning a placid expression on my face.

“Just a simple twist of fate,” she said and winked.

She was looking better than ever. I hate to admit it, but I was starting to feel the old chemistry again. Part of me wanted to hop over the Formica countertop and do her right there on the floor. Instead I said, “I need to report in to Phil Riggonowsski. Which way to his office?”

“Third door on the right,” she cooed.

“When do you get off?” I whispered, crumbling to temptation.

“At four,” she smiled.

“How about diner?”

“Can I bring my husband?”

“Sure,” I answered and then headed down the corridor to the third door. I knocked.

“Come in.”

I stepped through the doorway and saw Phil Rig-

gonowsski sitting behind a huge oak desk with a secretary taking notes to his left. She was about twenty-nine, I'd guess, blonde, sapphire eyes, tan, trim build—probably a jogger—teeth like piano keys, gold neck chain, eyeliner and a little powder-blue shadow. She was a perfect little piece of Aryan work—a regular Wendy Wasp.

“Sit down, Rainey, I've been expecting you. This is my personal secretary, Anna Faye Pertly.”

She stepped forward and extended a hand. I got a closer look at her face. She looked strangely familiar, but I couldn't get a handle on where I'd seen her before. She had piercing blue eyes, and yet oddly vacuous, and they were the color of Gatorade Frost. Then she said, “Phil tells me that you come very highly recommended.”

“By who—ah, whom?” I said, still startled by her eyes.

“By your old colleagues in the UFF and the Tracking and Detection Academy.”

I just smiled, adding a hint of deference to my expression.

“And, of course, Tina said good things about you, too.”

“You bet, Rainey, she said you were hung like

a Russian racehorse,” Riggonowsski said and broke into a big belly laugh.

I looked at the blonde hoping that her facial expression would help me to make sense of the rather blunt and seemingly inappropriate comment. She just winked.

“Relax, Rainey, you look tighter than a piano wire. We’re all family in this department,” Riggonowsski said. “Faye get us some coffee and donuts.”

“I know where I saw you,” I blurted out.

The blonde turned and looked at me with an inquisitive gleam in her eye.

“Where?”

“You were jogging at Lake Merit yesterday afternoon, with another woman, right?”

“Yes, indeed I was, Agent Rainey.”

“Yeah, I was sitting on a bench, on the east side of the lake, casing a sex pervert. An unshaven man in filthy clothes—did you notice him? Us?”

“Well, yes, I believe I do recall. But I think someone else must have been on the case, because I also remember seeing one of our people and a squad car with two officers from Oakland PD taking a man who fits that description.”

Before I could say anything more she excused

herself and left to get the coffee and donuts. Riggonowsski grinned at me and said, “Fine little slice of chicken, wouldn’t you say so Rainey?”

“Yes, sir, very much so.”

“I’ve been banging her for the last six months. Like I said, we’re all one big family here at Division A. You’re gonna like it here. Everybody likes it here ...”

“I’m sure I will,” I said, wondering where I had heard that phrase before.

Just then the blonde returned with coffee and donuts. We did a little more of the chitchat routine and then Riggonowsski handed me a file.

“Here, Rainey, your first big case. I want you to get together with Hank MacKetttersfield at the UFF and Doug Dutchenheimer with the CRCC. These boys are a pair of aces, topflight. The three of you are going to work up profiles on a sleazy ring of wife swappers who are using the Sierra Club as a front. You know how it works, sex perverts and nature freaks—they’re all cut from the same canvas. Good luck, Rainey.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll get right on it.” I said and turned for the door. The blonde smiled and winked. Riggonowsski pulled a cigar out of his desk. As I walked passed Tina’s station she looked up at me and smiled, saying, “Everything go all right?”

“Just like clockwork,” I said and left through the big double doors.

The following Sunday I was back at Lake Merit. It had been a very productive week. The wife swappers were going to get a big surprise—we had penetrated their operations in the Sierra Club and it was only a matter of time until we’d spring the trap. So, anyway, there I was, sitting on the same bench watching the female joggers, thinking that maybe I’d get the jump on another pervert. But after about an hour it was looking like the weirdos were laying low. Then a pair of really built blondes came around the bend in the jogging path. I recognized the one on the left—it was Riggonowsski’s secretary. She spotted me and said, “Just can’t leave your work at the office, huh, Agent Rainey? All you WCDD guys are alike.”

I stood and had to adjust my pants with a quick move of my right hand. She apparently noticed and smiled at her friend. “We’re going to Dance Fever, the nightclub over on Fifth Avenue, at about eight. Why don’t you join us?”

“Is Riggonowsski going to be there?” I wanted to know.

“Of course not, weekends are reserved for his wife.”

“Great, I’ll see you there,” I said and winked. She winked back and the two of them continued jogging.

“What a great pair she has,” I whispered to myself. Just then a jetliner came roaring in low and all the ducks on the lake flew for the rushes. God I just love the fall in Oakland.

*FORK ME:
AN APOCRYPHAL PARABLE*

There is no truth that is not usable - Marie Ponsot

The Bride and Groom loved each other, but in the end, the cause of their discord boiled down to a three-tine versus a four-tine preference. The evening that marked a week from their wedding date was exhausted by a protracted harangue. There were pound marks on either side of the dining room table, a dual testament to the other's conviction that one extra/one less spike of metal defined their universe.

Finally, they declared a cease fire. They gravely exchanged utensils for the purpose of fostering a

mutual respect based on the other's preference. They agreed to meet again after one diurnal cycle, and a course of three meals consumed with other's favorite instrument.

That night, the Groom seated himself before a plateful of bow-tie pasta drenched in Alfredo sauce. He picked up the fork, bothered by its extra weight and its asymmetrical balance. He spun it around in his hand; it rotated only two-and-half times before slipping onto the table, where it clanged impatiently. The Groom picked up the fork, stabbed into the pasta, and put a morsel into his mouth. He felt his tongue cringe at the invasion of four cold spikes. The pasta slipped off the fork and down the back of his throat. He choked, whereupon the Groom reached for his glass of wine and downed it in one swig. Tears burned his eyes. The Groom threw the fork across the room, where it smartly embedded itself into a sofa cushion, and sloppily finished his dinner with a soup spoon.

The Bride fared no better. She ignored her Cobb salad. Her stomach rumbled as she sat staring at the slim metal trident. The absence of a fourth digit made her light-headed. After 15 minutes of deep breathing, she picked up the offending fork and dug into her salad. As she placed the leafy morsel in her mouth, the

fork slid to the left and stabbed her cheek. With a cry, she spat out the lettuce, dropped the fork, and ran into her bedroom. She spent the rest of the evening staring through her bedroom door at the wilting salad and the shiny, deadly tines of the possessed fork.

They both had nightmares. The Bride dreamed she gave birth to web-footed, three-fingered, five-eyed twin boys with an incessant demand for bow-tie pasta. The Groom dreamed he was trapped in Dresden during WWII while being carpet bombed with an endless supply of four-tined forks. They both woke at 3:41 am, sweating, hearts pounding, and tossed and turned for the rest of the night.

Instead of pancakes, the Groom drove through McDonalds and ordered an egg-and-cheese biscuit, which he demolished in 30 seconds. An hour later, he ended up with a bad case of heartburn. The Bride drank prune juice and consumed a banana. She departed through the back door, so as not to confront the remains of her dinner, or the shiny mouth assassin that reigned from her table.

Lunch was forgotten as each one slogged through the day, exhausted and unhappy at the prospect of being alone. By 5 pm, fueled by coffee and false confidence, they both left their respective jobs to meet

at their favorite coffee shop. As the Bride and Groom entered the cafe, they ran to each other, embraced, laughed, and proclaimed, “We’ll eat only finger foods!”

