

# **THE INSIDE**



I'm thinking back. I don't know why I'm thinking back. I wish I could stop thinking back, but I can't, and it makes me want to kill people.

David Martin. He's the first thing I see, looking over my shoulder. Can I blame everything on him? No, but I can use him to break my fall. Our lives ran parallel, we matched each other step for miserable step. I can use him for a filter. He can be my welding goggles.

Do I feel guilty about him? No. Yes. Maybe. I did shove him into the road, but whatever I did, (what *did* I do?) it was my only option. Really. I swear.

David and Julie in their cold, empty house. Watching

them lie there in bed, sleeping with their backs to each other as always, I couldn't regret what I was doing. My conscience was a distant mosquito whine, and I slapped at it. I looked at the concrete wall on West Division Street—the projected shadows of cars became real cars, their headlights became fiery explosions—and I looked away. Thinking forward hurts as much as thinking back. I hate the future. I am fucking terrified of the future. That's why I didn't have a strategy. No master plan. One thing just *led to another* until cars were crashing, metal twisting and glass breaking, electric organs falling from the sky, vacuum tubes exploding, sparks flying, skulls cracking and blood spraying, until we were pushing ourselves through swords to get at what we wanted.

I'm thinking back. I'm telling myself a story. Sitting next to the bed in my mind, reading from a brightly colored book with bloodstains to a whiny brat who won't sit still, I begin with: *Listen. For once in your life, just shut the fuck up and listen.*

**FALL**

**AGE 12**

**FEAR / UNCERTAINTY / SCHOOL BUS**



I see the edge of a school parking lot, the concrete steps of the cafeteria back entrance. It's the furthest corner from the playground, half-hidden, almost an alleyway. I see a seventh-grade kid sitting there on the concrete steps, spinning a twig in his fingers, staring at the asphalt under his feet. It's a few minutes after noon, recess break. The air is soft and cool. Birdsong mixes with grumbling traffic noise. White jet trails slice the blue sky.

A warm breeze brushes against his face, and he looks up, startled. Everything is suddenly very quiet. The laughter and screams of the other kids fade into the distance, become muted and echoing. Something has changed.

There is a radio tower in the soccer field.

The seventh-grade kid stands up, hands dangling at his

sides, and squints into the sunlight. There never used to be a radio tower in the soccer field. He starts walking toward it.

All around him is total silence. The playground is empty. There are no cars on the road. No airplanes in the sky. Not even birds. Just the ocean murmur of wind in his ears.

He walks out onto the soccer field, and stops. The brilliant green grass stretches off to the horizon on all sides, perfectly flat, beautifully manicured. In the exact center of this green expanse is the radio tower.

It looms over him, vast and grim. The red signal light at the top blinks at him, flashing in irregular patterns like syllables. He stares up at it, craning his neck painfully. There is something *up there*. He can see it at the very top, something moving in the air. He takes a step closer and reaches for the—

“Ow!” A crushed pop can bounces off the back of his head, and he turns around, rubbing his scalp. Two of his classmates are standing a few feet off, laughing. “Hey space case!” one of them says. “Break ended five minutes ago. Come on.”

The seventh-grade kid nods, waits for them to leave, then looks back at the soccer field. It’s empty. Just a hundred yards of dull, yellow grass.

Frowning uneasily, he turns around and joins the stream of kids coming off the playground, hurrying back to class.

...

David Martin. Lost child. Tower climber. Shipwreck. My unwitting and unwilling accomplice. When I think back, I see his memories as clear as mine. I see the brass gears grinding in his head, throwing off sparks that start forest fires.

A day in ‘92, mid-October. Recess was over, and he had

just seen a radio tower in the soccer field. He walked a little slower than the rest of the kids on their way back to class, because he paused every few steps to look over his shoulder at the field. Still empty, of course. He kept walking.

David was the new kid at Sno-Isle Elementary, a small private school in northwestern Washington. His family had just moved here from some other sickly little city-town further east, and nothing had changed much. When people asked, "How's school?" he still said "Ok," and when they asked, "How are you?" he still said, "Fine."

The kids nodded to him or called out greetings as they ran by, and he acknowledged them with smiles. Looking back in my mind, it's kind of funny to think that exactly seven days later, most of those kids would be bleeding in the hospital because of him. But I digress.

The tardy group slipped into the class as unobtrusively as possible, and David managed to seat himself while the teacher was writing something on the blackboard. The teacher scratched out a few more letters, punctuated them with a hard rap of the chalk, then turned to face the class, revealing what he had written on the board. David's chest tightened.

ALL-SCHOOL DANCE—FRIDAY, 8:00 PM

A murmur of excitement flooded the room, making David's dread more acute. He unconsciously glanced over at Shelley Kent, and found her already looking at him. She smiled. David quickly looked away, feeling a twisting in his guts. It wasn't pleasant.

The classroom was claustrophobic as Mr. Kenneth droned through a few more announcements, then finally finished his class and dismissed them. David burst out the door as if drowning and sucked in the cool afternoon air. He stood off

to the side to avoid the stream of kids pouring out, hurrying off to other classes. Again he noticed Shelley Kent watching him.

“Hi David,” she said with a glowing smile, cradling her books in one arm, her blue-green eyes glittering with suggestion.

“Hi,” David mumbled, gave a brief, polite smile, and walked away.

If he hadn’t been so intent on getting out of the schoolyard and getting home, he might have noticed a skinny blonde kid watching him from behind, staring with brows creased in curious interest.

...

Quickly, violently, and without warning, Friday arrived, and David found himself at the school dance. He was barely aware of how he had gotten here, and had no idea why he had come. He was in jeans and a white T-shirt, his hair was unkempt, and he thought his breath probably stank. He just stood there leaning against the gymnasium wall, arms crossed, watching the rest of his school cavort happily on the makeshift dance floor.

(Looking back, seeing those kids, I see them all dancing on broken legs, shaking shattered hips, grinning toothless grins full of blood.)

The inane music throbbed around him, the lights pulsed red and purple, glittering off the metallic streamers that hung from the rafters. He couldn’t let his face relax—it would look like a morose stare to the crowds of minglers who clung to the edges of the dance floor. He had to keep that hint of a smile, had to keep his eyes dancing around in imitation of interest. That was the best way to avoid notice.



Maintaining this effort, he saw Shelley walking towards him, and muttered “Oh *shit*.” She was stunning, she was utterly unreal, she was—He had to hide somehow, but she had already seen him. For a moment he actually considered ducking behind a nearby bench, but he managed to compose himself to some degree.

“Hi David,” she greeted him with her warm smile.

“Hi,” he replied with his polite one. He took a sip from his plastic punch cup and made his eyes roam around the room, as if Shelley had just made a casual greeting while walking by. But she was still standing there, a little deflated, but maintaining her smile.

“How are you?” she persisted.

“Fine.” Another casual scan of the room, another sip of punch.

Shelley just stood there for a moment, looking very unsure, then made the attempt. “How come you’re just standing around out here?” she asked with an adorable tilt of her head, her eyes questioning, her voice tentative. “Why aren’t you... Why don’t you come out and dance?” Her smile returned, flooding David’s chest with sickly warmth.

“Uh, no thanks,” he said like a knee reflex from a sledgehammer. “I’m just going to hang around.” He gave her another polite but dismissive smile and took another sip of punch. It was like one of those dreams where you can’t move or scream. He had to just stand there and watch himself walk off the cliff.

She mumbled something he couldn’t hear over the music and walked away, back into the dancing crowd. He hated this. Everything was always such a mess.

He watched Shelley leave, and while watching her he no-

ticed someone else watching her from across the room. A kid probably his age, tall, skinny, with a loose mop of blonde hair, dressed and groomed as carelessly as David was. He was watching Shelley with an odd twist to his mouth, not quite a smile. After a moment, his eyes raised to look at David, then he disappeared into the crowd.

David resumed his punch-sipping and fake interest in the people around him. He was thinking about leaving, still unsure why he had come in the first place, when he saw the blonde kid take a place beside him against the wall, punch cup in hand. “Do you think we know too much?” the kid asked, without enough tone in his voice to tell David what kind of question this was. Rhetorical? Joking? Ironic? Sincere?

“About what?”

The kid shrugged and waved a hand around vaguely. “I don’t know...life?”

David paused, looking at the kid with a cautious frown. “How can you know too much about life?”

“I think it’s possible.” The kid’s eyes roamed around the dance hall, caught on something or someone for a moment, then flicked briefly to David. He nodded to himself.

David looked at him. He had a good response in mind, but dumped it before it reached his mouth. “Whatever,” he muttered with a roll of his eyes.

The blonde kid let out a short laugh that remained on his face in a grin. “Right, right, sorry. Anyway, hi. I’m Josh.”

“I’m David.”

“Hi, David.”

David eyed him sideways. “You’re in my history class, right? Mr. Kenneth?”

“Yep.”

David nodded. His eyes roamed, and he caught sight of Shelley again. She was dancing with some other kid, but she looked up and caught his eyes before he could look away. He flinched.

Josh was looking at him. "Hey, are you going to Fort Casey on Thursday?"

"Yeah." He figured if he was making it through this dance, a history field trip shouldn't be a problem. "Why?"

"I didn't know if there'd be anyone I knew there, so I wasn't sure if I was going to go."

David shrugged. "Well yeah, I'll be there. I went there a couple times with my old school, and it's a pretty cool place. They have these giant cannons that you can almost climb inside."

"Cool. Sounds fun."

"Yeah."

Josh glanced around the room and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "All right, well I'm going home now. I guess I'll see you at class Monday. Maybe we can eat together at lunch or something."

"Sure," David said, and smiled a little.

Josh gave a final nod and slipped out of the crowd. David watched him leave, feeling curiosity and unease.

...

The days flickered by zoetrope-style until it was Thursday, and David's class shuffled single file onto the bus, filling the air with a buzz of excitement. The blonde kid, Josh, sat next to David and they greeted each other with a "Hey David" and a "Hey Josh". They had been hanging out together almost

every day since the dance, and Josh had even come over to play video games a few times. They were becoming friends at that wonderful speed only possible in childhood, before maturity fucks everything up and then kills you. (One way or another.)

Now they were going to Fort Casey. The engine roared to life, Mr. Kenneth made some pointless caution speech, the bus jolted beneath them, and they were on their way. As the massive engine propelled the yellow beast into I-5 traffic, David's eyes caught Shelley Kent's. No coy smile this time. No inviting warmth. She just looked away. Well...of course she did.

"Forget it," Josh said quietly, behind his ear. "You had your chance."

David looked over at him, surprised. "What?"

"You had as many chances as you could want, and you blew them all."

"Chances with...?"

"Yeah."

David didn't know what to say, so he just looked at Josh. His eyes narrowed somewhat, half puzzlement, half accusation. "How would you know what chances I've had and blown?"

"I'm observant. And it's obvious to anyone who looks."

"Uh, I've only been hanging out with you a few days..."

"Yeah but I've been watching you for a while." His unaltered tone suggested there was nothing odd about this. "You and her and a lot of people."

David stared at him, eyebrows arched. "Uhhh..."

"I want to be a psychologist some day," Josh explained, "so I study...you know, human behavior and stuff." His eyes flicked to Shelley. "Trust me, you blew it."

David looked at the back of the girl's head, at her hair,

such a rich, shimmering gold that it shouldn't even be physical matter, much less something that grew out of a scalp. "What exactly did I blow, Josh? What am I missing out on? Being able to sit by her for fifteen minutes at lunch and call it a date? That's stupid. I mean...we're too young. It's just stupid."

Josh shook his head, but didn't reply.

It was a long way to the fort, and as the trip wore on, David's mind slowly poked at what Josh had said. They crossed the Deception Pass bridge, suspended hundreds of feet over the waters of Puget Sound. The water was set absolutely on fire by the sun. "So what would you have done?" he demanded after fifteen minutes of silence. "Seriously."

Josh took a long look at Shelley, and shook his head, sighing. "Sometimes you've got to ignore logic and just plunge ahead. I would've done that. But what does it matter what I would've done? I'm not the dark handsome stranger who has her—*had* her—drooling all over him."

David looked out the window and his lips pressed together, his jaw tightening. "This is so dumb. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"You're the one who brought it up again."

"I know but I'm done with it now. Can we just talk about something normal?"

There was silence for a while. Josh shrugged. "I beat *Zelda* last night."

"Cool."

...

Fort Casey had been an important part of the U.S.'s coastal defense during WWII, but since being abandoned in

1968 it had become just a moderately popular tourist stop. David's old school had taken the trip twice in three years, but the place still held his interest. There was a certain eerie ambience about it that intrigued him. To most of the kids, the only purpose of trips like these was to provide a more interesting stage for their games of flirtation and farcical romance. David usually ended up just wandering around.

To his surprise, Josh decided to take the low road and join the games. David occasionally saw him following Shelley at a distance, making awkward attempts to break into her conversations with her friends, looking clumsier and more vulnerable than David thought him capable of. Shelley was clearly not interested, and Josh seemed aware of this, but he pressed on anyway with embarrassing determination. When he saw David watching, he shot him a look that was equal parts frustration, resignation, and envy. David shook his head, and kept walking.

The top of the coast-side wall was now the primary sight-seeing track for tourists, offering a full view of the fort's interior. The inner walls were full of gaping black holes. Empty windows. Doorways left floating hundreds of feet above ground after the fort's guts had been removed. There were wire catwalks that led out to machine-gun equipped watchtowers, overlooking the fort's inner square. David wandered out to one of these and looked down. He could see a few of his classmates frolicking in and out of the black doorways, some of which were barred by massive doors of black iron. Everything was covered in moss and lichens, the concrete walls streaked with water stains, the metal rusted and crumbling under its gobbled coats of black paint. The place was disquieting in some way. An ancient ruin from the modern world. It was like wandering

through a Peruvian jungle and stumbling upon the vine-covered remains of an AM/PM.

Because this field trip was considered an “optional extra-curricular activity” by Sno-Isle’s unique private-school rules, they hadn’t left until early evening. Now it was getting late. The sun was well on its way down, and the dying light was curbing David’s desire to wander alone. He climbed down the watchtower into the open, grassy court below, and began scanning the faces milling around him. He didn’t see Josh anywhere, but he would most likely be inside the fort.

David made his way to the nearest doorway and stepped into the dark concrete labyrinth of the old bunkers. It was amazing how quickly the light from outside was choked off, within the space of four steps. David made a good walking pace, running his left hand along the wall to stay straight. He could hear the muffled warble of distant conversation, and he considered trying to scare some people, but he wasn’t really in a prankish mood. Wandering around alone for so long at dusk—*such a stupid time for a field trip*, he thought—was starting to creep him out. Right now he just wanted to find Josh and hang out by the big cannon until they went home.

A whisper in the ear, a breath on the neck, a fingernail down the spine. David stopped in midstep and felt his eyes stretching open, suddenly alert. All the concrete corridors were connected, so voices and footsteps echoed from all directions, but when someone was nearby, you could feel it. An imagined shadow in already total darkness, perhaps a slight shift in air pressure.

I was too close. I knew I was too close, but it was so hard to stay so cautious for so long.

He slowly pivoted around on one foot, craning his neck

in a useless effort to see. “Hello?”

Gritting my teeth, I stepped back.

“Hello?” He turned again, and reached his hands out, tentatively feeling the air. “...Josh?”

“Right here.”

David relaxed, and tried to make his way toward the sound.

“That’s David, right?”

“Yeah. Where’s everyone else? You by yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing?”

“Just walking.”

“Ignoring logic and plunging ahead?”

“Shut up, asshole.” There was bite to his words, but David realized there had been bite to his too.

They followed the walls in darkness and silence for about two minutes before they found an exit. When they emerged, the light outside wasn’t a vast improvement over the bunkers. The sun had fallen below the sea horizon, and the interior of the fort was smothered in thick shadow. David could hear Mr. Kenneth rounding up the class in the distance. The trip was over already, and it seemed like all David had done was complete one walk across the wall-top. Where was the educational value in that? What was the point of this stupid trip?

As they made their way up the hill toward the bus, he looked over at Josh, unable to completely filter out some of the bitterness in his voice. “So how did it go? Any luck with her?”

Josh didn’t take his eyes off the bus in the distance. They had turned the headlights on, it was time to go. A small smile bent his face, made tired and strange by the squint of his eyes. “You know you may have a point, David. You may be the



smartest guy I've ever met." The gray twilight made his face dark and angular, made him look older.




David watched the grass beneath his feet for a moment. "So you think—"

"Here." Josh grabbed something out of his back pocket and jabbed it into David's hand. A crumpled-up piece of notebook paper. "That's some shit I wrote on the way here. Read it on the way back."

David started to un-crumple it, but Josh shook his head. "On the way back I said." He smiled again, a happy smile this time, but with an odd twinkle in his eyes. "It's funny. I think you'll laugh." He quickened his pace, pulling ahead of David, and climbed into the bus.

For some reason, David didn't sit by Josh for the trip home. Josh sat in the back of the bus, and David sat in the middle, sandwiched between Jason Weaver and some girl he didn't know. It was 5:30 pm. He pulled out the paper Josh had given him.




tree tree tree telephone pole tree tree  
telephone pole tree tree Hi, I'm riding  
in a bus. My name is Josh. tree tree  
pole tree tree tree pole

I was asleep a  few minutes ago but I woke  
up. And there shall be eth a pillar  
of cloud by day and a pillar of  
fire by night.  -asleep  -awake

We're going on a field trip and  
pretty soon we'll be going home.  
Tomorrow we'll forget today (yesterday)  
and do something else. **ETC.**

~~but something~~ I should write something  
else, like ~~But for the paper~~ "Look in  
front of you." OK, do it. You're going  
to see something you don't care about.

Maybe you're looking up at your  
bedroom ceiling again crying for mom.

 where's my chicken  
Got a cold? Shoulda put your jacket on.  
  
Warm up by the pillar of fire. 

David held the piece of paper in front of him for about

two minutes after he read it, squinting at it, but not reading any of the words, as if studying the paper fiber. It should have sounded like poetic bullshit to him, but for some reason it just...*didn't*. It felt meaningful, though he couldn't actually see any meaning in it. "Where's my chicken soup?" he mumbled, and stuffed the paper into his pocket.

It was dark outside the bus. Black silhouettes, probably trees, maybe telephone poles, whisked by the windows. A rare oncoming vehicle blinded him with the flash of its headlights, leaving glowing green streaks across his vision. The bus was quiet except for the steady rumble of the engine. He was tired. Resting his head between his knees, trying not to bump the kids on both sides of him, he closed his eyes.

Dreams. Flashes of this and that, sounds, words, hard to focus, hard to move, distant, unaware, and then...

*Snap.*

...

He was sitting on a grassy hill, overlooking a freeway, and there was a full moon. The pale light rippled with the breeze in the grass, and shone softly on the town spread out beyond the freeway. This place, a town and landscape he didn't recognize, was beautiful. He was going to sit right here forever.

There was a rustle of bushes, then the soft thump of footsteps, fast ones, coming his way. No surprise. No fear. Just curiosity, expectation. A silhouetted form rounded the bend in the hill, paused on seeing David, then scurried up to him and crouched beside him. It was too dark to make out any of this person's details, but he or she was breathing heavily and seemed frightened.

“Hey,” she whispered breathlessly, and David felt his skin prickle. It was a girl’s voice, soft, airy, and liquid. “Is there somewhere here I could hide?”

David just peered at her, uncomprehending.

“Do you live down there?” she said, pointing to the town below.

David had absolutely no idea. “I...” he croaked, then forced his mouth shut. The girl didn’t wait for him to figure himself out. She stood up and pulled him to his feet, though all she had to do was touch his shoulder and he shot up. “Listen, I need help,” she whispered. “Some uh...some guys are after me and I need—can you hide me?”

The sounds of distant shouts and footfalls suddenly reached David’s ears. What was this, he wondered? A gang of thugs? Enemy soldiers? Goblins? He supposed it didn’t really matter. He grabbed the girl’s hand and said, “Let’s go.” He didn’t know where he was or what he was doing, but her hand felt so *real*.

As they ran down the hillside toward the freeway, the girl’s fear seemed to melt away, if it had ever really been there. She let go of David’s hand and threw her arms in the air, releasing a stream of clear laughter. Now in the more direct moonlight, David could make out her face, her brilliant smile, mouth opened in laughter, her long, dark hair fluttering out behind her. When her eyes turned his way, they were a sharp, flaming blue that he could make out even in the darkness.

They didn’t even pause when they reached the freeway, they just ran. Flashing headlights blinded them and blaring horns screamed by on all sides, but David grabbed the girl’s arm and barreled through, trying his best to see the oncoming traffic and time their dashes. The girl seemed even less afraid

than David. Her head darted about, eyes widening with excitement when a semi-truck hurtled by inches away, buffeting her hair and jacket. Within seconds they were over the median, across the northbound lane, and into the grass on the other side.

They climbed the manmade slope and collapsed at the top, panting for air through fits of laughter. “You think we lost them?” David wondered, raising himself up on his elbows.

“Oh I’m sure we did,” the girl said with some kind of mischievous glint in her eyes. She looked down at the busy pipeline of streaking headlights, and laughed. “God, I can’t believe we did that.” She looked over at David, shaking her head with a hint of reproach.

He chuckled and looked down. “Yeah...sorry about that. Guess I got caught up in the moment.” He glanced up and met her eyes.

“Me too,” she said. Her eyes flickered away, then back.

David’s face felt warm, a flood slowly spreading through his chest. “What’s your name?” he asked.

Her eyes went back to his, and her smile widened. “It’s—”

“Knock it off you little shit!”

The world shriveled and melted like film over flame, and the inside of the school bus crashed in around him to replace it. He jolted awake with a soundless scream shaking in his throat, too constricted to release. It would have been a single *NO!* sustained for at least a minute.

“Quit elbowing me or I’ll kick your ass.”

Jason Weaver. It was big, stupid, football player Jason with his blond bowl cut, scrunched down facial features and small, beady eyes. Still reeling, David jumped up and grabbed him by the throat, shoved him against the side of the bus and

attacked him, swinging hands and fists wildly. Too stunned to fight back, Jason ducked out of the way and David didn't even see him go. He just kept swinging, his fists now striking the metal wall of the bus, oblivious to the damage. A hand grabbed his shoulder and he leaped up, eyes red and watery, vision blurry.

"David!" Mr. Kenneth shrieked. "Calm down!"

"We have to go back," David panted, his voice cracking beyond understanding. He dashed for the cab of the bus.

The driver turned around just as David was almost on top of him, and was too startled to react. David stomped his foot down on the driver's foot, slamming the accelerator to the floor, and grabbed the wheel in both hands. *We have to go back. We have to go back and start over.*

He turned the wheel sharply to the left.

The bus was in total chaos, kids were screaming and getting out of their seats, the teacher was yelling and scrambling to get to David, but David wasn't aware of any of it. He was only dimly aware of where he was or what he was doing. He just knew that this place was dry and cold and meaningless, and he had to go back. He had to go back to Fort Casey, back to the drive home, back to falling asleep and opening his eyes somewhere else, back to that hill, that manmade freeway slope, back to where he was about to find out someone's name.

Moving fifty miles per hour down Highway 20, the school bus turned a sharp left. Two tires shrieked and burst, two wheel rims sent up showers of sparks, thirty-one kids screamed. In David's realm, everything became steadily slower and more silent as the bus tilted and tipped over. He didn't feel the impact when the steel hulk hit the pavement like a whale slapping the ocean, kicking up sprays of glass and sparks. He

didn't even feel the pain when the impact threw him down from the driver area and he crashed into the front seat. He just happily watched the silent jumble around him fade to a soft white, waiting for the hill by the freeway to materialize around him. But there was nothing. Just a black void. Simple, empty sleep.

...

I saw a girl sitting on a bench under a flickering street lamp on an empty street. She looked at me, and smiled weakly. "Hi," she said, almost a whisper. She looked lost.

"Hi," I said. My voice trembled. I took a few steps closer. "Hey...are you ok?"

"I...think so." Her face was bemused, like she had just wandered out of a forest into a foreign land. She was beautiful.

"What's your name?" I asked.

Her eyes moved back to me, and she smiled again. Then she was gone.

**WINTER**

**AGE 25**

**DESPERATION / NEED / MUD PILES**





David Martin, twenty-five-year-old Caucasian male, high-school graduate, college student, food worker, was finally able to take a deep breath. He had achieved the new American Dream: a job he could tolerate, enough money to pay his bills, and absolutely no ambitions to feel bad about not accomplishing. The constantly shaking sediment in his life was finally settling into a nice, flat muck. He was in a comfortable rut. He was stable.

His face was gray leather in the white, cloud-filtered winter sun as he strolled the Burlington sidewalk. His eyes were focused on no particular point straight ahead, dull and watery. His steps plodded with the slow, relentless rhythm of someone with nowhere to go. Stable.

The child psychiatrists would be so proud.

When he was thirteen, David had crashed a schoolbus

full of kids. When you do that, life becomes interesting. It becomes difficult to keep friends, especially among those you nearly killed. It becomes difficult to let out a single sigh of discontentment without being sent to a new counselor or psychiatrist to analyze your antisocial/self-destructive tendencies. Everyone watches you constantly, waiting for another fit or seizure like the one on the bus so they can attempt to diagnose you. But the years keep passing, and nothing happens. Everyone is left to wonder, and so are you. Eventually, you get sick of it. You try to smother the turmoil inside you. You pull yourself together. You become stable.

It was one of those sharp, impossibly clean-smelling winter days where the short gusts of icy wind are actually invigorating, and the pale sunlight looks cheerful. Wrapped tightly in coat, gloves, and stocking cap, David was just walking for the sake of walking, just to enjoy the crispness of the day. He actually felt pretty good. The dead eyes and plodding steps were a character trait these days, not a sign of mood.

He was just passing a place he called Costco Park, a small plot of grassland and young alders that sat stark and alone directly between Costco and a car lot, like a warning. On a whim, he trotted down the side of the sidewalk embankment and walked out into the middle of the park. Holding his arms straight out, he let his periphery vision take in the wide open space, and imagined that he was in a movie, and that the camera was slowly panning out from him, revealing the grass, the trees, and suddenly, Costco and the car lot, then the rest of Burlington squeezing in on all sides. I confess, I did understand what he was feeling, but I couldn't help laughing at him.

From where he stood on the grass, David could just make out the rooftops of the Cascade Mall in the distance, hundreds

of glass sheets supported by white metal beams, like transparent solar panels. The mall had been undergoing major remodeling for several months now, and had become a fascinating place to wander. Many of the roofs had been taken down, and almost half the walls had been removed. It had become a vast, open-air market, like the streets of Nepal with the rug sellers and bead makers replaced by Sam Goody and Hot Topic.

The place looked especially inviting today for some reason. The glass panels and white metal glittered and glowed in the pale sunlight. Magnified by the bitter cold, clouds of steam wreathed everything, puffing out from ventilation ducts and the mouths of the people inside. David wandered across the strangely bare parking lot and stepped in through the main entrance. The construction happened in shifts, and while no major work was being done, most of the shops remained open. There were still a lot of shoppers, but even though it was the holiday season, the herd was significantly thinned by the cold, and the unpredictability of the shops. Some areas were mostly abandoned, empty and silent. Eerily so given their normal level of noise and activity.

David gravitated toward these areas. There was an otherworldly quality about walking into the city center of bustle and chaos, and seeing only frost-laced tiles, abandoned forklifts and towering cranes, backlit by an open silver sky. It reminded him vaguely of somewhere else.

