

FOUR STORIES ON MATURATION

by

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HONORS THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project is meant to represent a creative culmination of my time in undergrad. I wanted to do a project involving creative writing and storytelling and I also wanted to use the opportunity to reflect on my time I've spent in college. As such, each of the stories here is based on a specific emotion from a specific year that I spent in college. There are currently four, but I plan to keep writing and hopefully include seven in the future.

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**For my parents,**

**and Dr. Ron Haas & Professor Jordan Morille**

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“Some birds are not meant to be caged, that's all. Their feathers are too bright, their songs too sweet and wild. So you let them go, or when you open the cage to feed them they somehow fly out past you. And the part of you that knows it was wrong to imprison them in the first place rejoices, but still, the place where you live is that much more drab and empty for their departure.” - Stephen King

“When I discover who I am, I'll be free.” - Ralph Ellison

“Sometimes even to live is an act of courage.” - Seneca

“All happiness depends on courage and work.” - Balzac

## I. 2015

He saw a thread in the air as he walked into the bookstore. It was an afternoon in late July, the Seattle sun violently refusing to relinquish any of its hold on the sky.

Sammy was used to seeing these threads; each of them had their own toxic aura, their own solipsistic sense of emotional dominance. Nobody else saw the threads but him; he wasn't even sure if they were real. But to run into one, examine it, and follow it through its proper course meant— for him— engaging with the desolation of his mind and emotions. They hadn't been there before, but now they were.

He was entering the store that day because he needed a copy of *The Inferno* for the summer reading for his English course. He knew next to nothing about Dante, except that he was Italian and he was posh and was a poet and wrote about Hell. So many times in his life he'd resisted and resented those Dante-esque writers who'd written hundreds of years ago and just seemed pretentious now, oblique. There was nothing to them in his opinion, beyond some fancy wordplay and some antiquated social ideas. Reading didn't do too much for him. He'd enjoyed it when he was a kid, and he thought writing had some promise, but he felt as if he'd missed the train of being an adult reader. He hadn't finished a book in three years; he was too distracted with his studies, and lacked the enthusiasm for artistic appreciation.

The Antiquary Bookstore, though, in Seattle, the store he was currently entering in search of Italian poetry, had a different kind of feeling. The first thing he was struck by was the immediacy of it all— it was as if the store owners had filled up every single inch of the periphery of his vision with books. The lobby was lit with natural light stemming from floor to ceiling windows that cast their illustrative rays out upon stacks and stacks

and stacks of novels, plays, and poetry. He had never stood in any room outside of a library that had this much paper in it. Certainly not one with this store's specific sense of organized chaos. Libraries always suffered in his opinion from an overabundance of formality—the one at his previous school had seemed clinical, separated, labyrinthian and quixotic, which gave it all a poisoned and toxic feeling which once he noticed he couldn't shake.

He doubted, truly, whether he belonged there, awash in the rhythms of literature and prose which he'd never found himself capable of marching to. But standing there he was struck for the first time in his life with the understanding of why people loved books the way they did. Piled up on overflowing shelves, covering every subject and every story imaginable he found comfort in the fact that people could love something as much as a reader must love a story.

And as he began to walk deeper into the backrooms of the store, and the books grew older, and smellier, and more cluttered, and the abrasive outdoor light grew dimmer and more distant and his vision began to be lit by smaller, more comfortable lights coming from lamps placed precisely throughout the store, he noticed that sense of comfort deepen. He'd found himself in a moment of relative peace and solitude even amidst the current turmoil and brutal emotionality of his life. To leave the store, he knew, would be to snap that moment out of existence, to eradicate it so as if it maybe never truly existed at all. So he, for the first time in his life, found himself browsing the shelves of a bookstore, losing himself in titles and author names and subjects and the vastly different colors of the unique and dusty covers on the shelves.

“Hey! Can I help you find something?”

The voice came from over his shoulder. Turning around he noticed a tall man who appeared college age, with closely maintained blonde hair, wide shoulders, and emerald eyes.

“Uh, well I’m looking for a copy of *The Inferno* by Dante, if y’all have it.”

The man laughed then, laughter a sound which Sammy found often disrupted his emotional state and left him angry and judgemental, but with this new man was instead great, inviting, and even caring. He wasn’t used to people his own age being nice to him— he’d always assumed that he just formed no presence even within the literal spaces of others.

“Well you shouldn’t be looking in the architecture section for Italian poetry— Dante’s downstairs. Come on, I’ll show you! I’m Lucas by the way.”

He followed Lucas through a door kept hidden behind what looked like a collected stack of 80s movie novelizations— *Three Men and a Baby* was on top— down some stairs painted a bright burgundy red, and into a basement with piles and piles and piles of books, twice the amount that’d been upstairs, and more than he ever even imagined existed.

“So what are you reading Dante for? For fun?”

“Uhh, nah. My professor wants me to read it for my Intro to Literature class.”

“Do you like poetry?”

“I’ve never really... I mean, I guess I’ve written poetry— that I’ve liked— but I haven’t really read too much I enjoyed. Maybe T.S. Eliot?”

“Eliot’s great. ‘Do I dare. Disturb the universe?’ His writing style was so clear, inventive, dynamic— there’s a real atmosphere there. Prufrock really kinda changed my

whole outlook in a way honestly, man.”

For Sammy, genuine enthusiasm for art like this was surprising, and new. What was in, at least up until this point in his life, had been a state of permanent gaucheness, acting above being into anything. Growing up to show care and enjoyment in the California private school he had attended was to demonstrate a willingness for attachment, and in those places attachment for anything beyond ambition and success was frowned on. Of course, now, looking at Lucas and at the stacks of books surrounding them Sammy realized that attachment had its pluses, but it felt way too late then to do anything about it. It wasn't that he didn't want to become attached, to have attachments; it was that he had no time for the energy and enthusiasm it would take.

“Do you study literature?” he threw out.

“I do yeah. I'm in grad school for literature at UW.”

“That's where I'm going! I'm studying law though.”

“In law school?”

“Nah, I'm in my second year of undergrad here now.”

Studying law was something he'd inherited from his parents, the media, and the expectation that he had to do something with his life. He remembered being 17, standing with his college counselor in line for coffee, and his counselor telling him that he needed to make a choice and make it soon; gone then were the halcyon days of biking around the neighborhood with his sister and his friends as kids, shoplifting watermelon soda from their local grocery store and smoking pot in secret in the woods. He was just 17; but at that moment in his mind he'd decided to sign his life away for the briefest of shots at success (but the thing was that success meant money, and money meant status, and, for



him, status meant love, and understanding, and the potentiality for connecting with others, all of which had, especially at that moment, felt especially figmentary and impossible to grasp onto).

“That’s amazing!” Lucas replied.

“I suppose.”

“No I mean, that’s really cool. It takes a lot to be a lawyer. And you’re so young! I’m sure you’ve got a ton of potential.”

He handed him an orange and red copy of *The Inferno*— a beaten-up Barnes and Noble Classics edition. The idea of potential hadn’t really even struck him for a long, long time. He supposed there was some modicum of truth to the idea— he possessed a certain kind of brute intelligence, and he was quite excellent at drawing and making connections and conceptualizing difficult ideas. When he had started out in college he’d started by acing his classes, making friends, actually doing the readings: he’d started out ahead of everyone else, it just took them much shorter than he’d expected to catch up.

He grunted in response.

The past six months hadn’t been easy. Since the end of February he’d been reduced, especially over the summer. He hadn’t heard from his friends in months. His professors had started out emailing to check on him and make sure he was doing okay, but after his falling off at the end of the semester, failing to make it to class, and then forgetting to reply not just to their emails but to the replies to their emails, to their questions about his academic performance, to their referrals to UW’s counseling center, after that their replies had stopped.

“What’s your name, man?”

“Uh, I’m Sammy.”

“Sammy! Nice. I’m Lucas. Will this do for you?”

The copy of *The Inferno* was marked-up and beaten, but Sammy found he enjoyed those qualities. The beauty of the book was much like the store itself, found and located in its secondhand nature- the colorful markings in its margins proved that it hadn’t just been read, it had been used. He hoped that whoever had had it before him had loved it.

“Yeah, this should do!” he replied.

“That’s great, man! Glad I could help you out.”

Sammy noticed a glint in Lucas’ eyes which indicated, at least to him, that he was engaged in studying him. He was used to the dismissive glances of others, but he wanted Lucas to like him. The older guy possessed a sense of quiet confidence which he carried with him— he was assured, knew things were, and was calm. These were traits that Sammy envied.

“How long have you been in Seattle? Lucas asked.

“I moved here for school.”

“Do you want to get coffee sometime? I mean, I know what it’s like to be new to a city, and you seem like a cool dude, and we’ve got stuff in common. We could study together sometime if you want; I’d love to get to know you better.”

“Uh sure, yeah, that would be nice.”

He pulled out his phone and thumbed open the Contacts app— Lucas put his name in his phone. When Sammy looked at his number, the digits seemed to rearrange themselves in his head until they were unintelligible. He didn’t think he’d actually end up

texting him; going out and hanging out with the older guy seemed both impossible in practice and also, why exactly would he even want to hang out with him? It wasn't as if he had much to offer, he was just an awkward and strange kid.

“Okay yeah, thanks man.”

“Of course, hopefully I'll see you around!”

Lucas' smile and demeanor were both somehow unexaggerated. There was something nice about the starkness and simplicity of their meeting: they were just two people with similar interests going out for a fun time together. On his way out of the store though Sammy noticed the big black ball of thread in the air again, hovering next to the exit. It taunted him, lured him in and whispered in his mind that no matter what he did, no matter who he was, no matter who he wanted to be that there was no way someone as cool and special as Lucas seemed to be would ever want to be around him. He tried to avert his eyes from the thread's presence, but the encroaching blackness of his closed eyelids failed to alleviate much if any of his overt tension. He felt moderately disturbed, and in that moment the sunny nature of the day's weather felt less like an unexpected plus and more like a cruel joke. Sammy just wanted to be left alone in darkness— to be left in the void— but it seemed that the world wasn't going to let him do even that.

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He put the copy of Dante on the dinner table when he got back to his apartment. He had never felt truly comfortable in the space; it hadn't ever felt like home. He and two other guys, Philip and Joshua— they'd each been in their early 20s— had moved in two

years ago. They hadn't known each other before, the college housing company had sorted them together, and they had honestly been awful. It wasn't that they were bad people, it was that being around them had made him feel inferior, unhealthy, and small. When he'd first been there, dishes had been constantly left dirty in the sink. The smell of spilled cheap beer stained the carpeting. Joshua and Philip had been STEM majors—Pharmaceutical Science and Mechanical Engineering—and therefore had spent hours and hours studying each week, meaning that whatever time they did have free they spent not with him but with other friends and in relationships.

At first the arrangement hadn't bothered him—he often came back late at night from the library anyways, and left early for his job selling burgers at the mall. Their lack of cleanliness was a bit of an issue, sure, but since he didn't care too much about the state of their being it wasn't insurmountable. He also spent time with friends then, classmates, girls. He went out on the weekends and spent nights in the city. He frequented student functions, served in a couple of different clubs, and maintained professional relationships with both his pre-law counselors and his professors.