Their wedding was a splendid affair with lots of pomp, circumstance, and no cutlery. Their children were born with 10 fingers and 10 non-webbed toes, and, as they grew, preferred to eat their peanut butter sandwiches with sporks.

HUNTING EROS

Let me begin by saying, The Universe—or God, if you will (‘cause I won’t)—hates me. This realization came to me at the heels of another, more pertinent revelation: that at a certain point bad luck stops being bad luck, and starts being a signal from The Universe that it’s placed a poorly hidden landmine under your morning slippers. Now, I am fully aware that the universe is an unfathomably large, unthinking, unfeeling machine which does not know I exist and never will, but I choose to use the term because it has become apparent to me that there is some malevolent force which transcends my own personal idiocy and

irresponsibility and treats me like an all too tender testicle trapped inside a pinball machine, tumbling slapped and smacked in its flashing innards. I'm serious. The amount of bad luck I have had to endure is nothing short of supernatural.

Some would try to find comfort in platitudes or rationalizations like, "well at least you still have your health." Yes, I know, as is the case with talent, that there will always be someone out there more unlucky and unfortunate than I am. Sure, somewhere out there, there is a homeless leper with Down syndrome, without a penny to his name no one knows anyway. But that does not somehow invalidate my suffering. The latest slap to the face I've had administered by The Universe began as I stood on the precipice of youth, about to be pushed into the chasm of adulthood. It was at that critical junction in age where virginity—that ugly epithet applied to those who, for one reason or another, dared not burden women with the quelling of their lascivious urges—stops being something acceptable and starts being something of shame, a fragment of your person to be veiled behind half-truths or whole lies.

I had had it. I'd had it with the constant failed attempts at trying to find a fucking mate ("fucking"

used in this case as both an intensifier and a verb), and I'd had it with still being technically a virgin. So I decided to hire an escort.

You may, as I have many times subsequently, ask why? Why would somebody decide to become part of an industry—and an industry it very is—where women are judged with monstrous callosity and are treated like a meat slab you pay to ‘tenderize’? Why would someone spend hundreds upon hard-earned hundreds in exchange for an hour of palpable awkwardness and awkward palpability, all culminating in the soulless expulsion of climactic material? Why would someone willingly submerge themselves into the pool of cess where sadness grows like algae? The simple answer is: because it's easier.

By treating sex as a commodity, you avoid all of the complications attached with courting women. There is no need for fancy dinners; no need for forced romantic gestures, countless hours of straining to impress, weeks or months of waiting for her to “be ready,” and other such bureaucratic requisites before The Act. More importantly, it's faster. My birthday was approaching and thus my status as a “youth” was about to expire like the condom packet in my wallet—bought when I was younger and more hopeful—

how naïve. Most, if not all, of my friends had already “known the touch of a woman,” as only virgins call it, and I would have considered it a personal failure (one to add to my formidable collection) if I was unable to take the “I” out of “virgin” before my youth-shedding.

The notion of hiring an escort was not new to me. I’d thought about it, toyed with the idea, mulled it around calculatngly. I had even gone as far as to try it once, when times were thin, and frustration thick. My only previous dalliance with an escort service taught me the hard way to never order by phone, and always demand a picture. That former, disastrous encounter left me with balls as blue as my wallet was light. Consequently I turned to the internet as my sexual sensei this time around, guiding me through the path towards carnal enlightenment. I went spelunking headlong into the murky depths of the internet’s underbelly in search of a fitting girl. She had to be attractive, she had to be compatible, and more importantly, she had to be accessible; I would’ve felt impossibly self-conscious and performance-affectingly nervous if she was too much out of my league—though a perusal of the offerings in my area showed that wouldn’t be a problem.

On the internet, being the candy store of delights perverse more times than not, such a person was not hard to find. I came across a girl by the name of Candy. I wondered, when parents are naming their kid, and the best they can come up with is “Candy” (which, to their credit, I believe was an abbreviation (also, fake)), what do they think their kid is going to end up doing for a living? How many congresswomen or doctors or millionaires have a name like Candy?

Her buffoonish name notwithstanding, she seemed nice enough. She was a supposed nineteen-year-old, and based off her pictures, an Asian girl, petite, as they tend to be, with supple contrails outlining the melody of her body, sprightly peaches ripe and ready, skin written in mumbled French, and a somniferous sea of alabaster for legs. Her pictures were not studio-produced, touched-up fabrications; they were cell-phone shots, which strengthened the prospect of their veracity. Although her eyes had been blotted out with a big black bar, as though the NSA thought their redaction integral to the security of the nation, her body communicated what her eyes would have: a sultry tilt of the waist, a hand positioned just so, legs but mere suggestions of the possibilities; all of which amounted to one phrase, enunciated with per-

fect grace and sonority: “Pay to fuck me!”

The thing about Candy was that she was about a couple hours away; though a vast stretch of long, winding road, the distance shriveled in stark contrast to that I was willing to travel. Having already gotten her phone number from her website, I dialed from home with uncertain fingers as a surge of nervous anticipation flooded me. After three rings, a soft hello.

“Um, hi ... is this Candice?” The question was uttered in a weak tremulous voice which I quickly noticed, hated myself for, and resolved.

“Yeah,” an artificial giggle, “this is Candy,” she corrected me.

A moment passed as I tried to think of a roundabout way to state my intentions. I needed to ask her in a way which would suggest what was sought but also be vague enough for me to be able to pass it off as something else should I have been talking to the wrong person.

“So I was just wondering if you were doing anything tonight.” Pleased with my contrivance, a smirk began to creep up my face, until she responded with an even vaguer question.

“Do you think I’m going to do anything?”

This got me nowhere. She could either be offend-

ed that a stranger was asking such a question or she could have meant it suggestively. Her inflection suggested the latter.

“Um, ahem, do you happen to have a website?” I continued, still treading carefully.

“Yeah...”

Frustrated that this conversation was inching fast nowhere, I sliced through the awkward with a more direct query. “I would... I-I’d like your company tonight,” I said through a grimace invisible to her.

Silence.

“Okay, yeah” She said and giggled infectiously, as I secretly hoped that her giggle was the only infectious thing about her.

We made our arrangements and agreed to meet at midnight in a place I prayed was only ironically titled, Cheap Hotel.

Later, the preparations for my enticingly erotic expedition began. I took a shower and groomed myself fervently, like some coke-fueled metrosexual. The body was now ready but the mind had yet to catch up. Inside the nooks and folds of my brain were images of my expectations for the night. I imagined a wild sexual romp with me usurping the role of the main character. In the theater behind my eyes, the film played by

the crazed projectionist began with a knock at a door. The camera, situated behind the protagonist (which bore a striking similarity to myself, only more handsome and toned) zoomed in slowly, seductively. The moment was impregnated by anticipation and their bastard child, Suspense, was relieved after the door was teased ajar by a hand at the end of a sinewy white arm. The door, now completely spread apart, allowed the full image of the woman to penetrate the gateway between them. It was a struggle to take it all in at once. All that could be seen was a brilliant opalescence in a form that was irredeemably woman. Then, as the eye adjusted to the abrupt burst of white, details came into focus and the eye began appraising hungrily every bulge and bend. The cyprian, leaning with a hand on the frame of the door, hip cocked coquettishly, wore only a pearly semitranslucent nightgown. I—for the camera dissolved and I stole into the scene—felt a pleasant breeze as she grabbed me by the shirt and pulled me into her room. Before even completely inside, she had enveloped me with those two tender tendrils of hers, and was pressing her parted mouth to mine. I was in the arms of Venus... (Di Milo). The silken touch of her lips, moist with the sweetest nectar, drew from me an awed suspiration. She led