He soon found himself in the food court, where the entire roof had been torn off except a few remaining panes of glass around the edges. These refracted the sunlight and cast sparkling forms all over the broken concrete pillars. Starting from the stump of one of these pillars, he climbed onto the top of the thick concrete wall and sat down in a corner. The clouds were

thinning, now just a silvery gauze over the sun, and the light actually warmed David's red cheeks. He just sat there with his eyes closed for a few minutes, soaking up the warmth, and then—

“Hey Dave! You're sitting in my spot!”

His eyes snapped open, then narrowed to a puzzled squint as he peered down at the person standing on the floor below. Some young guy looking up at him with a big smile. Vaguely familiar...was that...?

“*Josh?*”

“Been a while, hasn't it?”

“Holy shit, Josh. Hold on, I'm coming down.”

“Don't, I'm coming up.” Josh pulled himself onto the broken pillar and hopped up onto the wall. He had changed a lot since David had seen him last...whenever that was. His boyish awkwardness had become relaxed charm. His blue eyes were bright and full of humor, and his slightly curved smile was so movie-star it looked practiced, though David was sure it wasn't. It seemed strange to David now, how they had completely cut off contact after David left Sno-Isle Elementary. They had been on their way to becoming good friends. Really the only friends either of them had had at the time. What had happened? He couldn't seem to remember.

Josh walked over to the corner and sat down next to David, letting his legs hang off the edge. “Wow,” he said in a deep release of breath. “Weird, isn't it?”

David nodded. “Yeah. What's it been, eleven years?”

“Yeah, something like that.” He looked down at the food court below, glanced over at David, then back at the court. “Kind of awkward?”

David laughed and shrugged. “Well, you know. Eleven

years.”

Josh nodded. “Yeah. So what do you want to do here, David? The basic briefing type of thing? Long time no see, what have you been up to, ok see ya? Or do you have some time. Do you want to *catch up*.”

David thought about that a moment. Lately he’d had very little desire to meet any new people. He didn’t spend much time with the friends he had now, so why spread himself even thinner with more? He had little motivation to participate in social events or even conversations, and if he ever saw an old friend in a store or on the street, he would do anything he could to avoid running into him, to avoid that “basic briefing”. But Josh... This was different. Somehow...this was just different.

“I’ve got some time,” David announced. “So what have—shit, what’ve you been doing all these years? Where’ve you been living? What brings you *here*?” He glanced around at their immediate surroundings.

“Well...” Josh said, and chuckled. “Actually I followed you here.”

“You followed me?”

“Yeah. I first saw you just before you went down into that little field next to Costco.”

“Costco Park.”

“Sure. I saw you go down there and stand there with your arms out for about two minutes, and I’m thinking, ‘What the hell is this guy about?’ so I stayed and watched. But when you came back and started walking, you looked really familiar, so I started following you.” He glanced around the mall. “Anyway I’ve been coming in here a lot since they started tearing it down. In fact I usually sit right here where we’re sitting. It’s a good place to read and whatever.”

David nodded. "Ok. So do you live around here, then?"

"Yeah, I moved out to Sedro Wooley a couple years ago. Living for free in a cabin on my Grandpa's property right now, but I'm hoping to rent a place here in town eventually."

"You going to college at all, or...?"

"I'm planning to, but not yet. Just working—Office Depot, fun—and making plans."

"Plans?"

Josh shook his head dismissively. "I don't know, just stuff. Anyway, how about you? Anything more interesting than my story?"

David shrugged. "Not really. Living in Mount Vernon, working, going to SVC as close to full time as possible."

"SVC, no kidding! I've been thinking about going there myself, either there or Western. I've checked out the campus a lot, but I didn't know you went there. That's great, maybe you'll see me there pretty soon."

David nodded positively. "Yeah, and I'd definitely like to hang out with you sometime, too. Do you want to—"

"Tell you what," Josh cut him off. "Do you know Brandi Noel at all? She goes to your school."

David squinted one eye and tilted his hand back and forth. "Eh, sort of. I've seen her around. Why?"

"She's having a big party Friday night, a bunch of people from SVC and a bunch of other people you'd probably know. You want to go?"

David groaned inside. College parties. "Party, huh," he grimaced aloud.

"Come on, they can be fun. You look like you need to be shaken up a bit anyway."

David attempted a pained smile. "Uh huh."

Josh looked at him a moment, then shrugged. “Anyway, I’ve got to get going, but it’s at 8:00 I think. It’d be great to see you there.”

“Yeah,” David grunted. “We’ll see I guess.”

Josh chuckled and stood up. “Well David Martin...” He reached out a hand and David looked at it for a moment, then understood, got up, and shook it. “...it’s good, interesting, and a little surreal to see you again.”

“Yeah, uh, you too.”

Josh gave his hand a vigorous shake and released it. He climbed down from the wall and made his way toward the exit. “Hope to see you Friday!” he called up, and waved. David gave a noncommittal “maybe” that was said in a laugh, and then Josh was gone.

David’s wandering mood was broken. He packed up his stuff and left the mall. Walking at a quicker pace than normal, he found his head swimming with uninvited thoughts. Old thoughts, rusty and faded, forgotten. Buried. They thrust up through the dirt of his memory like zombie hands, clutching and clawing—He didn’t like this. This was not good. What had happened to the pleasantly numb state in which he had walked into the mall?

Josh. Somehow, Josh had done this. Because he was a link to the bus. This made David nervous. He didn’t need these thoughts spinning in his head. He was stable now.

12:00 was ticking closer. He didn’t bother to go home first, he just changed in his car, which was waiting in the Safe-way parking lot. He slipped on the black slacks, black apron, and red polo shirt, embroidered with a humanoid bird holding two trays of food, just above the words *Red Robin*. As he drove toward Burlington, he closed his eyes and took deep, slow

breaths, shaking his shoulders as he exhaled. He could not afford to start work in this weird state of turmoil. He needed his numbness back.

By the time he arrived at the greasy handprint-covered doors of the Burlington Red Robin, his thoughts were in check. They would only drift as far as to wonder if should he get some new socks tomorrow. He felt normal again. Pausing just inside the doors, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply one last time. When he exhaled, his face was a perfect portrait of smiling personability and good cheer. “Hi, welcome to Red Robin!” he chirped under his breath, smiling warmly, and strode onto the field. On his way to the kitchen to clock in and collect his first orders, he passed under the archway that held a grinning photo of him, above the words “Team Member of the Month”. That photo hadn’t moved in two years.

He was a different person here. He didn’t just put on a friendly mask for the customers, he put on a full-body costume. Wearing that costume, the stinging red tones that covered everything energized him. The glare of halogen lights off brass railings, brass chairs, and garish brass picture frames turned a switch in him. He was in the fray, moving from table to table with his unwavering smile, a too-wide, “no one on earth is this happy” grin that David thought had to look totally psychotic. But it worked.

A table of four, all old ladies in their seventies. Liberal-looking. New-fashioned. Good moods. Probably lonely at home. A plan.

“Good evening, lovely ladies,” David crooned with one eyebrow raised in a sleazy, lounge lizard sneer. He sauntered up to the table and leaned an elbow on it. “What can I get for ya?” Smiles all around. Connection. Proceed. They all made



their orders. “All right thank you, your fries will be here in just a minute.” He leaned toward one of the ladies and gave her a toothy, raised-eyebrow grin. “Just let me open that ketchup for you.” In the motion of reaching for the ketchup bottle he pulled his shirt sleeve up to his shoulder and leaned in, flexing his modest bicep on the table with a perfect smirk before straightening up and actually opening the bottle. All the women burst into the kind of amused, pleasantly surprised laughter that David dug for every day.

Forty-eight dollar tab, fifteen dollar tip. Success.

Everything was ok. He had crashed a bus, but he’d paid his dues years ago, he’d resolved his questions and settled his issues. There was nothing left to struggle with, no more intense feelings to trouble him. Nothing had changed today, and nothing was going to change tomorrow. Next table.

...

He ran into Josh again the very next day.

He was on his way to his Oceanography class, making his way down the tiled streets of Skagit Valley College, and feeling ok with himself and the world. SVC was a box fort, four connecting rows of classrooms and buildings surrounding a grassy square. It was a walled city, a temporary haven from the complex realities of the real world. Get out of high school and go to college and you’re on the right track, you’re in business, you’re making something of yourself. A warm, glowing coal of purpose to fill that cold hollow in your chest. David’s classes were a blur. He had no real interest in any of them, could see no connection between them and the future, but that wasn’t the point was it? Keep the kids out of trouble. When

someone asks you, "So are you going to school?" smile, and say, "Yes."

David was twenty-five, and still working on his AA. He had stretched two years into seven.

On one end of the grassy square, there was a rectangular expanse of ceramic tiles, mostly white, with scattered browns forming random patterns. David was never sure if it was campus art or the remaining floor of a dismantled restroom. This was where Josh found him.

"David!" He looked about as surprised as David did, maybe more. "We meet again!"

"Hey Josh, good to see you again." His enthusiasm had reservations. He remembered how he'd felt yesterday. "You still checking out the campus or something?"

Josh grinned and hefted the books stuffed under his arm. "I'm a student. I completed my enrollment yesterday evening, and I start classes next week. I'm just picking up books now."

"Right on," David said, nodding lightly the whole time. "Quick decision there...yesterday evening?"

"Yeah, hey, I've got to go," Josh said, and started to back up, smiling. "I'll see you in class, ok?"

"Are we in any of the same classes?"

"Yeah, a few, actually."

Did he check the student list or...? Josh was now backed up to the point where conversation was cut and couldn't be resumed without him awkwardly walking back to comfortable hearing distance. David waved and started to turn away but Josh wasn't quite done yet.

"Come to the party tonight, David! It'll do us both good for you to be there, ok?"

David gave a nod, waved, and turned back toward the

Oceanography room, muttering under his breath.

...

On his way home from class, he accidentally looked at the driver of an oncoming car, and paid for it with a sudden, burning emptiness in his chest. He usually tried to avoid looking, because he knew what would always happen. He would catch a glimpse of some stunning girl through the windshield, they would lock eyes, and then *whoosh*, she would be gone again. He would be left sitting in his car alone with that burning emptiness, and an angry, trembling death grip on the steering wheel.

Sometimes he hated them.

All these impossible beauties who he would never meet, styling their hair, putting on their makeup just so they could hurtle by him and catch his eye and torture him. That was their sole purpose in living, he knew it. They were all in it together, and there were hundreds of them, driving past him every day like a constant series of gut-punches. He wished they would stop. He wished they would go away.

He was driving home, and his overloaded rear speakers were making the sound of a lawnmower pull-start over Elliot Smith's "Needle in the Hay". He sat in the car until the song finished, then shut it off and listened to the battered engine clank to a halt. A little worse every time. Another unchecked box on his list. How many pages long now? He got out of the car and headed into his "house".

The place was a rickety, two-story monstrosity of chipped paint and rotting wood, inside and out. A perfectly stereotypical bachelor pad. Mismatched furniture, bare white

walls, soul-sucking *fluorescent lights* draining everything into a washed out, translucent gray. It was not a home, it was living quarters. That suited David just fine. He used only his bedroom and the bathroom, and there were rooms upstairs that he had never been into.

As he walked in and shut the door some guy walked through the room on his way to somewhere else, but their eyes had met, so the formality was necessary. “Hey,” the guy said. He was one of the roommates David hadn’t talked to much yet. He was pretty sure the name was either Joe or Jono. Maybe Titus. “Hey,” he said in response, and ducked into his room.

David’s room, gray carpet, white walls, bare as a warehouse. A bed, a dresser, and a desk. A trash can full of wrinkled up paper—poems, scraps of prose, even song lyrics. He never kept any of these. He was embarrassed that he even made the stuff. It always came out wrong, always such mopey, whiny, melodramatic bullshit. He wished he could write something grand and inspiring. Something that would uplift humanity and help millions of people. He would scribble it out on a piece of notebook paper and throw it in the trash, but a gust of wind would blow it out the window and onto the sidewalk, where someone important would find it, and read it, and show it to all her friends, and then...

For a long time he just sat on the corner of his bed, looking at the white wall in front of him. His normal schedule had him in class till early afternoon, then at work till late evening, but today was one of his rare days off, and it was a wrench in the well-oiled system of his routine. He simply didn’t know what to do.

On any given day, the average person spends 7 hours sleeping, 8 hours working, 2 hours driving, 1.5 hours eating, 3

hours watching TV and movies, and 24 hours wishing they were doing something else.

David sat in his room debating with himself for .4 hours. Finally he decided he needed to stop being such a recluse, needed to be more sociable. With that decision made, he stepped out into the living room and flopped onto the couch. Maybe one of his roommates would walk by eventually, and he could nod and say, “Hey.”

He sat there on the couch for about twenty minutes (.33 hours) before it happened. Fellow 1005 South 8th resident, Charlie Fransen, stepped into the doorway from the kitchen. Black T-shirt. Snug jeans. Cluttered blonde hair hanging above small, dark eyes with blonde lashes. Crooked, twitchy mouth. Black horn-rimmed glasses with unshaded lenses that I’m pretty sure were not prescription. He stopped there and looked down at David, lying sprawled on the couch staring at the TV, which was not turned on.

“Hey,” he said. A low, dry voice, always on the verge of cracking.

“Hey,” David murmured back, nodding.

“Me and Seth are heading out, some kind of party I guess. Want to come?”

“Nah.” It was a reflex.

“You’ve got to get out now and then.”

“I’m tired. I don’t have any energy for a party.”

“When did you go to bed last night?”

“I don’t know...around 1:00.”

“When did you get up?”

“11:00.”

“That’s ten hours sleep. You’re not tired.”

*Parties! What is it with you people?* David made a sound

halfway between a sigh and a groan, and rolled over on the couch, reaching out for the TV remote and falling short. “I don’t want to go, man.” He tried again, and connected this time. He clicked on the TV and the screen began to glow. “I’m just gonna lay around and watch TV for a while. Go on.”

“We don’t have TV, Dave. No cable, no antenna. We still don’t, after, uh, a year and a half?”

“I meant a movie.” David started to get up for the video shelf but Charlie grabbed him by the shoulder and began hauling him toward the door. David shook him off and glared at him. “*What* is the big deal, Charlie? Where is this thing happening?”

“It’s at Brandi Noel’s house.”

“Ah *shit* now you too?” David recoiled in disgust, incredulous. “Is this like the SVC campus get-together party or something?”

“Huh?”

“An old gradeschool friend I ran into has been at my throat for two days to go to this thing.”

“Well he’s a good friend then.”

“Look, all it’s going to be is a bunch of drunk assholes, shitty music, and ridiculously attractive girls that I’ll never talk to. It will suck. It will suck in every possible way.”

Charlie made a little smirk, not quite a smile, and shrugged. “You’ll love it. Come on.”

“I don’t want to go, Charlie.” A pleading tone had crept into his voice, and he didn’t like it one bit. He sounded desperate, like a man down on his knees.

Charlie dismissed his weakening objections with a shake of his head. “Come on. Get dressed and let’s go.”

And to David’s dismay, he stood up, sighed, and headed

for his room. And then he realized he was putting on his shoes. Apparently he had decided to go, without bothering to ask himself permission. *You sit right down, young man*, he thought. *You're not going anywhere*. But it was too late, he was out the door, and that voice was left pointing and sputtering and shouting threats of grounding for life.

...

He watched Burlington, Washington pass by his window with a dull, impassive stare. An endless parade of flashy department stores and street lamps, then rows of off-white houses in the residential district. The houses grew bigger and nicer as they approached Burlington Hill. Rising sharply out of a lot of flat-lands, this miniature mountain was a little splotch of upscale on the city's drab background of middle-class. David didn't quite catch the name on the sign next to the wrought-iron community gate. Meadowlark Meadows, or Sunnyvale - Meadowbrook - Windywood - Field - Clearing or something like that.

When they arrived at Brandi Noel's house there were so many cars, they had to park a full block down the street. David stepped out of the car feeling his stomach twisting as it always did before things like this. How had he been dragged into this? He barely knew who Brandi Noel *was*.

Seth and Charlie pushed through the front door and immediately began greeting people, scoping the place out. David paused just inside the doorway and looked around at the sea of bodies. It was in his face the moment he stepped in the door, like a noisy, animated Where's Waldo? scene, but more absurd. Fakenly smiling faces uttering useless phrases like "How's it

going?” People standing around just bobbing heads to the beat of some soulless R&B megahit. Speakers blasting loud enough to completely drown out attempts at conversation. Everyone reduced to the language of shouted words and hand signals favored by airport workers and basketball players.

He was standing just inside the doorway, like being on stage, so he had no choice but to plunge into the crowd. He needed to find Josh, fast. He probably knew a few people here from SVC, but no one he could really talk to. Seth and Charlie had already dumped him, so if he didn't latch on to someone quick things were going to get even more awkward. Besides, he was looking forward to showing Josh that he had come, that he was “getting out”, that he wasn't still just the overly introspective social retard that he was back in grade school.

The noise in the house was really astounding as David struggled through the wall-to-wall crowd, bumping into people and making unheard apologies. This was not just a little get-together-with-friends thing, it was a full scale Friday night “Block Party”, or whatever the kids called it now days. It was chaos. It was hard to imagine Josh Miller hanging out in a place like this, but he had probably changed a lot since seventh grade too. Not that David had really known him that well even then.

*A memory. Seeing Josh in the hospital lobby, both of them on their way out, on their way home. A big bandage on David's head, a cast on Josh's arm. Josh looks at him, his brows lower, squinting, mouth slightly open, shaking his head. “David...what the hell?” he asks, baffled, and that's the last thing David hears from him for eleven years.*

*The hospital is pale and lifeless, the air heavily machined and suffocating. A white glow from the windows and glass*



*door, the exit. The air looks so fresh outside. David doesn't respond to Josh. He just shrugs. His parents take him home.*

*A memory. Walking to the wall-mounted phone to call Josh, to see if he wants to hang out. Imagining what he would say, the awkward greeting, the uncomfortable silences.*

*Walking away.*

The noise flooded back into his head, pounding music, shouted conversation, smiles and winks and gestures. The air was heavy and wet, he could barely move, could barely breath. He pushed his way through a dense hallway and saw a clearing opening up to the left. He went for it, popping out of the crush like a watermelon seed between fingers, and collapsed into an overstuffed easy chair. The house was huge enough that the party was divided into several different regions of crowd density and volume levels. David had stumbled into one of the calmer regions. He was in some kind of sitting room, partially divided from the rest of the house by a shoulder-height stucco wall. The house—almost certainly Brandi's parents'—was beautiful in its middle-aged-wealth kind of style. All warm colors, light reddish orange and tan—sorry, not tan, *taupe*—track lighting, lamps, and expensive-looking art in every bare space. With the cacophony outside muted a little now, David was able to relax, to sit back in these deep cushions and breathe.

Charlie was right that he had gotten plenty of sleep the night before, but he was exhausted just the same, mainly in his head. It was that kind of tiredness that you feel in your face, a heavy numbness in the eyes and skin that makes you just want to bury your face under a couch cushion. In this lazy stupor it took him a moment to notice that there were other people here in his little haven of quiet. There were a couple guys and a girl

on the couch against the wall, laughing and talking with plastic-cup beers in hand, and one other girl lounging in the easy chair opposite him. The chairs were fairly close, and they had just made eye contact, so a response was in order. "What's up," David said with a short nod. The girl just smiled and nodded. Formality accomplished.

The girl was pretty, but David took no special notice of that. There were probably at least twenty downright sexy girls in this house right now, a smiling, giggling blur of bleached blond hair, tanned midriffs, and skin-tight tit-shirts. In a world of perfect makeup, glamorous hairstyles, and form-flattering clothes, basic physical beauty had become so commonplace that it no longer meant anything. To David it was now less an attraction than a frustration, a constant, teasing reminder of how lonely he was, of what he *didn't have*, and he was starting to hate it.

The girl looked out toward the crowds visible above the stucco wall, not pursuing any conversation, and that suited David. As tired as he was, there was no way he could put up the effort it took to maintain a shallow just-met conversation. So instead he just closed his eyes and slumped deeper into the endless cushions. He slipped quickly into semi-consciousness, and then at some point, he drifted off completely. That was when it happened again.

*Snap.*

...

He was standing in a wide open plain of sand dunes. Endless blades of stiff grass rustling in the breeze. A beach. He could smell the salt in the air, could hear the distant roar of the

surf. He began walking toward that sound.

The sky was a light, featureless gray, but it was warm, despite the breeze. On the horizon, just before the grass gave way to sandy beach, he could see several of those red-and-white-striped poles, usually set up to mark trails on ocean camp-grounds, to prevent campers from getting lost on the beach. But there were no paths to be marked as far as David could see, no trace of a campground or any kind of civilization within at least five miles. Only one thing broke up the endless, brown-green expanse of beach grass. A dark shape in the distance. Some kind of building. He ignored it, and kept walking toward the noise with mounting anticipation. Finally he broke free from the grassy dunes, and the shore opened up in front of him. He grinned like a six year-old.

The ocean. It had been years since he had seen it, even though he lived right on the coast. The pummeling roar, the immensity of the waves, the infinity leading up to the horizon. Even in the bland, overcast light, it was awe-inspiring. He walked out onto the beach and stopped at the edge of the tide, watching the water advance and retreat. Then he raised his eyes, and noticed a silhouette standing out in the water, just before the waves spread out into sliding sheets of glass.

It was a woman looking out into the horizon, now a pale yellow sunset. She stood up to her ankles in the water, her jogging sweatpants pulled to her knees, her arms wrapped tightly around herself, pulling her black, hooded sweatshirt close against her body. Her dark hair flailed in the wind like a tattered flag.

She cocked her head slightly as if hearing something, and then turned halfway around. Her face was veiled by the strands of hair wind-plastered across it, but David felt a tingle of rec-

ognition. A feeling rising in him, a vibration, like a boulder grinding over its restraints, about to start rolling. Their eyes locked, his brown to her burning, mesmerizing blue.

Her mouth opened slightly. "Oh my God," she whispered.

*Snap.*

...

A deep, soft recliner. The jet-prop buzz of a hundred people talking and laughing. Emptiness, fanned to glowing heat. He could feel it physically, a sinking weight in the middle of his chest.

He kept his eyes closed, squeezing them shut, straining to not wake up. *Go back. Go back. Go back.* But the door had shut. Nothing was happening, he was just sitting in a chair with his eyes closed in a room full of drunk teenagers. He let out a stifled groan, and let the harsh lights of the waking world flood his retinas again.

He knew right away that he had to get out of here. The memories of the dream's details were already becoming blurry, but he could still feel the sense of warmth there, that fullness. It made this place seem like a crushing nightmare.

"You ok?"

David looked up, squinting in the dim light. He must not have been asleep very long, because that same girl was still sitting across from him, now watching him with what looked like real concern.

"What?" David said dumbly.

"Are you ok?" she asked again. "You looked like you were about to throw up for a second."

Was his distress that visible? He rubbed his hands over his face and stretched his arms, trying to compose himself. “Yeah I’m fine. Just a weird dream.” He laughed out the words, dismissing them.

The girl smiled slightly. “Yeah, you don’t look like the drink-till-you-hurl type.” Suddenly David *noticed* her. She really was beautiful, and not in the bleached, tanned, painted and varnished kind of way. Loose curls of natural blonde hair past her shoulders, big, warm brown eyes, a wide smile that was all lips. He just looked at her, caught off guard.

I had no plan at that point, no detailed strategy. I didn’t even know the next step. All I had were feelings, and both feet on the road. I had to act.

I came from behind, leaned in close, and whispered in his ear. A voice lost in the noise of the crowd, in the quickening whirlwind of his thoughts, yet on some level, understood. It was only a suggestion, a hint. All I did was nudge him, but it was enough, and it started the boulder rolling.

David smiled. “What would give you that idea? Isn’t that why I’m here, to drink and hurl?”

“Is it?”

“No.”

“Good.” She nodded. “So why *are* you here?”

“Can I say I just...ended up here?”

The girl shrugged. “Sure, whatever. Then I don’t have to explain either.”

“Well there you go.” He leaned forward and put out his hand with a calm smile that said, *All right, all jokes aside...* “I’m David.”

She shook his hand, looking a little surprised. If she had been here long she was probably more used to guys introducing

themselves by grabbing her ass. “Julie.”

“Julie...it’s really good to meet you.” It came out slow and curious, like a revelation to himself.

She cocked her head. “Likewise.”

David’s mind had begun to hum with some new, startling excitement, but it was mixing strangely with the crushing weight left over from his dream, like chocolate with vinegar. “Julie,” he said, then hesitated, glancing around. “I need to get out of here, but, um...I’d love a chance to talk to you again sometime.”

“Sure,” she said, sounding a little surprised with herself. “848-3625.”

She handed him a pen and he scrawled the number on his palm. He felt so alert right now, so focused, like a conversational ninja jumping from sentence to sentence over chasms and alligator pits. It suddenly dawned on him what was happening here, what he was doing. *Holy shit*, he thought incredulously. *I’m at a party, and I’m getting The Digits!*

“Uh...thanks,” he said, and found that his momentary cushion of charm and confidence had deflated. Time to go. “See you around,” he managed, and Julie nodded, smiling. *Smiling*. What was happening?

He may have been sleeping longer than he thought, because the party was dying down as he made his way out. Other people were heading for the door too, in small groups and one by one. David walked out the front door and moved off to the side of the deck. He found a lawn chair at a distance where he could safely watch the exit stream without being noticed, and sat down to wait.

The crowd kept flooding out the door. David was amazed how many people there were here. Was Brandi Noel the most

popular girl at SVC or was it just that her parent's owned a massive house? He briefly wondered what would happen if *he* hosted a party, and smiled darkly at the thought. *Heyyy, come on in, make yourself at home! Here, I'll take your coats, and you can just set the chips and dip there on the coffee table. The fruit tray can go on the counter. Now who's up for some Scrabble?*

Watching the flow of people exiting the house, he saw a familiar face, but it recognized him first. "David!" it said, grinning, and started moving toward him.

"Hey Josh."

"I'm so surprised to see you here, man."

"Well," David shrugged. "Don't know what to say...I'm here." There were no other seats, so David just stood up, and leaned against the wall with his hands in his pockets. "I have had the weirdest night..." He trailed off, and mentally smacked himself for bringing that up. He certainly didn't want to talk about it now, with Josh. Thankfully Josh didn't ask him to elaborate. He just nodded.

David looked out past the deck, into the darkness of the neighborhood, punctured here and there by the yellow glitter of fancy crystal porch lights exactly like Brandi Noel's. He let out a slow breath, and pushed himself up from the wall. "I don't know. I just need to go home. My friends are still at it in there; could I get a ride?"

"Oh sure," Josh said, already turning to go. "You're practically on the way. Come on."

From Burlington Hill to the I-5, they rode mostly in silence. It wasn't a problem, it was just an absence of things to say, and neither of them were the type to just open their mouths and make noise to fill the air. It was this mutual understanding

that kept the silence from being awkward.

After about ten minutes of this, they pulled up next to the two-story rotten-wood hulk that was David's home. David got out of the car and leaned down to wave.

"Hey, sorry if the party sucked for you," Josh said, bunching his lips into each other in a facial shrug, *what can ya do?*

David brushed it off. "It wasn't that bad, don't worry about it. So I guess I'll see you on campus Monday, huh?"

"Yep. See ya there."

David walked up onto the porch, pulled out his key, reached for the doorknob, and stopped. He stood there, looking at his reflection in the window, and listening. Josh's car grinding into gear, driving away. A muffled conversation from somewhere off in the distance, voices raised, frustrated. A dog barking across the street. Crickets. He was at least two miles from any open field, but he could have sworn he heard crickets. He remembered a place that felt warm and secure, full and solid. *Real*. It was hard to think about getting up tomorrow and going to work after having seen that and felt that. The razor sharp, blinding contrast.