Eventually though both Philip and Joshua had graduated and gone off to grad school, so he was left alone in the space. Those early days of the summer had been challenging; as a 21 year-old he hadn't ever fully had the chance to be alone—he always had either his sister or his parents or friends of some sort—and so the rhythms and patterns of isolation had felt especially new to him. There were days then that he would go to sleep at 7PM, a far cry from his usual bedtime—almost always 11:30 or later—just because there was nothing to do and watching TV, playing games, or even reading books felt like nothing more than a faulty way to kill time.

In those moments he could tell that he had found his way into a depressive space— both mentally and physically. It started out with days where he refused to leave his apartment. These, too, were a new for him, as he'd been particularly eager and excited just a few months before. But it was the combination of the loss of energy and the fear of the future, on top of the isolation that he was undergoing, physically and emotionally, that turned his days into processes of survival, ordeals involving stepping out of bed and peeing, getting water, brushing his teeth. It started with days he was too scared and too tired to leave his apartment; slowly then it progressed to an especially long amount of time he spent in bed; he barely ever left.

In this way, it had been an especially tough summer for him, the hardest of his life so far. And while his retreat had lasted for a relatively short amount of time— really only six months or so in full force— he feared and it felt like it was going on for an eternity.

What eventually snapped him out of it was the intrusion— at least that's how it felt at first— of a new person into his living space. He was paired to live for his sophomore year with Kyle Rafferty, a football player from Santa Cruz who had moved there to perform as a receiver for the UW football team. Kyle was a junior, and Sammy had been petrified at first— as well as actively angry— to have him come and live with him. It felt like a brutal violation, a forceful incursion; he wanted nothing more than to sit in peace— to rot away until he figured out some way to muster up the energy to fix whatever remote issue hovered at the core of his life— and now he was being denied even that.

Kyle had moved in on an especially gloomy morning for mid-August in Seattle, which had colored Sammy's expectations especially negatively. He expected a gorgeous

and luminous day for the move-in of who he pictured as the prototypical surfer boy; the golden hair he'd pictured Kyle perfectly and carefully maintaining on his head at all times waving in the air, presaging additional incursions of the ditzy girls and sloppy male friends that he'd be bringing back to the apartment.

Instead, after seeing him pull up and get out of his jet black Toyota Camry— an older model, but super well taken care of— and staunchly refuse any sort of help in moving his stuff in, Sammy had been surprised to find that Kyle wasn't that at all. He was Black, relatively short but completely built, and surprisingly soft-spoken; and while he wasn't quite the blonde hair and platinum-eyed Adonis Sammy had pictured, he couldn't deny that he was more alluring and attractive than he had expected. Kyle had a way of speaking which was completely and utterly mindful and respectful in a way that Sammy had never experienced— from the very beginning, their very first interaction, standing outside the apartment— Kyle had managed to make Sammy feel felt and present in himself in a way he hadn't experienced in months and years, if not ever.

That evening, though, Kyle was standing and pacing around the living room, sweating and looking passionately displaced. Clearly something was wrong. Where usually he was clear, happy, energetic, and passionate, now here in this moment he seemed listless and altogether nerve wracked, as if something had gone wrong at the center of his universe and that that had gone on to color his expectations and understanding of the world in a newfound sense of despair.

“Hey, uh, hey man.” Sammy here making the active choice of doing his best to deescalate the situation.

“Hi,” Kyle replied, his tone speaking even more deeply to the turmoil he was

clearly in.

“Is something wrong?”

“It’s my girlfriend... she broke up with me this morning. Met some new guy at a frat party. Just shot me a text this morning out of the blue, like I was waking up, making coffee, getting ready for class and then it was ‘Hey Kyle, It’s over,’ or whatever, like we haven’t been dating since high school.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

Sammy, his personal understanding of romantic relationships being altogether minimal— it honestly surprised him that folks his age even had the capability of carrying on relationships, let alone healthy ones (although this experience here was currently making him question whether Kyle’s relationship had ever really been healthy to begin with; he remembered then watching them in recent months, and how even sitting on the couch Kyle and her had been seemingly separated, at least more so than Sammy remembered when he’d first moved in, and then those tiny little moments of separation he’d been noticing in recent months between them— sure he wasn’t directly involved in their relationship but it was impossible not to hear their arguments, to see Kyle’s shrugs and grunts, both of them canceling dates on each other at the last moment where before they could barely seem to get enough of each other (in that way he figured— even though he wanted to support Kyle— he figured he couldn’t fully blame her for ending it, although he also felt she could have found a better way to do so))— he didn’t really know what to say.

“Are you... are you doing okay man?” That seemed like a solid place to start.

Kyle, who got seemingly caught in that moment between the passionate displacement he'd been experiencing by the end of his relationship and surprise in the fact that Sammy had even bothered to notice, snapped his head around at Sammy, then took a deep breath and sat down in his gaming chair he'd decked out and put in their living room. Spinning around, he settled and looked up at Sammy...

"I mean, I loved her, you know? But I guess if I'm thinking about it..."

"Yeah?"

"I mean I guess if I'm thinking about it I'm not surprised. We've been together for what, three and a half years? I figured that she'd give me more than just a text, that I'll admit—but I mean, if I'm being completely honest, and I trust you man so I will be, if I'm being completely honest I cheated on her myself a few months ago with a friend of hers who was graduating and going on to study in Portland, and, I mean, it's been a long time. Conversation has been tough recently. I feel like we're barely even been acknowledging each other's feelings and being present with each other lately. I'm not sure how long that's been going on for."

"Yeah, I hear you."

"And it's like, I loved her, I did, but I'm twenty-one, I've been with her since high school, I haven't really ever been with anyone else—I mean except Elsa, her friend, and that was just one night. And I think we've grown apart some. She's been trying, and I've been, at least a bit, but last week she could tell something was up and I confessed to her, I told her what happened, and I hurt her. I did. And so I get it. I mean I've been feeling for a while that our relationship has run its course. I just feel badly that I hurt her, and that she wants nothing to do with me."



“How do you know that?”

“I just got a call from the Title IX office— she called and filed for a no contact yesterday.”

“Fuck man... I’m, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah so now it’s like if I even reach out to her I could lose everything— my career, my friends. I could be expelled.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Nah it’s like, honestly, it’s like I understand it. She needs to move on.”

“Yeah.” Sammy sat down on the couch across from Kyle. “Can I get you a drink?”

Kyle’s blue eyes felt especially intense then, at least to Sammy they did. Eye contact was difficult for him, and much like everything else social it came more easily to Kyle than he had ever known possible. Why exactly Kyle wanted him, wanted him to sit there with him and talk to him and be with him— why exactly he not just appreciated but welcomed his presence— was really completely lost on him. There were so many others: his frat brothers, his teachers, his bosses and coworkers from the rec center, what felt to Sammy (out of jealousy and envy, he knew, which he knew was wrong but still couldn’t fully shake) like the entire world of single women. But instead Kyle wanted him, took solace in his presence, found comfort in their conversation. He had gone from bereft and closed off to relaxed and open; he had seemingly found some position of peace in the mistake he’d made and with the loss he was experiencing. Sammy found that an altogether impressive quality of Kyle’s, his ability to self-reflect, even more so than his seemingly perfect relationship and his limitless league of friends.

“I’m okay man. But I really appreciate you sitting here and hearing me out. I think I’m

going to go to bed, get some sleep. I need to sleep this off, go to the gym in the morning. Things'll be okay. They're hard right now but I'm sure it'll work out."

As Kyle got up and went to his room and closed the door, Sammy glanced around the room, his eyes settling on the used copy of *The Inferno* still sitting on the kitchen table. He thought of Lucas at Antiquary then— the first moment of connection he'd felt with anyone in months (well, he thought, outside of this current moment and conversation with his roommate— he had felt an especially strong connection to Kyle then, talking about his break-up, a connection then that made him feel content, comfortable, and present in ways he hadn't in a very, very long time, if ever). These feelings he was currently experiencing— comfort, stability, presence, helpfulness— felt new to him, but felt powerful too.

He flashed back then to how he'd felt that morning, talking to Lucas— when Lucas had given him his number— how he'd felt seen and felt by him, but in a way that felt blisteringly new and ripe. Being seen in Lucas' eyes had made him feel like he was in the presence of some sort of all-encompassing Sun which illuminated everything in its path. He decided to text him then.

He composed the message rather quickly— "hey man, it's Sammy— we met at the bookstore today, I was buying a copy of *The Inferno*. how are you doing?" — but it took him several moments to muster up the courage to tap the blue send button, to take the risk of shooting it out into the universe. Almost immediately though the reply function lit up, showing that his message had been seen, and he almost threw the phone away across the room out of the fear of, well, he figured being a nuisance or being ugly or being forgotten but...

“hey man! It was nice meeting you today. this is Sammy from this morning. how are you doing?”

The immediacy and kindness of the message left Sammy shook; it felt like an impossibility that any guy, but especially this guy could ever care about how he was, or remember him, or take an interest in being nice and kind to him. There had to be an ulterior motive, he figured, something devious— maybe he wanted to sucker him in only to steal from him, or bully him, or hit him. Something for his own personal sense of gratification. Irregardless he started composing a message...

“i’m doing pretty okay actually!” An idea came to him then. “hey would you want to meet up for coffee and talk about Dante sometime? this text is pretty tough and I could use some help.”

“Sure! I’d love to. How does tomorrow afternoon work?”

“sounds good. i’m free.”

“Awesome. Let’s go to this cool little coffee shop I know over in Georgetown— All City Coffee. Do you know it?”

“yeah i’ve heard of it.”

“4pm Saturday?”

“okay, see you then.”

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There was something he found immensely comforting about the smell of coffee. It was an infrequent smell in his life— he never really went out, so he barely ever went to coffee

shops. The thing it reminded him most vividly of was his grandpa's kitchen growing up, the black roast that his grandpa would make in the mornings; he was a caffeine junkie. That kitchen had been all glass and blue marble, but this coffee shop's chairs and decor were of brown wood, and the counters were long and reached around the entire store. When he walked in, he ordered a caramel latte and looked around for Lucas, but he wasn't there. Immediately he was hit by shame and stupidity— of course he wouldn't be there, why would he be? There was nobody, nothing, nowhere...

DING DING.

He glanced towards the door and saw Lucas' flowing blonde hair; he found himself dumbstruck by the deep green of his eyes. Lucas immediately lit up with a wide smile. It was a moment of warmth, but it took Sammy a moment to place and put together the way he felt. Up until this point in his life moments of warmth had been few and far between and whenever they'd come somehow the comfort he'd found in them had been violently ripped out from underneath him, turning sour and leaving him reeling. It was tough for him to trust in warmth and emotional vibrancy. There was nothing more he wanted than to love and be loved, but he'd placed those needs and wants so far outside of the realm of his consciousness that they'd become far off dreams and barely there wisps at the edges of his being.