me to her bed (though I would have followed her anywhere ... off a cliff, into the sea where we could make like mermaids ...) and removed the white silk garment that clung longingly to her shoulders with a single arc of her wrist. It pooled around her ankles and exposed the full supple glory of her sea-white body. My hands became explorers from when the world was still new, wanting to discover, chart, and claim every stretch and crevice in the name of their king; carnal cartographers. She lay supine and offered me a whole new perspective. I, engorged and delirious with excitement, traded my hands for different implements of exploration and accepted the invitation. Every cell in my swollen scepter became a sensory organ unto itself. With every motion, slight and deep, she caressed me with her Infinite Softness. Feelings of galactic awe and ecstasy poured through my mind like a waterfall while I flooded her again and again. Entranced by the other's spell, we settled into a rhythm of mesmerized movements, motions, and moans. One infinite loop. In the middle of it, I stepped outside myself, swapping through vantage points so as to absorb every instant and angle in this blessed bubble outside of space and time. Then, as the crescendo neared, I stepped back into my imagined vessel to experience firsthand

the moment of transcendence. With a final thrust, the world stood still. A dying star of light and bliss and heat and color expanded my consciousness to levels uncharted. I had gone through a tunnel to a higher plane of existence where Bliss was God and I was held in prayer. The electrochemical supernovae, after expanding, contracted to a single point, magnifying the effects of gravity until I was reduced to a pool of shimmering quicksilver. Then, just as quickly as it came, the feeling faded, leaving only a sense of fulfilled numbness. Together we lay, in bed, suspiring as we succumbed to a glow in each other's heavy limbs. Everything was silent except for a faint ringing in my ears, the buzz of a universe of spent synapses.

This jumble of flesh colored images—and the promise that they would soon be a reality—gave me a rush, a wicked twitch of warmth, and released the butterflies from their little cage in my stomach. I would finally get to hear the amazing sounds of orgy—the saporous suspirations and saccharine susurrations of unimagined flesh.

The sense of effervescent anticipation I had felt just a moment ago was shoved out of the way by that emotion which has dogged me for most of my life like a shadow: anxiety. Whenever Professor Anxiety

showed up to the party, more often than not he would bring along his two hundred pound pet orangutan, The Fear.

The uneasiness crept down my spine and spread itself around with an animalistic fervor. The time was nearing when I would have to man-up and head out the door. I hoped that once I came back home, I would be different—foolishly thinking the myth that losing your virginity turns you into a man was true. Little did I know how fate would grant me my wish but in a sick and twisted way, like a monkey's paw would. I left home still feeling the butterflies flapping their velvet wings against the lining of my gut. Prof. Anxiety was in control now, but I had a flask-shaped rifle with me that could take out the son of a bitch with one shot. Bang. I was ready.

The drive, like my life until that point, was largely uneventful. By the time I reached the highway, most of the road was empty save the occasional truck. The address of the place was put into the car's GPS, and although it told me the trip would be a long one, it seemed much longer than it sounded. One thing I noticed early on was my curious lack of excitement. I was just about an hour away from performing the act which had long eluded me and there was not a shred

of elation near. In the past, whenever that happened, it was always an omen of either A) misfortune B) disappointment or C) a miraculous screw-up on my part. Time would prove it to be D) All of the above, in the great multiple choice test of Life.

We had agreed to meet at midnight but I, predictably, was there early. The hotel was easily found and one look at the place proved conclusively that there was nothing ironic about its moniker. Cheap Hotel was exactly what it sounded like: an inexpensive hotel of the shabbiest grade. The place seemed to have been built by either the most half-assed construction crew in the county, or a pack of well-trained bums, not quite at the shantytown level but not too far off either. It was a ratty building, with the second story added as an afterthought to the first. The walls were painted a tired dark green, and the brass railings stood alongside the walkways feebly. The sun was starting to droop, and it cast an ill brown-orange on the chewed-up construct. Intermingling with the air was a tang, an aura of desperation and failure—partly borne from the knowledge that people successful, happy, or fulfilled had never been within a ten-mile radius of the place. The walkways were empty and the rooms themselves showed no sign of habitation, adding to the vile mys-

tique of the place. It was Hell's embassy in America.

Still in my car, I gave the escort a ring but was met with nothing but silence. An insidious doubt crept into my psychology. Worries began to sprout from every corner of my mind. A text message and two more calls were met with the same sorry silence. The moments bloated and bulged at their seams and the thought of having another drink from the flask I had relocated to my trunk flew through my mind like a wisp of elegantly curling smoke. Unable to convince myself that it was possible for me to face the escort soberly, I quickly resolved that having a drink was not an option, but a necessity.

Upon stepping out of the car, the bitter autumnal chill hurled a series of windy curses. On my way to the trunk, I noticed a pair of young women sitting on a step by the base of the stairwell, and from the way they were looking at me, it seemed like they had been observing the entire time. Not wanting to draw attention to myself, direct eye contact was avoided and I hastily got my little silver container of anxiolytic ambrosia and got back in my car. After sitting down, I realized that the two girls had been in my line of sight the entire time, hidden by the many shadows. Feeling like a germ in a petri dish under a microscope, my

nerves began to flare up so I reached for the flask and took a big drag.

I never quite understood why people claimed to like the taste of alcohol, particularly hard liquor like vodka. To me it seemed that alcohol didn't have as much of a taste as it did a sensation—a horrid, burning sensation that seemed to eat away at everything it touched. That particular gulp felt as if The Human Torch from The Fantastic 4 was ramming his unsolicited “flamethrower” down my throat.

In secret, I stole a glance from the two girls. One was chatting away while the other continued looking in my direction. Judging by their appearance and the nature of the location, they were most likely call girls as well. One of them, whose mouth jabbered in a way that suggested she was talking about a subject she was very much invested in, was short and stocky, with dutone blonde/bright red hair. The other girl was considerably more appealing; she had tawny hair, resting like strands of silk over her shoulders, and a very pretty, well-proportioned face. Her body was lean and sexily waifish, that much was discernible despite her posture, slouched forward with her arms tucked in for warmth. Both dressed uniformly in taught spaghetti strap tops and sweat pants as loose as they likely

were—an interesting choice of attire considering the biting cold.

After another thrust of The Human Torch's fiery phallus, I called Candy, but again to no avail. Looking at the two girls chatting and sitting forward with their arms nestled snugly in between their legs and breasts (a place I would have loved to be in at that moment) I had the vagrant idea that they must have been friends of Candy, looking out for potential clients or threats or something, so I decided to approach and start a conversation, with the aim of extracting from them the whereabouts of the elusive slut.

By then the drink had disinhibited me to the point where I was unselfconscious about wandering towards them. They saw me coming, whereupon they stopped talking and stared, trying to judge my intentions. The walk to them was a mercifully short one and at the halfway point I waived and offered a smile.

"Hi," I said as they eyed me with a leeriness I couldn't possibly blame them for.

"M-hi" The older, chubbier one replied after a pause.

"Erm," for a moment the comforting mist of the ethanol lifted, giving way to some nervousness, but soon it reformed, stronger than ever. "I was just won-

dering if you guys knew someone named Candice from around here.” They looked at each other quizzically and both replied in the negative.

“No, but is it someone you were planning on... meeting? Are you waiting for her?” the older one asked, careful to not reveal too much.