He put the key in the lock, then stopped again. Through the window he could see a perfect Friday night party scene. His roommates and company sprawled around the living room, cans of beer stacked in a pyramid on the coffee table next to the congealed pizza, the pale light of the TV flickering over everything. No. Not tonight. He'd had plenty of this tonight. He felt hollow like a vacuum, depressurized, and going into the house right now would be the tack that burst him, that made him implode. No. Flee the scene. Run for it.

He got into his car, turned it on, and pushed down the



gas, just moving forward, just *going*.

...

The night had changed in the few hours since he had driven through it to Brandi Noel's house. It had intensified. The sky was clear and bright, and the perfect half moon made everything into a sharp, high-contrast black and white. The outlines of objects seemed to vibrate.

David was driving exactly the speed limit, with the radio off and the windows down. The air was crisp, blowing through the car and through his hair, right on the edge of being too cold. He drove constantly straight, turning only when there was no other choice. He forgot that he was driving, forgot everything, and floated. Sensing this, his body took the wheel, driving by instinct from instructions prerecorded over the course of nine driving years. It drove him in random patterns throughout downtown Mount Vernon and the surrounding area, and when his mind finally snapped into place, he was parked somewhere he didn't recognize.

Street lamps spread hazy, sepia-toned circles of light on the asphalt, revealing nothing of the further surroundings. *Sleepwalking*, he thought with a bemused smile. *Is this what it's like?*

He left the car running and got out. A wooden boardwalk ran along the edge of the asphalt, railed with wood and chicken-wire. Below it, beyond it, was absolute darkness, pierced by glittering yellow shards, reflections of the street lamps in water. The Skagit River made a distant gurgle as it flowed west, and far, far out of David's world.

He knew where he was now. The revetment. A big public parking lot overlooking the river. Still Mount Vernon, still

Skagit Valley. His subconscious would always know better than to take him anywhere else.

He wasn't sure what time it was now. 10:30? Maybe closer to midnight? The air got colder as he stood there, staring blankly down into the water. Another street lamp buzzed and flickered on. A few more people drove in, parked, didn't get out. Maybe doing the same thing he was. Maybe floating.

It was way too cold out. He slipped back into the warm car, leaned the seat back, and began to drift. The gentle purr of the engine felt like it was from a set of headphones, like surround sound. The street lamps refracted through his eyelashes, pulsating yellow dragonfly wings, just before he let his eyes fall shut. And he was gone. He was *elsewhere*.

...

He was in the beach grass. The stuff was like a bed of knives under his feet, which were bare for some reason. He took light, careful steps until he reached the beach itself, and then buried his feet. He wriggled his toes into the soft, cool sand, then just collapsed. He curled into a ball and smiled. *Home! Home! Home!* Everything made *sense*.

He felt a pinprick of cold on the back of his neck, then three more. He could see dark spots spreading across the sand as the rain increased. Eyes level with the ground, he saw just one continuous line, sand becoming surf becoming pale white overcast horizon. A storm of questions in his head, unable to phrase them to himself.

The rain advanced quickly, into a kind of heavy spray that came from all directions with the swirling sea breeze. It was *cold*. All these feelings of bliss and contentment didn't

change the fact that the rain was very, very cold. He rose to his feet, brushed himself off, and there she was. Somehow, he had expected her.

The wind flew her denim skirt out behind her closepressed knees, and she clutched a jacket tight around her shoulders, looking at him through windblown feathers of dark brown hair. The look on her face was a kind of pained, apologetic smile, as if to say "All right, I'm here, but it's really, really cold, can we go?" She didn't say that, though. She just brushed some hair back from her face and said:

"Hi."

Her smile warmed briefly, then returned to being pained.

"Hi," David said, almost a question. The distance between them was awkward. The wind and ocean noise was annoying, making them raise their voices to an unnatural volume.

She cocked her head slightly and smiled. "It was...David, right?"

He nodded. "Yeah. And....?"

She took a step toward him, but seemed reluctant. "We almost got to this a long time ago, didn't we?" She reached out a delicate hand for him to take. "I'm Laura."

David took her hand and half squeezed, half shook it. *Her name is Laura. I'm here on the beach, talking to Laura.*

He saw again the red-and-white-striped marker poles, marking no trails for no visible campground. He saw the building shape, closer now. A cabin.

"Is that yours?" he asked, pointing to it.

She opened her mouth to answer, then paused, and exhaled. She took a few steps closer, out of the blade grass, close enough to talk without raised voices. "Look, David," she said, and locked eyes with him. "This is useless. I wish it wasn't, but

it is. So I'm going to leave now."

Everything felt like it was in slow-motion. He thought "*What?*" but didn't say it. He just stared at her in stupid bewilderment, not really processing what she was saying.

"Maybe we'll see each other again someday, but...I kind of hope we don't." She took two steps back, and smiled a small, sad smile. "So...goodbye." And then under her breath, like something she hadn't meant to say aloud, she whispered, "But don't forget me."

Then she turned around, and walked away.

*Snap.*

Musty air. A sun-stained plastic ceiling. A perpetually damp canvas bucket seat. Grinding, gnawing emptiness.

*She's there*, his blurry thoughts muttered in that place just before consciousness. *She's there on the beach, somewhere, balanced on the tip of a needle. One specific pebble in the whole of the Rockies, a map coordinate you didn't quite catch, a stray signal on your cordless phone, flickering in then gone forever—out there, anywhere, and gone.*

And absolutely no way to find her ever again.

He pulled the lever on his seat and it catapulted him upright, into a view of noonday sun on the Skagit River. "Shit," he muttered, shaking his head. He braced his arms against the steering wheel and shut his eyes. "Shiiiiit!" he groaned through gritted teeth. *Goodbye...* He was hours late for work, and his car was dead and out of gas after being left running all night, but he barely even thought about those things. Just a word, smothered in reverb, echoing, fading. *Goodbye... Goodbye... Goodbye...*

"What the *hell!*" he shouted, and smacked the steering wheel. It was *her*. He knew it now, he recognized her. It was

the girl he had dreamed about on the bus seven years ago. Just...older. *Grown up*. A hundred voices started barking questions in his head, but he shut them out. He had to think, had to get—

“Hey!”

He looked out his driver’s side window, saw a familiar face, and something in him shifted. The hollowness in his chest changed forms. “Julie?”

...

Leaning down to his window, her lazy smile opened, revealing just the tops of her teeth. “You don’t have to stalk me, David, I gave you my phone number.”

He glanced out the window at the vehicle she had come out of, and realized it was one of the ones that had been parked there last night. He looked up at her. “You were here last night too?”

She nodded. “Yeah. It was an...odd night for me.”

“Yeah. Me too.” There was a pause, and he could feel the “well, see you around” coming. He groped for something to say. “I...ha...I left my car running all night. It’s dead.” He smiled stupidly, like he had made some clever joke.

“Gas?” Julie asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

She eyed him consideringly. In another second she would have offered, but he had to blurt it out first. “Hey, I’m late for work already and kinda stuck here...do you think you could maybe give me a ride to a gas station...?”

He was such an ass, such a—

“Sure,” she said, smiling, cocking her head. “Hop in.”

So he hopped in. And they drove off. It made me fucking sick. Having to just sit back and watch it all go down. I guess it had to happen, but God I hated it.

...

“So...did you sleep in your car too?” David asked casually. They were heading down Freeway Drive. The nearest gas station was only a few minutes away, but they were going pretty slow.

“Uh, yeah I did.” She giggled and held it back.

“Mind if I ask why?”

“Oh, it was just some stupid...” She sighed and fidgeted her hands on the steering wheel. “I don’t know. It was nothing. Just a mood.”

David realized that the natural progression of this conversation would be him trying to explain why *he* had slept there. That was no good. “So where do you work?” he asked, and the conversation blurred.

They got a gas can at Shell, and Julie drove him back to his car. As she pulled up next to it, the talk died down, and David breathed a silent sigh of relief. He had made it through alive, without saying anything disastrous. He unbuckled his seatbelt and held in a deep breath, looking over at Julie. She smiled back at him.

“That was nice, talking to you,” she said.

“Yeah,” David said, totally unsure of himself but firmly holding her gaze. “Maybe I’ll...um...” A pause.

“Call—?”

“Call you, yeah. Maybe I’ll call you sometime.” He had the urge to laugh suddenly, but squelched it.

“Sure.” She smiled and nodded. “Well, you’d better get

to work, right?”

“Right, right.” He opened the door and stepped out.  
“Thanks for the ride, Julie.”

“No problem. Be seeing you.”

He slammed the door, and tried to keep his face neutral as she drove away. Inside he was a kaleidoscope, and the only feeling he could identify in that rainbow was not very pleasant. Not excitement. Not eager, rosy-hued anticipation. Just longing. Simple, powerful, unfocused need.

...

He stepped in through the door of his house, and stopped there with it half-shut behind him, staring blankly ahead. He slowly became aware of noises coming from the TV in the left end of the room. Charlie was laid out on the couch, watching a fuzzy, distorted CNN. On the floor next to him was a copy of *Scientific American*, with the headline, *Love, Down to a Science: Whims of the heart may be more predictable than we think.*

“Hey,” Charlie said without looking up from the screen.

“Hey.”

Charlie waved his hand at the screen. “Can you believe this shit?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.” David looked at the TV. It was some public address by some politician, making a lot of hand gestures and enunciating words with exaggerated lip movements.

“Can’t believe this shit,” Charlie muttered.

“How are you getting CNN?”

“It’s a tape. I’ve been having my mom record it for me.”

David paused. "You're watching the news on a tape?"

"Well yeah, David, we don't have cable do we? Because none of you guys wanted to pitch in, did you?"

"Ever heard of a newspaper?"

"I get the newspaper. Local news too, but you know. More coverage this way."

"Hm," David said, and headed for the kitchen.

"Some party last night, huh?" Charlie called after him.

David paused in midstep. "Um...yeah." His eyes rose to the ceiling. His mind swirled, searching. ...*sand, waves, grass—stop, goddamn it!* "Yeah, it was interesting."

Charlie burst out laughing. "Oh my God, what a riot! It's amazing to watch those people, it's like a big sick sociology experiment. Every sub-species of idiot all in one place..."

Charlie was still talking, but David was out of his field of vision, so he walked away. Charlie's voice faded into the grey silence of the unlit kitchen. David gazed out the kitchen window at the lovely backdrop of brick walls and concrete.

*Don't forget me...*

On his way home, he had copied Julie's phone number off his palm onto a piece of paper. His fingers toyed with the paper in his pocket, lightly turning it over and over.





848-3625...

*Ring...*

A table of middle-aged, middle-class women, easy to amuse. Visibly in a good mood, already laughing amongst themselves. An easy score by any server's standards. All he had to do was follow through. Warm them up, make some jokes...

"Hello and welcome to Red Robin," David said, while thinking *Hi Julie, it's me, David. Hey, I was wondering if...*  
"My name is David and I'll be your server today, can I get you anything to drink?" Be friendly... Make a joke...

"I'll have a Flat on Your Beak."

"Water please."

"We'll have two Miami Ices."

A quick, perfunctory smile. "All right, I'll be back shortly to take your orders." *I was just wondering if you wanted to...*

Forty dollar tab, four dollar tip. He barely noticed. *...because I had fun talking to you the other night and was just wondering if...*

Rehearsal. He paced in his room, repeating what he was going to say over and over, trying out different tones and inflections. He drank a glass of water. He set a glass of water next to the phone. He formulated a conversation flowchart in his head like a telemarketer. He mapped out every likely direction the exchange might take from greeting to closing, and came up with smooth responses for each possible scenario. He developed a contingency plan in case he choked, forgot his lines, wandered off the flowchart. He would say, "Hey, that reminds me..." and start telling a story about his trip to the Tillamook cheese factory two years ago. It would be random and funny. They would both laugh, and then David would jump them right back onto the chart. He drank the water next to the phone, and had to refill it again. He started chewing some gum.

Hours passed. Back and forth, then flop down on the bed, breathe deep, try to relax, then up again, pick up the phone, set it down, walk through the house, rehearse, pick up the phone, dial 848-362...pause, hang up, flop down on the bed, breathe deep, rehearse some more.

*Hello?*

Hey Julie, this is David.

*Oh hi David!*

How's it going?

*Pretty good, pretty good.*

Cool, well hey, I wanted to say thanks again for the ride

the other day, and the conversation.

*Oh no problem, I enjoyed it.*

So I was just thinking we should hang out again sometime, pick up where we left off.

*Sure. I'd like that.*

And so on. That would work. He had it all down. He could do this. Another ten minutes passed with his fingers trembling over the phone keys, then he did it.

848-362...5

"Hello?"

So far so good.

"Hey Julie—this is Julie, right?"

"Yep."

"Hey Julie, this is David, hi."

"Hey David, how are you?"

"How's it g—I'm ok, how's it going?"

A pause. *Shit.*

"Oh, pretty good."

"Cool—well hey, cool, so I just wanted to say thanks again for the ride the other day, and just for the conversation, too, that was...cool. It was...it was fun."

"Yeah, no problem." Her voice was cheerful. Maybe she was laughing. She was probably laughing. *Shit.*

"So...I was just thinking it would be cool if we could—we should just hang out again sometime so we could pick up where we left off last time. Like I mean like go somewhere and hang out."

A pause. *Shit! David, you fucking—*

"Yeah...I'd like that."

David stopped breathing. His voice wanted to rise two octaves but he held it down. "All right, great! Do you want to

stop by uh, Starbucks tomorrow and chat for a bit?”

“Sure.” He could hear a smile.

“All right, how about 6:00?”

“Sounds good.”

“All right, so I’ll see you then, then.”

“See you tomorrow. Goodnight David.”

“Goodnight.”

He slammed down the phone and dropped backward onto his bed, letting out a huge breath. “Oh my God...” he murmured.

He had done it. He was going on a date with this girl. And he could already feel an emotional stew building. A thick, black anxiety bubbling through his elation like crude oil. Was this normal? He couldn’t remember.

...

Sleep came to him grudgingly that night, but when it finally arrived it was deep and dark, a vast, black sea. It was empty, and nothing happened. He was alone in it.

*Don’t forget me...* her voice whispered into that blackness, and he started running. He shuddered, stifled a scream, and ran. Blindly.

...

*I feel weird...*

That thought sprang loudly in his head at the same time he lurched out of sleep. He still felt halfway in, but his eyes opened clear and alert. Why had he woken up? The only thing he could think of was that he might have to piss. Usually his

subconscious would throw some terrible nightmare at him to wake him up for bladder relief, but maybe tonight it was feeling benevolent.

He slid out of bed and started for the door. His foot sank into something cold, soft, and wet.

He let out a muffled “What th—” and stumbled sideways, trying not to step on that same foot again. Some of the stuff was still clinging to it. He flipped on the lightswitch and squinted his eyes shut as the sudden glare hammered his retinas. When they finally adjusted, his face was still for a moment, then his brows slowly creased while his lips mouthed “*what?*”

Because there in the middle of his bedroom carpet was a small, rather well-formed pile of mud. Not brown, earthy mud, but the kind of slimy, grayish goop you find at the bottom of some rivers and lakes. It was just *there*, by itself in the middle of the room, splattered out slightly like it had been dropped from a few feet up.

David stood there staring at it blankly for several minutes. So...there it was. A pile of mud on the floor. And on his foot. “O...kay...” he mumbled with a dazed shrug, and got back into bed, with one muddy foot sticking out the side of his sheets. *Ha ha, that didn’t happen*, he chuckled to himself with a peaceful smile as his head hit the pillow. *That’s silly.*

...

Morning sun rays passed over his eyes first, bringing him awake, then slowly made their way across the floor and over the mud pile. He sat up in bed and slid his feet to the floor, but just sat there and looked at it for a while. Now that he was

more conscious, it seemed a little less otherworldly. In this house, there were at least five possible causes, one for each dumb-ass roommate.

He threw on his bathrobe and stepped out into the front room of the house. A staircase led to the upstairs bathroom, which was where he was headed for a shower, but he spotted one of the aforementioned dumb-asses laid out on the couch.

Aaron. Tall, skinny, naturally tan complexion, huge mop of curly black hair, he was the perpetually “between jobs” guy, the guy who sits around all day watching hundreds of movies and cooking hundreds of bags of Top Ramen, who can never quite pay his bills but will always be able to “in a couple days, man”. Maybe there was one in every bachelor household.

“Hey Aaron,” David said as a command for attention, not a greeting.

“‘Sup.” He didn’t look up from the movie he was watching. The elegant, frameless glasses he wore looked almost scholarly. Ha ha.

“Hey, you wouldn’t know anything about the pile of mud in my room would you?”

“Nope.”

David kept looking at him. “You’re sure?”

“Wait, what’d you ask me?” He finally looked up from the TV, briefly.

“Do you know anything about the pile of mud in my room.”

“There’s a pile of mud in your room?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. Weird.” Back to the movie.

David kept looking at him, expecting more. After a moment Aaron looked up and shrugged. “Hey, sorry to hear it,

man. You want me to help you clean it up or something?" It didn't sound like an offer.

"Forget it. Is anyone else home?"

"Don't think so."

David gave up, and went and took his shower. He felt vaguely off balance throughout the rest of the day. He was dizzily tired though he'd gotten plenty of sleep, and he found it hard to concentrate on anything at work. His tip level declined a little further. And then he was driving to Starbucks for his big date, and he wasn't scared or excited or even aware. He was just *there*, driving, sleepwalking in a car.

The view through his windshield faded in and out of focus as he drove, hands hanging limply on the wheel, eyes half shut. Blurry visions of the future bloomed in his head like time-lapse roses. He and Julie would marry and embark upon an epic honeymoon that would span the globe. Their love would be an inspiration to all the native cultures they encountered. Wars would end. Ancient territorial disputes would be resolved in tearful handshakes. They would buy a big house in Hawaii and have a vast family of grinning, well-adjusted kids. More wars would end. Evil foreign dictators would hand over their countries to benevolent democratic governments, who would then proceed to end world hunger. The AIDS virus would be stricken with remorse, and would leave all its hosts and dissolve in the atmosphere. So would all other species of viruses, ending disease forever.

Their love would save the world.

He walked across the parking lot with a dreamy smile smeared across his face. Where was he again? A coffee shop? What was he doing here? Oh yeah, that girl. Julie. Right.

At least he'd had enough presence of mind to come early.

They were scheduled for 6:00 and it was 5:50. There was something about arriving first, being the one to welcome the other party, that gave a slight psychological upper hand. He walked in the door feeling confident, scanned the room, and sighed. Apparently Julie was reading the same tipbook, because she was already seated with a drink. She smiled and waved when she saw him, and he made his way over to her table, trying not to let his momentary surprise throw him off.

“Hey, how are you?” he said, but didn’t sit down yet.

“I’m great, it’s good to see you again.”

“Yeah, you too.” This all took place with that certain tone, that surprised, almost puzzled timbre of *interest*, always accompanied by constant smiles and excessive eye contact.

“I’m going to get a drink,” David said with head cocked, eyes boring into hers like probes. “I’ll be right back, ok?”

“Ok.”

He got himself a big drink with some goofy, made-up Starbucks name ending in “-ccino”, and sat opposite Julie. He just smiled at her for a minute, then scooted his chair closer and leaned in, getting ready to speak. “So,” he said, laying his palms out, and grinned.

Julie grinned back.

Ok. What now? He needed to find a track to get on. “Uh, where were we?”

Julie smiled, and shrugged. “I don’t remember.”

“I’m sure it was something really interesting.”

“Oh definitely.”

“Yeah.”

There was a pause.

“Yeah.”

They both grabbed for their drinks. David took a very



slow sip, hiding his face in the cup, scanning his brain for a starting point. “So who invited you to Brandi’s party the other night?” he blurted finally. “I mean did you hear about it at Skagit?”

“Yeah, one of my friends from my Chem class wanted me to go. I ended up knowing practically everyone, though. It was like an SVC reunion party in the middle of the year.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. So how long have you been going to Skagit, then? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you there.”

“Oh I’ve been there a few quarters. I try to spend as little time hanging out there as possible, though. I’m pretty busy between classes and full time work.”

“Huh, where do you work?”

“Safeway, for about two months now.”

It was at that point that David realized they had entered the Information Phase of the relationship, and the rest of this conversation would continue on auto-pilot. Job, school, home, hobbies, likes, dislikes... They could have the same conversation by exchanging printed info cards. But this phase still mattered. People’s likes and dislikes can say a lot about their personalities, about who they are. Unfortunately, David wasn’t paying much attention to who Julie was. He was just looking at her, distracted by the warm feeling spreading through his chest as he listened to her talk. A feeling like a balloon inflating, like hot water splashing over a frosted windshield. Her words blurred in his ears, all red flags ignored.

“Sure, I guess I...”

“...is my favorite movie of all time...”

“Well, I do a lot of...”

“I don’t know, I guess I mostly just listen to...”

“...sometimes I...”

“I usually just...”

“I haven’t in a while, but...”

“Well, I...”

David had been talking to her for over twenty minutes. His impression so far: *Damn, she’s pretty.*

Eventually the flow of information dried up, and the conversational auto-pilot began to fail. Time to end on a good note. During an awkward pause, David took a deep breath and leaned onto the table. “Well Julie it’s been great talking to you.”

She nodded and reached for her jacket. “Yeah, this was fun.” It was that tone again, that *interest*. It still blew David’s mind to hear it reciprocated.

“Let’s do it again, ok? Like *soon*.”

“Sure. You mean come here again...?”

“No no, let’s...” David’s mind raced through things like camping on the beach, taking her to a restaurant blindfolded, having a picnic in an open, moving boxcar...

“How about a movie?” Julie offered.

“Uh...ok, sure...” David recovered his smile. “That’d be fun. What do you want to see?”

“How about the new Nutty Professor one? That looks pretty funny.”

“Um, ok, sure. I’ll call you when I’ve got the showtimes. How does next Fri—” (too long) “—Tuesday sound?”

“Sounds great.”

Smiling, they both stood up and put on their jackets.

“I’ll walk you to your car.”

They paused outside the door of Julie’s nondescript white coupe. David noticed that there was a romantic sunset

ablaze in the sky.

“Well, goodnight, David.”

He decided to try an appropriately romantic farewell. “Sleep well,” he said. It rolled out of his mouth like a big, oily cheese ball, but Julie seemed to like it. Her smile brightened a little, and she held his gaze as she got into the car, right up until she shut the door. That little touch almost knocked him over. *Oh my God*, he thought, trying to breathe, and made a break for his own car. *I am a dead man*.

And I was thinking the same thing. *Oh my God. I am a dead man too*.

...

For the rest of the evening, David was walking on air. It was a rare time when he felt cheerful enough to listen to Weezer without it feeling like a sledge hammer to his skull, and this was one of those times. He popped in *Pinkerton* on his way home and actually sang along with it. He was riding the high of a “successful” date.

This euphoria kept going strong through 7:00, 8:00, 9:00...but around 10:00, things began to change. As he went about his normal evening activities (homework, mostly) something in his joy began to go sour. Giddy contentment slowly congealed into empty loneliness. The warm glow of growing affection twisted into the gnawing hunger of longing. All he wanted to do was drive to her apartment right now and wrap his arms around her, but of course he couldn’t. It was too soon. He had just seen her *three hours ago*.

He decided he would sleep it off. What better way to get your mind off something than sleep? So he went to bed much

earlier than normal, and lay there tossing and turning for hours. Then at some point, he fell through. His bedroom disappeared, and something like a scene from a play opened out around him.

...

Kids are splashing in a blow-up swimming pool, their skin darkening by the second in the relentless sunlight. It's a muggy summer evening, it's the Fourth of July. Patriotic streamers hang from every doorpost. In every yard, a sumptuous picnic is laid out on red-white-and-blue blankets, each identical, each with a wicker basket and a half-eaten watermelon. Oscillating fans turn slowly on the window sill of every house, but the houses are all empty. The picnics have all been abandoned, and now the swimming pools are motionless too. Small fireworks go off periodically on the suburb skyline.

"...waving and welcoming all who've gathered, turning away none."

Snatches of a television broadcast drift through the humid air, along with the sounds of a murmuring crowd.

"...and it is my pleasure to bring you this uplifting vision..."

Down on the main street, the sidewalks are packed with people. Everyone in town has gathered to watch the parade and cheer the candidate on.

"...we have eliminated any danger. We are entering easy times, friends. A bumper crop is to be harvested..."

The car moves slowly, festooned with inverted rainbows of pleated patriotic cloth, hands are waving everywhere, grins straining to widen even more. The crowd goes wild!

Children throw themselves in front of the wheels of the

car, and it rolls over them, but they are laughing, and get up yelling that they're completely fine. The candidate waves, and patriotic confetti suddenly clouds the air, a blizzard of red white and blue.

"Citizens of every town are giving their heartfelt testimonies!"

"What a beautiful day! What perfect weather for a fireworks show!"

"I just bought a brand new yacht!"

Fireworks are bursting all over the sky in brilliant shades of red, white, and blue.

"We will preserve the sanctity of our great nation for our children and our children's children..."

"This is a time for safe celebration and evenings free of tragedy."

There are more children than adults now, swarming the streets, throwing themselves in front of the car *en masse*. Everyone is screaming and laughing. The fireworks are bursting in the rooftops, lighting red, white, and blue fires in the shingles.

"It's a miracle! It's a Fourth of July miracle!"

David heard music as the scene faded. It sounded like an ice cream truck.

...

He awoke in a grey, washed out world that he had never seen before. It was bitter cold outside his blankets, but it was cold inside them too. His room was dark and colorless. For a moment he actually didn't know where he was. "Oh my *God*," he whispered as he sat up in bed, having trouble breathing. He had to see Julie *right now*. It was the only thing he could think

about.

He stumbled out of bed and grabbed the phone in pale, shaky hands. What time was it? He felt like he had been pulled out of bed in the middle of the night and thrown into the Skagit River. The phone rang once, twice. He glanced at the clock. 4:40 in the morning. What was he doing? He snarled through gritted teeth and slammed the phone down. He dropped down onto the corner of his bed and sat there clutching his naked shoulders, shivering. What the hell was happening here? He felt the loneliness in every vein, like a physical hunger. He felt like...

*Shit*, he thought suddenly. *You feel like a junkie, that's what.* He'd been on the drug for just a couple hours, and now he was going through withdrawal? The need in him was overpowering. He had been alone for years and nothing had ever been half this bad. This was bizarre.

He thought about waiting until she might be up, try to catch her before she went to work. If he could just talk to her for a while, he was sure he would feel better. Just to hear her voice, just for a few minutes... He realized this was all crazy, though. What would she think if he called her now, like this? He had to pull himself out of this, try to act sane. Like a normal guy at the start of a relationship, not this love-starved psychopath.

With an intense effort, he was able to throw himself out of his stupor enough to start getting dressed. Everything felt cold. The lights in his house looked sickly. Somehow, he was going to go to work. He had no idea how he was going to survive the day.

And he basically *didn't*. The whole week was like this, and it was seven months long. Waking up, going to work, go-

ing to school, everything took superhuman effort. Especially waking up. A little to his surprise, his one anchor in all of this turned out to be Josh. They saw each other at school almost every day, and they were beginning to catch up. They had some of their most interesting conversations there at school, mostly during the actual classes. They passed notes like seventh-graders.