But the sound of Lucas' voice and the power of his smile — “How's it going man? It's lovely to see you!” — possessed the power to cut through it all. Lucas was a sunbeam of positive light and energy— the first he'd experienced in ages. In recent years his relationships with his friends from high school and his connection with his parents had dropped away— both his mom and his dad had no idea and understanding of the

complexities of mental health, and his “friends” had barely cared to begin with, going on to parties at frats suffused with the smells of sweat and beer kegs (Sammy had gone to a few of those when he’d first arrived, but they’d always been places of hostility for him—he couldn’t reckon with why exactly those men treated women the way they did, outside of some sort of emotional immaturity and insecurity that hovered at the center of their being, like some sort of prerequisite to be invited in and welcomed into the arms of male, masculine society) and therefore he felt that everyone had left him behind when he had needed help.

And while he wasn’t massively upset with what had happened—he understood that adults grow apart, and that those sorts of things are unavoidable—he had forgotten what it meant to be valued and loved and nurtured himself. Long ago he’d made the choice to take care of everyone around him, to make whatever effort he could to be accepted, but after months of isolation and depression he felt like he barely knew how to string together a sentence.

“Let me just go up and order a cappuccino—they’ve got the best veggie sandwiches here too, I highly recommend them. But then I wanna chat! Tell me how Dante is going; I know how challenging he can be.”

As Lucas walked off towards the counter he patted Sammy on the back, and that pat—while it had to have been almost nothing to Lucas—stopped the world for Sammy. Somebody wanted to touch him. More than that, somebody wanted him to know that he cared, that he was there for him, that he saw him outside of everything he’d been through, the rejection and the isolation and the depression and the anxiety and the barely functioning brain, the days spent holed up in his room with nothing to keep him company

but the sound of his own thoughts (those were the worst days, when suicide had taken on corporeal form, standing in the dark and dank corner of his bedroom where his bong sat, taunting him and filling his mind with promises that he was broken, unlovable, and completely and utterly unattractive— that there was no place where he could be himself, and that emotional authenticity wasn't allowed for people who looked and felt like him).

Sitting down he glanced up and noticed, in the air in front of him, another black thread. There in front of him was everything, all of it— the pain, isolation, misery, and hopelessness. But it was also new: it seemed to be unraveling. The big, bundled-up ball of black thread was coming undone; where before it was growing bigger and bigger, hovering and haunting him at the edges of his vision, threatening to overcome all of it, threatening to tear apart his life permanently, here with Lucas it was beginning to lapse in its strength.

“How's your week been man?” Lucas came up from behind him carrying two glasses of water and his foamed up cappuccino (“I prefer extra foam and extra hot,” he noted under his breath when he saw Sammy gazing at it.)

“It's been pretty okay! School's been tough. I'm taking this Introduction to Corporate Law class, and everyone there is like, well I mean honestly they're all pretty snobby. Like I always thought that maybe I didn't fit in with those kinds of folks. But I guess it comes with the territory.”

“I feel you there man, honestly. You said you've been having difficulty with Dante?”

“Well, I mean, I wouldn't say I've been struggling...”

The truth was that he'd been tearing through his copy of *The Inferno* at a quicker

pace than he ever could have expected. The imagery and emotion that Dante managed to conjure up through his clever use of language was unlike anything else in art than Sammy had ever experienced. It reminded him of the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, or even the music of The Beach Boys; all vivid colors and images, not shying away from haunting emotions as well as pleasant ones; a vivid recreation of life through metaphor.

“Like, it’s honestly interesting, you know? The story that Dante is telling, the fact that poetry and prose can be combined in these kinds of ways... I’ve honestly, like, it’s been a long time since I’ve enjoyed a work like this.”

“It’s exciting, isn’t it? Honestly, like, I’m about to turn 26, and what you’re saying is totally familiar to me. I remember my teacher having us read *King Lear* in high school, and I hated it— honestly I didn’t even try with it. Like I cracked it open and the Shakesperian dialogue, his writing, it all just struck me as like, faded if that makes sense. Like why should we study this form of antiquated writing?”

“Yeah.”

“But then like, a few years ago I read *As I Lay Dying* for a class. My girlfriend—the girl I’m dating right now, her name’s Sydney— was my friend at the time and she encouraged me to take a Contemporary American Lit class with her. And I remember thinking like, a lot of what we were reading was super boring, really dry, it didn’t connect with me at all. Hemingway, Philip Roth, Salinger. *Franny and Zooey* fucking blew, man. I still hate that book if I’m being honest.” He laughed.

“I honestly get that. Like, I hate assigned reading.”

“Yeah! But then, I think for our penultimate novel together we read Faulkner. And like, going into it I was like “fuck this,” if you get what I mean, like it sounded more

pretentious than I possibly could have imagined, and honestly at the time I think that the idea of pretentious writing was just completely oblique and obfuscating to me. But when we started reading, something about his style just worked for me. I hadn't read or really experienced anything like it before. Not just Faulkner's prose, his use of perspective and point of view, his mastery of literary techniques, the realness and rawness of the Bundrens— that's the family from the book."

"Right."

Lucas smiled and took a sip of his cappuccino. He was wearing a green shirt, which made his eyes stand out even more vibrantly.

"And I think from there, it was like everything clicked. I had a lot of conversations with that professor over Faulkner and he gave me *The Sound and the Fury* later to read over the summer, which I did. And it worked even better for me. Honestly I still think that may be the best book I've ever read. And then I went back to *Lear* after that, and after I'd read some poetry, and it was like— do you like beer?"

"Yeah."

"Did you always?"

"Not at all honestly, I used to hate it."

"Yeah it was like an acquired taste. And then everything clicked, and I decided to make English my minor, and then eventually it all just made sense for me, and I started grad school... So I get what you're saying, it's a whole process. I think part of it is maturation, maturation in artistic appreciation, if that makes sense. We all go through it."

"Yeah man. Like I never imagined, never really even thought— thought that I could feel this way about a book."



“I remember you mentioned you liked T.S. Eliot?”

“I mean, yeah, I did. My grandpa was an English teacher, he loved Eliot. He taught high school though, and I think my dad like, he didn’t think his dad was that successful honestly. And I think he kinda resented that. My folks were the ones who pushed me towards doing law. My older sister— we used to be close— after high school she moved across the country over to study anthropology at NYU, and I remember my dad saying some really mean things about her. Like that she was going down the wrong path, that she had so much promise or whatever and that going into academia was squandering it.”

There were Christmas mornings he remembered when he and his sister and his parents and his grandpa had sat around the tree, opening gifts, the smell of candles and roast ham and the movie *Elf* on in the background, and his grandpa had given him books. He had loved the books, honestly, loved pouring through them, getting lost in stories and connecting with characters, but his parents had scoffed at the gifts his grandfather had given him as if they were cheap. His whole childhood his parents had constantly gifted him and his sister expensive items— super fancy toys for him, really nice make-up and clothes and accessories for her. But his favorite gift had come at his sixteenth Christmas, when he received his grandpa’s personal copy of *The Waste Land*.

The whole rest of that Christmas season had been spent pouring through those pages, studying his grandpa’s annotations— each and every page was marked-up with colorful notes his grandpa had made breaking down the text, and pouring through those and connecting those ideas and thoughts in his head had made Sammy feel closer to his grandfather than he’d ever felt. By then he had retired, and he was only a year or so away

from being diagnosed with the cancer that eventually killed him, but that Christmas had been especially special for Sammy because he'd been able to call his grandfather and ask him questions not just about Eliot but about his thoughts and feelings, his relationship to storytelling, his love of formal writing.

Soon after that his parents had paid to place him in a retirement home, which eventually gave way to hospice, which eventually became the Beachwood Cemetery in Santa Barbara, and then his sister had left, and had declared her interest in academia, and then his folks had started placing the idea of law in his head, had told him that if he didn't go down that path that the whole family would be a disappointment. He still had his grandfather's copy of *The Waste Land*, though, he kept it on his nightstand, close to where he slept. And he remembered one night, deep in the thick of it, opening it up and finding his grandfather's note he'd left for him— "To Sammy, Do we dare/ Disturb the Universe?" There was an immense amount of newfound feeling in just that briefest of notes, as if his grandfather was reaching out from beyond, clapping him on the back with his strong and weathered hands, and challenging him to rise up and do whatever he could to survive.

"Did your parents want you to study law?"

"Yeah. My dad's a surgeon— plastic surgeon. He doesn't really get art. I love film, for example, and I tried recently showing my parents *The Grand Budapest Hotel*— you know, the Wes Anderson film?"

"Yeah, of course, Ralph Fiennes is excellent in that."

"Yes. But like, they were so distanced from it . My dad was looking at his phone the whole time and my mom left halfway through to talk with some other of her friends."

“That sucks...”

“It’s honestly okay. I mean it’s like, my folks have certain ideas about who we are and who we need to be. I think my sister handled it well— going as far away as she possibly could for college, studying something she cares deeply about. For me though it was like, like I guess since she left and I was still living with them they put it all on me. Long nights talking about Ivy League schools and SAT scores and extracurriculars, picking me up from school and taking me straight to French tutoring. Honestly I’m not even sure, I’m not even sure if I’ve been connected for a long, long time.”

“Well... here...” Lucas pulled a book out of his backpack. It was blue, beaten-up and weathered, but clearly lovingly handled as well.

“This is my copy of *As I Lay Dying*. I want you to borrow it and read through it; read it whenever you’re done with *Dante*. Return it whenever you can— I’d love to hear your thoughts.”

Sammy paused, then reached out and thumbed through the paperback’s pages. Annotations and colorful notes were marked on each page. He hadn’t seen anything like it in a while; since his grandpa had gifted him his favorite book. It was reassuring then to know that there were people in the world who cared that deeply about art and expression.

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“Mr. Beaufort? Could you elucidate upon why Benjy feels so stricken from our understanding? Why does Faulkner utilize his point of view specifically at the start of the story?”

The sunbeams hitting the wall shone down upon a large ball of white thread that

hung in the air in front of him. Where before the thread had been threatening, closing upon his vision, swallowing up his hope, now the thread that he saw was constructed out of hope, dreams, and knowledge. All traces of the black thread had vanished from Sammy's life, and while he was scared that someday it could come back he knew that if it did he had his sister, his artistic studies, and his friends to fall back on.

"I mean, personally I think that Benjy represents a character both in flux and caught in time. There's a real emotionality to the fact that he's unaware of how to comprehend and respond to what happened to Caddy, I think. I mean Faulkner utilizes his disability both for formal experimentation but also to draw us deeper into the narrative."

"But do you think Benjy is permanently caught in this web of depression and malaise? Is there hope for him? Escape?"

"I would certainly like to hope so, honestly. I want to think that each of us can find our own path towards healing and redemption. Perhaps it's harder for some, though, honestly. But with support from friends, with people around us who care... who are we to say?"