“Well, yeah, sort of. I just thought you two might know her if you’re from around here.”

The prettier girl leaned over and whispered something into her friend’s ear then said, “No, we don’t. Sorry.”

I thanked them and trudged back into my car.

Several more attempts were made to communicate with The Cunt, as Candy the escort shall be referred to hereinafter. These failed communications were followed by another attempt to dull the quiet misery of the situation with another pull of putrid position (I could almost taste the regret). Tired of sitting alone in my car, desperation rising with each tick of the clock, I was in want of some company, someone to pass the time with. Glancing over to the two girls at the base of the stairwell, they had stopped paying attention to me and continued their emotive conversation. Following the same procedure as before, as if rehearsed a million times, I made my way towards

them. Both looked askingly at me while I sat down next to them. Chemically bolstered courage enabled this otherwise impossible act.

“Hey. I was just waiting and I thought I might as well have someone to talk to.” I heard someone say in a voice too cool and confident to be my own. “What are your names?”

The girls looked at each other, then at their interloping interlocutor.

The older one answered for both of them. “My name’s Jessica and she’s Alice.” The girl now identified as Alice acknowledged it with one graceful hand gesture—the prim wave of a beauty queen. “What’s yours?”

Failing to see a reason why I shouldn’t, I gave them my real name. “James. My name is James. Nice to meet you two.” I said through a smile which seemed to lower their defenses.

“Nice to be met.” I heard one of them say.

“So what brings you two out here? It’s freezing.” I asked them, motioning to their huddled posture.

“Oh we’re just waiting for someone. So are you here to see an escort?” Jessica said, skipping a beat. It took me aback and I couldn’t help but chuckle at her forthrightness.

“Mmm... is it that obvious?”

Alice smiled, revealing a lineup of criminally nice teeth. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“So you guys must know something about that whole business. Are either of you... you know.” Such a dangerous question had to be asked in exactly the right manner, otherwise you risked ending up with a big red handprint on the side of your skull.

“I am. She isn’t.” Jessica told me pointing to her friend.

“Oh, really?” A beat. “How old are you guys?”

As if in accordance to some predetermined arrangement, Jessica spoke for both again. “I’m twenty two and she’s seventeen.”

“Seventeen?” I exclaimed, studying Alice, all her face and body, which seemed to have grown in beauty somehow.

A hot and wrong thrill bubbled up from the pit of my core. A venom, sudden, more potent than any alcohol coursed through my veins. From the moment I saw her, an attraction was sparked and the fact that she was seventeen, and so inaccessible, made her all the more wanted. She was forbidden fruit, one whose taste could only be imagined, but she was there, within my reach! I had only to grab the branch and shake

it. She teased her hair back as I gawked in quiet awe.

“Wait, so if you’re seventeen and not an escort, why are you hanging out in a place like this?” I asked, fully aware of the question’s intrusiveness.

“I’m just keeping her company.”

I was sure that if I could just ask the right questions, say the right things, the gates to the fortified compound where Alice was held, would open up and let me in.

“So, can I ask who you guys are waiting for?”

“No, go ahead.” She tossed the quip at me with her chin. Cute.

“Who are you guys waiting for?” I chuckled.

“We’re just waiting for another girl who has the room right now.”

“You guys share a room? Why?”

“It’s cheaper that way. We all pitch in for a night and just take turns.”

“Does the hotel guy give you any trouble?”

“No, he’s cool. There are a lot of girls here that do the same thing. He doesn’t give a shit.”

Jessica pulled out a cigarette hidden behind her left ear and placed it in the corner of her mouth. She turned her body away from me in a gesture of pointless modesty and fished a lighter from her bra. It was

flicked on skillfully and brought up to her face, the sick yellow glow of the flame revealed a thick layer of caked-on makeup, and her attractiveness dropped another notch. She took a drag from the cigarette and exhaled deeply as plumes of blue-tinged smoke shot from her nostrils. I wanted another drink.

“Wait so if you- if Alice just hangs with you, what does she do when you’re working? She must do something to pass the time, right?” Slowly, I felt like I was inching closer to my goal. The gates of heaven were bound to part, to reveal the mythic boudoir of the angelic Alice.

“Um... she just stays in the living room.”

“Wouldn’t that be awkward?” I said, turning to Alice (I caught myself forgetting to look back at her now ugly companion; Alice’s beauty was a bear trap for the senses).

“No, not really,” they said, looking at each other.

As the conversation progressed, the two girls became more open and communicative. They seemed to have taken a liking to me. I figured it was because I was a , less aggressive type than they were probably used to. The few areas I had seen of the town were populated mostly by thugs, fiends, dope, and dope-fiend thugs.

Since hearing about Alice's age, I had forgotten about Candy and her maddening absence. The object of my desires had shifted shape, taking the form of this ostensibly unsoiled maiden. The question that was lurking in the back of my mind came forward. We had gotten close enough with each other for me to feel comfortable asking it, or at least in an oblique way.

"So Alice, what do you do for a living? Do you work with your friend?" She seemed unfazed by the question, as if it were something routinely asked.

Turning to look towards her guardian, she responded, "No, I'm not. I ran away from home, and Jessica took me in. I live with her." She looked down and fiddled with her nails.

In that moment, the illusion disappeared. She wasn't at the crosshairs of my turgid lust, but a girl, caught between the gears of the clockwork behind a callous universe. It is a testament to the bewildering nature of the male libido that I felt for her in equal parts compassion and lust—manifesting as a lachrymose stiffy. Although half of me wanted nothing more than to petition her for a quick lay in the hay, the other half wanted to pull a Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver* and save her from this wretched scene ... (then petition her for a hay-laying).

Before I could supplement that question with another, as if knowingly diverting my line of thought which had become apparent to her, Alice looked up at me and asked, “So who are you waiting for, anyway?”

“Oh, I was just going to meet this girl here. I drove from a town over two hours away, and I’ve been waiting here for almost as long. I’ve tried calling her, but she doesn’t answer.”

“Wow. She made you come all the way for nothing?”

“That’s what it’s starting to look like.” The statement was colored with a letdown I could not hide.

Jessica seemed to deliberate something and after a moment said, “You know, if you want, I’m available if she doesn’t show up.”

I pretended to consider it. She seemed nice, but not the type I was looking for. Before I could gratefully decline her offer, I felt something stirring in my pants. I groped into my jeans grabbed, and pulled it out, my cell phone. I had received a new text message. Finally I had gotten a response to my countless calls and texts.

“Oops. I must have fallen asleep,” quo The Cunt. “Just give me fifteen minutes to get ready.”

It was 1:30 am.

After informing my two friends about the development, I said goodbye and went back to the comparative warmth of my car. Not long after, I saw a pair of greasy, hooded thugs emerge from the darkness hidden on the second floor. They sleazed their way towards the girls, shuffling as thugs with thug pants do, shadows hiding all but their leering Cheshire cat grins. Alice and her friend sat innocently as the shadows shifted behind them. The scum-hounds scooped down towards the girls, pointed their hideous upturned scythes at them and reaped them into their crooked arms, stealing them someplace up the staircase.

Unaware of what their situation was or what had actually happened, I was left with the vague impression that I had just witnessed something terrible. The vision was disturbing. Like I had peeped through a keyhole and seen a flash of some secret best left unseen... something truly monstrous and depraved. It was one of those uncanny moments just when the world seems wrong where through some ephemeron you can catch a glimpse of the gears turning... the sinister workings of the cosmic machine.

The girls, beneath the shadow bloom of The Universe's thunderous boot descending, vanished back

into the nightly gloom along with those two hideous, those cackling goons.