It was sometime in the middle of the week, they were in some Biology class, and David found it impossible to get his mind onto anything other than Julie and the gaping hole in his chest. He tore out a piece of his notebook as quietly as he could, and scribbled a note.

*What do you think about women?*

He crumpled it up and tossed it at Josh's back, two seats ahead. Josh picked it up, read it, wrote a response on the backside, and tossed it back.

*What, just in general?*

David tore out another piece, wrote on it, and tossed it. This exchange happened between the professor's major "points", when he turned his back to write them out on the dry-erase board.

How many serious relationships  
have you had since seventh grade?

Define serious.

You know. SERIOUS.

I don't know, man...don't ask  
me that question, I don't know if I  
could answer that even if I  
wanted to.

So none?



I'm not saying that, but it's like...  
you've got this box of puzzle pieces,  
all from different puzzles, all different  
sizes and shapes and patterns, and you're  
supposed to build something that makes  
sense. It's not easy.

What about you, buddy? How's your  
love meter been reading?

Well..... I don't exactly  
meet many people, you know?

How pathetic are we?  
We're 25 years old.

I don't know, maybe we're better off. I mean everyone tells you love is so great, you see all the movies and books and poems and songs and stuff but it's ... I don't know, it's like the Army recruitment ads, you know, all the glamour, all the action and honor and building valuable leadership skills, being all you can be and an army of one and all that, but those ads never show those attractive young recruits getting their brains blown out by mortars.

He sent the note, thought about it a second, then sent another one.

Ok, so that analogy was a little over the top, but you get the idea.

Yeah...I guess. What was the question again?

I don't know... I guess I was just thinking. Wondering if you had any sage wisdom or profound discoveries for me.

You were full of that shit back in the day.

Anyway, never mind. I guess we could listen to the prof.

There was a long pause, and David assumed the conversation was over. Then Josh tossed back one more.

One thing though. You can laugh at the recruitment ads all you want, but sometimes you just get drafted. Then what do you do?

“Shit,” David muttered to himself when he read the note. Because that was exactly it. David had been drafted. And now he was going through the horrors of basic training.

I would like to think I had nothing to do with this. I would like to think it was all his fault. That it was the natural course. I would feel better, thinking back, if I could believe this. Maybe, if I try hard enough...



Finally, it came. Tuesday.

He found himself in his car, exceeding the speed limit. Crushing the steering wheel in his hands. Grinning.

He had called her earlier to confirm, to set a time and all that. Time had slowed, sputtered, warped. Each ring of the phone became two rings, then four, then eight. He was on the verge of screaming and then:

“Hello?”

The word seemed to trail off in a flood of reverb, washing over his aching, junkie veins.

“Hey Julie. It’s David.”

“Oh hi, David! How are you?”

She sounded...giddy? Was it even possible that she’d had a brush with these same absurd withdrawal pains? “I’m

incredible,” he replied. “Are we still on for tonight?”

“Absolutely!”

He opened his mouth to tell her the showtimes, but the words jammed in his neural cortex before they made it to his larynx. Here he was talking to this girl who he apparently needed *so* badly, and instead of meeting her to talk to her, to look in her eyes, to just watch her move, he was meeting her to watch Eddie Murphy run around in a fat-suit.

“Hey Julie?”

“Yeah?”

“What if we skipped the movie tonight. What if we drove up Little Mountain instead and slept in the woods, watched the sunrise.”

There was a brief pause. “What?”

“It’s beautiful up there. It’s amazing. Wouldn’t you rather go somewhere beautiful and just talk than sit in some sweaty theater watching some pointless movie?” Hm. Had he said too much?

Another pause. “David...it’d be so cold up there this late. Besides, the park closes at dusk. We could get in trouble.”

David felt a sickly lurch in his stomach, a brief feeling of *Oh shit...* and then it was gone, and he forgot it.

“Let’s just go see the movie, ok?” Julie said. “I’ve heard it’s really funny.”

David relented. He put on a large smile that felt easygoing and magnanimous. “All right, that’s fine. Let’s do it. How does the 9:30 showing sound?”

It didn’t matter. There would be plenty of time for romantic mountaintop rendezvous. Right now all he cared about was seeing her. Right now a tour of a fish processing plant would make as good date as any, as long as he was *with her*.

So he continued to exceed the speed limit toward Safety, where he would pick her up straight off the end of her shift. They would meet at the video rental desk, and she would probably go into the bathroom and change into some stunning dress or something, probably making him feel stupid in his grey jeans and red polo shirt. He would probably stumble over himself when he first saw her, and she would remain cool, calmly waiting for him to recover. From there they would go to the movie and... Suddenly he could see it all. The future was an open book of clumsy conversation, skin on skin, bursts of euphoria, and inexplicable emptiness. He slammed it shut. He didn't want to look past *right now*, because *right now* felt good.

Everything happened more or less as he had predicted. He met her at the video counter, and she went into the bathroom with an armful of clothes. She came out in nicely form-fitting jeans (Come on David, girls don't wear dresses anymore) and one of those thin, loose, ruffly shirts with vague, earthy patterns and colors. She wasn't "dressed up" any more than he was, but he still felt stupid in what he was wearing, in his hairstyle, in his skin, because *she* looked so spectacular. Her long, loose curls of blonde hair, her shadowy eyes, her lazy smile, her tan...she wasn't what he had ever thought of as his "type", but it didn't seem to matter anymore. She became more his type every time he saw her.

As predicted, he stumbled over himself when he saw her, that rush of emotion knocking him off balance, almost physically, but Julie was not cool and collected while this happened. She looked...well, giddy. She almost looked like he felt. Could she possibly *feel* like he felt? He still couldn't believe it.

"Let's go," she said with an excited grin, and they went.

They bought their tickets, they sat down in the dark. Af-

ter an amusing clip of a loud moviegoer being attacked through the screen by the characters in the film, the screen commanded, “SHH! NO TALKING DURING THE MOVIE!” and they obeyed. The movie was funny. David laughed occasionally. Then it was over.

As they made their way out of the theater toward the parking lot, toward his car, where he would drive her back to Safeway and part ways, David had trouble listening to what Julie was saying. His mind was racing for a way to prolong this wonderful *right now*. He was not content yet. His veins were still hungry.

The parking lot was fairly empty and his Civic gleamed silver in the powerful fluorescent lamplight, like moonlight if the moon was fifty feet away. He knew that if he got in that car it would be over. The moment he sat down everything would go into fast-motion, they would hurtle uncontrollably straight to Safeway and it would all be over. He stopped about ten feet from the car. “Wait. It’s pretty early still...” It was close to 12:00. “Can we go somewhere and talk for a while? I mean...I’d at least like...to talk for a while, somewhere...”

Julie looked at him with arms folded, and cocked her head slightly. “Ok.”

Think quick. “Like...Starbucks, maybe...?”

“Sure.”

So they went to Starbucks. Again. He felt like such an idiot, such a desperate fucking idiot, and of course, he was. And of course, Starbucks was closed (it was almost midnight) so they sat at one of the outdoor tables, in the dark. At least that was a little different, right? A little odd and spontaneous?

The ensuing conversation was excruciating. David could think of very little to talk about other than the usual informa-



tion-gathering, but they were running out of questions about their day-to-day lives. What do you say when you already know where your date works and what she's doing in school? And they had no drink cups to hide in during awkward lulls. Julie didn't offer much either, but David felt like it was his fault as his mind raced desperately for things to say. It was painful.

When it was over, they stood up, and he pasted on a smile. "I really enjoyed all this tonight."

He expected her to roll her eyes. He expected her smile to look more forced than his. The whole evening had been dull and awkward—he could even sense this through his cloud of adoration and need. He expected her to smile wanly and say, "Well, maybe I'll see you around." But...

"I had a lot of fun, David." A widening grin. "I really like talking to you, even when it's so late we can't think straight enough to actually talk."

David thought he loved her for that. His cloud of need thickened.

...

He dropped her off at Safeway (she holds his gaze as she gets into the car, and just before she shuts the door, "You've got my number...") and drove home, well within the speed limit, his mind somewhere else.

Moving slowly down West Division Street, his eyes caught the concrete wall of a used book store facing the bridge over the river. As cars crossed the bridge, their headlights filtered through railings and around other cars, projecting vivid shadows onto the concrete wall. As the cars moved, the shad-

ows warped and shifted, forming a twisting collage of lines and bars and strange shapes. It enveloped his field of vision, and began to change.

Constantly moving bridge framework became towering buildings of gray brick, a stone fountain, distant streets. Warping, stretching vehicles became human forms, pale silhouettes. Women. Mermaids. Yellow carlight became soft, gray, wooly fog, enshrouding the mermaids like wraiths.

*Poor, sad man*, they murmur as he sits alone in the gray streets. *Come with us*.

And he does. He drifts toward them, and they wrap him up in their arms, carrying him down into an endless black ocean where he lives a happy life, grows old, and dies.

His face is against the steering wheel. His hands grip the sides, squeezing hard. His teeth are clenched. His breathing is heavy.

...

He fell asleep almost instantly that night, but slept fitfully. He tossed and turned, and glanced blearily at his bedside clock over and over as he drifted in and out of sleep. He had brief, truncated dreams that ended in the middle of their dramatic climaxes. Dreams of dystopian futures where love was an illegal narcotic, an “emotional hallucinogenic”, or where all the world’s beauty had been reduced to mathematical equations, or had been outlawed, or removed entirely via some incomprehensible technology, and David and some girl, maybe Julie, said, “Let’s go up Little Mountain and catch the sunset!” and drove up Little Mountain, paid five dollars, parked their car in a huge parking lot, and watched grainy footage of a sun-

set projected onto a tattered drive-in movie screen, behind which was just an empty sky of thick, inky blackness.

He didn't know exactly what time it was when he got out of bed and clumsily dressed himself, but it was still mostly dark out. Before washing up, before eating breakfast or even putting socks on, he stepped out onto the front porch in pajamas and a t-shirt, and slowly looked around. Everything was still. Quiet. Muted. Like being underwater.

He shuffled slowly forward, down the porch steps, across the street, toward his car. All around him the silence heaved and hissed gently, just that soft, swirling hush of open spaces. He got in his car and started to drive.

Slowly, the gray light swelled, and things began to glow, but the world was still a dark place when he found himself driving some winding road through the woods. He was floating again. Acting purely on feeling. This weird agony that sizzled darkly in his chest was a kinetic force thudding against his insides, jerking him in random directions. He let it take him where it wanted, eyes open and glazed, hypnotized.

It took him to the top of Little Mountain. Just a five minute drive from home. He had been here before. Nature's majesty encased in a trim, efficient city park with a roofed viewpoint, picnic tables, and a concrete outhouse. It was a good place to get out of the house to. A place to sit down, watch the sunset, and think. And even as diluted and sterilized as it was, trekking up to this windy mountain peak still provided some sense of adventure for the times when he felt desperate.

He came here often.

This time, though, as he parked and walked up the hill toward the viewpoint, it felt a little different. It wasn't premeditated this time. It wasn't a "getaway", it was just...happening.

And he was in his pajamas.

He stood there inside the roofed viewpoint, in his pajamas, staring out at the scattered quilt-patches of farm fields, and beyond that, Puget Sound, an endless stretch of blurry silver spotted with evergreen islands. It was all dark down there. The flat gray glow of fresh morning tinted everything enough to make it visible, but it was a muted, washed out world.

“Why are you here?” David asked himself out loud. Not in the broad philosophical sense, but the plain literal one. Why had he driven up here barefoot at four in the morning? And then, also out loud, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

He wasn’t in the habit of talking to himself, but these were good questions. Why was he feeling this stupid, pointless pain instead of the more traditional lovestruck euphoria? Why couldn’t he be a team player and just fall in love quietly like everyone else? Why did he have to make such a scene?

It was getting brighter. The sky gradually took on a golden glow, and David stood there on the rough planks of the gazebo-like viewpoint, barefoot and shivering. He wished he could see the sunrise. This stunning view was a travesty right now, because it was a view of the west. The sun rising gloriously in the east did nothing here but cast long shadows through the choke of pine and cedar.

He could feel the light building up against his back. He could see it catching on the silvery frame of the park’s radio tower, a looming monolith of steel bars and girders, antennas and dishes, purpose unknown. It had always seemed striking to him, that tower. Huge, imposing, such a stark contrast to its surroundings. It was beautiful in a strange way. He watched the sun slowly move down its length, lighting up one steel bar after another. *There, right there*, he thought with a sudden smile.

*That's the spot. It's the eastward viewpoint, the sunrise spot. I can hop the fence and climb that tower, and enjoy the most fantastic view in a hundred miles.*

And yet...why?

His smile faded. It was worthless. Urges, illogical passions, *whimsy*...this was the basic joy of living, and it was worthless. It had to be shared with someone else, or it became empty, defunct. He dropped the idea of climbing the tower. What was the point? He looked around him, frustrated. In *any* of this shit? He was alone, and it was like playing single-player charades. Who was watching, who was guessing? What a fucking waste of time.

At that moment he coined a new saying, a proverb, an old adage to be cross-stitched and framed and hung in Grandma's living room next to "Home Is Where The Heart Is".

"The Last Man On Earth Writes No Plays."

*How's that, Grandma? Too oblique? Not homey enough? Too fucking bad. Stitch it and hang it.*

He let out a tired breath, and headed back to the car. He was done here. That old adage had clawed him down from his surreal floating. Now he was just standing stupidly in reality, barefoot and shivering.

*Don't for—*



Despite the muck churning in his head, he was somehow able to keep up with his classes. I know I never saw him study, but he was still passing tests. The whole campus experience had become difficult for him, though. All of Julie's classes were in the evening and all of his were afternoon, so the school was just a buzzing hive of empty faces and nameless people. Walking across the green grass hills in the center square, he hunched his shoulders in, as if to protect himself from the simmering chaos around him. What he needed was a good night's sleep, but he didn't hold out much hope for that. Every night lately his mind had been spinning like the wheels of a gyroscope, keeping him stiffly upright when all he wanted was to fall over.

And then there was Josh, standing in the hall just outside

the Biology classroom, waving. What would he think of David's predicament? What kind of sage advice would he have now?

David and Josh shuffled into the half-full class room and took seats toward the back of the class. The professor started to drone, and David tore off a piece of paper. He held his pen over it and thought for a moment, then shook his head, smiling, and scribbled it out.

*I've been drafted.*

Josh unwrinkled the note and read it. He paused, his brows creased, then shot up in understanding. He twisted his head around to look at David, one eyebrow raised. David nodded. A brief wait while Josh wrote out his note.

*Shit, wow. When did this happen?  
Where? Fully drafted, huh?*



**I WANT YOU**

yeah, and its fucking WWII.  
I've been a total wreck every  
day I haven't seen her. I  
actually met her at that  
party of yours...

yeah yeah, don't start.

I met her again that  
night. ~~And she told me~~  
~~that she was~~ and  
we ended up going on  
a couple small "dates".

Her name's Julie.

Josh read the note, then seemed to pause for a bit, though he might have been still reading. Eventually his note came back.

Huh. So what is she like?



I don't know she's sweet  
I guess. she makes me feel  
warm solid.

Another brief pause, then Josh started writing. The prof suddenly finished his diagram and started to turn around so Josh just tossed it unfinished.

That's great man. Kinda wavy  
blonde hair right? Brown eyes?  
If she's the same Julie, I think  
I talked to her at the party too.  
Yeah she seemed really cool. Really  
real you know? I'd

David had to sit there for a while, pretending to listen to the lecture. Something about oxygen, brain damage, comas.

Eventually, the lesson called for diagrams again.

I have no idea where to go from here though. How is this stuff supposed to work anyway? It's been a long time.

You're on your own there buddy.

David held the note for a while, then sighed and wrinkled it up. What was he expecting? He knew he wasn't going to get any answers. He paid vague attention to the rest of the lecture, and as it was winding toward its conclusion, he wrote one more note and tossed it. It said:

So the brain can only go  
about 3 minutes without oxygen  
before it starts shutting down,  
right? After that you get at  
least brain damage, maybe coma?  
Tell you what I'm gonna do after class.  
Gonna go home, curl up in bed, put  
the pillow over my face, smother  
myself for 3 minutes, and take  
a nice long nap. I'll just forget  
about all this shit. What  
do you think?

Josh read the note, and paused. He craned his neck around and gave David an odd look. Then he turned back to the professor. He didn't send any more notes. When the class was over, they nodded to each other, and went their separate ways without another word.

...

When the last class of the day finally ground to a halt David headed home, with a huge pile of papers and books on his passenger seat. Was he even going to look at half of them? Did he *ever* look at these piles? He supposed he must since he

was doing above-average in his classes, but he sure couldn't remember doing it. School, his job...they were part of another dimension, a parallel universe. There was a David Martin who lived in that world, who held a job and paid the rent and did his homework every day, but David didn't know him, and didn't want to.

When he got home, he was greeted by the typical sight of Aaron sitting on the couch, watching a movie. David suspected that Aaron's parallel-universe self was just as much of a slacker.

"Sup," Aaron said. This time he was lounging with a couple high-school age girls, watching an old X-files tape. "Girls this is my roommate David," he said, making a quick hand gesture from the girls to David. "David, this is Amy and Nicole." Their names went through David's head and directly out the back, but he smiled and nodded politely, mumbled a quick "How's it going," and turned for his room.

"Hey David," Aaron caught him.

"Yeah?"

"I'm trying to get together some people to go up to the Oyster Dome next Friday. You want to come?"

"The what?"

"Oyster Dome. It's a spot on Chuckanut Mountain. Great hike, huge boulders and cliffs, awesome view from the top. It'd be rad to camp up there."

"Nah—" David's reflexes started to say, then he paused, cocked his head. "Well, actually...sure, what the hell? Sounds fun."

Aaron snapped his fingers into a thumbs-up and grinned. "Sweet. And invite anyone else you want to, all right?"

"Sure," David said, pleasantly surprised that he had said

yes. This wasn't like him. "I'll see who I can round up." The surprise even came out in his voice.

He started to go into his room again, but then thought of something, and turned toward the kitchen instead. They had a huge dry-erase board hung on the kitchen wall, covered in phone numbers, bill due dates, "Jeff, your mom called" type messages, and random little notes like "rickets and razors and lazors" or "join a gang and be happy for life" or "Ernest Borginine will kill you in the face". Today there was one that just said "Poop", next to a drawing of some. It was that kind of house.

David erased the poop and the rickets to clear some space, and wrote his own note.

Dear house,

A few days ago I woke up to find a pile of river mud on my floor. Whaaaat theeee hell. Need I say more? Some one owes me an explanation.

Thanks.



He doubted he would get a confession, and really it

wasn't that big of deal; the mud had cleaned up fairly easily. It was just so...weird. Plopping a pile of mud in someone's room...if it was a joke, where was the punch line? The "Poop" message on the board made more comic sense than that.

As he was finishing the note, he heard the front door open, followed by muffled conversation. In a house with six guys, there were people coming in and out all the time. Most of them were people David didn't know, friends of his roommates (whom he didn't know), so he let other people answer the door and usually tried to avoid being seen. That part was tough since the door to his bedroom was in the main living room, right next to the front door. He had developed a knack for waltzing through with just a quick, polite nod, and slipping into his room barely noticed.

He tried it now, establishing a good, purposeful pace so when he entered the living room he would appear to be passing through on important business. But the visitor was Josh. He was standing in the entryway, talking to Aaron. David was caught off guard. Josh never came over here. They rarely saw each other outside class except for going to see a movie every once in a while or grabbing lunch together between classes.

"Hey," Josh said cheerfully, and David wondered what he was doing here, but didn't ask.

"Hey Josh. What's up?"

"Oh I was just on my way through town...thought I'd stop by and say hi. I guess I ended up saying 'hey', though, didn't I?"

"Sure did."

"Damn."

"Work on it."

"Yeah. So anyway, I hear you guys are heading up to the

Oyster Dome.”

“He’s coming too,” Aaron chimed in from the couch.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep,” Josh said. “I hiked up there a couple years ago and it was amazing. I’m stoked.” David nodded, smiling. There was a brief silence, then Josh said, “So are you bringing World War III?” He didn’t say it slyly or with a wink, he just asked.

David hadn’t gotten that far yet, but it was a perfect idea. “Yeah, I’m going to ask her at least.”

Josh smiled one of those pursed-lipped, upside-down smiles, always accompanied by a nod. “Cool.”

There was another silence.

“Well,” Josh said, checking his watch conspicuously, “I’m going to head out. I was just stopping by on my way to do some errands.”

David started toward his room as Josh started toward the door. “All right man, see you tomorrow.”

“See ya.”

Josh went out the front door, David went into his room, and both doors slapped shut at the same time.

...

Next Friday arrived, and David went to pick Julie up for the hike. She lived by herself in a big, brown apartment complex, the inside of which David hadn’t seen yet. This was actually the first time he had picked her up, so he was a little nervous about the protocol for these things, but Julie came out to meet him as soon as he pulled up.

“Hi,” she said with a cute little smile as she hopped in and snapped on her seatbelt.

“Hi,” he replied, and they started driving.

There were too many people to fit in one car so David and Julie were supposed to meet the rest of the group at the start of the trail. David had offered for Josh to ride with him when they all met at David’s house, but Josh had casually slipped in with the others. David was somewhat disappointed. Conversation between three people is a lot easier than between two. Especially when those two have noth—*Damn she’s pretty*, David thought, glancing over at Julie.

It was perfect hiking weather. The sky was an infinite expanse of uninterrupted blue, with just a few wisps of cirrus clouds floating like brushstrokes at the very top of the sky. After about twenty minutes of sickeningly twisty roads through the Chuckanut area, then a steep drive up the mountain’s access road, they arrived at the parking lot. The lot was just a flat rectangle of chunky gravel, featureless except for its peculiar outhouse. This was the most attractive shit can David had ever seen. It had a steeply sloping wood-shingle roof that ran all the way to the ground, covering the wooden frame which, for some reason, was carved and painted with ornate Scandinavian designs. *Beats the hell out of that concrete box on Little Mountain*, he thought with a wry smile, and that became a laugh as he realized he was admiring an outhouse.

He and Julie got out of the car and joined the others over by the exquisite shithaus. Aaron was unloading a nice-looking red Pathfinder (not his, of course) with five equally nice-looking girls, all gathered around him smiling and laughing, hanging on his every word. Aaron didn’t look like the smug pimp that he could have, but he was clearly (and understandably) enjoying himself.

“Hey guys,” he greeted them with a grin and a rock and



roll devil hand sign.

“Hey.”

“Girls, this is my roommate David, and...”

“Julie,” she offered.

“David, Julie,” Aaron began, and David groaned inside, “these are my friends \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ , \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ , \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ .”

While Aaron introduced his harem, David glanced around for Josh and saw him through the Pathfinder’s rear window, leaning against the hood with arms crossed, looking out over the breathtaking view of Puget Sound and the islands. David wondered if something was wrong or if this was just moodiness.

“... \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ , and \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ ,” Aaron finally finished. His grin took in the whole group, glad that *everyone* was here, not just his girls. David could tell he wasn’t interested in any of them, their presence was welcome but incidental. He was probably quite oblivious to their wide-eyed attentiveness.

“Hey Josh!” David called, and Josh turned around for the first time.

“Hey. We ready?”

“Yeah,” Aaron said, hefting his backpack. “Let’s rock.”

So they proceeded to rock. As with most hikes he had been on, David started out strong and confident. He kept as fast a pace as the group would allow, talking more than usual for the semi-conscious purpose of showing everyone that he wasn’t breathing hard. He surprised himself with his unexpected endurance, and then, as usual, the hike seemed to drag on much longer than expected, and get much steeper than he was prepared for. His talkativeness quickly subsided as the gradual switchbacks became steady upward slopes. The canopy of pine and cedar mercifully kept the sun off their backs, but

they were all dripping sweat. David's overstuffed backpack, even with all its costly North Face advancements, had somehow gone from a manageable twenty pounds to a crushing 3.5 tons.

Josh stayed in the back of the line. Whenever they stopped for a breather and the order got mixed up, he still ended up at the back every time. He chuckled every once in a while at an overheard joke from farther up the line, but said very little. He was breathing pretty hard, David thought, maybe he just didn't have the spare breath for conversation. Not that there *was* much conversation, aside from Aaron and his giggling groupies. But David didn't mind. He didn't have to be interacting with Julie to enjoy her presence.

Earlier in the hike, at one of the forks in the trail, they had followed a sign that promised "Bat Caves". After another fifteen or twenty minutes of intense mountaineering (Did that explain the shithaus? Was this a Swiss Alps-themed hike?) the evergreens opened into a huge field of immense, jagged boulders and razor sharp rock shards straight out of a fantasy novel. ("Welcome," said the wood guide with a grim smile, "to the Black Plains of Kharath'daen, wherein lurks the mighty Trogdor...")

"Well, this is the Oyster Dome," Aaron said, standing on a boulder and stretching his arms. "Watch your step, obviously."

Apparently there were bat caves, sort of, in the crevices beneath and between some of the rocks, but no one seemed very interested in those. David was thrilled just to be traversing this alien landscape of angles, pits, and towers. There was nothing quite like the feeling of hopping from rock to rock with a well-tractioned pair of shoes. He felt like Hermes flying

down Mount Olympus, his feet had wings, and it seemed like he should fall, but he never did.

Julie was more cautious and yelled for him to stop. He actually managed to ignore her for a moment and skipped gleefully on ahead, until the pit in his stomach hauled him back.

“All right guys,” Aaron addressed the group when they were all gathered on the same boulder. “See that cliff?” He pointed toward the towering rock face that had spawned all these shattered chunks below. “That’s the top, that’s the end of our hike. The trail we were on keeps going all the way up so if you want, you can just hike it the rest of the way, but I brought enough gear for a few of us to climb the rock, so...” He dropped his backpack and started opening it up. “...if anyone wants to, it’s a lot of fun.”

David looked at the cliff. He had absolutely no guess how high it was except *damn* high, and it was at best a 90 degree angle, at worst, 45 degrees *out*. “That?” he laughed incredulously, thinking maybe it really was a joke, in which case Aaron was a pretty witty guy.

Aaron glanced where David was pointing, then shook his head. “Uhh, no I don’t think so...that’d be pushing it. I was thinking that easier slope over to the left.” He pointed to an area of the cliff where the rock jutted out in a kind of steep staircase shape, a series of gradually increasing inclines that ran all the way to the top. It was a lot more reasonable, but still...

Aaron pulled out a roll of rope, a couple harnesses, a few carabineers and some other gear David didn’t recognize. It all looked fairly high-quality. Somehow, all the Aaron-type guys David had ever known seemed to own a set of expensive climbing gear, despite rarely having jobs. He could see their

shopping lists, written in order of importance...

Shopping List  
(WRITTEN IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE)  
GRIPPIER SHOES  
EXTRA HARNESS (FOR CHICKS)  
SNOWBOARDING SHIT  
FOOD  
BILLS

"We'll need someone to hike up there first to hook the rope in, though," Aaron said, hefting the rope bundle in his hand as he spoke. "Has anyone been climbing before?"

"I can hook it in," Josh offered with a shrug. "I've never actually climbed but I've 'been climbing' with people so I know how you hook in."

"Sure you don't want to climb this time?"

Josh shrugged again. "Nah."

"Sweet, well here you go then." He handed Josh the rope, then turned to the rest of the group with a big grin. "So, who's up for it?"

The group began to split. Two of Aaron's groupies started looking the gear over, while everyone else fidgeted in the general direction of the trail, smiling, shaking their heads, and mumbling excuses. David was the last to move. He hesitated, but Julie was joining the trail party, so he followed. When Aaron saw him going he waved his hands out and shook his head decisively. "Woah woah woah, David, come on, man. Get back here. You know you're climbing. You too, Julie."