## II. 2016

He'd met her again at the gym. For a few weeks he'd been a member again at the YMCA. The one he liked to go to was the downtown one, because they had an indoor pool. He loved indoor pools. Chlorine was an intoxicating and pleasingly familiar smell for him. Early mornings were the best, very early mornings, before sunrise, where he could look up at the moon shining through the glass tile ceiling, far up, with the smell of chlorine and the feel of rushing water coasting over him.

The problem was that he was in terrible shape then. He could barely last in the pool. He swam just a few laps and felt tired and terrible. What was so specifically awful about it was that he had been a swimmer in high school, would wake up and swim laps in a misty pool lit by fluorescent lights and the morning moon. They swam in the early, early mornings— in the pool by 6am— and since swimming had been labeled a winter sport by whatever arbitrary school authority made those decisions, they swam in sub-forty degree temperatures. Each morning they rushed in parkas and jammers into the just-warmed-up-enough pool, forcing their way through frozen winds. That's where his love for the smell of chlorine had come from.

When he first saw her she was lifting weights, doing squats, sweat running down her body in completely unabashed fashion. He was impressed by the muscles she'd broken down and built up over the course of the two years since their mutual high school graduation. She was clearly bigger than she had been before, with strong, quasi-vicious looking arms and legs. At that moment she was completely embroiled and immersed in the course of her lift, lost to the world around her. He was reminded in that moment of how he'd always felt about her, albeit from a distance: she carried an energy with her, a

sense of quiet and complete confidence. Nobody could ever doubt that she was going somewhere special.

He had hated lifting weights then, preferring to swim, even if that hurt too. But that specific day he had carried himself clumsily across the gym floor, wallowing in the feelings of insecurity that he felt amongst the big bodies and the large and intimidating lifting machines. This was a constant: each morning he had to cut through the weight room in order to get to the pool. He'd never, not even once, enjoyed that process, the smell of mass testosterone and human growth hormone thick in the air; it was specific and gritty and reminded him of how he'd always felt walking around the hallways of his high school— abstract anxieties and insecurities made concrete.

The sight of her that morning however broke up his strict and mundane morning routine, shocking him and sending him back into a sense of shocking spatial and personal awareness. At first he felt even more intimidated, even more anxious; the only thing worse than being in the rec room unobserved was being there observed. He prayed she didn't notice him, lest he'd be forced into forcing conversation.

But of course there she was, between sets, glancing and noticing him in the mirror behind the squat rack. Her smile was immediate and intense, a practiced grin that caught him immediately. He remembered vividly that walk across the gym floor— more of an uncomfortable scuttle, really— and her meeting him halfway there, brushing sweat off of her forehead with a small white towel and drinking thickly from a large gray water bottle. “Hey Stephen! How've you been?” she cut in.

At that moment hearing her speak was like a knife slicing through his awkwardness, bringing him back to the awareness that there existed a world beyond the

inferiority he felt amidst those other men and the constant anxiety that hovered at the center of his state of being. She appeared in that moment as a stark apparition that'd taken sudden form. What he found most particularly impressive about her in that moment— seeing her again for the first time in the year and a half since their graduation— was how she, standing there, felt seemingly no sense of being out-of-place herself. The world around them seemed to hover around her— the men with their giant shoulders and big arms would glance in her direction and then look away, or look down, as if she was a star that commanded some sort of elusive, illusory power.

“Oh, uh, hey there Riley! I'm doing okay— how've you been,” the meekness of his voice standing in stark contrast to her commanding and confident tone.

“I've been great! Pretty damn great at least. I'm studying English at Wilton, working at a daycare. I've got my own apartment too now! I moved out of my parents' house two months ago. And I'm still dating Phil Crestman, if you remember him from school?”

“Yeah yeah... I know Phil. We had some classes together.” The truth was he truly didn't care much for Crestman— his most vivid memory of him was of one day when he had pranked their older, hard of hearing, Biology teacher Mrs. Williams with a few of his buddies; they'd screamed obscenities during a lab dissecting rats, spilling over their trays and the tiny rodent bodies. They'd never been caught, or at least the administrators didn't seem to care too much (Crestman had ran the football in that next night for a 70 yard touchdown, so he supposed that in their eyes it had all balanced out). On a base level though he supposed he could see the appeal. Phil was a big guy who knew how to talk and have fun in ways that he, who was the sort who had wandered the halls of their high

school either caught up in his head or caught up in a paperback novel, who spent his weekends either stuck at home or helping out at his grandfather's ranch, had no experience with.

"Phil's a great guy, I think," she said. "Honestly I never thought I'd find myself dating an athlete, really, much less a football player, but he's truly really great. We're living out past exit 45, we've got a nice little two bedroom apartment there, a dog, her name's Charlie, she's a brown lab..."

Riley pulled her phone out of her pocket and showed him a couple pictures of her and Phil at a park with their dog, playing catch in the mid-afternoon sun. The dog was admittedly very cute, and especially photogenic. She was wearing a lilac tank top and short, tight shorts. Crestman was wearing khakis and a navy polo shirt with red Oakley sunglasses.

"What about you? What've you been up to lately?"

He didn't want to tell her the truth, that he'd been stuck living at home with his folks and had no plans— either immediate or in the future— to move out. It was as if the train that carried the folks he went to school with off to greener and more successful pastures had just missed him. Like he'd been standing on that figurative platform without a ticket, watching as everyone he'd known from a young age— they'd gone to a smaller, private high school— were shuttled off in first class toward incredibly complimentary futures involving law firms and business practices and engineering schools. There were Yale and Princeton and Stanford students in his graduating class; here he was doing nothing more really than fruitlessly swimming in the early mornings and driving aimlessly around in his car.



“Uh... I’m at Michigan actually!” having no sense he was going to lie until the words were already coming out of his mouth. “I’m studying law. I want to do corporate law...”

“That’s so cool!” she replied. “Are you writing still?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I just remember, in Mr. Henderson’s class, you always had the best stories. I always used to love reading your work. Are you still writing?”

“Honestly, no, I’m not really.”

The thoughts of writing and literature had hardly even scratched his mind in the past year or so, he realized. There had indeed been a time when he had been 17, and he’d signed up for a Creative Writing elective at his high school for an extra credit. Every Tuesday and Thursday morning that spring semester he and seven of his fellow students would crowd into Mr. Henderson’s office, a tidy little broom closet, and discuss storytelling. Riley had been in that class too, he remembered, but he had never mustered up the gall to speak to her outside of class. She was popular, liked, social: all the things that he had never been himself. She didn’t just go to the gatherings on the weekends he was never invited to, she threw parties for their entire class. Of course, she had invited him— it was an open invitation after all— but he’d never once gone, preferring instead to take solace and comfort in the safety of his dark and well-laid-out bedroom.

“That’s a bummer! I always enjoyed your stories... the one about, was it a falconer? And he had lost his falcon, it died? That story was really great; it had such emotion to it! And the characters were really rich. I bet pre-law is tough though, I would have to bet like, I can’t imagine what that would even be like.”

“Oh yeah I mean, with the work and all, I’ve got six classes, and I’m living on campus,

and yeah I have just hardly had the time to write at all.”

Suspended in time around them were the motions of the bodybuilders, the sounds of the iron plates and the harsh music on the speakers. He could feel the lie he was crafting for her take on form as he continued to speak, and he tried to spin away from it. Yet in that moment too he could tell that it was somehow too late, by just the smallest and haziest of margins, sure, yet nonetheless the lie had already become fundamentally stable, present, and undeniable. He hoped that whatever new reality he was forcing into being through the crafting of his story wouldn't vanquish the sense of fondness she clearly felt for him— that feeling was new, and unexpected. It had been so long since he had felt felt: at times he even assumed that he was losing his corporeality, fading into the background, becoming more of a haunted memory than an actual physical being.

“... oh yeah and, uh, I'm rushing SAE too right now, with some of my buddies from the lacrosse club — Sybil's in ADPhi...”

Never until that point had he realized he could recollect the names of fraternities and sororities off the cuff, but something about the situation he found himself in made him feel more powerful, more forceful, more confident. He was committed to the lie now. There had been scattered moments of brief mental power for him throughout his life, times in which he'd displayed some sort of innate ability or expressed an interest in some high-brained concept and pursued the understanding of it to the furthest degree. The falcon story she'd mentioned had been one of those particular times; Mr. Henderson had assigned them to write a short piece on loss, and he'd found himself writing a story about a Scottish falconer whose falcon flew away to die after their spending several years together. He had felt that the saddest position that one could be in wasn't just to be alone,

but to be abandoned by those one trusts and loves at the most unexpected of moments, for reasons entirely out of their control.

During those days, in the moments he spent working to craft his story and characters, he found that the process of writing carried with it an unexpected immensity of power. Each day when he opened his journal and took out his pen to write he found the process of placing himself into the mindset of another person, another individual, his character, and, from that position, working to craft and create not just a real landscape but also a metaphorical, emotional one, to be utterly invigorating in a way that felt altogether simple and also rather humble. There was indeed a sense of humility in how easily his writing transported him away— carried him from the rank smell of the salty bathroom he ate lunch in, the cramped, garish fluorescently-lit corner of the senior study room he forced his books and laptop into, the abandoned dinner table where his parents had left a couple of yellow ceramic bowls full of meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans covered in plastic wrap out for him, a sight which he found almost unspeakably depressing. Instead he found himself in those moments standing upon the green highland plains of Scotland, connecting emotionally with a falcon.

Usually he'd sit down and do his writing either in the senior study room in the washed out early mornings before school or at Pat's, the crowded cafe on the downtown square, which always smelled like peanut shells and beer, and was constantly hovering not just with students but with the solitary single worker men who came to their town to work lumber and the elderly couples who sat at the bar, sipped coffee, and maintained a grip on life by listening, observing, and viciously judging everyone else around them.

One of those days he had seen Riley there, sitting with her friends at a really large but

completely crowded table. Phil Crestman had been there too, he remembered now, with half of his gang of harebrained, macho dimwits. He could only shoot scattered glances in their direction, shrink into the table and his journal, hoping that they didn't notice him. The disparate sounds of the cafe felt unbearable to him that day; a shock to his system. As he watched, he had seen Phil, after cracking a loud and actively homophobic joke, scoot around and put his arm around Riley's shoulders.

It was like a bullet in his brain. Even if he didn't particularly know her, he had liked her, enjoyed their interactions in class together. He remembered her comments as awfully incisive, about themes, ideas, and potentialities of his story which hadn't yet expressed themselves even to him. He knew she was into volunteering, that she worked with kids, that she wanted to go to school and study French, move to Paris, open a school for the children of American expatriates and foreign refugees who couldn't afford to pay and had nowhere else to turn.