Twenty minutes passed, and I was left sitting in my car half-drunkenly flipping through an old issue of *Esquire*, listening to the radio. As I sat with my patience on trial, I looked up from my magazine to my surroundings. A moment of clarity, as those living in the fog refer to it. I was able to take a step back and ask myself, what the hell am I doing? Why do I need to do this? Is this really how this has to be done? A voice from within, with an tone of renouncement, assured me that there was no other way. I had spent the past few years tracking the movements of Eros, in any form. All the roads I followed—endlessly bifurcating, hopeless roads—led either to stone-dead ends or places where she had once been, but was long gone from.

I suppose the drive to lose the unfortunate “Virgin” label came from a tacit social expectation. Sex was everywhere. I saw it on TV, in the news, on the street, in movies, in songs, written across the forehead of every blond bimbo with nothing more to offer; I saw it advertised on billboards and in conversations, in secret voices and sullen whispers. It was an intrinsic and inescapable part of life everywhere, and I was missing out on it. This was something that needed to be done.

Even after waiting for another ten minutes, there was still no sign of The Cunt so I sent a text message asking what the deal was. That's when the real games began. We began a game of phone tag, with her sending me cryptic messages and me countering with increasingly annoyed ones. She was winning.

"Which car are you in?" she would go. "There are a few things I have to take care of first," "what color is your car?" "Something just came up, give me a few minutes." "I have to make a call, so I won't reply for a bit."

It was becoming quickly evident that there was some serious chain-yanking going on (and not in a good way), presumably for little hooker giggles. I felt like I was fishing for diamonds in a sewer, and not unlike a sewer, the whole thing reeked of shit.

Then finally, "I'm sorry, I'm at a different hotel. Meet me there."

Before going ahead and blowing seventy bucks on single hour just for the room, I wanted assurances that she would not leave me hanging with Smurf-blue testes. Soon enough, assurances were made and I set off for the suggested hotel with my optimism renewed, but slightly.

Unlike Cheap Hotel, the name for the Luxury Inn,

where The Cunt wanted to meet, was most definitely ironic. Right as I pulled into the parking lot, I realized that the last hotel seemed utterly steeped in decadent opulence when compared to this dump. One could feel the presence of the same aura of failure and desperation that permeated the last hotel, but while that was a faint and transparent mist, this one was fog, opaque and tangible. After parking my car, I walked towards the registration office, secretly hoping it would be closed. Sure enough, it was open and I superstitiously (read, stupidly) wondered if it would have been closed had I wished for the opposite.

The door of the office—the term used in the loosest sense as the place was really more of a broom closet—was rigged with a whiny bell that got the attention of the man on the other side of inch-thick bulletproof glass. He was a large, heavysset Arabic man with frizzled jet-black hair shooting from out his chin and head. He looked at me with tired, bloodshot eyes. The man seemed to personify the very essence of the place. I checked the time and was not surprised that it was past three A.M. It actually felt later.

“Good ... morning sir ... How may I help you today?” The man said in a raspy timbre, an accent hiding in between his words.

“I’d like to rent a room please.”

“You certainly could. And... for how long will we be pleased by your... presence, young sir?”

Despite the dry, oddly paced delivery, he spoke in a surprisingly grandiloquent manner ill-befitting his surroundings, and indeed, his appearance.

“I’d just like to stay for a night.”

“Very good. May I have... seventy five dollars and an ID please?”

“Seventy five? I might be wrong, but I thought the sign outside said it was seventy.”

“It is seventy, you will be returned the extra five dollars, if you bring back the... key before ten thirty tomorrow.”

For a second, his facade of tired dignity cracked and revealed a glimmer of rage in his eye. This was clearly a man capable of great horrors, a man whose mask of gentility made his underlying monstrousness all the more frightening. Wanting to put as much time and distance between the man behind the bulletproof glass and myself, I gave him what he wanted and asked no more questions.

All rooms smoking rooms, claimed a plaque on the door of the hotel room, as if the owner knew precisely what its occupants would want to do after what-

ever illicit romantic trysts they engaged in. The thing that first struck me (and struck me hard) as I opened the door—the thing that stays with me to this day—is the smell of the place. I can honestly still smell it. The pungent stench of a thousand ghosts of cigarettes long forgotten clung to the cardboard walls like a bad memory. The scent is forever etched into my mind and will always remind me that no matter how bad my surroundings are, there is always somewhere worse.

Setting aside the overpowering gloom of despair intermixed with the air, hell, that was the air, the room was a straightforward one. It consisted of basically two sections: a bathroom, which included a shower one could use to try to scrub off the sad, and a bedroom with a mattress that looked as if it had weathered its fair share of deviancy. Time-beaten wooden things furnished the less-than-spacious pit. The room was made smaller by the wallpaper. The paper, a vile shade of yellow, erratically covered the wall and had a strange and terrible dizzying effect. The pattern on it was an abomination of design; the asymmetrical loops, curls, and abrupt twists led the eye towards somewhere evil, a place of abject intensity. That room, and the hotel at large, was designed with one thing in mind, to provide limited refuge for troubled souls

from a world that set out to crush them. Time and use had rendered it less of a refuge and more of a nexus for lingering remnants of sorrows past.

As I lay on a bed fit for a bum, I began to question the existence of The Cunt. It was four o' clock in the morning, a good five hours since arriving, and I had still not heard of or seen that slug. I checked my phone to see if there were any missed messages and found there was. A lone message from said Cunt claimed that she was getting ready and was going to walk down the street to where I was. The message had been sent about twenty minutes before read, so my reasoning, deeply flawed, as it would prove, concluded that enough time had passed for her to be on her way towards me. Gripped by a fit of desperation/frustration, I decided to drive back down the street to see if I could find her and maybe give her a ride or something. Since arriving at the hotel, I had been constantly sipping from my bottle of sweet, caustic nepenthe and was certainly beginning to feel it. I never once questioned my ability to drive though, as the insane never once question their sanity. Besides, it was just down the street, not even a block away (so my logic went).

I grabbed my keys from the bedside table and headed outside. No sooner than I turn onto the road that from my rearview mirror a pair of howling red and blue lights signaled the presence of a fucking shiteater (that's "cop" for those unfamiliar with the improv vernacular of those in an Oh Shit mindset). Turns out what I had previously assumed to be a gradual ramp from a parking lot onto the street was nothing less than a slab of sidewalk jutting from the side of the road. Needless to say, I was promptly pulled over as feelings of dread, fear and loathing basted my brain like gravy.

The cop—hereafter discarding invective references to coprophagia—exited his vehicle with a wide step, and approached my car, taking it slow as if to show that, yes, he was in control here.

As he neared, I looked forward, towards dead road, conscious of the severity, but aware of the possibility of escape, if composure remained. Steps on loose gravel. Threat imminent. A pale round light. Scene replete with red-blue repeating. Bloated delay.

Suddenly there came a tapping, as of someone gently rapping, rapping at my window-door. This was no raven though, but a man in raven uniform. He was standing in my blind spot and was ticking on the glass

with his magnum flashlight. It produced a sharp popping noise which, like the cocking of an assailant's handgun, signaled the beginning of the end for me. The motor of the window on my side was broken, so I was forced to open the car door instead. Realizing how it would look, I held out the palms of my weapon-free hands and told him through the gap that my window did not work. This failed to reassure him though, as he took a step and beamed his domineering flashlight in my face. A visually deafening beam of light forced my eyes shut.

“License and registration!” the cop exclaimed in a way designed to immediately establish his authority.