"No way," Julie said with a raised-eyebrow smile that said she meant it. "I'd like to live long enough to finish the hike, if you don't mind. David, you're not are you?"

He hesitated.

“Come on, Dave,” Aaron said like a warning. “Don’t give me that, don’t pretend like you’re thinking. You know you’re gonna do it. Let’s go.”

Somehow, that cliff looked really inviting. David had done a small amount of very low-elevation climbing before, big rocks and small ledges, and he’d been to a climbing gym, but that was it. This was different, and scarier. It might be fun, but it wasn’t the “fun” that was tempting him, it was something internal. Machoism? Masochism? Maybe some of both. It was a test. He had this feeling that it would somehow “do him good”.

David smiled and hopped forward onto the next rock. “Which harness do I use?”

Aaron nodded approvingly. “Right here buddy.”

David heard Julie sigh behind him. “All right. I’ll see you at the top.”

David gave her a winning grin. “Maybe I’ll beat you there!” He was relieved to see her return his smile.

“Just...God...be careful.”

When the climbers arrived at the very base of the cliff, Aaron informed them that it would be a good ten minutes before Josh got to the top to hook the rope in, so they had plenty of time to make sure their gear was set up right. The climbing harnesses were like little short-shorts made out of heavy nylon rope, with straps around the waist and upper thighs/groin. Any man who has put on this gear knows the not-talked-about awkwardness that occurs when these straps are pulled tight, and everything has nowhere to go but *out*.

David chuckled self-consciously as he cinched up the straps. *Hi. I’m David Martin, and these are my genitals.*

Now that he was this close, David realized that it really wasn't that hard of a climb. There were hand and footholds everywhere, and it was never steeper than 90 degrees, often less. It would take a while to get to the top, but would be fairly straight-forward. Still, it was a little disconcerting when Josh, a tiny speck high up on the peak, hooked the rope in and let it fall, and fall, and fall.

One of Aaron's girls went first, after listening attentively to a lengthy dissertation on climbing technique by Aaron. Watching girls climb was also somewhat awkward, David discovered. Pretty much all he could see of the climber while she went up was her ass squeezing out of the harness straps, which accentuated it like a picture frame. It had to be especially difficult for the belayer (Aaron, in this case) as he was responsible for keeping the rope taut during the ascent, and therefore had to watch the climber constantly. Where do you put your eyes? Of course most guys wouldn't see this as a problem (Aaron probably didn't), but call him a prude, David didn't like to feel like he was mentally molesting someone. It hurt him, thinking that way, made him feel somehow lonelier.

He eventually gave up pretending not to notice the piece of art in that frame and just turned around, trying to find something else to look at. He could see the Puget Sound over the treeline, the islands, the horizon, all soft and blurry in the distance. He stood there feeling the beauty all around him, and wondered if he had remembered to pay the gas bill.

Finally, \_ \_ \_ \_ made it to the top. "So who's next?" Aaron asked, looking from David to \_ \_ \_ \_ with a big grin. He was probably enjoying seeing other people doing "his thing" more than he would enjoy actually doing it himself. David understood that. It was like introducing a friend to a new band or

getting someone hooked on a book series, like converting a new member to your cult.

— — — was looking a little woozy as she craned her neck to see her friend waving at her from the top. “Umm...he can go next,” she said, flicking her eyes to David, then smiling weakly at Aaron. Aaron shrugged and transferred the belaying device from the girl’s harness to David’s. “Ready?” he said, giving the harness a couple jerks to make sure it was secure.

“Ha...sure.”

“All right. Saddle up.”

David went at it like Spiderman. He scaled the first half of the cliff like a ladder, made more fearless than he knew he should be by the rope at his waist. He surprised himself, and felt very good for it. Aaron would occasionally pause his conversation with his groupie to yell up something like, “Doin’ great!” or “Almost there, man!”

When David reached the final third of the climb, he began to slow down. The rock was starting to tilt outward a little, and holds were getting scarcer. Within a few minutes, he was stuck. He had a good hold where he was, but when he groped around above him, all his hand touched was smooth rock.

“I’m kinda stuck,” he yelled. No response from below. “Any suggestions, Aaron?” Still no response, but he could hear the distant murmur of conversation. “Aaron!”

“Right here, what’s up?”

“You see any good holds? I’m kinda stuck.”

“Uhh...don’t know, hard to tell from here. Keep looking.”

David stalled, pressing his body close to the rock to take some weight off his arms. As much as it was possible, he rested, trying to think of a plan. A mild breeze whipped up and

brushed against his face, ran through his hair. He heard the earthy crackle of tiny rocks falling somewhere, of wind and animals in the underbrush. He heard that subtle, fuzzy hiss of silence. He took a deep breath and held it, closed his eyes, then opened them. He could see those transparent dots that float in your vision when you look up at the sky, always drifting slowly downward. He could see the tiny specks of light that darted around like fireflies when he focused just right, those unexplained little photons that he didn't know if anyone else saw. He was aware of everything. He could feel the whole world, and he was suddenly happy. In that moment, he was actually *happy*. Free. Ecstatic just to be alive in a bright, complexly beautiful world where every single object and moment had infinite meaning. And in this swirling, flowery cloud of euphoria, a small, hard, shiny black *something* poked out of the middle, and asked,

*Wait...did I remember to pay the gas bill...?*

The cloud collapsed in on itself. The warm flow choked off.

*You have to work in a couple days*, the black something reminded him.

*Check your account balance before you write that check.*

*Don't forget to pay that speeding ticket by September 8<sup>th</sup>*

*Do you have anything for dinner tonight?*

Everything was so fucking complicated and loud, like the deafening whine of a mosquito stuck in some earwax deep in his ear canal. Every time he started to let go and feel alive, his conscience dutifully reminded him how many things he needed to be thinking about. It told him to feel guilty for his underserved bliss, for thinking he could afford to relax. This world was too complex. It was an impossible, salt-crusted knot, a



hangman's noose, so tight that there was no need to kick the bucket, it would kill by strangling.

What would it be like to let go of everything? To feel nothing but the breeze, to see nothing but the sky?

David smiled, and let go of the rock.

He shouldn't have fallen far, the rope should have been taut, but it wasn't, and he did. He had expected to, though. In that long moment, he had forgotten the rope existed. The air was totally still around him. All he could see was the sky, an empty blue void above him. He was weightless. The whole world was nothing but air, and he was free.

He had just enough time to emit a short, strangled laugh, and then he hit the rocks.

Aaron had not been paying attention to David's ascent and hadn't been pulling the rope in taut, so David scraped down the side of the ledge then freefell a long stretch before the rope caught him and swung him back against the cliff like a piñata. He hit hard once, taking most of the impact against his knees and right arm, then bounced lightly a couple times before coming to a rest.

"Ahhhhhhhhh..." he moaned slowly through a grin, and started laughing as he swung gently back and forth. *Ladies and gentlemen, I am a fucking idiot! Yes! Three cheers! Ha ha!*

Aaron's voice drifted up to him, understandably anxious. "David!"

"Yeah," David called back wearily. "I'm ok. Just a few cuts."

Optimism.

"Like hell you're ok! You just threw yourself off a cliff!"

"I fell off."

"I don't think so, I saw you jump out, man."

"I fell off, and thanks for belaying me so well, buddy."

That ended Aaron's offensive. He scratched his head uneasily. "Uhh...yeah...sorry about that. Sure you're ok?"

No. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just keep a closer eye on me, ok? I'm going up again."

"All right, go for it," Aaron said, relieved to have been let off the hook so easily.

David hurt all over, but he didn't want to inspect the damage just yet. He climbed harder and faster than he had before, taking a route that avoided the place he got stuck last time. (If he had looked closely at the rock, would there have been blood or peels of skin there? Would there have been peels of sanity?)

The rest of the climb went smoothly, and in less than ten minutes he crawled up over the edge and stood up. He had hoped someone, maybe Julie, would have been there waiting for him, and would have cheered as he rose triumphantly onto the peak and struck a statuesque pose. No one even noticed him for about two minutes.

The top of the Oyster Dome was the kind of sheer, flat-topped cliff that you usually only see in Road Runner cartoons, with a fantastical view that seemed to encompass the entire Pacific Northwest. The cliff jutted out about thirty or forty feet from the forested part of the mountain, giving room for a campfire and such, while the forest was ideal for the actual camping. Aaron's groupies were working on setting up their tent, while Josh and Julie worked on the other one a little ways off. It would be tight, but all eight of them were sleeping in those two small tents.

David just stood on the edge of the cliff for a bit, breathing heavily and trying to force life into his numb, hanging

limbs. He could hear snatches of Julie and Josh's conversation, pierced here and there by Julie's gleaming laugh. He started making his way over to them, hobbling on his battered, bruised legs. He still didn't want to give himself a damage report.

Josh and Julie were absorbed in what they were doing, and in whatever apparently hilarious story Josh was telling, so they didn't notice David until he was fairly close. Julie saw him first, started to smile, then saw his injuries, and her face paled.

"Oh my God! What happened?"

The extremeness of her reaction forced David to have a look for himself. He realized it did look pretty ugly. A raised, purple bruise was forming on his forearm, and his knees and elbows looked like moist, fresh-ground hamburger. "It's uh...not as bad as it looks?" he said, trying to smile it off.

Julie was not deterred. "What *happened*, David?"

"I fell."

"God damn it, David!" she said miserably. "I told you to be careful! You could have—"

"I jumped off."

Silence.

"You jumped off?"

"Yep." David smiled like a kid who's just taken off his training wheels. "Threw myself right off the rock."

Julie just stared at him with her mouth open in a silent "uh!". Josh's eyebrows raised, and he let out an amazed chuckle. "Damn," he said with a slight shake of his head. "That's... Wow." He sounded almost...what? Impressed?

*What the hell kind of reaction is that?* David wondered, his brows furrowing. What was Josh thinking? Did he think he actually knew why David had jumped? How was that possible?

How could he know why a guy might suddenly throw himself off a cliff for no apparent reason, just on a whim? But hadn't it always been like this? Hadn't Josh always seemed to understand what David was thinking? Enough even to verbalize it? Yes. He had. This fact made David want him as a friend forever, made him want to be eighty years old sitting in a rocking chair next to Josh on the porch, looking out at the world and just smiling knowingly. It also made him want to run away in terror.

Julie, on the other hand... "You jumped off? On purpose?"

"Yeah."

"Why would you do that?" To David's relief she was calming down. She had dropped the scolding housewife tone and now just sounded genuinely puzzled.

"Because...I...just..." David stumbled through his mind looking for an explanation (he guessed she deserved one) but came up empty-handed. "It was just one of those moods." A silent pause. "You know?"

"What moods?"

David searched a little more, still found nothing.

"What moods, David? Suicide moods?"

*Maybe.* "No—God!—No, that wasn't it at all, it was just...forget it. It was just a weird moment, just a few scratches, I'm ok, don't worry about it. Let's go set up camp, ok?" He gave Julie a questioning smile as he walked by her: "*Everything's fine, let's drop it, ok?*" Her expression didn't really answer the request his face made. He wasn't sure if she would acquiesce or not.

She wanted to know, *what moods?* As David walked away toward the tent, he heard Josh mutter under his breath,

“Moods you’re lucky to be incapable of.” And it wasn’t condescension. It didn’t sound at all like pitying a lesser intelligence. It sounded like real envy. Even admiration.

...

Eventually Aaron and \_ \_ \_ \_ came puffing up the trail that Josh and Julie had taken. Apparently \_ \_ \_ \_ had changed her mind about braving the cliff and taken the easy way, dragging Aaron along with her. They both joined the rest of the girls still working on their tent. Josh and Julie had finished setting up theirs and now they and David were busy unloading their packs and getting generally “set up”. Most of the work was done in silence. David thought Julie had probably let his little aerial excursion go, but it had put a damper on conversation.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly as they both knelt inside the tent laying out their sleeping bags.

“Sorry?”

“For scaring you. Jumping off the cliff. Sorry I can’t explain it well enough, it was just...weird. Sometimes you just get these feelings, you know? Like you start thinking about something and it just snowballs until it’s overwhelming, whatever it is, and you have to just...*do* something. You know, something crazy, something...”

She looked at him, studying him, frowning. David looked at her, and saw the incomprehension.

“I thought the rope would catch me.”

Her face lit up with relief.

“I was just trying to get better footing. I thought the rope would catch me.”

Julie smiled. "Ok, well just as long as you're ok up here." She jabbed a finger at his forehead. "And don't do it again, ok? Please?"

"I pr—I won't."

"Good. Thank you."

A few hours later, he found himself sitting next to the edge of the cliff, watching the sun go down in flames on the horizon, waiting for its explosive crash-landing in the ocean. He wondered if it was wrong to think that the World Trade Center collapse was an awesome sight. That destruction can be breathtakingly beautiful. Nuclear explosions put nature's best displays to shame, and no one likes to hear stories about happy people and good relationships. (Not even the people in them)

Eventually Julie wandered over and stood behind him. He patted the ground next to him, and she smiled and sat down with her arms wrapped around her knees, both prickling with goose bumps. David guessed she didn't get out in the wild that often, as she had assumed her shorts and girly tank top would suffice at night like they had in the heat of the day. His instincts told him to help her, but he had already given her his fleece, and it would probably be awkward if he offered her his pants. All he could do was put his arm around her and hold her tight against him. For a moment he actually considered doing so.

They sat there quietly for a while, her shivering, him thinking and wishing. Wishing he could put his arm around a girl without seeing a vision of life's complexities exploding outward in a widening web of tangled events and choices. And...there was something else. A tiny burr in the back of his mind, a fuzzy uncertainty that made his brows crease now and then, that made him abruptly say to himself, *Wait, wait...* for

no apparent reason. An old memory. A pair of eyes. A voice, a whisper, *Don't for—*

"This is incredible," Julie said, waving her hand out at the sunset. "It doesn't even look real. It's like a painting, or a computer effect background in a movie or something."

"Yeah," David agreed, thinking about something else. Trying not to, but failing. "It's funny, isn't it? How we think like that? We're so *used* to everything, you know, the whole drab, everyday 'real world', that when we see something like this, something really beautiful, it looks *fake*."

*Just a dream, David...just a dream...*

While he sat there absorbed in thought, the figurative fire of the sunset became the literal fire of the campfire, and he didn't really notice the transition. The shimmering coal of the sun became actual coals, and David sat in much the same position, staring into the heart of the blaze. Julie was sitting next to him. She was too close to look at without craning his neck, but he could feel her presence there. It was like an invisible force-field extending out from her, a warm, gentle pressure against his side. For a brief moment he felt frantic. Disoriented. What *was* she to him? What did he actually know about her? What the hell was this bizarre, thousand-ring circus of feelings he had for her, ranging from almost-love to that crushing, panicking desperation?

His head suddenly seemed to open up. His mind became a stationary point in a vast expanse of clear sky, suspended between the earth and the stratosphere. *Is this it?* he wondered, his thoughts echoing in this infinite, empty space. *Is this what all the fuss is about? All the poems and songs and books and movies? Is this really it?* At that moment, and just for a second, he had this thought:

No one alive on this earth can ever, ever be happy.  
And he smiled. At least *that* was settled.

...

The flames of the sun's crash finally fizzled out in the ocean, and their campfire became the only light in the world. For a bunch of college kids on a Friday night campout, the group was pretty somber. Everyone just stared at the fire, mesmerized. Minutes went by without a word spoken.

David didn't like the silence right now. He didn't like the sound of his thoughts. He felt in danger of coming to some conclusion he wouldn't want. He didn't want *any* conclusions right now.

"I love fires," Josh said. "Look at those coals. How they ripple like that? Doesn't even look real."

*Because it's too strange to be real? Too good to be true? Too beautiful to not be a dream? Because reality is ugly, right?*

"Anyone want a beer?" Aaron said, his first contribution to the conversation, and David was glad for it. It was a sandbag on a runaway hot-air balloon.

"I'll take one," he said quickly. He didn't even mind that it was Schmidt. He didn't mind that the second one was Schmidt either, or the third, or the fourth. Or the fifth. He began to feel tired. His eyes began to track slower, and he had trouble focusing. His posture became unsteady.

"Josh," he said abruptly, in the middle of the silence, in a slightly puzzled tone, "you matter."

Josh raised an eyebrow. "What?"

But David didn't elaborate. He looked over at Julie with the same puzzled expression, then glanced at Aaron. He rubbed



his eyes and sighed. He was drunk on Animal Beer. How embarrassing. "I'm going to bed," he said blearily, and stumbled into his tent. His skin prickled in the cold air as he undressed (he thought of Julie out there, and felt regret) but the sleeping bag was a warm cocoon. Everything in the world was an analogy, a metaphor, a simile, and David was the last page in a book. The one at the very end that's completely blank, and no one knows why it's there.

The alcohol pulled him into sleep immediately, and he dreamed.

...

David is driving down the freeway through some unfamiliar city. He is smiling and nodding his head to the music from his stereo, feeling lighthearted and carefree, driving a great deal over the speed limit. He glances casually at his speedometer, which reads 93 mph, and smiles wider. It's a day for living hard and throwing caution to the wind.

He notices a car broken down on the side of the road ahead. The engine is smoking and the driver is standing over it looking distressed. David is just glad it isn't him. His car is shiny and new and has a full drive-train warranty.

Up ahead, he sees a car start to shimmy, then swerve violently. It smashes into a car next to it then careens off the road into the median, where it grinds to a stop in the dirt. David watches this in fascination, as he has never witnessed a car wreck before, but he can't slow down on the freeway to gawk at it. He drives past and looks on ahead with a rueful frown. *Poor bastard.*

Just then three cars in front of him start swerving erratic-

ally, bumping into other cars and disrupting the entire traffic flow. Brake lights flare all around, but it's too late. The three cars go spinning into the median, taking two others with them, one of which rolls and lands upside down. On the side of the road next to this crash, someone has pulled over with a flat tire, and twenty feet ahead, someone else stands over his smoking engine, scratching his head and squinting. David cranes his neck backward as he passes this scene, staring in astonishment. When he looks forward again, he sees a red galaxy of brake lights blinking on in a sweeping wave as car after car suddenly swerves out of control and crashes. David wonders what is going on up ahead that could be causing all this, but is unable to see far enough to tell. His view is obstructed by the thick cloud of smoke rising from the hundreds of broken down or wrecked vehicles in the distance.

The woman on the radio giving the traffic report says all northbound and southbound lanes are clear. David shrugs, and keeps driving.

...

He woke up to the sound of Julie's rhythmic breathing. In his dark, blurry vision he could see her wrapped up in her sleeping bag next to him. Her back was to him, and she looked hunched. She mumbled something, but it was unintelligible. She was shaking slightly. Was she laughing? Or crying? Hard to tell in the dark.

Everything was quiet except for her breathing, and the distant forest noises. David rolled onto his back and stared up at the tent ceiling, an empty blackness. Julie let out a small whimpering sound. David could feel the future opening up, a

slow, deep, creaking groan. He could see a thin slit of light widening in the darkness of the tent, revealing something. An image, an unfolding scene, events and series of events—his future—he shut his eyes. The disrupted blackness above his head was replaced by the smooth emptiness behind his eyelids.

He exhaled. When he finished the breath, he was asleep again. And he was on a beach.

He gasped and whirled around to take in his surroundings. Wide, sandy beach, endless dunes of bladegrass... His heart pounded wildly. He grinned with wide, glowing eyes like the discoverer of King Tut's treasure vault. He had found it! The needle in the haystack! Somehow, he had found his way back!

"Hi, David."

There she was! Beautiful, smiling, standing right next to him! David was momentarily speechless. "Laura," he said slowly, as if testing the word to see if he could really speak it. He couldn't believe he was really here.

"Let's spend the rest of our lives together!" Laura said cheerfully.

David's astonished smile faltered.

"We'll be together always!"

"Laura—?"

"I love you!" Her face was a grinning, plastic mask. "I love you!" Her voice was the lifeless drone of a Tickle-Me Elmo doll.

This wasn't real.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and the beach scene deflated, contracted inward, wrapped around him, darkened, became the inside of his sleeping bag. There was turmoil and momentum in him; he couldn't lay still. He wriggled out of his bag and

stepped over Julie's sleeping form to get out of the tent, out into the cold night air. Standing barefoot just outside the doorway, he stared with hollow eyes into the darkness. It was just a dream. It wasn't really Laura. It was a pathetic fabrication cruelly presented to him by his sadistic subconscious. *Did you think I'd enjoy that?* he demanded bitterly. *Did you think that would make me happy you son of a bitch?*

And then he stopped, and almost laughed. It "wasn't really Laura"? It was just a "fabrication" of Laura? *Laura was a fabrication! She was a dream!*

"Oh God..." David groaned, and stumbled out toward the edge of the cliff, feeling too weak to walk. The vast horizon was almost totally dark, except for the slight halo of dawn around the very edge. This was feeble and gray, more like dying light than the approach of morning, like the halo of the most shit-poor angel in heaven.

And Earth was a terrible, ugly place. Everyone in the world was unhappy. All the handsome, smiling faces he saw on TV were suicidal and addicted to drugs. Songs about heart-break outnumbered songs about happiness ten to one. The neighborhood ice cream man was slowly going insane from the music in his truck, and hated all the children who bought from him. Billionaires hated their lives. The President hated America. Romeo hated Juliet. Mothers hated giving birth. Babies hated being born. The delivery room was a cold, dark, angry place of sharp metal, dim fluorescent lights, and frantic, screaming people. Precious newborns were gnarled, slimy, blood-smeared monsters, twisting and screeching in anticipation of the horrors that awaited them in this world. The miracle of new life was a grotesque nightmare. Love was a placebo. Life was a tasteless joke. Life was dying. Life was a deleted

scene. Long, unnecessary, and without music.

David lay down on his side, and curled into a ball. *Everything will look better in the morning.* He fell asleep there, shivering, and laughing quietly to himself.

It didn't. Nothing looked better. He woke up still curled into a ball, stiffened into a ball, frozen there. He slowly straightened himself out, forcing wooden muscles to stretch, forcing blood into frozen fingers, then he opened his eyes to a frostbitten world. It was pre-dawn, everything was dark and gray and cold, glittering with ice. The pine trees were covered with deadly-looking icicles. Below the cliff, the jagged chunks of fallen rock had become jagged chunks of ice, giant ice cubes the size of houses, with woolly mammoths visible deep in their centers. On the horizon, towering glaciers rushed in from the east and the west, pushing aside hills and mountains, reshaping the Earth, converging on the place where David sat. He watched this spectacle in sad resignation, watched the Age of Man come to an end and the Age of Penguins and Polar Bears rise to power. He watched it all close in on him, alone, and just wished it would hurry up.

He gradually became aware of Julie sitting next to him. The sound of breathing, then a movement, shifting position, a slow release of breath. He looked over at her, and she smiled. Warmly. "You're a strange guy, you know that?" she whispered. "What are you doing?"

David was so cold. So stiff, hollow, brittle, and cold. He trembled as he gave her a pitiful smile. She was so warm. She was so pretty, and so warm. And she was *close*. She was *right there*, sitting right next to him.

The pit in his stomach was consuming him. It was unbearable.

“Julie...?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to get married?”

She looked at him for a moment, her face unreadable. Then she smiled. “Sure.”

...

*Message—One. Sent—Thursday—the—Eighth. Five—Twenty—P.M.*

*(beep)*

“Hey David, this is Dale from work. Hey, so Todd asked if I wanted to take your shift next Friday because, uh, you’re getting *married*? Shit, man, I didn’t even know you had a *girl-friend*! How’d this happen? Anyway, I can cover I guess. See ya tomorrow, bud.”

...

Dear Mr. Martin,

Your credit check was approved. We will be contacting you shortly to discuss the damage deposit and your intended moving date.

Respectfully,

Travis Baer,

Sunrise Rentals

...

I saw her on a park bench one bright, sunny day. Julie “Martin”. It caught me by surprise, seeing her there. Things had turned out well so far in my insane, unplanned little plan. Everything had clicked, everything was ready. But I wasn’t. I stayed back, watching her from a distance. She was reading. Some gentle, simple, unpretentious book. She was immersed in it; it showed in her gleaming eyes. She was so beautiful.

My insides surged in my chest, but I wasn’t ready yet. I covered my face with the hood of my sweatshirt, and walked by at a brisk pace, hands in my pockets. “Evening,” I said politely as I passed.

She looked up, and I could feel her eyes on the back of my head, squinted slightly in partial recognition. “Evening,” she replied faintly, almost a question. She stared after me a little longer. Then I imagine she returned to her book.

All I wanted to do was scream. That’s all anyone really wants to do, I think. To just let it all out. And no one can.

...

*Next—message. Sent—Wednesday—the—Sixth. Twelve—  
O—Six—P.M*

*(beep)*

“Julie, it’s me. I’m on my lunch break, just uh, just needed to talk to you. I...I miss you. Like pretty much all the time. I mean, almost literally. Kindof ridiculous really but anyway, give me a call. I uh...I love you.”

**WINTER**

**AGE 26**

**LOVE / DISEASE / CASSETTE TAPES**





David Martin, twenty-six-year-old Caucasian male, college graduate, food worker, renter of one half of a small duplex, had his honeymoon at a Holiday Inn. There had been no planning ahead and no saving, so he couldn't afford a real honeymoon. And both of them had to work the next day.

On the outside, everything continued pretty much normally, but David was able to survive now. The pit in his soul was filled up, or at least covered over. He was with Julie almost all the time, and he felt...a happiness. A kind of quiet, muted happiness that was like a pale yellow tint to his world. He found it hard to think about the past, even the recent past. What had life felt like before he'd met Julie? Had he been miserable? He couldn't remember. All the complex emotions he used to have had been distilled into this yellow haze.

Well...and one other thing. There was the vague, blurry

feeling of dissatisfaction. He didn't like to think about this, didn't like to admit it to himself, but it was right there in his face. (He saw it and looked away.) He was unsatisfied. And I don't mean sexually—oh no, their “sex life” was fantastic, or at least *abundant*. It was *all* the time, grappling and clutching each other like drowning children clutching pieces of their broken boat. I didn't watch this, of course, but I could see it all in my mind, constantly, and I wanted to fucking kill someone. But even in my mind, I didn't see bliss. Her moans sounded like anguish. His ragged breathing sounded like an effort not to cry. Why do agony and ecstasy make the same noises? What does that say about us? I guess for them, the line between the two was blurred. But they *needed* it.

Afterward, David always felt guilty. Like he had betrayed someone. And he didn't know why.

It killed me. *God* it killed me. What was I waiting for? I don't know. My opportunity had arrived, but it was all too strange, too uncharted. I didn't know what to do. For a year, I was paralyzed.

Both of them worked full time to pay their bills. Julie quit Safeway and started working at an espresso stand in Anacortes. She quickly mastered the Barista Tease, flashing a smile and winning a fortune in tips from all the lonely young refinery workers with money to burn. (It was more socially acceptable than traditional prostitution, and there was less risk of disease, ha ha.) David, to his surprise, continued to work at Red Robin. His performance had been flagging for a while, there had been questions about his health and wellbeing, but he was “back”. His employee of the month picture was firmly in place. “Daviiiiiid! My man!” bosses and co-workers would say, and he would grin, wink, and flash them a thumbs up.

Somewhere in the world, a neighborhood ice cream man was listening to a warbling “Pop Goes The Weasel” for the 2,106th time, was breaking down, was reaching for a handgun, or a knife, or anything.