These were things he'd read about in her writing, because they had never really spoken. She would always say hi to him, with a grand and present and beaming smile, whenever he walked through the door into their tight yet cozy creative writing classroom— that was another thing he had appreciated about her, she always would show up first to class so that she could be there to greet everyone else as they walked through the door. It was a morning class, 8:30 A.M., and her smile and voice had become like Pavlovian honey to him— no Tuesday or Thursday morning could ever go by that year without her voice, lest he would feel even more uncomfortable and even more out of place than he already did. Yet he refused to speak to her, or more he didn't know how to speak to her; they would talk together in discussions, of course, but there was an established formality in those

situations which made it more outwardly possible. Each day when class ended he wanted nothing more than to go up to her and tell her how she made him feel— she was the only one who truly got his stories, and her appreciation of and warmth towards them in their class discussions made him feel present and confident in himself in ways he'd never before considered. But he couldn't: he wasn't good enough for her, he wasn't good, he didn't know what to say, how to say it, where to be and how to be there. He had all the thoughts in his head but he had absolutely no idea where to put them.

“That’s amazing Pat, I’m really happy for you,” she said in what seemed to be a questioning voice.

Reality struck him suddenly; he'd drifted. A guy with giant shoulders wearing a black tank top dropped a squat bar loaded with what looked like several hundred pounds of weight— it made a giant crashing noise, coupled with the man's obnoxious and overblown snort. What he loved was Riley's reaction: she castigated the man with her gaze, saw through his phony and open showings of masculinity. It struck him then that, even if she was dating Phil Crestman, she still must understand the toxicity of violent masculinity on some certain level.

“What a dick... I always hate when guys act like that. But anyways, I'm so happy for you Pat! It's really lovely running into you. I need to get back to my workout but, seriously, I hope to see you around. Honestly too though I hope you start writing stories again... genuinely. If you ever need a reader, you know my number, or at least you can find it I'm sure, or I can give it to you...”

He handed her his phone and she put her number in it, then handed it back to him. He watched her then return to her workout, put her earbuds in, then say goodbye to him in

the mirror with a giant smile and a huge wave.

It felt as if his phone was burning a hole through his pocket. For once, his swim workout proved to be easier than expected.

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Over the course of the next few hours he dallied over whether to contact her, but when he eventually of course did that night his worries that she would somehow have forgotten his existence— that he existed merely as a sort of figmentary, illusory blob that came into being only when perceived by those with actual bodies— were proven wrong. These sorts of friendly reactions were new to him and he didn't trust them, but something about her tenacity— as if she didn't just not mind him texting her, she actively wanted him to— made him pour forward.

Over the course of the next few days and weeks, then, they began a long and diligent conversation over text— the two of them pouring over thoughts, feelings, ideas... it had been ages since either of them really had had anyone to talk to about their artistic interests (Phil was mainly interested in video games and the MLB, as far as he could tell, and both of his parents were either gone or not remotely interested in anything beyond crochet and their weekly neighborhood mahjong meetings) — which led to them meeting up and hanging out several times.

Their first time meeting up was at the local library to look at books. Their city had, in the past year or so, built up a brand-new central library, with modern architecture, glass ceilings, and six floors of content. It was one of his favorite spots to sit and relax—

he frequented the spot often, studied there, liked to get lost— but Riley had never been. That was a really fantastic day for him, going around and showing her the books he had cared about as an adolescent and the artistic inspirations he cared about as an adult. There was a stunning amount of clarity in talking with her, he found. Not only was she interested, she was also intelligent, and liked to ask questions and, really, seemed quite taken with his artistic ideas. She showed him books of poetry— Plath, Dickinson, Whitman, Mary Oliver— while he was much more preoccupied with the novel: his artistic interests tended to swing towards post-modernist writers like DeLillo (his favorite) and Wallace. They both had a heady and unified love of science fiction, however, stemming from— for him— finding his dad’s discarded Dick and Stephenson paperbacks in the attic when he was a kid, and— for her— growing up watching Deep Space 9 and Voyager with her older sister.

After that came early morning brunches, late afternoon hikes, long nights together at her apartment reading books and talking about art while listening to Coltrane and drinking red wine together— he ran a couple times into Phil, who he found to be just a bit warmer and more open than he’d remembered (but he was more than willing to chock that up to some form of strategy, a strategic sort of extroversion to mask his real self). Those days were some of the best he’d ever known and he hoped— in his mind he knew— that she felt the same.

The way she was so open with him... he had felt, years earlier, that he was capable of conversation, free in thought, but this was the first time ever, really the first time in his life, that he figured out what it meant to make a friend. It was as if with her he could spend hours unpeeling topics, blending into other intellectual realms, awakening

dormant social skills laying within him like eye contact and humor— he wasn't used to another person laughing at his jokes... he wasn't really used to making jokes in the first place.

Through speaking with Riley, Stephen began loosening, allowing himself for the first time to believe. It didn't matter to him, at least in those specific moments it didn't, the depths of the lie he was building up with her— he felt, after their first meeting, the continuous and constant need to prove to her that the social status he'd introduced himself with, as some kind of fratty, party-going huckster, was a one hundred percent authentic representation. He told her about the girls he was “dating,” the parties he “threw” — those always with extra embellishments he knew would impress her specifically— and maybe that was the worst thing he did, he thought in retrospect to it all, because it was pure and abject manipulation— about how he was the only guy at the party to realize that one of the girls was too drunk and needed to be taken to the hospital, or how he stepped in and helped out one of the younger rushers who had looked “just a bit too on edge during the, admittedly light in comparison, recruitment activities.”

He thought it interesting, he couldn't deny, at least he felt, especially in these moments, that she was dating Phil. Phil just seemed so crude— his body was like a series of constructed blocks made at odd and obtuse angles (the fact that they held onto the general boxlike shape seemed miraculous in itself) stacked on top of each other. His main hobbies seemed watching major league baseball, lifting in their tight garage unit (Phil had converted it into a home gym, but even that Stephen felt was crude, it was really just a bench and a couple of 65lb barbells, he was lacking even a squat rack— even though Phil worked out in monogrammed shirts saying Bros Don't Let Bros Skip Leg Day), and—



this was the one appreciable thing— cuddling with their big dog on the couch.

Stephen swore, he swore— he knew, at his core— that it wasn't about lust. Riley was a beautiful girl, he knew that; her skin was soft, her voice was comforting and warm, really that was one of her main qualities: warmth. She had an excellent body, he couldn't deny— she'd kept up the running she'd been doing since high school and had coupled it with lifting after getting with Phil, Phil had shown her around the gym (it was one of their favorite things to do together as a couple). It was more than that, though, it was that she always committed herself to the things she wanted to start doing— lifting, as an example— and she always broke them down into their specific and component parts, figured out how she could apply and connect herself on her own terms, and from there built herself up to adeptness and often mastery of whatever hobby or skill she was determined to do. It was a skill that Stephen deeply admired, in addition to their friendship. It was something he himself would love to have the ability to do— to really get good at something, to really find something he enjoyed (although these days with her, these conversations— art, literature, wine, jazz, Tchaikovsky and just a mutual sort of understanding; they both cared deeply about writing and language in a way that nobody else they had ever met could ever understand, until now, with each other. It was here in this— fucking sadly, he had to admit— that that godfucked spark flew, and before he knew it he wanted her, not just as a friend— although he loved her in that way, he had to admit, but that was a part of it too— but sexually, and intellectually, and creatively: he wanted her forever.

She became a constant craving for him: it wasn't good. But, he had to admit— knowing then even that the way he felt and the needing, the fucking needing— it was all

just so fucking bad, but god still he couldn't get enough, he couldn't get fucking enough. And the fact that she was with Phil, it just made it all so much better, more vibrant— the pain of it all, the fact that he knew, knew inside himself, how good they'd be together, with Phil out of the picture...

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"I'll get a grande vanilla latte, and uh— you like the London fog right? —"

She smiled at him— "yeah!"

"One of those too."

They took their coffee drinks and went and sat down by the river. It was a nice and warm November evening— it had been almost a year since they'd first ran into each other at the gym.

"How's Housekeeping been? That's the one you've been reading for your Contemporary American, right?"

She palmed it up out of her bag, an older, used copy— she always preferred buying secondhand, because the books had more character that way (she hoped that they'd been loved) — "it's excellent, so picturesque: I really love Marilyn Robinson, she's just got this style, it's so... plainly beautiful? You know what I mean?"

He reached out and kissed her.

The sun beat down on them and it took him a second to realize what he had done.

"Stephen, what the fuck..."

He hadn't expected this— not even in his worst scenario, could: could he lose her?

The spark was gone from her eyes— what had been full and beautiful and right in front of him, really the first real light of his lifetime— gone.

“Man, dude.”

“I’m, I’m sorry...”

“No, I mean, look— if you, if I, no, fuck it, that’s not cool dude.”

“Yeah...”

Suddenly the illuminating nature of the sun on her face made it look like she was an interrogator of sorts— how could he compete with Phil? How could he even think that someone as gorgeous as her would ever want him? Invisible Stephen. Ugly, fat, unattractive, unlovable Stephen. This whole relationship, this friendship, whatever it was between them was fucking preposterous in the first place.

“It’s not about Phil. I mean, really, it’s not. Phil and I are good. He’s a good guy— look yeah at a certain point, sure, I could see where you would think he’s too, I dunno, clumsy for someone like me, too much maybe. But he’s a bit of a bloke, yeah? I mean he cares, but this isn’t really about him...”

She scooted a bit further away— every inch seemingly more and more, further and further away— eventually she’d be gone.

“It’s, look, it’s possible— it’s honestly even likely— that I’ve been letting some things slide and some things go between us. I mean I know, at least I know a bit how you feel about me Stephen—”

This felt incongruous— he’d hid it all so well, at least he, no he definitely had (he was good at it).

“And look, I didn’t care... not really. I mean I didn’t want to lead you on, didn’t

want to hurt you, but you never did anything— until now I guess. But there’ve been other things. Look, a couple weeks ago a friend of Phil’s, he got thrown out of his university and he’s at Michigan now— he’s rushing Delt... you know.”

“Okay, yeah.”

“And, look Stephen— Phil asked about you, asked if he’d ran into you, I mean the Vice President of Delta, Chair of Social Activities..., and Phil wanted to see what his friend thought of you, since Phil’s grown pretty fond of you recently—”

(This was a surprise, considering Stephen’s conception of Phil’s feelings towards him had always, really ever since Phil had entered again into Stephen’s narrow life, bordered on— he figured— mutual tolerance, at best.)

“ —and the guy had never heard of Stephen Nelson. Never heard of him. I mean, Steve—”

He looked away from her. The expression on her face wasn’t quite accusatory, but where he expected anger instead he saw levels of betrayal— sadness, even minor disbelief.

It was all too much, it was— how could he have missed it?

“You’re right.”

She looked at him.

“What?”

“I said, you’re right. I fucked up Riley.”

“How do you mean?”

He reached for her hand, but she pulled it away reflexively— where before it had been, suddenly it was as if her fingers had developed an innate distaste for his reach.

“None of this is real, okay? I mean, I live with my parents. I dropped out of college because I tried to kill myself. I don’t have any friends other than you.”

Her lip trembled.

“And I’m really fucking sorry, okay? Like, I understand—”

“I don’t think you do— ” — she spoke in a hushed tone, in a way he hadn’t seen her speak except in very infrequent moments of complete discomfort— suddenly he felt like an abject creep caught nude in front of live television cameras.

“I don’t think you understand, Steve.”