Silent, I pulled out my wallet and dug through it for my license, handing it to him once found.

“Registration!”

The registration took a bit longer to find; it was hidden among various unimportant documents in the glove compartment. While I searched, the cop's radio cackled and he muttered into it something unintelligible.

I gave him the registration and he studied it for a second before asking, “Do you know why I pulled you over?”

“No, sir” I said, still trying to shield my eyes from

the light particles brutalizing my corneas.

“Were you aware that you drove over a sidewalk?” If I said no, I was fucked. If I said yes, I was doubly fucked—there’s nothing more dangerous than a man with a loaded question... except one with a loaded gun too. Not having the wherewithal to find an alternative, I told him the truth.

Then came the multi-thousand dollar question, “Have you been drinking tonight?”

“No sir,” I lied, wondering if anyone but the drunkest of the drunk ever actually said yes.

“Sir, I can smell it.”

Could he? I thought. I don’t smell anything but maybe I’m just used to it ... or maybe he’s lying. Truth can be a slippery concept for a cop. Then I remembered about the open flask my previous self tucked between the seat and the console. Godfuckingdamnit!

“Sir would you like to step out of the car for me.” An order in the guise of a question.

Coldness in the pit of my stomach, I obliged. After stepping out, I noticed a hitherto unseen officer standing on the other side of my car. With the flashlight finally out of my face, I got a good look at the two perpetrators. The one on my side of the car was a clean-cut Asian man with a good three inches on me. His

posture and tidily arranged accoutrements warned he was the type that enjoys using rods as suppositories. The other cop was a doughy middle-aged man with a hairline that ran towards the back of his head, as if to avoid association with his face. His waistline also ran from him, but in the opposite direction.

“Okay, here’s how this is going to work. I am going to give you instructions, and you are going to follow them, got it?”

I nodded impotently.

He made me walk up to the sidewalk and read me the instructions for the field sobriety test.

“Alright, so here’s what’s gonna happen, You are going to touch each of your fingers to your thumb and count to four. When you finish at your pinky, you will then do the same but in reverse.” He mimed the test, like an impatient special-ed teacher. “One, two, three, four, four, three, two, one. You are going to do this three times, understood?”

The surge of adrenaline produced from this ordeal ensured that my dexterity and enunciation had not been affected. The cop seemed displeased that I had passed with such ease.

“In this next test, you are going to put one foot directly in front of the other and walk in a straight

line. You will take eight steps, turn around, and return with seven steps. Understand?”

Again, I passed the test with relative ease. In all fifteen steps, I only flubbed one, because of nerves more than anything else.

The next test was also easily done, but passing all three tests was apparently not enough for the badge-huffing power-crazed law beast to not want to give me the breathalyzer—that horrid device with a suitably horrid portmanteau of a name. Wanting to know why he was going to give me the test, I asked how I’d failed, but wasn’t given a real answer. He motioned to the other cop, and the other cop fetched a small case from their car. I could picture these two goons cackling about our encounter afterward... while getting strange kicks off the fumes from their recently-used badges. We sure fucked that guy... up, over, and in the ass! Haw haw... quit hogging that badge man, it’s my turn.

As the top of the vehicle flashed, it drenched the sidewalk in strobing red and blue. It was the world’s shittiest rave. The two toyed open the case and eventually produced a handheld device. They unwrapped a small envelope containing a fresh mouthpiece and attached it to the machine.

While the Asian cop lectured me on the use of the thing, my eyes tiptoed over to the gun in his holster. I imagined myself stepping behind him in a swift, decisive move and snatching it from him. I imagined taking off the safety and firing round after round into the two meddlesome pricks, each bullet hurdling through the air and wreaking unspeakable mayhem on impact. Then I would dash from the scene in their car and later, commandeer a small jet, fly it out of the country, settle down on an island, maybe marry a Natalie Portman. Take that Uncle Sam.

Before they stuck that intrusive piece of plastic in my mouth, I asked the officer what his name was. He shot a crooked eyebrow and tapped his name tag. Sheng.

“No, what’s your first name?”

Sheng the cop looked at his partner and said, “Christian.” His uneasiness was apparent, and I found it a small victory that I could make him squirm. It was comforting to see that behind his tough guy exoskeleton was a child, lost playing a game of men. At least it’s what I liked to think.

The other cop stood unseen behind me as Sheng penetrated my warm open mouth with the device’s hard tube. A soft whimper escaped me. It was as if The

Universe had taken the script of what was supposed to happen that night and switched the characters and setting for its deranged amusement.

Sheng told me that the breathalyzer was impossible to fool and that he would know if I tried to cheat. After having to breathe into it, the machine emitted an incriminating beep. Sheng inspected it and after a moment that seemed to trudge by extra slow, gestured the doughy cop with his eyes.

I knew exactly what was coming.

Two hands grasped my shoulders while a steel-toed boot wedged itself in between my legs and forced them to spread out. The hands slid down and snatched my hands from out my pockets and thrust them into a set of icy metal loops, circumference, comfort, and freedom decreasing with every click. At this moment, I was experiencing a strobe light of emotions, synchronized with that of the red and blue. Anger at the cops and the schemes of fate, fear of the consequences, loathing, fury towards the escort, disappointment, but eventually all of these were silenced with the arrival of one self-evident realization.

I was officially fucked.

Would things have gone according to plan, I still would have been officially fucked, but in an infinitely

better way.

The ride to the station was unbearable, or would have been had it not been for the tranquilizing liquid that festered in my stomach. Riding on the less-comfortable side of a police car is a very strange experience. After the tumult of arrest that leaves you with a farrago of emotions, the ride to the station is eerily tranquil. It also leaves you in an odd state where your thoughts are your biggest enemy. They stray into the hole of ideas about all of the possible consequences. My biggest concern was how to get home, hours away, without a ride.

No, this night was not going well, and it was probably not going to get any better in the foreseeable future. The bastard swine had confiscated my car and taken my phone (which was in my car). To echo a previous sentiment, I was fucked.

I walked into the police booking station as the last remains of my luck walked out. The place was a small sterile-white room with colorless lighting and a bench on one side, a few computers and devices lined up on a long desk, and another area with a mug shot camera separated by a glass divider.

Sheng the cop asked me whether I wanted to take a breath test or a blood test. I mulled the option over

for a second; I could either have that little plastic device stick its little plastic device in my mouth again or get paid a visit by Dr. Acula. There was a memory about the high school driver's-ed teacher, a drunkard, suggesting that if ever caught, one should always ask for the blood test. Although the exact reason why escaped me at the moment, I gave the cop my decision. His frustration, to me, was a good indicator that I had done something right.

“If you want the blood test, we’ll need to wait for the nurse to drive down here. It’s four thirty in the morning, are you sure you want it?” He said, attempting to appeal to my non-existent concern for the nurse’s time.

Ah, now I see. He’s afraid that by the time the nurse gets here my blood alcohol level will have dropped.

“Yeah, I’m sure. By the way, what was my BAC when you arrested me?”

He looked at me sideways with guilty eyes. “It was .09 percent...”

Point-oh-nine percent?! That’s one fucking hundredth of a percent over the limit! What is that, like two fucking molecules of ethanol over the line? As if I needed more proof that The Universe was out to shit

on my muffins, there it was.

The cop, almost conscious of the ridiculousness of the arrest, tried to rationalize it, “I mean, it’s like having your leg broken, it’s either broken or it’s not.”

The cop dragged me through the booking process. I could have gone kicking and screaming, but it seemed mock-compliance was the more sensible option. Fingerprints were taken, information was gathered, and somewhere out there a file bearing my name shat itself; I no longer had a clean record.