“Hi!” David said under his breath, pausing in the entry-way. “Welcome to Red Robin!”

David and Josh remained fairly close, for a while. Josh became almost a “friend of the family”, and then he gradually disappeared. There was a brief period when he was always around—they would hit the town with him, sit around on weekends and watch movies, etc. They did whatever it is friends do to remain friends. But it began to feel awkward to David. Their spending time with him felt like an act of charity, since they were “happily married” and Josh still had no prospects at all. Maybe Josh sensed this too, because they began to see less and less of him.

The explanation he offered was that he was just really busy with school and personal studies. It turned out he had been studying psychology for two years at Western before he re-met David and decided to jump back into it at Skagit. As he drifted out of David’s life, David let him go, and was surprised to realize he regretted it. He had split ways with countless old friends during and after highschool, forgotten about them, and felt nothing. But when he deleted Josh’s number from his cell phone, that final, decisive act of losing touch, he hesitated a long time. Out of all the numbers he’d deleted, all the friends and acquaintances come and gone, Josh was the only one he hoped to see again. He pressed the “Delete” button, sighed deeply, and lay down on the couch, thinking about glaciers and continental drift.

Time passed, things wore thin and repaired themselves,

then wore thin again. Life weaved in and out and up and down, but stayed pretty much the same. It was “Hey man, what’s up?” and it was “Work, school, the usual.” The usual was everything. It was the easy chair in the living room with the brown shag carpet, the 18” TV, it was the refrigerator opened, found empty, shut, opened again, (just to make sure) and left open by accident. It was the bedroom, covered with clothes, lit by strings of white Christmas lights attempting ambiance, white walls, brown carpet, and the bed—too hard, too small. It was the bed, dreaming about nothing, just crackling black and white static. And it was a line of cars at a stoplight, turn signals blinking at random, but slowly moving closer together, until for a brief moment they all appear to be in sync, blinking in perfect unison, then drifting apart again.

And then it was Winter again, David was 26, and he woke up to find a pile of mud on the floor next to his bed.

...

In the barely-there morning light, all he saw was a vague, dark mass. He reached out and touched it, a cold, wet, sticky heap. A distant memory lit up in his brain, of another cold, wet, sticky heap, and of finding himself wandering the peak of Little Mountain, barefoot and utterly lost. He felt a chill run up his spine and into the base of his skull.

“Julie,” he whispered loudly, grabbing her shoulder.

She moaned, and slowly turned her head. “What?” she croaked, her eyes squinted shut.

“Look at this.” He clicked on the bedside lamp. And then suddenly, he changed his mind. He clicked off the lamp, and lay back down, eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling.

“What?” Julie asked groggily, now sitting up in bed.

“Nothing.”

“Wh...?”

“I just thought I heard something outside. Nevermind.”

Julie hesitated a moment, then lay down again without a word.

It seemed prudent. If she knew, if she saw it too, it wouldn't be surreal anymore, it would be *real*. It would be so much harder to ignore. And it would demand that he be scared. (There were no roommates around this time to be pulling pranks, so then where...?) He didn't want to be scared. He wanted to go to sleep and wake up, and see that the strange little mud pile was gone, and had never even been there.

He waited for Julie's breathing to slow, then got out of bed, threw the mud out into front yard, and took a scrubber to the carpet. He went back to sleep, and when he woke up, miracle of miracles, the mud pile was gone, as if it had never been there. He happily forgot about it, and went about his morning.

On his way out of the house to go to work, he paused on the porch, and stared out at the driveway, at the brush beyond the chain link fence, at the railroad tracks beyond that, and the looming backdrop of warehouses beyond it all.

From childhood to early twenties, the average person spends thirty-two full days per year dreaming. He had been alive for twenty-six years. He had lived a child's carefree life for the first seven. He had gone to school for twelve. He had been working at Red Robin for six. He had been married to Julie for one.

For two full years and twenty-seven days of all this, he had been *dreaming*.

He shook his head in amazement, and his eyes caught on

his porch mailbox. He saw a letter sticking out, and experienced a Big Moment.

“Big Moment” was the first term that came to mind when this first began happening to him, years ago. It was something that happened very quickly, and could be brought on by just about anything. There were two ways it happened. He might, for instance, see a bus drive by and stir up a few fallen leaves. It might strike him in some obscure way, and his mind would jump from the leaves to the wind to the mass of the bus to the firmness of the ground to the feeling of Earth’s gravity, spreading outward in scope until for a brief second, he felt like he was comprehending all of existence all at once, *feeling* all its weight and cosmic meaning. (Sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? It can’t be explained, only felt.) This all happened in a split second. It was an overwhelming and exhilarating feeling, a stunning shock to his brain that left him reeling.

The other way it happened was not as fun. He might see something as innocuous as an old lady pushing a shopping cart, and would suddenly see her with a miserable home and no family, would think of the curse of old age in broad terms, and this would jump to global poverty to disease to inevitable lonely death until—for a brief second—the whole of human suffering and futility was condensed into a single thought. It was like an explosion in his head. It crushed him.

Now, as he stared at his mailbox, seeing the grain of the metal and every fleck of rust, he felt a massive, churning sensation of weight, as if distant planets were attached to his back by cables, and when he turned, he dragged the entire solar system slowly around with him. He wasn’t sure which type of Big Moment this was. Somehow, it felt like both.

He pulled out the letter and opened it right there. There

was no return address. The envelope was a delicate purple with a rose embossed on it. The letter was printed on frilly-edged, flower-patterned stationery. David began to laugh as soon as he saw who it was from.

*Dearest, deepest, truest friend, co-worker, or family member,*

*Deepest, warmest, most heartfelt greetings to you from myself, Joshua T. Miller, the sender of this auspicious invitation to the event I shall describe forthwith, in the following lines. It has been my great joy and honor to recently complete my college courses, and by the aforementioned course completion, earn a Bachelor's Degree in my particular field of study, that being the field of studying things of a psychological nature, namely, psychology. I myself, with great humility, wish to humbly cause you to be invited to attend, in body, mind, and spirit, a celebrative celebration of me and my achievement, that is to say, an extravagant party forced upon me by my mom, who is way too proud of me, and insisted that I have a party and invite "everybody". I apologize for this mass-mailing "Dear Resident" invitation, and I apologize for inviting you at all, and encourage you not to even come unless you really, actually want to. But if you really want to, please do, because my mom would like it. It will be held at my parents' house in Seattle, next Saturday, at around 7:30*

*By the way, how is/are your wife/girlfriend/children/ankle feeling/job search/cancer treatment going? Are you still in school/working*

*at that place/looking for a pool table/on crutches/a damn punkass?*

*Yours truly, sincerely, with best regards,*

*Joshua C. Miller the First  
dignan456@hotmail.com*

After directions to Josh's parents' house, there was a small note hand-written in pencil.

*What's up, David?  
-Josh*

David chuckled as he stuffed the letter into his pocket and got into his car. That was so Josh. David suddenly missed him intensely. He heard his own voice, maybe his conscience, accusing him in the deep tone of a frowning, reproachful Green Giant. *Who do you think you are, letting friends go so easily? You think you don't need friends? Stupid little man! Everyone needs friends!*

David told the Giant that he was absolutely right, thanked him for the advice, and politely asked him to leave so he could go to work. Grumbling, the Giant trudged away, and David breathed a sigh of relief. *I'll go to his party and catch up!* he called after the large green man. *Maybe I'll even shoot him an email! Ok?*

The Giant was almost out of sight, but his reply came



back louder than ever.

*I'M NOT SATISFIED YET.*

And then he was gone.

David raised an eyebrow, puzzled. What did that mean? He shrugged and got into his car.

In the Red Robin foyer, he paused to admire his employee of the month photo. The managers of this particular store didn't care if the same person ended up the EOTM every month, if he or she earned it. They looked for attitude, speed, efficiency, and of course, sales. And somehow David was top of his class in all these areas, though people who knew him outside of work found it hard to believe.

He often wondered what he was still doing here. Why he had been standing in the exact same place for six years. The same job, the same town, the same exact life, with the addition of one somewhat comforting wife. He had gotten his transfer degree from Skagit at the beginning of this year, but hadn't "moved on" yet. He told everyone he was still researching different fields, but the truth was he just had no idea what to do with that fucking little piece of paper they called a Diploma. None of his interests made for viable careers. Like most people, he had graduated from highschool and just assumed that going to college was the next logical step. Nevermind that it was aimless education. He had to feel like he was "doing something with his life", like he was "going somewhere", and signing up for random classes was a lot easier and more straightforward than actually working toward his future. Now the hallucination of purpose and direction had worn off, and here he was. From here, there *was* no next logical step.

There was a song by a band called Far that contained the line, "We dream up stupid shit/To while away our days".

Poetry.

In the midst of this haze, David took a renewed interest in painting. Early that October, he had impulsively bought several 2'x 3' canvases and a "beginning painter's kit" and set to work with a zeal that was admirable but unfortunate. The walls of his bedroom were soon adorned with five 2'x 3' slabs of shit. Attempts at avant-garde abstraction. Collages of oozing glue, peeling magazine cutouts, and meaningless, haphazardly arranged cut-out sentences like:



Now he was doing portraits. I suppose he got some kind of fulfillment out of it. I was just glad he only had two canvases left.

Julie seemed to enjoy his hobby, or at least acted convincingly like she did. Maybe it was because she had none of her own. She spent a lot of time in town, presumably shopping, and when she was home she could usually be found curled up in the chair in front of the window, soaking in the sunlight and reading an Oprah Book Club book. There was always this faint, relaxed smile on her lips.

In general, they were around the house very little. There is something subtly depressing about the homes of young, childless, working couples. The small, dumpy houses or smaller, dumpier apartments. The muted silence that clings to the rooms even after husband and wife have come home from

their long workdays. The lingering atmosphere of desperation, of day to day struggles with life. (Two people setting out on their own, into new territory always thought to be inhabited by older people, by “adults”. A permeating fear hidden from visitors by hearty smiles and loving gazes and a mat on the doorstep that says “Welcome!”.)

And perhaps most disquieting, the scene of two people sitting across from each other at a small folding table in a gloomily lit room, eating a meal that took hours to prepare and will now be consumed in five or six minutes of silence.

With David and Julie, it didn’t happen often, but the day eventually arrived when I had to watch that scene unfold. Julie cooked dinner, so they sat down together like husbands and wives are supposed to do from time to time. It was fettuccini, homemade alfredo sauce, garlic-stuffed mushrooms, and French bread. It smelled like heaven. Julie was a damn fine cook, despite rarely practicing.

They ate in silence for a while. David was glad they had been able to get past small talk. Sometimes it was depressing to have nothing to talk about, but it was much more depressing to listen to themselves chit-chat emptily about news and weather. That was ok, though. Sometimes they just liked to be quiet. That’s all it was.

David was thinking about work, and a movie he had seen yesterday. His thoughts were drifting aimlessly, with no intention to speak, and then suddenly his mouth just opened. “Hey Julie?”

She looked up. She looked startled. “What?”

“I was just thinking...”(No he wasn’t, the words were coming to him as he said them.) “...have you ever been to...” His mouth remained open, but the words jammed. Somewhere

in his brain, the thought stuck tight. Then the excitement at its core evaporated, and it was just...gone. He was left with the residue, wondering what the hell it had been.

It had been important, he knew that. In fact he *almost* knew what it was. A thought pulled from space, from a long time ago.

“What?” Julie said again.

“Um...nothing,” David murmured, stabbing at his food. “Forgot what I was going to say.”



It's 5:00 in the morning, and David is driving a U-Haul truck south on I-5. Traffic is light. He passes the hours listening to fuzzy Canadian radio stations, turned up very loud to keep him awake. The sun has not risen yet, but a pale grey luminescence lights the sky.

He drives for hours on end without a break. The pre-dawn gloom lingers, and a dense fog gradually fills the air. Trees and overpasses become gray silhouettes. Soon everything is obscured in a white blanket and all he can see is the road directly in front of him. For all appearances, the world has vanished, and he is driving on a freeway suspended in an infinite void. He keeps driving at full speed, humming along with the radio. He carelessly and illegally tosses a pop can out the window.

It flies out past the edge of the freeway concrete, to

where the median should be, and drops until lost from sight in the fog.

He gasps and swerves the wheel violently—

—lurched up in his bed, and felt a single staccato *UMP* the moment his eyes opened, like the kick of a bass drum deep in his brain. Then total, ringing silence.

Slowly, the sound of breathing faded into his perception. His short, clipped breaths, and Julie's slow, steady exhalations. The room was completely dark, but something felt wrong. Unfamiliar. He felt like he was in a hotel room somewhere in another state.

Like always, Julie was sleeping curled up on her side, facing him. Cautiously, he pulled the comforter up from her shoulder, just enough to cover her eyes. Then he clicked on the bedside lamp, and froze with his hand still on the switch.

He wasn't in a hotel room. This was his bedroom in his house in rural Burlington. It had felt odd because it was now completely bare. The little TV they kept on the dresser was gone. The radio was gone. The framed prints on the walls were gone. David's first thought was that they had been robbed, but then he noticed other details that made this seem unlikely. Not just the framed prints...his own hideous, un-framed paintings were gone too. The clutter of junk and clothes that normally covered the floor was gone. His closet was open, and all of his clothes were gone. The room was completely cleaned out—every little thing that had been laying around, including his shoes and his deodorant stick, was gone.

But it wasn't gone.

The door to the bedroom was open. In the hallway outside, there were four or five cardboard boxes of varying size. Some were open, a few had been taped shut. David crept out of

bed and stood over the boxes, staring at them blankly.

One box was full of his clothes. With a black marker, it was labeled “CLOTHES”.

One of the smaller boxes was full of toiletries. Toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, deodorant stick, etc. It was marked “TOILETRIES”. Another box contained his TV. It was marked “TV”.

“What...the...hell...?” David whispered.

He could see other boxes out in the living room. He grabbed a flashlight out of a box marked “MISC” and moved through the house, gripping the flashlight like a club. The front door was still locked. None of the windows were broken. Nothing was stolen. Everything that was missing was in one of the boxes.

He didn’t call the police. When he had finished his search of the house, he stopped and just stood there in the middle of the living room, staring down at the boxes. He stood motionless for several long, drawn-out minutes, watching the boxes blur into vague shapes in his squinted vision. And then he began to unpack them. He put the books back on the shelf, in order. He put all the toiletries back in the bathroom cupboard. He set the TV back on the dresser, being extremely careful not to make any noise. He hung all his nice clothes in the closet, and then began tossing the rest out on the floor. Like they had been the day before.

He found it uncomfortable to think about what he was doing, so he pretended he was just cleaning the house. Nothing strange about that. *Just put it back in order*, he told himself. *Put it all back. Wake up. It never happened.*

...

6:45 AM the next morning, a dim, early-winter pre-dawn. David sat at the small, round kitchen table, spooning cereal into his mouth and staring out the window. A light drizzle fell outside in gentle sheets, making a soft, almost inaudible whisper as it melted into the parking lot asphalt. He had opened the window to hear it better. The sound drifted in through the screen, along with the muted noises of the world slowly waking up. Lonely birdcalls. A distant street sweeper finishing up its route. A car warming up. The light rain and muffled atmosphere seemed familiar to him, somehow.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Julie enter the kitchen. She was barefoot, in her thin night shirt and pajamas, barely awake. She was probably starting a pot of coffee, but he wasn't sure. He hadn't really looked at her yet. He just kept staring at the rain outside. His chewing slowed, then stopped with his cheek still full of cereal. His vision began to blur. He had stopped blinking, and his eyes were starting to tear up. The funny thing was...the window didn't blur. While the inside of the house and everything else faded to a teary haze, the view of the parking lot outside stayed sharp. "Hm," he mumbled, and squinted the water out of his eyes.

"Hello? David?" Julie was looking at him expectantly.

"Huh?"

"I said good morning."

He didn't respond. He was somewhere else. "Julie..." He looked down at the table, then back up at the window. His back was still mostly to her. "How long has it been since you've been to the ocean?"

She ran a hand through her hair and squinted her puffy eyes. "I don't know...two...three years? Why?"



“Do you want to go sometime soon?”

She paused a moment, then shrugged. “I don’t know, David...it doesn’t really thrill me that much anymore. Washington beaches are pretty dismal. It’s always drizzling, always cold...”

David nodded and looked down at the table again. “Yeah. Ok.”

“But I guess I don’t care, if you really want to go. I could always catch up on my reading or...”

David smiled and shook his head. “Nah, forget it. It was just a thought. He stood up and started putting his dishes in the dishwasher. “Well, I’d better get ready for work.”

“David?” There was a sudden change in her voice, a slight quaver that made him stop and look at her.

“Yeah?”

“Um...” Her eyes flickered over him, searched his face. She bit her lower lip. “What are...what are we doing?” David started to say something, but Julie continued as if finishing the sentence. “This weekend. Are we doing anything this weekend?”

“Uh...I don’t think so. I mean...I don’t know, I...” His brows creased, a little puzzled. “I don’t know...I’ve got to get going, Julie.”

“Right, I know.” She moved her face toward him unexpectedly, and it took David a moment to realize she was trying give him a kiss. The delay made it strange, an awkward slow-collision of faces. It might have been funny, but it wasn’t.

“I’m going to go get dressed,” David said.

“Ok,” Julie said. She stepped back to let him move.

...

*What the fuck was I waiting for?* I was such a spineless prick. I'd strung her along this far, and I couldn't make the next move. So I left her where she was, stranded. I left *both* of them.

Why the hell do we have to have memories? Why do I have to go through this again? I'm telling myself a horror story, and I just can't make myself shut up.

...

Since receiving that invitation from Josh, David had been running into an amazing number of old friends and acquaintances. It was as if a portal to his past had opened up somewhere, and people were just wandering out of it. He saw two guys on the street that he was pretty sure were classmates from high school. (He kept his head down, and they didn't notice him.) A few days later, at Wal-Mart, he almost got into a checkout line run by a guy he used to work with, but he recognized him just in time and got into a different line. Sometimes when you stumble upon a distant acquaintance, they have the clarity to realize that just because you've recognized each other doesn't mean you have any real desire to share a conversation at that moment. They will have the courtesy to just smile, wave, and move on, or if you're lucky, pretend they didn't recognize you at all. But not all of them have such clear perception. Chances are, if you're not careful, you will end up stuck in the middle of a busy grocery aisle, smiling big and trying to think of enough pointless "life update" questions to qualify as a conversation, so you can say "Good to see you!" and be on your way.

There were exceptions, of course. People David wouldn't hide from, who he would actually *want* to talk to. Josh had been one, when he had met him at the Cascade Mall. (And he

was one again, now. It had been months.) There were others who he wasn't sure about, and couldn't predict his reaction to. For instance, a few days after the Wal-Mart encounter, he ran into none other than Shelley Kent.

He was at Safeway, shopping for milk and cereal, when she surprised him, (terrified him) pushing her shopping cart up alongside his and matching his speed for a moment before catching his attention. When he saw her he expected to be knocked on the floor by a Big Moment of the most extremely negative kind, but it never came. He expected there to be some kind of tension, some kind of look in her eye that would drag him back to the turmoil of Seventh Grade, but it wasn't there. She had been his first "love", his first of many experiences with unfulfilled longing. She had been the center of a violent whirlpool of adolescent emotion for about a year of his childhood. Thirteen years later, they were reunited, and they talked for about two minutes.

She lived in Bellingham now. She worked as a waitress at the Olive Garden. She had been married three years. She had two kids. She seemed happy. They smiled, said "Good to see you!" and resumed their shopping.

It was surreal. There were times when David feared the fabric of reality might just fall apart like a poorly woven wicker basket. There were times when he *wished* it would. Just drop the pretense, he figured. Then maybe the world would start making more sense.

But reality held on, if only by a thin strand. The portal into David's past remained open for three more days, and then that weekend he found himself at the Crocodile, a famous Seattle club, waiting to see Army Airforce, a semi-famous Seattle band. He was alone. Julie had to work, and she wouldn't have

wanted to go anyway.

Army Airforce was the headlining band, so he had to sit through two openers. The first one had already played, and now a band called Sartre Through the Window Pane was just starting their set. It was during a between-song tuning session that David noticed his old roommate, Charlie Fransen, sitting near the back of the room. David was so surprised that he stared long enough to be noticed.

Charlie's eyebrows rose momentarily, and he set down his magazine, an issue of *Discovery* with the headline, *Dreams and the Subconscious: Is your brain trying to tell you something?* He pulled himself out of his chair and slowly made his way over to David. "David Martin," he said with a wry smile in that low, about-to-crack voice.

"How's it going, Charlie."

"Fantastically."

Charlie looked about the same as he had a year ago. He still wore the uniform, everything from the tight, thrift store t-shirt and kitschy lapel buttons to the black Converse All-Stars and horn-rimmed glasses that weren't for shade or eyesight, just looks.

"So what have you been—" David started to say and was cut off by a thundering test chord from the stage. The band then launched into their next song, making further conversation impossible. Brief, shouted sentences were all they could use now.

"Have you heard these guys before?" David yelled, feeling like he had to say something.

"Yeah, they're fantastic," Charlie yelled back. "This is the band I came to see. Did you come for Army Airforce?"

"Yeah."

Charlie nodded. "That's unfortunate."

"Why?"

Charlie just shrugged, and turned his attention back to the stage, from which poured the fantastic music played by musicians dressed exactly like Charlie.

Eventually it ended, and the sound of conversation reclaimed the room as the band took down their gear. "So what have you been up to?" David asked in the new relative quiet. "Where are you living now days?"

"Um, still living at the old house. Just living, working, etc."

"Where are you working?"

"Actually I'm an aspiring writer," he said with a straight face.

"Oh, really?" David said, fighting to keep his own equally straight. "How's that going?"

"It's an incredibly fulfilling artform."

"Uh huh."

"Yeah, the book is kind of a social satire, you know? Kind of political. Skewers a lot of cultural issues. Media, consumerism, religious fanaticism, all that kind of shit."

"Wow, sounds interesting." Charlie was about to continue expounding, but David didn't let him. "Well that's really cool. I hope that works out for you. So how's the house? Who lives there now?"

Charlie had to pause a moment to change tracks. "Oh, just me and a couple people you don't know. Aaron just moved out last month because—surprise, surprise—he couldn't pay the rent. Toward the end he hardly ever even went to work, he just slept all day. I have no idea where he is now."

"Huh." David started thinking how to end the conversa-

tion. He hoped Army Airforce would take the stage soon and solve the problem.

“Oh by the way, we still have some of your old stuff at the house,” Charlie said. “Your lamp, that nasty cat-piss recliner, and that old electric organ.”

“Oh shit, that’s right!” David said, grinning. “I forgot all about that thing.”

“When are you going to get it out of there? It takes up half the dining room.”

“Yeah, I’ll have to come by and pick that up sometime. You can keep the recliner, though.”

“Ha, ha.”

Army Airforce was sound-checking at that moment, and they were starting to get loud. Charlie watched the stage for a few minutes, then rolled his eyes and stood up. “Well, I’m going to head out. Enjoy the show.” Heavy sarcasm.

“See ya, Charlie.”

Charlie left, and David sat alone for the rest of the show. He briefly wondered what Julie was doing. He wondered what Josh was doing. Seeing Charlie brought back memories. He wandered through vague recollections of Brandi Noel’s party, of hanging out with Josh after classes and exchanging notes during lectures. He thought of Chuckanut Mountain, of Aaron, and a moment of exhilarating freedom as he threw himself off the side of a cliff. And Josh’s reaction.

*“Damn,” he said with a slight shake of his head. “That’s...wow.” He was impressed.*

David suddenly knew what he needed to do next. He needed to talk to Josh. Whatever it was that had driven them apart, he needed to find a way around it and talk to him, because Josh *understood*. David didn’t know exactly *what* he un-

derstood, but...something important. *Ask God when you get to heaven, he thought. Ask Josh when you get home to your computer.*



From: David Martin <kumar9345@yahoo.com>

Subject: Rock over London

Date: Sat, Nov 14 23:29:46

JOSH!

whats up, man? It's been like 20 years! we should get together sometime and talk.

oh, I got your invitation (congrats, by the way) I'm looking forward to your big party. :-)

see you then, if not sooner

David

...



From: Josh Miller <dignan456@hotmail.com>

Subject: Lone Locust of the Apocalypse

Date: Sun, Nov 15, 26:10:21

Hey David,

Yeah it's definitely been a while. How have you been? I hope you don't think I've been avoiding you. I have been, but I hope you don't think I have. ;-) (I hate using those smiley faces but how else do you type something "in humor"?) Anyway, I guess I kindof have been elusive lately, but you can probably guess what that's about. Mostly anyway.

But besides that I really have been pretty busy (working on this amazing achievement we're going to be celebrating, you know) and haven't had time to hang out with much of anybody.

So how's the Robin and all that?

-Josh

...

From: David Martin <kumar9345@yahoo.com>

Subject: Sometimes I doubt your commitment to Sparkle Motion

Date: Mon, Nov 16 2006 10:49:36

Hey Josh,

yah I realize its no fun being a third wheel, but we should still hang out sometime, like just us two. Go hit some bars, do something stupid, you know?

...

From: Josh Miller <dignan456@hotmail.com>

Subject: Tom Dick and Harry Connick Jr. Mints

Date: Tues, Nov 17 2006 20:49:18

Its not just the third wheel thing...I don't know, its complicated.

But yeah, I guess we oughta get together sometime. I'll see you at the party, we'll do some catching up alright?

See ya.

Josh

...

I don't know what David did for the next two days. I was in Bellingham, staying with some friends, hiding from him. And from *her*. The whole ordeal was a new and agonizing experience for me. I was exhausted.

Being in love ain't easy.

(Especially when...ha ha, well, nevermind.)

I wonder why I didn't just come out and explain everything? What would have happened if I had, at the beginning? Would he have believed me? Probably not. (Would he have had himself committed? Probably.) And what about Julie, for that matter? I guess I really didn't have much choice. It needed time. It had to be gradual. Still...not *this* gradual. There's no getting around it; I was gutless and scared.

Part of me was breathing a huge sigh of relief to be away from that turmoil for a while, but the other part, the part that wears the steel-toed boots, was kicking me. I could hear its drill-sergeant voice—*Get up, you maggot!*—ordering me back to my post, ordering me to complete my mission. With court-martialable reluctance, I obeyed.

When I got back, I found that David had started painting again. He had his cheap little easel set up in his bedroom and had laid down the first layer of a close-up portrait. It was too early to tell who it was supposed to be, but not too early to tell that it was bad. A few days later I saw him working on it again,

glancing back and forth between the canvas and a photo of Julie. It was her portrait he was attempting, and I shuddered to imagine the finished product. It would be a desecration of something holy.

There were times when I hated David. That stupid little prick. He had everything I wanted and was blind to it, wandering through his life in a daze. I wanted to grab him by the shirt and shake him until either he woke up from his stupor or his neck broke.

He didn't deserve any of it. He deserved nothing but my empathy and pity. The truth is, he was in a deeper hell than I was, and I had helped put him there. I had no right to resent him, but I did. Even as I watched him slowly fall apart.

...

David jammed his feet into his shoes and stomped out the door, barely keeping himself from slamming it on the way out. The Burlington nightscape greeted him with its muted white noise of buzzing street lamps and cars on a distant freeway. It was 12:48 AM, and he couldn't sleep. His mind felt like an angry beehive. He was mortally tired, but he just couldn't achieve that magical *click* of sleep, so he jumped in his car and started to drive.