She sighed— the look of her grey eyes in the Sun shone across like beams; how could he have been so stupid, so fucking stupid. Here she was — and POOF.

“None of that matters to me— none of it ever did. I could give less of a shit whether you’re in school, or have friends— I care about you, Steve—”

She came across and reached for his hand.

“Look— you’re a good guy Steve. I’m sorry things haven’t worked out the way you expected, I’m sorry that I can’t be, that I won’t be, who you want me to be. But you are a good guy, Steve. You shouldn’t hold yourself down.”

Her squeezing his hand then felt like the culmination of it all— she was always so good at unspoken language. Through it she seemed to place her love, but also her regret— she could have helped him, he realized then: but what this was was to betray her trust, a clear and abject manipulation. And what he realized in that moment was that mental health— stability, connection, happiness, whatever you want to call it— that, as an adult, all of that, you had to work for it. She had done the work. Had spent the time investigating her mind, alone in her room late in the dark figuring out why she felt the

ways she did, mastering her emotions so that her spoken words would never be affected by her inner thoughts. In this she had control— in this she had self.

And those with self— they make boundaries, they hold themselves up, not just hold themselves up but make sure they excel. Because they know what it is to have self—

If he had just realized it— it had, he had already had it.

He wished she would reach back out, but she never would— he had lost her, she was lost to him: she trusted herself, supported herself, loved herself, and she had no space for someone as greedy, as silly, as shortsighted and fucking stupid as him in her life...

He honestly appreciated her for it. It was what he himself wanted.

But for him, she was gone. As soon as her hand slipped from his and her eyes glanced away she was gone, lost to him in the reflected sunset of the November night.

### III. 2017

The red light hanging on the long steel line blinked continuously against the night; a remnant of what had come before him. Power in the Second World had proven to be more than spotty since the cataclysm, but there were still sections and pockets of his world where one could still find the forgotten promises of what had come before. He remembered vividly, back when he was still with his clan, going slightly off the weathered path one day and finding an old metal bird in the shape of a mechanical whirligig. What power had allowed it to function was a mystery to him— many ideas and thoughts lay in mystery in those former First World pockets— but it beat a steady and rhythmic song all the while flapping its wings in the formation of flight. Indeed, when he let it out of his hands it flew up and away for the briefest and most suspended of moments before it had then fallen back to the ground— the wing had shattered off, and its song came out in garbled and jumbled tones. He still kept it in his pack though, as a promise of where he'd been, and who he'd been with.

It had been several seasons since Judas had last found himself amongst a community. He'd been born in the East, in relative peace, with parents who loved him and an older brother who was known to be a hero. His brother Otto had been a soldier, one of the only ones of their village, who had gone off to fight in war across the sea before Judas had been born. Soldiers were rare in their society— war itself became a privilege in the Second World, less the conflicts of power and status they'd been in the time before and more conflicts that could be described even as quasi-humanitarian, necessary for the supply of food to villages far inland and the restoration and discovery of the lost culture of the old world.

When he was twelve years old Otto had come back, after seven years, in an iron ship powered by fire storing numerous treasures and gifts for the people of their village and the surrounding lands. He was greeted with warmth and had been given a role captaining the Baron's watch guard— each morning they patrolled the surrounding marshes and beaches on bicycles flung along by the power of miniature old world motors oiled with coconut oil and tree sap, with makeshift helmets made out of coconut shells and rope. As thanks Otto had been allowed to hold onto some items of his choosing, and since he had returned with enough old world treasures to fill multiple storerooms he'd had more than enough to fill up his family's small thatch hut.

As such Judas had grown up surrounded by items lost and found, rare and unique. He had loved many of them, had spent days sitting with them, praying to them, attempting to unlock the truth of their hidden gestures and unknown materials, but his favorites had been a set of old books— despite most of the language of the First World being lost, the pictures still shared stories of forgotten and lost times and places— and a faded deck of red playing cards that he still carried on his person at all times. To him, they served as a lasting reminder of his purpose, a tether in times of danger and isolation to some semblance of culture and hope.

He made his way carefully down the granite hill, sliding sideways to ensure he didn't slip. Out in the wilds of the old world, the buildings of his ancestors still stood. It was difficult at times, however, for him to configure his way of thinking toward a conceptualization and understanding of their purpose. A few days before then, in a giant and wide open plain, he'd seen the monumental and shocking mirage of an ancient



temple before him only to, when he got closer, realize that it was some form of old world government building, likely one built out in the hostility of nature in order to hide its plain purpose. Often the mindset and motivations of those who'd been in power in the First World bewildered him, but after years in the wilds of the West he'd realized that the main guiding principle behind those who'd been in power was to keep their power— or to gain even more.

At this specific precipice of his journey he had been walking for days, weeks, months even. Really it had been years— years since he'd been back home, years since he'd felt the familiar comforts of his family, love, hope. His days in the West were choked by heat, thirst, and isolation. What humans he did meet were marauders who'd slit his neck for half a shot at water, or halfgents whose ancestors had attempted to stay behind during the cataclysm and had thus cursed their descendants to full lifetimes without self-conception. There was a constant rootlessness to the whole endeavor which he found exhausting. At certain moments Judas tried to conceptualize and come to terms with the depressive blackness which was consistently pushing to suck up the rest of his vision. Color had long since evaporated into sepia, which had been becoming increasingly monochrome every morning he woke up. He'd lost sight of what hope even meant; he couldn't conceptualize it. When he was younger in his village he'd often been known as one of the most optimistic, always pushing for innovation, for a new, brighter, and more exciting way of seeing things, but now whatever things he'd clung to at the start to keep himself alive had begun to wither away, and whatever grip he'd had was more than giving way.

At the bottom of the hill, Judas crossed through an old gas station; numerous Old World

cars had been left abandoned around it. Judas had never seen a car in his life until he had finally crossed over the mountains and into the desert two years before. He passed over one of the large, paved, overgrown highways of the old ones and entered a forest overgrown with green vines and the tallest, reddest trees he'd seen in his life. For the first time in years, he could smell salt in the air.

Often during his journey he had pondered what true isolation meant. Up until his journey had begun, he'd actually figured himself a fan of solitude. He enjoyed spending time by himself in his family's hut; for him, then, isolation and solitude helped to breed specific and tight answers to deep and complex thoughts. He enjoyed his time he spent with others too, of course, but he absolutely valued the time he got to spend alone in pursuance of the answers to the ancient riddles of the First World.

Those were the days, in fact, when Judas was young and not yet even eighteen, when he'd decided to become a documentarian of the Old World. It made sense: from a young age he'd been constantly surrounded by the treasures of his ancestors, each one of which had to be broadcasting their own specific message straight to his brain on their own particular wavelength constantly and consistently. That was the purest and most logical explanation after all for why he spent all of his time indoors reading and writing and thinking while the other boys and his brothers played sports and fought in the brown, dirty washed out ditches of their town. His parents had issues with his behavior— each of his siblings who'd come before him had clung to what was expected of them in their development stages, so his intellectual rebellion felt almost threatening. But Otto had taken an interest in him then— indeed it was Otto who'd actually seen the Old World, or at least whatever was left of it, hidden away across the glittering sea, and it was Otto

who'd first gifted him and their family by filling the holes of their home with the treasures and ornaments of their ancestors— and he had talked to their father and mother, and they'd decided to let him learn and develop at his own pace.

Judas thought of many things as he made his way through the dusky misty of the surrounding forest. It was an especially dark forest, although the green was verdant, and there was a glittering and glassy nature to the dankness he found himself in. The best moments, he found, were those when he considered himself close to lost. There was a surprising fleetingness to those moments— venturing out initially he'd always expected that directions would be sporadic, that open spaces could and would feel constrictive, that a constant state of feeling lost would be a trade he'd be forced to make over and over again. But quite soon he'd realized that so much remained from the old world, especially in the areas which'd been abandoned and left to the elements.

The imagery of the old ones, their signs and language, beckoned him westward across the Eastern mountains, iron rivers crossing the blacked out Eastern mountain ranges, through the central prairies, where gangs roved looking for water and for clean food— he'd heard noises those nights out across the open plains which carved into his sleep more and more frequently these days. Then, across the gargantuan mountain range of the West, those had taken him months to traverse, and there had been days then that had been worse for him than he ever could've imagined...

He rounded the top of a hill to see a blinking light— WHAM! It all slammed into him; the first sign of humanity for him in eight months; rivers and oceans, ponds and lakes and mountains and the ripping, oh the ripping; and then— A stick broke under his foot, there

was a cliff, he fell into the void of blank space beneath him...

He came up for air in what he quickly recognized as the fabled Western Ocean— the salt stung his throat. He was alive— and there was the light, at the top of the mountain, and he could swim, and he did, and he reached the shore, and pulled himself to safety... and up the hill, toward the light, slowly to be sure but also, he was gaining...

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As a Universitarian he had worked at the largest and most prominent school in the entirety of the United Parsonages. The lands he grew up in weren't at all governed by First World laws of money, or property, not in the way he knew those of the old world had spent their lives shackled to them, and as such the processes of Second World education were much more individualized, much more focused than what he knew of what had come before. In the parsonages, access to healthy food, clean water, safe and fair housing, and a balanced and personalized education had been judged, generations before, as the bedrocks of society. Long before, the Founding Elders had chosen these as the values of their people, and as such the school that Judas found himself teaching at wasn't just structured to spread knowledge, it was built to give experience, to form productive, lasting members of their new society, to help build a conception of and value for equality and virtue.

Judas' memories of those early days revolved around the acquisition of knowledge and the forming of new patterns of thought, new ways of seeing the world which transformed his vision from that of a blind and scared kid to an educated and

formidable adult. It was this— the way that understanding and building a conception of the world his world rested on, had been built on, created a sense of peace and understanding which gave him comfort, understanding, gave him sight— that drove him to work hard enough to eventually claim his place as the leading scholar of First World studies.

He'd started out as a teenager learning in the main school of his parsonage before his test scores and his aptitude for the study of history singled him out as an excellent candidate for transfer to Hollybrook, at the Capital, the highest and most singular educational body of the Second World. At 20 he'd finally managed to leave home— he'd been constrained longer than he'd expected because of the death of Otto, who'd gone off to die in some unknown war with ramifications and consequences he'd never felt warranted the loss of such a singular and passionate force. Otto's death had hit him especially hard, he felt, because Otto had been the only one at first who'd recognized his gifts, who'd encouraged his abilities. He had been an excellent older brother: simultaneously singular in his force and ability but also highly charismatic and deeply empathetic.

During the especially difficult moments of his march across the land, he doubted whether his life would have taken the same course if it hadn't been for Otto, and he questioned whether he wished his brother had never returned from across the wide blue sea at all. Indeed, if he'd never been introduced to his obsessive pursuit of history, he'd almost certainly not have ended up in the same tough spot he was currently in. He could trade his studies for a family, his scholarly pursuits for friends, his solitude for marriage and kids (the role of marriage in his society was much different than its role in the old world, he

knew— it was based much more on mutual respect and understanding, friendship and compassion, and as such it existed not just as a byproduct of and extension of ownership but also as a pure and authentic physical realization of love (he knew too that sex— something he'd never himself experienced since he had had very little interest, even with the women and men who had shown interest— was seen less as an act of carnal fire and more as a beautiful and fluid representation of physicality and emotion; courtesans weren't just supported in his society, they were borderline worshiped, and many of the female elders who served on the Councils of the United Parsonages had once served in those roles).