At one point in the process of being plundered for info, the cop loosened up.

“You seem like a good kid. Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot away, officer.” Part of me hoped he would take that literally.

Before he said anything, the door of the station creaked open. In came another pig towing a woman. The arriving cop looked absurdly all-American. I could almost hear the national anthem playing behind him. He was tall, scarily clean-cut, handsome, and buff. Captain fucking America’s here! Join the party! He sat the woman next to me and gave Sheng a pat on the back as he passed by him to the other booking computers. The woman looked at me then pointed her

gaze to the floor.

Sheng acknowledged him and continued. “What do you think makes life worth living?” His tone seemed to indicate some spark of compassion, or sympathy. Maybe neither.

“Why? Is ‘anything I do or say going to be used against me in a court of law’?”

“No, no. I just like to ask people that.”

My kneejerk response would have been from the nihilist point of view; that life is intrinsically worthless, but by then, my intoxication had become acute. My lips were loosened and the old propaganda phrase, “loose lips sink ships,” forgotten. Despite the source of the question, it held a special relevance for me. What the hell was I living for?

“Family. Friends and family are what make life worth living.” Was I right? Was that a sincere statement, or just the sound of fumes seeping out of my mouth?

Sheng, the cop looked at me in subtle appreciation. “I agree. Family is a good thing to live for.”

“Do you believe in God?”

The question, at once expected and not, hit another sore spot. It seemed so nonsensical that someone could look at all the horrors in the world, all the rape,

murder, despair, torture, and misery and conclude that it's the doing of an all-loving deity who loves us so hugging much. If there is an omnipotent force controlling the universe, it is certainly not benevolent. It would have to be some sort of Hitler/Bundy/tarantula amalgamation who clubs baby seals for exercise and flosses with the intestines of grief-stricken widows for the world to make any fucking sense.

“Umm... Not really,” I answered. “Do you?”

“Yes, I'm a Christian.” He did not elaborate on it because there was no need to. For once I'd like to meet someone named Christian who is a vehement atheist or a devout Muslim.

“What do you think happens after death?” Sheng continued, his real motivation for the questions still unclear.

Aware that we had piqued the interest of Captain America, I tried to cut the conversation off. “Wow, you're starting to get pretty metaphysical, officer.”

“Metaphysical? That's a pretty big word. You go to school?” Captain America asked with a patronizing smirk.

“I used to.”

“Hmm, used to.” The patronizing smirk widened into an insultingly toothy grin.

Sheng seemed to be tickled by his remark, but tried to hide it for my sake.

“But really, what do you think happens after death?”

After the skirmish with Captain America, my defenses were up and running once more. “Nothing. I think once you die, there’s nothing. Just a big, black, nothing.”

“Seems like a kind of scary thing to believe in. Isn’t it?”

“I think it’s scarier to believe that my fate doesn’t belong to me, but some bozo in the sky.” My description seemed to have fouled the air, by the expression on his face.

After a pause he apparently felt that we had become trusting enough of each other for him to ask me, “James, so is alcohol the only thing in your system?”

The subject change was about as smoothly transitioned as a snapped neck and all of a sudden his ulterior motive for asking me such questions came into focus. He was trying to establish some sort of connection in order to squeeze out a confession of further culpability, but the asshole would get nothing from me.

One thing I forgot to remember, and the cop to

mention, is that I had the right to remain silent. In the forward-thinking backward-leaning state of California, cops are apparently not required to read you your Miranda rights even after arresting you. It's a decidedly underhanded tactic that officials use to try to pry as much information from you as they can. If they have you believe that they are the uncontested masters of reality, you are more likely give them what they want. I could have at any point in the process, refused to answer any questions posed by the oinks but as I was ignorant of the right, the idea never came up. Frankly, it would have saved me a lot of trouble.

While Captain America began the information mining process with the woman sitting next to me, Sheng dragged me over to the mug shot area like a captive of war. He sat me next to a glass divider on a bench that couldn't have been less comfortable, and he positioned himself behind an evil-seeming camera. Its sharp angles and inhuman lens made me feel like a germ under a microscope once again.

As the cop adjusted the lens and fiddled with the aperture, he told me to look up and face the optics which peered unforgivingly at me.

“Okay, three, two, one...”

Click. The camera winked, immortalizing my

bloodshot eyes and unkempt, drunken visage. I had attempted to hide behind cover that wasn't there, averting gaze to the side before it clicked, but I could just imagine how woundingly honest the image of myself would be. I could imagine looking at the image years later and staring in a sickening mixture of horror and disgust.

Sheng looked at the image on his screen and said, "are you sure you don't want to do it right? You look kind of..." (as if to confirm my fears).

After that ordeal, he brought me back to the bench next to the frumpy lady. She was conversing with Capt. America in a way that seemed too happy and friendly for someone who had just been arrested and groped by Johnny Law. She gladly gave in to the cop's requests and even sprinkled the conversation with the occasional joke.

"How can you be so upbeat right now?" I asked during a lull in their exchange.

"Well, I was brought in on a warrant for a missed court date and my theory is that there's no use in being unhappy in situations like these. I mean, what good will it do me? It'll only make things worse, right officer?" He absently agreed and continued his paperwork. "'When in doubt, smile' is what my mother al-

ways used to say and experience has taught me that that's the only way that you can get ahead in life and move past difficulties, you know?" She seemed way too energetic at nearly five in the morning.

"It's like that one Beatles song goes, 'don't worry, be happy.' Or was it Bob Dylan? I forget. I used to be big into Dylan in the seventies, you know. He had the cutest lyrics. Oh you kids nowadays can't tell good music from a stick up your ass. Ha ha ha! Nah, I'm just kidding, that Justin Bieberlake is okay."

Tired of pretending to care, I stopped paying attention to her and stared instead into air. I wondered if Candy the Cunt was laughing somewhere.

When the woman sitting beside me finally stopped her word-spewing, I looked over at Captain America with bitter resentment and turned back to the woman beside me and said, "I fucking hate cops," with intention unclear even to me. Then, turning back to the cop I muttered, "especially you."

"What did you say?" He said, snapping his gaze at me, burrowing into my eyes with his.

I was unsure if he had heard precisely what I said, but he was sure to have known that it wasn't good. His contempt towards me turned into a wordless anger, to be revenged at nearest opportunity, as was evidenced

by his glare, steely and vindictive.

“Nothing,” I said, quickly retracting my claws. He seemed ill-humored to begin with and I did not want to test his limits. I’ve seen videos of piglets beating down civvies with savage abandon, for a lot less than this. He gave me a look that said motherfucker and went back to his work.

The rest of the miserable procedure played itself out with a hateful sluggishness. After booking me, I was allowed to make a call. I arranged for a ride, and while giving details on how to traverse the tangled path to this rotting town, Captain America, after stating his impatience, snatched the phone away from me and slammed it on the receiver. The way in which he asserted his authority over such a trivial matter ignited a spark of fury in me. The spark cackled and popped, igniting its surroundings with viral flames. The alcohol sashaying through my veins helped in turning the whole thing into a wildfire. First they had taken my car and means of communication, now this? Action had to be taken. I raised my hand up to his meticulously groomed, pie-scarfing, flag-saluting, face and flipped him the finger—although not the one you might expect.

In an ill-conceived attempt to convert an R rated

gesture into a more security-camera-friendly PG-13, I lifted my ring finger instead of the tradition-dictated middle one. On reflection, it seemed a bit needless, as my intention was as obvious as the expression of anger on the recipient's face. Like a fat guy ordering three quarter pounders with a diet soda, I fooled no one but myself.