He drifted through Burlington like a shipwreck survivor clinging to a piece of debris, going wherever the tide took him. He drove over the unfinished bridge into Mount Vernon, through the desolate stillness of the abandoned construction site, under the archway of towering cranes, and meandered through the streets of the old downtown. Everything was brick here. In places where the concrete had crumbled, you could see

the worn, rounded bricks of the old-world street that the city had paved over. Ancient train tracks ran right through the concrete of West Division Street, a sharp bump to drive over that always made his CD player skip. They ran all the way out of town and into oblivion, lost from view in a distant fog.

West Division Street. It led to the bridge into Westside Mount Vernon. And to 1005 South 8th. On a sudden impulse (at this point, everything he did was a sudden impulse) he turned onto that street and headed toward the bridge. It was now 1:18 AM, and David had lost track of time, place, everything. He was floating.

As he approached the bridge, several cars came over from the other direction. Their headlights pierced every gap in the bridge's girders, flooded around the cars in front, and struck the concrete wall of the nearby used bookstore like the light from a projector. The shadow shapes of cars and railings stretched and warped as the cars moved, covering the wall with a mesmerizing procession of alien forms.

David stared at the wall as he drove, and watched the shadows change. Railings became grass. Girders became trees. Trees smeared out into an endless forest of short birch and alder all the way to the horizon. The grey of the concrete faded into a deep, clear blue sky. He heard birds chirping.

Looking straight up with a dumbstruck smile, he wandered through the still, silent trees, stumbling now and then over logs and underbrush. The sky was an incredibly vibrant blue. *God*, he had never seen a blue like that. Had never seen *any* color like that. And then he noticed something strange. The sky was rippling. The entire sky was disrupted by a glassy refraction that made him think of water. It was making him dizzy, so he looked down, and saw the tower.

Rising out of the trees in the distance was a radio tower that looked at least a mile high. Its shaft of steel girders and cables rose until it was lost in the blue expanse, with blinking red lights all the way up. When he reached its base, which didn't look nearly big enough to support its height, he found that there was no fence. And there was a ladder.

He climbed slowly and carefully, but every time he looked down he seemed to have ascended hundreds of feet. He quickly stopped looking down. He could feel a vibration in the steel, from the machinery at the base. He could hear a deep, buzzing hum like high-voltage power lines that seemed to get louder as he climbed.

He soon realized that the undulating refraction in the sky was getting closer. It wasn't just a hazy visual disturbance; he could actually see it now, a layer of glassy ripples that had length and width, less distinct as it stretched away horizontally in all directions. It looked so close, like it was right in front of his face. Clinging to the ladder with one hand, he slowly reached out a finger, and touched it. It was cold. *Wet.*

Trembling with a feeling of indescribable vertigo, he reached through it, seized the next rung, and hauled himself up. He passed through the shimmering wetness and crashed into fresh air, sunlight, and thundering noise. His head and shoulders were now rising above the surface of an *ocean*, buffeted by a fierce wind. He saw dark water and choppy waves all around, though he could still feel the ladder beneath him, warm and dry.

The wind was a steady, muffled blast in his ears, but he thought he heard a voice carried on it. Someone calling out his name.

Off in the distance, he saw—

“Sir?”

David was standing on the sidewalk next to the used book store, his arms hanging at his sides, staring at the wall with wide, glazed eyes. His mouth hung slightly open.

“Sir?”

He turned at the sound of the voice. A cop was pulled up next to him, leaning out of his window with a searchlight in hand. “Are you ok, sir?”

“Yeah...?” David replied, not sure what the cop meant.

“What happened? You have a little accident?” He gestured over toward the bridge, and David saw that his car was up on the sidewalk, resting against the concrete foundation of the bridge with a headlight broken out.

He stared at it a moment, uncomprehending, then turned to the cop and chuckled dismissively. “Oh, heh, I was messing with my radio...I guess I veered off the road a little and bumped the concrete there.” He smiled, and shrugged it off.

The cop was dubious. He shone the searchlight in David’s face several times, and made him take a few sobriety tests, but eventually left him with a stern warning, and drove away. David got back in his car, pulled off the sidewalk, and drove over the bridge toward his old house like nothing had happened. Maybe nothing had.

The house approached in his windshield ominously, like an old, haunted mansion. Its shaky two stories were battered and moldy, and two windows were broken and repaired with duct tape. It was standing wreckage, but David was pretty sure it had always been like this.

There were no lights on inside, so he assumed no one was home. It didn’t occur to him that they might all be asleep, because it didn’t occur to him that it was now 2:13 in the morn-

ing. The ocean noise was still booming in his head, and it drowned out rational thoughts like *What the hell am I doing?*

He ascended the porch with purpose in his steps, though he actually had no purpose (but didn't know it). He rapped on the door with a crisp, businesslike rhythm, and waited. There was no response, so he raised his hand to knock again, but he saw a light flicker through the door window. A pale, colorless light that had to be a TV. He leaned to the right and looked through the door into the main living room area. He could see someone sitting on the couch facing the TV, the back of his head a silhouette against the flashing white glow. He knocked one more time, but the person didn't stir, so he just opened the door and walked in.

At the noise of the door shutting, the person sprawled in the chair slowly turned his head. It was Charlie, staring with eyes that were puffy and bloodshot. "The hell?" he croaked. His voice was more brittle than normal, as if he hadn't used it in a while. "David?"

"Hey Charlie."

"Hey...uh, what's up? What are you doing here?"

"Just stopping by. I wanted to see the old house." He saw that Charlie was watching the news, some kind of foreign crisis or controversial initiative or something. There were several empty beer bottles on the floor. "I thought I'd pick up my stuff while I was here, too. Like that organ." Where had *that* idea come from?

Charlie glanced around the room. "What time is it?"

"It's Ten."

"What? Ten PM?"

"Yep."

Halfway to himself, "Huh...thought it'd be later..."

“Well, it’s winter, it gets dark fast.”

Charlie raised the remote and hit “pause” just as George W. Bush came on the screen, freezing him with his lips in a silent “Yoooh” sound. “That’s a cute shot, Dubya,” Charlie muttered at the screen, then twisted in his chair to face David. “So...”

“Are you still watching the news on tape?” David asked.

“That’s right. We still don’t have cable. Do you have cable at your house?”

“No.”

“Do you get the newspaper, or have a good antenna for local news?”

“No.”

“Then how are you staying in touch with the world,?”

David looked at him a moment, and decided not to answer the question. But the answer was “I’m *not*,” and Charlie seemed to read that in the silence. He shook his head slowly. “You’re in your own little world now, aren’t you?” His voice was slightly slurred. He had obviously had a few. “It’s like, you and your little wife, in your little house...all that idyllic suburbia shit. I wonder about you, man.” He unpaused the tape, and the scene shifted from the President to a movie premier or something. “I mean, what, you just let everything slide now? You just ignore it? You need to pull your head out of your ass.”

He turned his attention back to the screen. He seemed to be finished. David heard every word of that sudden attack, but none of it penetrated. He looked at the images of political turmoil on the screen. He saw the pile of newspapers near Charlie’s chair, all today’s edition but different presses. Skagit Valley Herald. Everett Herald. Seattle P.I. Arlington Weekly Argus. Next to those, a stack of magazines, topped by an issue of



Time with the headline *The Big Picture: What does the world look like today?* Everything began to snowball. He was seized in a Big Moment. Scattered storms of disjointed sentences and word fragments exploded in his head.

*...I am running for president and I don't have a thing to wear...when I awoke dear, I was mistaken...the United States Army will no longer offer surplus nukes to Northern Sales outlet stores...I held my head and I cried...gee whiz, I'm dreaming my life away...please send care packages...*

He stared at the TV screen for a moment, then his face fell blank. "Whatever, Charlie," he said. "How about a hand with that organ?"

"How about getting it yourself. I'm tired."

"Come on, it's only 10:00, remember? You said you wanted it out of your house, and I sure as hell can't move it myself."

Charlie sat there staring at the TV, flexing his jaw. Finally, he stopped the tape and got up. "Fine. Let's move the damn organ."

Moving the damn organ proved to be a major ordeal. The awkward mass of polished wood and vacuum tubes was nearly as heavy as a refrigerator, and far more delicate. With tempers already on edge at the start, by the time they got the organ into David's hatchback, blood was boiling and profanity flowing. Once they laid it down in the car, though, the relief was so strong that they quickly cooled off.

"Thanks," David said.

Charlie nodded, and went back inside without a word. David figured that considering how late it really was, (about 2:40 AM) Charlie had been reasonably polite. That prick.

With the hatchback door flying wide open and the organ

sticking out the back, David drove home. He backed the car into the garage, got out, and stood there looking at the organ. He would definitely need help to get it out, but for now... He ran an extension cord from the workbench to the organ, and turned it on. It took a good fifteen seconds to warm up before anything happened when he pressed the keys. Then a loud, shrill music surged out of it, crackling and popping like a bad radio. He could smell the metallic odor of hot electronics. He could see the orange light of glowing vacuum tubes glimmering in the cracks between the keys. He stood there with a small, hazy smile on his face, holding down a steady D major.

Minutes passed.

“David?”

He jumped and whirled away from the keys like a kid caught with a Playboy. Julie was standing in the house doorway in her bathrobe, staring at him with squinted, puffy eyes.

“Hey Julie...” David murmured. “I’m, uh...sorry about that, I forgot what time it was...”

Julie nodded, but her face was still tight with patient confusion. “Where have you been?” she asked. Her voice was half-asleep and cracking.

“I couldn’t sleep. Went for a drive.”

She nodded again. “Ok...” She looked at the organ, then back at him.

“Oh, I left this at my old house when we moved in here. I stopped by and picked it up while I was out.”

Julie squeezed her forehead and rubbed her eyes with a small moan. “Ok just come back to bed, ok?”

David switched off the organ and hurried to follow her back inside. As he walked beside her, he gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. It was intended to be a tender gesture of affec-

tion, but it came out...friendly. Soldierly. A gesture of camaraderie.

...

That was the night I talked to Julie.

I'll never know why, but that was the night I finally gathered enough courage to do it. It was like I'd been holding my breath for my entire life. Blacking out and on the edge of death, I collapsed, and gasped in a huge, ragged breath of air. We met, we talked, and we parted ways with a promise to meet again. I was still alive, and now I felt like I could live forever.

It had been agonizing to see the two of them together for so long. Both of them dry, empty, totally alone even as they clutched at each other in bed like frightened animals. Things were going to change for Julie. I would see to it. But David was still lost. I couldn't stand to think of him left behind to wander and die, so I tracked down his tormentor, his elusive pot of rainbow gold, and left her a message. A simple message telling her what was happening. I left it, and crossed my fingers.

I don't know why I did what I did next. It might not have been wise. It might have done more harm than good, but I did it out of compassion. David needed help, and I didn't want to wait for *her* to act. So I tried to get through to him in the only safe way I could think of, considering the circumstances.

I left him a message.



When David went to bed that night (or morning, technically), he felt no more ready to sleep than he had before his drive. He expected to lie there awake all night, but then suddenly he was waking up, and it was morning. Not just technical morning, but actual sunrise-and-songbirds morning. He felt strangely cheerful. Like he had survived something long and horrible.

As he went about his morning routine, getting ready for work, he happened to glance at the calendar, and realized that tomorrow was Josh's graduation party. He smiled, and drew a bigger, bolder circle around the date. His eyes were a little puffy, but overall he was not feeling the effects of his late night on the town. He was feeling good.

He had to go to work in a couple hours, but he was still in his bathrobe as he poured his morning cup of coffee. He

loved wearing the bathrobe in the morning. It made him feel like a man when being twenty-six and married with a steady job didn't. Married, aging, and stable was an image he still couldn't associate with himself. He still felt like a kid, skating clumsily on the thin ice of the world. He couldn't wait to step out onto the porch in his bathrobe and wave to the mailman, pick up the newspaper, and kick back in his La-Z-Boy to read. It would make him feel for a moment like everything was sitcom-smooth. No real tragedies or true crises, just funny situations and amusing misunderstandings that will all be resolved by tomorrow.

He stepped out onto the porch to greet a neighborhood of sunshine and chirping birds. He stretched out his arms and let out a deep yawn.

"David Knows Best"

His yawn was the kind deep enough to constrict his ear canals, and the noise of the world was muffled into the soft roar of blood rushing through his veins. When it released him and the world flooded back into his ears, something had changed. There was a sound in the air...some kind of swirling, resonating tone that seemed to come from all around, from the air itself. It sounded like someone hitting all the white keys on an organ at the same time. Vaguely musical, but hideously discordant.

It was at that moment that he saw the tape.

It was sitting on the welcome mat directly at his feet. A cassette tape, the old kind made of matte black plastic. A crooked white label sticker had one word scribbled on it in huge, bold letters.

HELLO

He felt a sudden sense of alarm. He took a step back-

ward, glancing quickly around him, and almost tripped on the rolled-up newspaper. "What now?" he heard himself whispering breathlessly. "What the fuck is this? What now?" His feet were planted on the threshold of the doorway now, and he crouched there warily as if the porch were electrified. Slowly, still glancing around, he reached out and snatched the tape, and hurried to the bathroom.

It was 11:00. He had to be at work in forty-five minutes. Sitting on the toilet lid, he spun the tape in his hands, thinking hard. Did he even have a cassette player? Who used cassettes anymore? Who would have—

"David?"

Goddamn it, why did she always address him as a question? *David*? Did she think he was asleep, that she had to wake him up and get his attention every time she spoke? "I'm in the bathroom." He thought he had seen an old cassette player in the top shelf of his closet one time, but—

"David? What time do you get off work today?" She was right outside the bathroom door.

"6:00, Julie, why?"

"I was just wondering if you're going to be home for dinner. I have to run some errands after work so I won't be home in time to fix anything."

*But you just fixed something last month, dear!* "That's all right, I'll pick up something after work."

"Ok. Well I've got to get ready and go. Have a good day."

"Thanks."

David fingered the tape nervously, and bit his lower lip. Not now. Julie would be buzzing around like a relentless housefly, and there wasn't enough time. He stashed the tape

under some towels in the bathroom closet, and went to get dressed for work.

His five-and-a-half hour workday felt like twenty. He tried not to think about anything but serving his customers well and getting good tips (between him and Julie, about 70% of their income came from tips) but he couldn't concentrate. His mind was locked on some strange gear, and that little black tape had taken on ominous characteristics for no logical reason. He never even wondered if it might be from a friend, or some kind of prank by neighborhood kids.

By around 4:00, he was performing so badly that when he told his boss he wasn't feeling well and could he please go home early, his boss agreed without hesitation. David exceeded the speed limit all the way home. He didn't see Julie's car, but even so he went inside quietly. No lights were on. "Julie?" he yelled. His voice echoed in the inexplicable vastness of a working couple's empty home. Julie was definitely not here. He flicked on a few lights and rushed to the bedroom closet where he remembered seeing the tape player. To his amazement, it was actually where he remembered it, an old, box-shaped 80's style player/recorder. And it even had batteries.

He took it down into the bathroom, flicking off lights as he went, and planted himself on the toilet lid with the door firmly shut. He set the player on the counter, and pulled the tape out from under the towels. He held it in front of him, staring at it blankly.

HELLO

The word looked like it had been scrawled left-handed by a kindergartner. It was only legible because it was so big. Swallowing hard, he slowly set the tape in the player. He felt distinctly uneasy as he snapped the lid shut and pressed the

button—“*HELLO!*”

“Shit!” David gasped and smashed his hand against the Stop button. The voice had exploded out of the speaker the instant he pressed Play, and apparently the volume was cranked all the way up.

His heart was now pounding rapidly and irregularly, in nauseating flutters. He leaned back against the toilet and breathed deeply, his eyes rolling up to the ceiling. The tape player sat on the counter, silent.

Two minutes passed before he wanted to look at it again. He made sure the volume was set almost at minimum, then gingerly pressed Play again.

He heard nothing but tape hiss at first, so he slowly raised the volume. Still silent. Was the tape blank? Wait...no, he could hear noises in the background. The click and clatter of the recorder being moved. The sound of slow, rhythmic breathing. He was just about to turn it up further when the breathing came closer to the microphone, and then a small, strained whisper:

*“Don’t call the cops...”*

David leaned forward. He didn’t know it, but his eyes were wide and his jaw was tensed.

Another long silence with nothing but breathing.

*“Don’t call anybody...I...”*

More silence.

*“What...the...fuck...?”* David muttered slowly.

*“This is difficult for me. When I get the chance...”*

Just breathing for about twenty seconds, then a click, a pop, and total, blank-tape silence.

David just stared at the player for a while, then he hit Stop and leaned back with a deep release of breath, staring up



at the ceiling with his mouth open. “Oh my God...” he sighed wearily, each word a little lower in pitch. *What next?* The steady hum of the ceiling fan was his only answer, and it was sarcastic.

As he wandered out of the bathroom and through the house, he distantly wondered why he had turned off the lights on his way from the bedroom. Winter’s early twilight had already snuffed out the sun outside, so the house was almost completely dark. After stashing the tape and player in a desk drawer, he clicked on one lamp so he wouldn’t trip on anything, and flopped into a chair at the kitchen table. When Julie got home an hour or two later, she found him still sitting there, in a house totally dark except for that one lamp.

She paused just inside the door, looking at him, then kicked off her shoes and set her two bags of groceries on the table where David sat. “You ok?” she said casually as she started putting the groceries in the cupboards. She didn’t bother to turn on any more lights.

Resting his elbow on the table, his forehead on his palm, David let out a short, choppy laugh. “That’s the first thing you ever said to me.”

“What?”

“You ok. First words you said to me, when I met you. At that party, remember?”

Julie nodded, and started on the other bag.

In his mind David could see the desk in his bedroom. He could see that little black tape in a drawer, buried under old tax forms and bill payment stubs. He could see packing boxes, and piles of mud. He could see cranes, and cars, and trees, and radio towers...Mount Vernon...Burlington... It occurred to him suddenly, like a cartoon lightbulb above his head, like a revela-

tion. *This is a crazy place. You need to get out.*

"Julie."

"Mm?"

"Do you want to take a trip tomorrow? Like to the Oregon coast or something?"

She paused with a can of beans in one hand, and looked at him. "Tomorrow is Josh's party."

"How about Sunday?"

"I have to work Sunday."

"Monday."

"David..." Her eyebrows arched in concern. "I can't just drop out of work and take off like that. Neither can you."

David just stared for a moment, then he sighed and looked down at the table. "Yeah. You're right. It was just...a random idea."

"If you want to plan ahead a little we could get some time off and go somewhere I guess..."

He half shrugged, half nodded, half shook his head. "Ah, yeah, well...maybe sometime. So how was your day?"

"Fine." She put the last can in the cupboard and shut the door. "So we should leave for Josh's thing around 6:00 tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"All right. I'm going to go take a shower." She threw the bags in the trash and started toward the bathroom.

"Julie?"

She stopped, and turned around. "Yeah?"

Sometimes David forgot how beautiful she was. Especially when she got home from work, all made up. She had straightened her hair a little, maybe even highlighted it. How long ago, David wondered? And why hadn't he noticed?

“You’re very pretty,” he said.

“Thanks.” Her smile was polite. She turned around and disappeared into the bathroom.

Spotlighted in the dark by the solitary lamp, David rested his head between both hands, his fingers gripping his hair, looking down at the table. He smiled, thin and pale, and closed his eyes.

...

He worked an early shift the next day, and got home at about 1:30. He put on the pair of coveralls he had gotten at Value Village for ninety-nine cents, and started to paint. He had been working on Julie’s portrait off and on throughout the past few weeks, and was very pleased with how it was coming along. (It was terrible.) He had decided near the beginning of his shift that today was the day he was going to finish it.

He spent the next three hours gripping his frayed, shedding brushes, dabbing at the Valu-Pac canvas-board with paints whose most highlighted feature was “Affordably priced!”. Once or twice he actually stood back and held out his brush against his thumb with one eye squinted shut. He of course had no idea what this was supposed to accomplish. He didn’t know why he was doing it, it just seemed like the thing to do. He just shrugged and said, “I’ve seen it done.”

Julie got home at 5:30, and David came out of the garage with wet paint still on his hands. “Hey Julie,” he said, grinning like a kid at show-and-tell.

“Hey,” she replied, slipping off her coat with a slow release of breath. She looked tired.

“I finished your portrait. Want to see it?”

She cocked her head and smiled. "Of course I do." It was either interest or feigned interest. Or maybe discomfort. Most people get nervous when someone draws them. They understandably fear the result. Is that *really* what I look like? Even worse when the artist is incompetent, and the portrait becomes a nightmare caricature.

Julie walked into the garage and saw the painting sitting on the rickety easel. Her reaction was fascinating. She automatically began an "amazed" gasp, as if about to say, "Oh David that's so great!" Then she realized how shitty it was, and faltered. She recovered quickly and followed through with her praise, but it was a little more restrained. "David...wow..." Nicely ambiguous.

David didn't notice this choked response, but he still felt self-conscious, and needed to cover himself. "Yeah...it's really not that good, but it was fun. Didn't help that I was using a really bad-quality photo of you for a model."

"No, it's..." She reached for words, strangled by the line between kindness and honesty. It looked in every way like a student painting, a purely mechanical effort coerced out of someone who was never meant to pick up a brush. She leaned in to look closer, probably trying to find something to comment on. "It's very, uh..." And then she noticed something that made her jolt. The background and the face itself could have been done by a fingerpainting toddler, but the eyes... "Oh my God..." she murmured.

They were stunning. Exquisitely detailed, richly colored and nuanced...they almost looked real. But at the same time they looked distinctly *unreal* in a way she couldn't explain. Like a different *kind* of real.

"The eyes are incredible," she half-whispered, her face

inches from the canvas. “They look almost—oh—” she cut off suddenly, straightened up, glanced at David, then back at the canvas. “They’re blue,” she said in an awkward laugh, her forehead wrinkling as she studied the painting.

“Blue?” David repeated, not understanding.

She looked at him and pointed two fingers at her eyes, then at the painting, then back at her eyes again. “Brown? Blue? Brown? See?”

It took a moment for his mistake to fully dawn on him. “Ohhhhhh...” he said, leaning backward and looking up at the ceiling. “Well shit,” he laughed, shaking his head. “How did I do that? The photo was too blurry to tell, but...”

Julie released a strained laugh. “Well I don’t know, David, have you ever actually looked me in the eyes?” She laughed again, but it sounded like it took effort.

David wrapped an arm around her shoulders, facing the painting. She didn’t lean into him at all, she just stood there. “I’m sorry Julie. I’ve got plenty of brown paint. I’ll fix it, all right?”

“Oh no, no, leave it like that. I’d probably look better with blue eyes, don’t you think? Just leave it, I think it looks great.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.” She turned around and walked out of the garage. “It’s getting close to 6:00. Let’s get ready to go.”

...

Their drive started out with a flurry of small talk. Julie inflated every potentially silent moment with questions and comments about David’s job, stories about hers, and thoughts

on the latest news. David squirmed uncomfortably through it all, offering only bare-minimum replies. The barrage continued until they were ten minutes south of Marysville, then abruptly stopped. Julie finished one drawn-out topic about something she'd read in Reader's Digest, and just clammed up. They passed through Everett, Lynwood, and into Seattle in complete silence.

Attempting to navigate the Seattle streets was the usual nightmare, but the directions Josh had given turned out to be pretty good. They drove into Mr. and Mrs. Miller's crowded driveway and stepped through the door at about 7:45, fifteen minutes to spare.

David had never realized that Josh came from a fairly wealthy family. The house was large, bright, and decorated with a fondness for things elegantly rustic and falsely-antique. Natural colors, track lighting and lamps, plants in the corners, a piano in the den. It reminded him of Brandi Noel's house.

It wasn't just the house that was familiar, either. The crowds of people, the roar of conversation over music... Of course everyone was better dressed, the conversations were more civilized, and the music was more subdued, but David still felt that old awkwardness as he and Julie hung up their coats and made their way through the crowd. As usual, he didn't know anyone here. It was strange to think that he could know Josh for so many years and not have a single mutual friend.

The house was like a three-story labyrinth. Finding Josh in the crowd was going to take a while. There were a *lot* of people here, so many that Josh couldn't possibly know them all personally. His parents must have invited everyone they'd ever met. But then again, David figured Josh would be the type of

guy who would be happy to stop in the middle of a store aisle to catch up with any old acquaintance. A guy like that could accumulate a lot of friends over the years.

Having checked the entire middle floor, they descended into the basement, feeling more and more awkward with every step. At least David did. Julie seemed comfortable enough, even enjoying herself. She looked like a movie star in her black dress, her hair all done up with pearl pins and those painted chopstick things holding it all together. David didn't recall the invitation saying "evening casual" or "semi-formal" or "semi-evening formal-casual" or anything like that, but apparently everyone else had read it between the lines. Pretty much everyone was dressed better than he was. He thought Julie might even be overdressed, but he knew he was no judge of that kind of thing.

Wandering around in his blue jeans and short-sleeve shirt, he was about to ask someone where to find Josh when he spotted Aaron leaning in a corner by himself. Aaron was perhaps the only person in the house dressed worse than David. Just faded jeans and a white T-shirt that looked like it had been there a while. Aaron...did he even have a last name? David had never heard it.

He began debating whether to avoid him or not, but Julie made the decision for him. She spotted Aaron, smiled, and immediately started walking toward him. David was forced to follow.

"Aaron!" she said.

Aaron had a far-away look in his eyes, which were not focused on anything in the room. He blinked hard when he heard his name, and his eyes darted to Julie, then to David. His blank face broke into a wide grin. "Heyyyy!"

“Long time no see,” David said, while thinking what an absurd phrase that was. Like something the injuns in an old Western would say.

“Yeah...” Aaron trailed off, and his eyes slowly drifted to Julie, his hand hovering with fingers out as if about conclude a lecture. An incredibly weird expression came over him as he looked at her. David had never seen anything quite like it. “J...Julie, right...?”

She arched her eyebrows, let out a clipped, unsure giggle. “Yep...”

Aaron stared a moment longer, then shook his head and made a puzzled grunting sound. “Huh.”

“You all right?” David asked, now starting to feel even more awkward than before.

“Yeah I just...I don’t know, déjà vu or something.” His wide grin quickly returned. “So how’ve you guys been, man? Haven’t seen you since you moved out, I think. How’s the whole ‘adult life’ thing going?”

“Oh it’s great. I mean...” He looked over at Julie and smiled. “I’ve got a house, a good job, I’m married...couldn’t ask for much else.”

“Well said,” Aaron declared while David was thinking how corny it sounded. This was, of course, small talk, and there was probably no way out of it. Long time no see. Many moons. Big Chief Running Bullshit.

“How about you?” David said, reading off the cue card in his head. “What have you been up to lately?”

“Well, I moved out of the old shanty. Living in a studio in North Everett. Working for Skagit county, driving the line-painter truck.”

“Oh yeah? Good job?”



“Well, it’s all right. Pretty easy, not very stressful.”

“Right on. So are you doing anything else? School, travel, hobbies...?”

Aaron smiled a wide smile that showed no teeth, and shrugged. He was probably about twenty-eight years old by now, and the shrug was his answer. Just the shrug.

*But I wonder if he’s happy? I wonder what he’d say if I asked if he was happy? I bet he’d say yes.* And then he was asking it. “Are you happy?”

It was an odd question, but Aaron answered it as if it wasn’t. “Well, life’s life, you know? I take what I get, enjoy what I can. So...yeah, I guess I’d say I’m happy. I mean, why not?”

*Why not.* It seemed like a good enough answer.