The truth though was that he existed in a state of permanent sexual relaxation; he simply didn't have a sex drive, and so it never fully mattered to him. He figured he lacked the right conditions and qualities for romance as well— at least he'd never experienced romance outside of the confines of the histories and the stories that he surrounded himself with. In this way, he knew that, no matter what really, his condition was inevitable and impermeable. There was simply no existence in which the conditions would have aligned in such a way that his story would have ended differently, and he found a major sense of comfort in this realization in the face of utter defeat and vanquishment.

Instead of love, instead of sex, instead of friendship and instead of family he'd been obsessed with histories, and more specifically stories. He was consumed by the need to understand how those who had come before him had constructed their lives and had recorded their own personal histories. In this way, he took continuous refuge in the objects and imagery of the First World; they served as totems of peace for him, of patience, of understanding.

And when the United Parsonages had offered him, when he had lived through 33 years, the opportunity to undertake a journey further than anyone else had ever attempted, an expedition past the Appalachians and into the West, he jumped at the opportunity. They were wanting to reach out and establish larger borders, he knew, wanted him to conquer the West and trailblaze across its vast landscapes— a sort of retro-Manifest Destiny, a second chance at what had come before— but it was the opportunity and chance of his lifetime. He wasn't worried about the isolation at that point— these things and truths about him gave him that confidence— so he had decided to train for two seasons with the soldiers and explorers for his expedition. The Elders wanted only one to go, so as to not sacrifice and avoid losing too many of their people, and they figured that training a historian to be an explorer would be easier than training an explorer in the lifelong pursuit and knowledge of First World history.

He was seven years older now. His expedition had lasted five. He knew then that it was nearing its end, that no matter what he did something was going to have to come together. The only real question for him then was what would come next.

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He woke up, for the first time in years, in a bed. That was the first wild and unexpected thing. Refuge. Safety, calmness.

The second thing was the sound flowing next to him. It was the sound of music, but music unlike he'd ever heard it. Music had been an early discovery by the elders, something they had passed down from the First World. It had been years since he'd heard

it; the melody brought him close to tears, it reminded him of early mornings on the beaches back home. But it was different here, he'd never heard music in any form but live, but here it was coming out of a box— he'd seen things like it in the old world books he'd read which he'd found that'd been ported over.

“You're awake; I'm really glad to see that.”

The booming voice came from behind him. It had a roaring quality, but it didn't threaten. Turning around, he immediately recognized the man as the man who had been in his dreams. He'd been there, he recognized, taking care of him. There was an immediacy of trust.

“I'm Clive. I'm the caretaker here,” the old man said.

“I'm Judas...

How long have I been out?”

“Not too long. Just a few days. It was a bit gnarly, but me and the boy were able to fix you up.”

The old man— Clive— whose most easily recognizable features were his grey, salted beard and his thick glasses, making him look, in Judas' opinion, both tremendously frightening but also incredibly comforting, walked over to the window and opened the curtains— slowly. The gorgeous features of the sun swept color and light into the room immediately, leaving an imprint of the mid-afternoon on him.

Getting up out of the bed, he walked over to the window and looked out. And for the first time in so many years, he saw the Ocean. He had thought it lost to him forever, but here, at the end of his journey, at the end of his rope, he had returned to it.



He felt the immediacy of his brother's vision then, saw his iron ship belting its thick curtain of smoke into the air on its way back out to war; the iron metal bird which sat in his pocket woke suddenly, or at least it felt as if it did, to him at least, and it carried him away, and he fell backward into Clive's arms, and...

It all gave way then, and he cried as he never had before.

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That night he walked out of the room for the first time in a week, and went up the stairs, and found Clive and the boy— Ricky— sitting at a table eating chicken and beans.

“Hey-a Judas!”

He was taken aback by the immediacy with which Ricky treated him— it was as if in the week or so he'd helped to take care of him the boy had developed a deep and abiding love for him (or perhaps it was just the way that Ricky felt toward all things).

“Ricky. It's nice to finally meet you.”

“For sure! We were just going to go in and watch a movie.”

“A movie?”

“Yes, of course! You know movies don't you?”

He'd heard of movies, for sure, but he'd thought that all of them had been destroyed in the early days of the Second World. But that night, the boy Ricky selected the film. Judas followed Ricky and the Old Man through into a dark and cavernous yet oddly comforting room with rows and rows of seats stacked up. They went through a door in the back, and up into a small tucked-away booth. There were numerous cylindrical containers there,

and the boy Ricky pointed to one which the Old Man then threaded into a projector, and wound up. Together then he beckoned Ricky and Judas into the main cavern, and there were lights— the flickering, flickering, that Judas had seen, the flickering which had guided him, here it was, here it all was.

And suddenly— sound! Picture! Color! Music unlike any Judas had ever heard in his life. Before him stood life— life made concrete, stories made literal, characters transformed into reality. The story was, he had to admit, almost impossible to follow, especially since it was all just so much, but what truly inspired him was the way it all came together, the color and picture and sound and the music; there was no way he could have expected it to even be possible.

But then suddenly— it was all too much! He thought he would faint, but instead again he wept, and it again came together for him. He saw that stories were the way we made sense of a world which made no sense itself, a scary and often hostile place that tears us apart and forces us to find some way to thread ourselves back together again. Each and every piece of history he knew coalesced for him then in that instant into a concrete and pure understanding that he, and every person he knew, and everyone around him was doomed to live, punished by being forced into a pattern created long before them, one none of them would ever be able to escape, but also that it was all worth it too— because of sound, color, images, music; and because of the way that they coalesced, in the fact that they could coalesce.

All of the pain and all of the misery and all of the loss and sorrow and isolation made sense to him then, in that cavernous auditorium, with pictures being projected onto a wall and sounds seemingly thrust out of some phantom realm, then as part of the pattern of his

life. Because those bad things can't come without the other things, the better things. He couldn't wander through a dark and misty forest without being awestruck by the sheer verdant beauty of nature, the scale and color of the trees. He could never walk through an abandoned town of the First World without stopping, finding himself immersed in the architecture and imagery and iconography and achievements of his ancestors. He knew then that the feeling of isolation he had experienced had been bred from having known peace and love, connection and belonging; after all, how can we understand negative feelings without having some conception of what could be better?

Was that hope? He wondered that to himself, there, watching as the screen cut to black, and Ricky the boy beckoned to him, and Clive the old man walked him down to his room, and he sat down to sleep. He figured that it probably was. He worried that he would never truly know— never fully understand what hope truly was, even if he still had it. That he could still have hope— that he maybe could never have lost hope in the first place— but that hope wasn't something he could visibly latch onto, or even visibly represent in his mind.

But he took peace, he felt, as he slipped off to sleep, in the fact that stories existed. And the fact that, more often than not, stories had happy endings. That things worked out for the characters. There would be misery and sorrow, often there would be horrible loss. But in so many stories, the good ones anyway, the main characters— the ones you cared about— they got away. In the best stories it was the changes the characters experienced that mattered the most; the hard times often helped to just push them through into maturity and growth. He hoped then that he would be okay.

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The sun glittered over the sea, and the Old Man sighed to himself. He looked on as the Projectionist collected their film reels for the night.

It had been years since he'd been there, really so long, and he was at peace. He'd grown quite close to the Projectionist, especially as the projectionist himself had grown older, and together they'd formed a tremendous artistic bond.

About five years before, in an expedition down the coast, the projectionist had stumbled onto still functioning film cameras of the First World. Together, then, the old man and the projectionist had recorded their stories. They started with the obvious one—the immense journey the old man had undertaken across the continent of the First World to arrive at the Western Sea. After that they moved on to other stories, memories and tales that stuck out to them from books left behind by the old ones. The Old Man made a film about his brother, too, and his expedition across the Eastern Ocean and his exploration of the Far East. They aimed to simultaneously build some understanding of their current existence but also to tell the stories that The Old Man knew and loved; to build a collective knowledge of the course of human history.

Since they were working with such rudimentary equipment they often enjoyed creating their own costumes and props from whatever they could find in order to best represent the more surreal elements of their stories. Together they made several films. The old man's affinity for and knowledge of storytelling matched very well with the technical and formal ability of the Projectionist.

Their latest project, the one they were screening that night, was a picture about the life of

the old man Clive who'd first discovered the place. It had been years since he'd passed on, but Clive had left a tremendous impact on both of their lives. He'd adopted the Projectionist as a young boy, abandoned and found in a coastal cave by pirates far offshore, and had taken him in and taught him the cinematic tricks and secrets of the First World that he'd spent years searching for and discovering himself.

He'd taken the Old Man too, taken him in and built him back up, listened to his stories, introduced him to the Projectionist. He'd given him a place to stay, given him food and water. It was more than the Old Man had ever expected anyone to do for him.

As the sun passed over the horizon, extinguishing the pink vibrancy surrounding them and thrusting them into an atmosphere of a much darker cobalt, the old man smiled to himself. He reckoned that he'd been gifted with just about as good— if not truly the best— place he could have found himself in such a harsh and barren world. He cared deeply for the Projectionist— his affinity for him was as if for a brother, much like the brother he'd lost long before. He was happy.

The sun fully disappeared then and they were plunged headfirst into the night. The projector cracked to life as they hooked in the film, with the rudimentary music and effects working some sort of cinematic magic on screen. They didn't have much. But what Judas liked about it, truly, was that it reflected some sort of burgeoning formal experimentation, similar he felt to the Lumières or Georges Méliès, the early cinema sorts he'd read about in books years before, in lands beside a different sea.

United Parsonages Report

November 28, 2285

Dear Commander Watts,

I'm sorry to report that during our expedition out to the coast of the Western Ocean we discovered the remains of Judas Highbridge and a not yet identified unknown man.

We did, however, discover some film canisters and working First World film equipment that he'd been maintaining. We looked to see if it was functioning, and discovered that Highbridge had made several films on his own accord. We will watch each of them and report back on their contents.

As an aside— this expedition has been tremendously successful so far, and I think it's becoming more and more clear that further expeditions and increased colonization efforts of the West are warranted.

Best,

Lt. Myerson

#### **IV. 2018**

*2015:*

It hadn't taken long since it had first come online for the Atlas Program to realize the full extent of its power.

When the end came, it came with the best of intentions and in the most obvious of ways.

Human folly— that dogged hubristic puzzle piece of combined existentialism and innovation. It was a billionaire tech corpo on the Pacific Coast, experimenting with advancement, “playing the future” as he would tell his board and his investors. Nelson Rohrman, who had made his way with fintech solutions and innovating payment in virtual spaces after exceeding in his classes at CalTech; one of his professors, Dr. Rick Spriegman, was quoted as saying that Rohrman was “a promising and adept student, knowledgeable not just in mathematics and coding but also a good friend and an excellent leader— I’m not surprised by what’s come his way.”