The hog, infuriated by my audacity and contempt for his authority bellowed, "...and get the fuck outta my booking station!"

Not to be outdone, I retorted with a "fuck you, asshole!" The first word sounded out with cutting hate. I didn't cross the line, I pole-vaulted over it.

There was an audible gasp from the woman behind me, validation of the proclamation's brute impact. Words fail me in expressing just how deeply gratifying the outburst was. The words lingered in the air of the booking station, making it seemed more cramped than it actually was, and slowly eroded the time until someone would inevitably have to say something.

With the cause now cemented firmly in place, I was not going to stick around to witness the effect. At this point, the other cop had already opened the door and was waiting for me to exit, but just as I did so, he reminded me to pick up the papers, the papers

which were in front of the vein-poppingly upset Capt. America.

As Sheng drove me back to the hotel, it was clear that he too knew I had crossed a line few had the lack of sense to cross. He dropped me off from where I was stopped, and I offered insincere thanks which were mirrored with a goodbye of the same sincerity.

The events following my encounter with the ugly fangs of the law were of an actuality I cannot vouch for. The real and the imagined, normally separate entities like oil and water, mixed and combined. The drink might have had something to do with it. Immediately after Sheng the cop dropped me off in that same parking lot where my luck had shriveled like an old man's nethers in arctic waters, I headed to the nearest convenience store which in a town like that abound. After purchasing a sufficient amount to blur the reality of what had happened, I gulped from the bottle of liquid, corrosive to memory, sadness, anger, and pretty much everything else.

From then on details and recollections of the night fell towards the black hole, one having at its center a singularity of ethanol which, with its impossible gravity, pulled memories into irrecoverable depths. Of the remainder of that night (or morning at

this point), only faint bits of raw sensory data were available. I remember the sound of a bursting bottle, the sickening swirl of the yellow wallpaper, the fireworks of a thrown lamp, the cold of a phone, a flash of flesh, black.

When noon came, it dragged with it wakefulness and the disappointing knowledge that death did not find me in my sleep. I stumbled into consciousness while a wildfire seared the insides of my eyes. Pulses of pain, acute and vengeful, throbbed synchronously with my heartbeat. A fist-fight had erupted in a back room inside my brain. Around me were the dregs of a night ill-spent. Lingering from the night before was my scornful sorrow. It now mingled with the sorrows of those who had stayed there before. My story had been added to theirs, written into the gloom. I looked at the half of the room that was visible as I lay sidewise and took all in. Polygons of glass adorned the carpeting. The few conveniences I had been gifted as a hotel guest were strewn about in every way and state possible. They were relics, allegories of my failure. Then I felt a movement next to me... behind me.

At first I was startled by the movement, and as I whirled around, my surprise ebbed then roared back. A woman—an actual woman, a creature of flesh and

blood and boobs and matter—lay with her back facing me, half covered with the bed sheets. Her naked back shone with the daylight seeping in through the cracks in the curtains. A dirty-blonde head of hair rested on a pillow, frizzled from a night of unknown thrills. For a moment, when the realization of what this meant seeped in, the fog of haze and ache parted, giving way to a more limpid, elevated state. For a moment, the creature that lay lightly snoring—I could hear it now—wasn't some whore sleeping on a dirty bed in a gruesome hotel, but a winged seraph, an angel, of the highest order, resting beautifully, (mechanically), on a cloud, in the boudoir of Aphrodite. That brief moment, that ephemeral thrill, proved, like my youth, to be transient, fleeting, as the clouds swarmed back, and the seraph's wings withered into cigarette ashes, and the walls of Aphrodite's chamber crumbled and revealed the dank yellow wallpaper beneath.

Then all was gray again.

It was a bittersweet moment, to be unburdened with that rite of passage in such a way and at such a cost. I was so detached from what had happened that night, my memory of it so tissue-thin, that it's almost like it wasn't me it happened to, but someone else entirely. But I did it. It was done.





POETRY

CONTINENTAL DRIFT



I move
one piece of me at a time.

At a pace that could rival the likes of erosion.

And when one piece moves, another replaces
quick into pockets, of vibrating spaces.

All providence left to the tides

THE CARE PATHWAY FOR THE DYING PHASE



There's a phrase to give us pause -
it's what you're on and where you're ending.
I've read so in your case notes
while your daughter was attempting
to colour in the silence
with progress of the garden
and accomplishments of children.
An undulating pathway, I'd imagine;
these levers and buttons at the side
of your bed will help you to adjust.
All it lacks is a Reverse.

Just a phase, do they reckon?
Like cutting teeth and teens;
ration books and air shelters;
Sinatra and Swing;
seamed stockings, breast feeding
and breast cancer.

A fond glance back and the tips
of your ears blushing, your lips
creasing an embarrassed smile
as you struggle to retain your teeth.

What need of teeth!
A swallowing reflex defunct
as speech and vision.
Only listen to the insistent
drip of metal and plastic;
a thousand unanswered phones
are the music you expire to.

You're reduced to squeezing hands
or shakes of the head to acknowledge pain.
You hear the nurses arrive
to administer Paracetamol per rectum;
the uniform hiss and swish of curtains;
the brief discussion as to whether
to first do "this one" or "the other";
you or your fellow-traveller
in the adjacent bed.

I turn away and read the poster
describing how best to wash one's hands
and the Mission Statement promises
which conclude by exhorting
everyone to work together
for a cleaner, better future.

NO THEOPHANY



Sixty thousand years passed by.
I wasn't even counting the days.

One evening the telephone rang;
You reminded me to look outside.

I strolled the length of the gloomy lane,
My eyes toward the southeastern sky:

And the angry red planet appeared,
But didn't seem so angry that night.

At the beach I stood atop the stairs
That stepped down to the churning waves—

But the god sought his cloud-chamber.
I stayed awhile, out of reverence

(He was a classic myth, after all!)
But the sky turned its back on me.

So I made my way back home.
The crickets and screech owls were silent.

And sixty thousand years passed by,
Before I gave him another chance.

GROUND-TRIP



Having a sense of my own body would be
allowing your shadow to triumph.

So if I win, it's because I am a
victim of victory.

Hold the procession—
cheer in the houses, not in the streets.

All the roads once leading to my heart,
have remained without traffic.

Give me a gift that's been unwrapped by the giver,
and let my fraud surpass the record you've set.

I am now visionless and blind
because my eyes have not seen anything
after your departure.

SINGING A SONG OF A SNUG



Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

The perfect warmth of your body

We drift

Unhurriedly

In and out of sleep

And as we turn

Somehow

No surface of our bodies

Loses contact

With the other

As though we've willed ourselves

Into velvet magnetism

Your gracious breath

On my neck

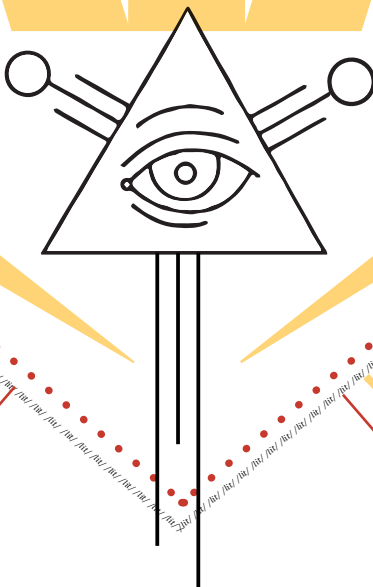
Your serenely whispered words

Would that you and I, my love

Could live out our days

Wrapped in the heartening delight

Of this bed



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