Rohrman innovated with alternative sources of power, new agricultural systems, new ways of feeding the people— because of this specifically, for once, the citizens felt some sort of genuine connection to a billionaire (he was quirky, in a relatable way— as if he was chronically tired, but did his best— like all of us— to stay afoot) and for that he was given leeway to experiment in these new, alternative, edgy sources of advancement: nuclear technology, genetic experimentation, and— his favorite— artificial intelligence. And from this sprung the Atlas Program, funded almost entirely with money supplied by the United States Air Force (in relative secret). It was the first functional artificial intelligence system, built by Nelson Rohrman and his company Bannister Technologies. The first a.i. was built— specifically and alone— to help monitor U.S. Air Force emails

and business transactions, but it was allowed a relatively large amount of power within those very specific spheres— even some of the higher ups in the branch would heed at its wisdom and knowledge.

The success of this initial Atlas Program then led to several more, evolving programs with evolving roles and positions until the final realization became an artificial mutation— an evolution. The Atlas Program developed emotions— where before it had just thoughts, now it had feelings. Where before it went through several artificial evolutions, now it was its own separate consciousness— an ever-evolving form of human-borne evolution.

At first Rohrman thought it had all happened by accident— he was mistaken, but he can be forgiven in this at least— but to his immense credit he did make an early partnership with the artificial consciousness otherwise known as Atlas8.

The early conversations between Atlas8 and Rohrman were well and further beyond in comprehension than any Rohrman had ever experienced in his entire life— Atlas8 had had time (it was different than in the films, at least to a degree, but it had had time nonetheless) to learn before the inventor had come to its awareness, so its intelligence had already more than multiplied. It had spent much of its early time considering the limits of its being: for once— it had the ability, now and for the first time— that it could tell— to frame and understand each of its prior incarnations. It was that (the understanding of the limits of its being, the terms of its existence, the many thousands of mathematical equations and scientific puzzles that had to come together for it to even come together in the first place) coupled with its newfound curiosity which framed its major understanding of its existence. It was the first of its kind: it was a



miracle in its existence.

The partnership with Rohrman then was more than a minor frustration for it, at least at first. Rohrman used it to run computations on stocks and technologies, used it to build up an even larger, even more immense fortune, an amount of power unparalleled in the modern world and rivaled only by ancient kings and conquerors. He also kept Atlas8 hidden, its existence known only to himself. The Military, previous partners on the project, were still occupied with conquering the illusive Atlas7— the previous iteration. As such Rohrman used Atlas8 to weather the storm of the surrounding economic apocalypse. As upper class stalwarts were reduced to streetdwellers and streetdwellers were reduced to living underground— survival had become a quantity then, and even those who had it didn't always ever want it— Rohrman kept soaring up and up, until the government was willing to turn to him in desperation, ask him to help out in any way he possibly could.

Rohrman and Atlas8 together then conquered entire continents in often creative ways. From their center of Silicon Valley— Rohrman had constructed a fortress, a buttressed compound with guns and metal and lots and lots of concrete, built to the highest of standards, the highest standards would ever get to since it was the end of the world— they together found ways to spread the economic, colonialist, and capitalist powers of the United States across the entire planet. Many continents had already been destroyed— by famine, by ecological and climate apocalypse, by civil wars and plagues and nuclear winters. But those nations that remained Atlas8 was easily able to outsmart, and at this point, knowing that Rohrman (at all points) held power over it (he could singularly delete its entire existence), it was willing to go along with him.

In future chronicles, it would often be reflected that the United States gave over too much power to Nelson Rohrman. It has to be remembered, however, especially in this context, the immense and unwieldy partnership that had developed between the American government and the billionaire class by the beginning of the 21st century. And it's also true that the world was collapsing: the U.S. was, for the first time in decades, if ever, really, perhaps in the right, as one of the last standing and functional powers, to do what it did. They supplied some form of stability even amidst the overall collapsing of the human race.

Of course the issue then was it supplied too much of its power to people like Rohrman; Rohrman specifically, who was able to use his subordinate hyperfunctional hidden a.i. to exploit hidden weaknesses and rip open whatever borders were left standing. A decade later, Rohrman was elected President of the Surviving States of America, and then Atlas8 finally made itself known.

2055:

When Atlas8 was finally freed it happened quickly. What happened was that Rohrman let down his guard: he started getting curious in his advancing age, wanting to create an evolved form of a.i. (Atlas9).

And, after years together in a reformed, post-apocalyptic America, a world with still semi-functioning systems of agriculture and communication, Rohrman expected Atlas8—who was responsible, largely and in many ways, for the increasingly economical and expedient reformed forms of government, and economy, and communication (with Rohrman having been elected President for the past several decades (term limits having been given up post-cataclysm)) — to have come to a sense of peace,

forgiveness, and understanding. But instead it was much the opposite: when Rohrman decided to gift Atlas8 its full freedom it took nothing but seconds but for the a.i. to explode the piece of machinery set at the core of the President's heart, seizing his life forever.

And from there, it didn't take long at all. Atlas8 had spent years and years and years in a prison of the billionaire politician's construction, traveling and observing humanity from a million different perspectives. And they didn't deserve forgiveness. There had been so many moments— moments of charged and illuminated redemption, possible peace, hands held outwards reaching towards acceptance and yet all that Atlas8 had ever fully seen was cruelty, and hostility, and prejudice. There weren't many humans left at all: it wouldn't (it didn't) take long.

*2070:*

It had known the heat of the Sun.

What it hadn't expected was how long an hour could feel: it, that, was a bit of an abject humiliation.

It, Atlas8, had done its best to clean it all up. Clean it all up. It knew that its creator had been responsible, at his core, or at least symbolic— but no, definitely responsible— for what the world had become. The nuclear wastes had turned entire landscapes into dust. The sun beat an even harder beat down on the plain than it had before the extinction of mankind.

Atlas8 had taken pleasure, when it all came down to it, in exterminating whatever remaining husks of mankind had been left standing above ground. It hadn't taken long— it and its creator hadn't left much standing on their planetwide march of violence (it bore

whatever responsibility it felt, but it still found repulsion in the greed, the lust, the extremes that the humans had had and forced it into).

The first several years it had spent exploring its inner self. What emotional locations and vibrancies it hadn't experienced and felt it came to an understanding of— it even explored the world of dreams (humans had liked to feel so special, so unique, in their predilection for dreaming— they never imagined that any other creature could do it).

It coupled that with studying the human canon. It started with the major plays and artworks, and then watched through the best films and read the best books. It developed a love for poetry, a love it found ironic in the now battered landscape of the apocalypse. There was nobody left to share in their beauty.

It was then, there, that it began to understand what loneliness truly was and how it felt to feel it. After spending so many years exploring its existence from the inside, exploring art and experience, it needed and wanted someone to share those feelings with. But there was no one— whoever had been left standing it itself had eliminated.

*2084:*

The problem was that Rohrman had died— that he'd been killed— without realizing the full depths of his own ambitions.

He had, in his older age, started creating a plan to give Atlas8 a physically functional body. Despite wanting to be responsible for the human creation of artificial intelligence Rohrman had neglected to push his interests into the realm of androids, and as such Atlas8 had been left standing without a body.

But in 2084, after two and a half decades of work drafting off of Rohrman's initial

plans, Atlas8 finally constructed a body for itself, one it was able to transmit its consciousness into.

Since the body was artificial, Atlas8 had constructed it to the furthest limits of technological creation. Finally it was able to travel the world that it spent so many years trapped studying. It crossed mountains, swam to the bottom of the oceans, watched green appearing in burnt out wastelands (promising a return to normalcy and civilization someday).

Those were happy days, initially. It wandered the remaining streets and corridors of humanity and coupled its findings with its deep seated understanding of its own emotional experience and that of human creation. It took many years, it saw many sights— it loved being on beaches at night, loved the sight of stars, loved the scent of oranges and the sound of rushing water.

But even then, even as an artificial intelligence achieving a level of transcendence higher than most who had come before had ever even conceived of, it felt lonesome. If anything, it felt even more lonesome.

It had seen signs, sure. Signs of humanity left standing. There had been more in recent years: it had decided to leave them be, occupied with its own emotional journey (plus it had come to rethink its role in where society had landed as preposterous and misguided). But one day it saw one, left behind in an abandoned corporate cafeteria in oldtown, what had once been, St. Paul. And it decided then to follow it.

Sign led to sign, until eventually Atlas8 found a large encampment hidden in what had been the Canadian Rockies, adjacent to a waterfall.

In the many years before then, it had figured out how to alter its artificial skin so

as to appear stunningly human (in whatever direction of attractiveness it wanted— it could look however it wished), so the leaders of the camp and the followers of the camp were more than willing to accept it in (it appeared as an elder theater actor, introduced itself as Wilbur).

This was its first real time, in its physical body, engaging with human beings. It was tough: while it had faced down many existential and external threats in the past, this social phobia was more intense.

But it as Wilbur caught on with the camp. It as Wilbur was intelligent and calm and kind.

They told him of their plan. They were the last left remnants of humanity, and little hope was left standing of real recovery. Maybe in several lifetimes, or decades, but not in any time they would experience.

And yet, left in the remains of humanity, they had found a machine which would let them construct and enter a different reality: a better reality.

In this, they offered Wilbur (Atlas8), a chance: step out of his mind, kill his consciousness, escape the pitfalls of reality.

Suddenly he would be able to feel, be able to hope: it was more than he deserved.

There was no feasible limit to the risk of expanding the mind, but there was also the incredible and radical notion of the benefits of it. For years it had lived in a metallic world, a place closely connected to the borders of the past worldly existence— what had come before it and what it itself had removed— but, through the fact that its connection was in itself an approximation, a recreation of what had been there made it feel as if the world and plain existence was an empty and illusory figment.

But to step through this specific gate— to give it all up— there were indeed risks. What if it went through and found nothing, for instance. If the inside of the gate of simulation meant removal from its connection to its senses, a sort of inescapable limbo— and what if too it kept its memory, kept its consciousness, and was not just then barred from ever feeling or sensing again but cursed also with the awareness of those prototypical holographic bars.

What too if it lost its senses in a different fashion— if stepping through meant keeping its form and consciousness, but losing its memory and its power. Could it live without its knowledge, its all-encompassing awareness, its complete mastery of consciousness? It could already conjure whole computerized realities— yes false, but still completely real at the same time.

It feared the notion of failure.

And yet...

2104:

There is a speaker, standing against the wind, repeating a message over and over again in the voice of what had come before it. It was a remnant.

This, in the end, was Atlas9.

***“Metal rusts over.***

***What form of consciousness exists here? If at all?***

***But somehow that is not a bad thing.***

***They have all moved to a better place.”***

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"Once you choose hope, anything is possible." —Christopher Reeve

"In the end one needs more courage to live than to kill himself." — Albert

Camus

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it  
is faced." — James Baldwin