David was about to ask where Josh was when one of the guests stood up and called for attention. “Folks, I’d like to make a toast to Mr. Josh Miller.” David heard a groan that sounded like Josh from somewhere in the room, and everyone laughed. “The main reason being that I knew he’d hate it,” the guy added with a grin. “We all know this party was forced on him by his parents, and he’s been a pretty good sport about it so far, so I figure we ought to embarrass him a little further.” He raised his beer bottle in a salute. “Josh, congratulations on your graduations. Maybe now you’ll actually make something of your life. Cheers.” There was a wave of good-natured social laughter, and everyone clinked their bottles or glasses. David was able to locate Josh by finding the focus of all the smiles and backslapping. Josh was taking it with good humor, but he was obviously uncomfortable. David managed to catch his eye, and waved. Seizing his chance, Josh excused himself from the well-wishers, and came over to the corner where David, Aaron,

and Julie were standing.

“Ridiculous,” he muttered, and reached out a hand to David. They shook. “It’s just a BA, and I’m getting toasts. I feel like I’m at my wedding reception. Thanks for the rescue, man. Good to see you again.” He smiled and gave Julie a nod. “Julie.”

She returned his smile. “Hey.”

“Well, congratulations on your graduations,” David said, and slapped Josh’s shoulder.

“Good stuff, huh? At least I actually knew that guy. Probably half the people here I’ve barely said two words to in my life.”

“I think I’d be a little scared if all these people were actually close friends of yours.”

“So would I.”

“Too much of a good thing and all that.”

“Right. See, it’s—wait, I’m a college graduate tonight. I should say something intellectual.” He cleared his throat. “Yes. You see, friends are much like, ah...cinder blocks, yes. A few of them are nice, but if you have too many, they can get in the way of things and you might trip on them, or try to pick them up and hurt your back, or drop them on your foot or something. You see?”

David nodded approvingly. “Yes, very true. And so mesenchymal, so propaedeutic.”

“Thank you.”

They looked at each other solemnly for a moment, then broke into grins. “Yeah, it’s good to see you, too, man,” David said. “It’s been too long.”

Julie saw someone she recognized across the room, and waved to her. “I went to high school with that girl,” she said to

David. "I'm going to go talk to her for a while, all right?"

"Ok. Be back before Eleven. Don't get into trouble."

Julie rolled her eyes at him, and he wasn't sure if it was in humor or not.

He and Josh both watched her go. "How's married life treating you, David?"

David kept staring into the crowd. "Good."

There were about twenty seconds of silence. Aaron, who had been just standing there listening this whole time, let out a huge yawn. "Hey Josh," he said in a gritty, just-woke-up voice, "I need to get to bed, man."

Josh struggled to resist the contagious yawn effect. "All right, let me go tell my parents." He started to move, then turned to David. "Hey, I'm giving Aaron a ride home. You want to come with us?"

David fought the yawn too, but lost. "You're coming back here?" he said with his mouth straining open, making his voice all mushy and ridiculous. (I have to yawn now just remembering it. If I ever talked about this to anyone, they'd probably be yawning right now too.)

"Yeah, I have to," Josh said. "It'd be nice if I could drop him off on my way home but I'm staying the night here, so no choice. Plus, you know, I just enjoy carting Aaron's ass around the country, so..."

"Dude, I'll walk," Aaron said. "I'm serious, I'll totally hitchhike the whole way. Where's my shoes?"

Josh snorted dismissively, and turned back to David. "Well?"

"Sure, I'll come," David said with a shrug. "Just let me go tell Julie."

They all piled into Josh's car, and Aaron was asleep in

the back seat by the time they hit the freeway.

"Is he ok?" David asked. "Why's he so tired?"

"I don't know, I guess his job really takes it out of him or something."

"What, driving a truck down an empty road at five miles an hour?"

Josh shrugged. "Yeah, doesn't sound too exhausting does it? I don't know."

Apparently not much had changed for Aaron in a year. Still bumming rides, still killing time. *And yet he's the one who's happy. Happy because, "why not?"*

The freeway inclined steadily upward, until they were soaring above the twilit mess below. It was all a black ocean of lights and imposing towers, stretching off to a watery horizon where cargo cranes loomed out of the bay like mechanical dinosaurs. A little distance did wonders for the city. From far enough away, crumbling concrete and smog-choked squalor became breathtaking grandeur.

Passing through the northern outskirts of Seattle, the freeway ascended a small hill and began to curve around a gradual corner. "What time is it?" Josh asked.

"About 8:45."

"Shit," Josh muttered, and shook his head. "Well, here comes the Red Sea."

"What?"

"Wait a second."

They came around the corner, to the top of the incline, and David understood. Below, the angry red glow of thousands of brake lights smothered a valley of bumper-to-bumper cars. It swept back toward them like a wave as the cars ahead slowed down to be absorbed into that seething ocean.

“I totally forgot what time it was,” Josh sighed, letting go of the steering wheel and falling back in his seat. “It’s been like this around this time almost every day lately. Some damn construction project or something.” He stared at the car in front of him for about a minute. “Well...shit.”

Those were the last words spoken in the car for almost an hour. The time passed in the kind of silent, empty daydreaming that’s only possible when riding in a car. The feeling of motion and the passing scenery keep the left brain occupied, while the right brain is free to wander in a disconnected, quasi-dreaming state. David floated there for what seemed like hours. Outside, the world darkened from twilight to night. He drifted in and out of half-sleep until, in one of his semi-conscious dreams, the alligator he was wrestling opened its mouth and said,

“Can I ask you a question?”

He stared at the gator for a moment, then the inside of Josh’s car flooded in around him. He listened to the echo in his head, and realized it was Josh’s voice. “Sure,” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“You remember the school bus thing?”

David didn’t answer. There was a long pause.

“Why did you do that? It’s awkward to ask, but I mean...”

David slouched in his seat and chuckled dryly with his lips closed. “What got you thinking about that?”

“I don’t know. Driving at night does that kind of thing. Pulls stuff out of nowhere.”

“Why did I crash the schoolbus.”

“Yeah.”

“Well...I was a kid. I mean, hey, boys will be boys.”

Josh cracked a smile, but remained intent.

“All right,” David said like a surrender. He waved his hands in the air like spooky quotation marks and widened his eyes. “ ‘This is gonna sound crazy, but...’ ” He paused. “Well...I fell asleep on the bus. I had a dream where there was this girl—”

Josh’s eyes darted toward David just for an instant, then he turned back to the road.

“What?”

Josh shook his head. “Nothing, sorry, go ahead.”

“Ok, so in the dream there was this girl, and I guess I kinda fell in love with her. Jason Weaver woke me up right in the middle of it...I guess I just lost it.” He shrugged. “I wanted to go back.”

“Back to the dream?”

“Well, yeah...but how was I supposed to do that, right? So I just tried to go *back*. Back to Fort Casey, back to the exact spot on the road where I fell asleep, whatever. I don’t know. I wasn’t exactly thinking it through.”

Josh nodded, eyes still on the road. Traffic was starting to clear up a little, but it was still crawling. Now and then they would pass by a sign declaring the speed limit to be 70 mph. Apparently the government had a sense of humor.

“The thing is, this...girl... It was the realest damn dream I’d ever had. It was...intense...it was just *so real*. When I woke up, I didn’t care about anything but getting back there. I think it was like dying, in a way. Being pulled down that tunnel... Light at the end or not, you’re being ripped right out of your world and thrown into something totally unknown. I mean...imagine the panic. That’s really what it was. Just panic.”

Josh kept looking straight ahead as he spoke. “Has any-

thing like that happened since then?”

“Anything like what?”

“Like that dream. That girl.”

David hesitated. “Why would you think that?”

“Well, you said in that email that you wanted to get together and talk. I was just wondering if maybe you were having some of the same... Like if there was any connection or, you know...reoccurrences of that. What happened on the bus.”

David stared at him. “Uh...what are you talking about, Josh? That email was just saying hello, I wasn’t requesting a psychological consultation.”

“I know, that’s not what I meant.”

“Where would you get the idea that it was about the bus thing? I was just saying we should get together and hang out.”

“I know, I know, I was just wondering. I was just curious. If anything like that’s happened to you since the bus.”

David opened his mouth, but found that he had no ready reply. *Isn’t this exactly why you emailed him? You wanted to talk. You wanted to tell it all. Why be shy now?*

“Yes,” David said in a release of breath. “Twice.”

Josh’s face and voice remained decidedly neutral. “No kidding.”

“Last year, at that party you invited me to, and then again later that night. It was the second time when I realized it was the same girl.”

“So it’s a recurring lucid dream, then? Is it exactly the same every time?”

“No, it was...” David squinted at the dashboard, struggling for words to explain how different this was. “This was different.”

“How?”

"It didn't...*feel* like a dream, not even a lucid dream. Dreams have that chaotic, disconnected feel to them. You don't notice it while you're dreaming, but when you wake up it feels...you know, washed out, hollow. This felt...solid." He closed his eyes, but not to recall the dreams better. He called into his mind's eye pictures of elephants, space shuttles, the Las Vegas strip, anything that would blot out images of those dreams. He wanted to forget them, but he couldn't stop talking about them. "And she's *aged*."

"The girl in the dream?"

"Laura." *Oh God, don't.* "Her name is Laura."

"What do you mean she's *aged*?"

*Why did you have to do that? Why did you have to dig up her name? Why did you have to fucking say it out loud?* "She's older now. When I first...met her—you know, on the bus—she looked about my age, maybe twelve or thirteen. When I saw her again last year..." He saw a flicker of an angelic face, fluttering hair like dark mahogany, riveting blue eyes that stung like frost—*Goddamn it, no!* "No!" he blurted in a loud, abrupt whimper. He squeezed his eyes shut and thought of elephants. "No."

Josh stared at him in alarm. "Hey, settle *down*, man. Are you ok?"

David took a deep breath and kept going. He wasn't even aware that he had just said anything out loud. As far as he knew, the last words he had spoken were, *When I saw her again last year...* "She was older, probably twenty-four or twenty-five. But I recognized her. She was the same person. Could my brain really come up with that kind of perfect age progression? It's just... It's..." He cupped his face in his hands and pushed, stretching the skin tight while letting out a feeble,



growing groan. “It was just too weird. It’s really...It really used to mess with me.”

Josh released a short, uncomfortable laugh, both eyebrows raised. “Used to?”

David looked straight out the front window, his face blank.

The Red Sea was parting. The fierce red glow dwindled, and they gradually began to approach the posted speed limit.

“That’s pretty interesting, David,” Josh said, glancing over at him. “Do you have any idea what it might—”

“I don’t think I should talk about it anymore, actually.” He kept looking straight ahead. His voice sounded robotic to him. “It’s not good. I’m a mature, married adult. This is...I don’t need shit like this running around in my head.”

Josh nodded with one of those upside-down, lower-lip “if you say so” expressions. “Ok.”

There was a stirring noise in the back, and Aaron poked his head between the two seats, looking dazed and sleepy. He looked at David, and a wide grin split his face. “Man...you’re fucked up.”

“Aaron, go back to sleep,” Josh said, rolling his eyes.

“Fucked *up*. Can I hang out with you?”

“What?” David laughed.

“You want to throw some Frisbee sometime?”

“Aaron...” Josh warned.

“No, I’m serious, he’s one crazy sonofabitch.”

David burst out laughing.

“Seriously, you’re the man, Dave, you’re nuts. We should hang.”

“Sure, whatever.”

Smiling a little, Josh reached over and shoved Aaron’s

face backward, and Aaron toppled back onto the seat, laughing.

“Well I guess *he* had a good nap,” Josh said with a shrug.

Within five minutes, Aaron’s laughter had faded into gentle snoring again. David felt his own eyelids sagging, and wondered what time it was, but lacked the will to look at his watch. He wondered if Julie was doing ok back at the party. He wondered why he cared, and wondered why he wondered that. He wondered why he felt a pit in his stomach, like he hadn’t eaten in days. A starving, suffocating hole in his very center. He had thought it was over a long time ago. That familiar weight. He thought it had faded away for good. He wondered why it was growing.

*Don’t forget me...*

Sitting there in the car, those three words reverberated in his head like pulses of pain from an infected ear. He tried to shut them out, but they were slow to fade. They held on with claws.

Finally, after a drive long enough to cross the Eastern Hemisphere, they arrived at Aaron’s dismal apartment complex, and dropped him off. Aaron was appropriately grateful, and to David’s surprise, even offered Josh a few bucks for gas, but Josh turned him down. It was almost 9:30 now, so David figured he should call Julie. He dialed Josh’s parents’ house on his cell phone.

“What does she look like?” Mrs. Miller asked cheerfully.

“She has blonde hair. She’s very pretty. I guess she’s kind of tall.”

“Oh that could be just about anyone! Come on now, is that the best you can do?”

“...Yep.”

A pause. “Oh.”

“She has chopsticks in her hair.”

“Well...I guess I can ask around. Just a minute.”

Cheerful Mrs. Miller found her eventually. The conversation was brief. “Hey Julie. How’s the party?”

“It’s all right.”

“Good. We got stuck in some traffic but we’re on our way back now.”

“Ok.”

“All right. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

“Bye.”

It was as if that clipped exchange used up the last of their words for the day. It came out slowly, like the last few drops in a bottle (...*drip*.....*drip*.....*drip*) and then it was gone. The drive back to the Millers’ house passed in silence. David found Julie, they said perfunctory thank-yous to Josh and his parents, and they drove home in silence. They changed their clothes, took showers, and brushed their teeth in silence. They went to bed in silence.

...

I met Julie that night at the park bench where I met her for the first time. She was a child then, small, lost, and confused, just like me. I remember the innocence in her eyes, the beautiful softness as she sat there, lost, but content. It’s still there even now. That innocence. Even after so many years, it’s still there, and it makes her whole face glow. Call it naivety or simplicity if you want, but it’s a gift. It’s beautiful.

I met her on the park bench, and watched those warm brown eyes light up. It was around 9:00, and the street lamps suffused her loose gold curls. Her expression was surprise, al-

most disbelief, as if she hadn't been sure I would come.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said in a breathless whisper, grinning. She stood up and took a step toward me. We stood there awkwardly for a moment, then she lunged into me and we embraced. It was so strange. We had only *really* talked to each other a few times, we barely knew each other, but when I put my arms around her there was so much there, like a history. And I guess that makes sense.

"Why did you wait so long?" she whispered into my neck.

I thought about her question, and all I could say was, "I don't know."

We walked through downtown Bellingham, looking up at a sky as deep and rich as blue paint. There were so many stars. We were walking in outer space. Our sidewalk was a floating bridge between galaxies.

We stopped at the only taco truck still open, and I bought dinner for both of us since this was, I guess, a date. I ordered using the little bit of Spanish I know, trying to impress Julie, but she and the taco guy both looked at me strangely, and I ended up with two burritos full of steaming cow brains.

"Please give my *mother* two *mind* burritos?" Julie said with a puzzled grin. "Where did you get *that*?"

"No idea," I said, grimacing at the chunks of lumpy gray-matter inside my burrito. "I thought I was ordering shredded beef."

"That's 'picadillo'. You said 'genio', so he probably figured you meant 'sesos'."

I looked at her and cocked my head. "When exactly did you become fluent?"

“Well, I took two years of it at Skagit.”

I grinned. “I didn’t realize you were so brainy.”

She groaned, but I offered no apology. She retaliated by taking a big bite of her “sesos”, closing her eyes, and saying, “Mmmm...”

“Oh God,” I muttered, and averted my eyes. She laughed, and I smiled and shook my head, and we started walking again. And you would think that a dinner of hot cow brains would pretty much kill all the romance in the evening, but it didn’t. It just added to the tangy, shivering thrill of it all. It complimented the lunacy.

All night, we were in a kind of starry-eyed trance. Our conversations had a vague, dreamy feel to them. We never once discussed practical, everyday things. Nothing about our jobs, our pursuits, our day-to-day lives. I don’t really know *what* we talked about.

We didn’t talk about David, I know that. But I thought about him. In my mind I saw him cold and alone in his bed, and I tried to look away. I tried to force him out of my thoughts while I looked into Julie’s eyes, but it wasn’t easy. I tried to rationalize everything to myself. I said, *Don’t worry about him. All he needs is Laura. He’ll be with her any time now. He might even be with her right now. Yeah, it’s all a mess, but it’s going to work out.*

Saying that to myself, I could smile. I had no idea how far down the jagged road David had already gone.

...

“Deep in the oceaaaaan...”

2:17 AM. David stood in the pitch black garage, wearing

only his plain white boxer shorts. The only light came from the orange glow of the electric organ's "ON" light, and the occasional glitter of a vacuum tube firing, visible in the cracks between the keys.

"...there lies a waaaave foor youuuu..."

One hand rested at his side, while one hand held a steady chord on the organ. D major. It was the wrong chord. Didn't fit the melody he was singing. A sour, painful dissonance. He held it, and began adding keys to it. He lifted his other hand, and added more keys, pressing his hands flat so that every key in two octaves was pressed. The sound was frightening. It was the sound he'd heard permeating the air outside, the day he found the cassette tape.

HELLO

As tired as he was, he couldn't sleep. He had tossed and turned for hours while Julie slept soundly beside him, and had eventually given up. He couldn't sleep. At least he thought he couldn't.

Still wearing only his boxers, he walked out the front door and down to the sidewalk. The night air was freezing cold and silent. Street lamps shone their pale green fluorescent light on every corner, and similar lights bathed the factories that loomed across the street. A thick fog shrouded the outskirts of town, curling around the farthest buildings, but leaving the center clear.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a woman coming down the sidewalk toward him, wearing a brown coat and carrying several woven bags. He glanced toward her, and she was gone. A neighbor's clump of dry beach grass grew near the place where she had been, but that was it.

As he stared at the beach grass, out of the corner of his

eye he saw a cyclist hurtling down the other street at ridiculous speed, directly toward him. He took in a sharp breath and whirled to face the cyclist, to try to get out of the way...and there was no cyclist. There was a swallow flitting down from a rooftop and into a nearby tree, but no cyclist. David stared into the tree, and thought, *I don't like that.*

That was how the police found him, standing there in the middle of the sidewalk in his underwear, staring up into a tree. They parked their cruiser against the curb, and shone a spotlight on him. "Sir?"

David squinted when the light hit him, but he didn't yet register the cops' presence. *Nope. I don't like that at all.*

One of them kept the spotlight on him while the second got out and walked toward him with a flashlight in hand. "Sir?" He shone the flashlight directly into David's eyes, and David turned.

"Yes?"

"Is this your house, sir?"

David glanced back at the open door. "Yeah."

"Can I ask why you're out here in your underwear, sir?"

David glanced down at his boxers. "I couldn't sleep. I just wanted some air."

"Have you been drinking, sir?"

"No."

"Well, you're going to have to go back inside and get some clothes on. This is a public area."

"Ok, sure." He started to look up at the cop. "Thanks of-  
fice—" And all he saw was a chest because the cop was suddenly an enormous, ten-foot pillar of heaving, uniformed flesh with no visible head. David opened his mouth to scream—  
—and it filled with water.

He was in the shower.

*Deep in the ocea-a-a-n...*

His knees felt weak, and he slid down the shower wall to a sitting position in the tub. He sat there a while letting the hot water rain down on him before he realized he was still wearing those white boxers. Little bits of gravel and grass were stuck to the soles of his feet.

He sat there under the warm rain for a long time. Eventually the hot water tank ran dry, and the rain turned cold. He got out, took off his boxers, and began drying himself.

Distantly, he wondered how everything had turned out with the police.

When he walked into the bedroom, he found the bed empty. The covers were thrown almost all the way off on both sides. "Julie?" he said, and got no answer. He stuck his head out into the hallway, and called again. "Julie?" The house was quiet.

He waited there in the doorway for a moment, just staring at the floor with puffy, bleary eyes. He couldn't seem to form one good, rational thought right now. Everything was choked up. Clipped. Chopped. All fragment sentences.

He shuffled backward into the bedroom and dropped onto the corner of the bed. He sat there, bent over, arms folded, until he heard a car pull up in the driveway, and the front door opened. Julie looked startled when she came into the bedroom and saw him there, but just for a moment.

"Where were you?" David asked.

"Where were *you*, David? I was out looking for you, that's where I was." She didn't sound frightened or worried so much as exasperated. She was dressed. Pants, shirt, shoes.

"I couldn't sleep. I needed some air."



Julie gave him a long, strange look, then closed her eyes and let out a deep breath. “All right, anyway...” she sighed, shaking her head with three fingers pressed to her temple. “I’m going back to bed.”

She unbuttoned her shirt, let it fall, kicked off her shoes, slid her pants down and stepped out of them. It was a beautiful sound, that gentle *whisk* of cloth sliding off smooth skin. In the dark of the room, David caught a brief glimpse of her silhouette before she crawled into bed. A few curves caught the light creeping around the doorframe from the hall outside, and were highlighted a soft orange. Even in the plain white cotton bras and panties she always wore, David had always thought she had the body of a Victoria’s Secret model.

She lay on her side facing away from him, and he lay facing her, studying the curving line of her shoulder, her back, her hip, listening to her breathing slow. He could feel each heave of breath in the mattress. He could feel her warmth next to him.

Slowly, he reached out and ran two fingers across her shoulder, down her spine to the small of her back. He felt her skin prickle as he spread his hand out and ran it over her hip and down the back of her thigh. Her ribcage expanded with a slow intake of a breath, but she didn’t move. Sliding his hand up over her belly, he pulled himself closer and pressed up against her with a deep sigh, planting his chin on her shoulder, against her neck.

She seemed to shrink into herself.

“I need sleep.”

It came out in a whisper. A small, pleading whisper.

David’s eyes came open slowly. He relaxed the pressure against her body, and dropped away from her onto his back.

Eyes fully open and staring up at the dark ceiling, David said, “Goodnight.”

And Julie said, “Goodnight.”

And David closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

When he woke up, he was in the middle of a forest, somewhere in the wilds of the Pacific Northwest.



David had moved quite a few times in his life, and it always took him a while to get used to a new house. He would wake up in his new bedroom, and with eyes still closed, he could see his old bedroom around him, could imagine where he was in the room. Everything felt normal until he opened his eyes, then the image in his mind would scramble as his new surroundings hit him. The bare walls. The strange carpet. The cardboard boxes full of “Clothes” and “Books” and “Misc”

Before he remembered what was going on, there was always a brief, frightening moment of wondering, *Where am I?*

So now here he was, waking up. Lying peacefully on his King-sized Posturepedic mattress, warm and secure in the darkness of his bedroom. Then he felt the branches of a salmonberry bush digging into his ribs. *That tickles*, he thought with a little giggle, and opened his eyes.

A thought rose in the back of his mind like a small, amused whisper. *Welcome to your new room.*

The patch of salmonberries around him stretched for about thirty feet, then there were just trees. Stark, bony alders stripped of all their leaves, clawing at the sky as far as he could see in all directions. The sky was the dim gray of early morning, and the forest was dark, but there was enough light to see that he was not on a trail, or in a clearing. He was totally surrounded by trees, scraggly underbrush, and mud. It had rained in the night, and the trees dripped a steady sprinkle like fake rain on a movie set.

Standing there in the middle of all this, his jeans and hooded sweatshirt clinging to him, his expression wasn't one of shock or fear. It was a look of total, empty-headed bewilderment that almost resembled disgust. His brows creased low over his squinted eyes, his mouth hung halfway open, and his head swiveled left, right, up, down, as if looking for an explanation somewhere in the bushes.

The movie-set rain dripped down on him in cold, steady rhythms. It was the only sound he could hear. Not even the muffled roar of semi-trucks downshifting on some distant freeway. Just the rain.

"Hello?" he called in a hoarse, tentative whisper.

His voice sounded distant, echoing as if in a concert hall.

"Hello?" he said again, a little louder, and then ridiculously, "Is anyone there?"

The looming trees that surrounded him on all sides as far as he could see gave him the silent, obvious answer.

*It's a dream!* he thought suddenly, and an electrical tingle shot through him. *I found my way back!*

"Laura!" he shouted. His eyes darted left and right,

searching the trees. "Laura I'm here!" And then he caught himself. Straining with effort, he reined himself in like a wild horse. *Pinch yourself, idiot.*

He pinched himself, and it hurt. He kept pinching, harder and harder, until he felt his fingernails touching each other through a bloody loop of skin.

It hurt like hell. This had to be real life.

He had to stand there motionless for about five minutes before he could think calmly enough to take any further action. *Look for your tracks.* Yes, that was it. Unless he had just fallen out of the sky (which he couldn't rule out yet) there would be tracks leading back to wherever he had come from.

The mud was thick, so the footprints were still strong. They formed a path of erratic steps that curved back and forth like a snake trail. He was able to follow them easily for about a hundred feet, and then he started to slow down, peering uncertainly at the ground. It was no longer mud but soft, leafy earth. Was that a footprint, or just a dent in the ground? He dropped to one knee and pressed two fingers into the ground because he had seen it done in movies, but all that told him was that the ground was wet.

He stopped, and leaned against a tree. He had to think. What was the last thing he remembered? It was all muddled in his brain, he couldn't remember what had happened when or where. *Think! Where were you last night? Josh's party. So you probably had too much to drink. Way too much. Julie drove you home, and you wandered across town to Burlington Hill, drunk off your ass. You kept going straight into the woods and passed out you stupid fuck!*

Slapping a hand to his forehead, he burst out laughing. Of course! So in that case, he couldn't have gone very far. He

just needed to get above the treeline to see which direction Burlington was from here.

He found one of the shorter alders and started to climb it. The mossy bark was wet and slick, but he advanced carefully, one branch at a time. Finally, his head poked above the dense thicket of branches, and he could see. *All right, so Burlington is...*

The satisfied smile froze on his face, and slackened. *...nowhere in sight.* Just trees. Endless skeletons of alders for miles. Then cedar and pine. Just cedar and pine, until the mountains took the horizon from view.

David's body went limp, and he lost his grip on the branches. He fell, grabbing onto branches here and there only to lose his grip again or break the branch and keep sliding. He landed flat on his back with a thump that splattered mud everywhere and knocked the breath out of him.

Staring straight up at the gray sky, gasping for air, he thought of Chuckanut Mountain, and his great flight from a rock face into the blue expanse. And then he thought of the aisle in Hagen, of meeting Shelley Kent there, of their two-minute conversation, and of the poorly-woven wicker basket that was reality. Had he slipped through a hole somewhere?

...

He lay there in the mud for about an hour. Slowly the gray pre-dawn faded into proper morning light. The birds began to chirp their tuneless songs, their blips and squeaks, and David thought that if these were songs written by God, God had better not quit His day job. (He was in the mood to have thoughts like that.)

*Well?* he asked himself as he lay there on his back. *Any bright ideas?*

*Step one would be pulling your ass out of this mud.*

*That's true,* he agreed. *That would be step one.*

He had been lying there long enough that the mud made a wet sucking sound when he peeled himself out of it. Clinging to his entire back side, it was wet and cold, but so were his soaking clothes, so it didn't really matter.

He stood up and took in his surroundings again. *Ok, now what?* This time there was no answer. He thought about his cell phone, but he didn't need to check his pockets to know it wouldn't be there. He was in an emergency, one situation where a cell phone would really come in handy, so therefore, he would have left it at home. There wouldn't be any reception out here anyway.

He remembered something about moss on trees. You were supposed to be able tell what direction you were facing by which side of the trees the moss was growing on. Something to do with the direction the sun hits. The moss was supposed to always grow...on the *west* side...of the trees...because the sun rose in the east? But then again, the sun *set* in the *west*, so maybe the moss grew on the *east* side of the trees. Or wait...maybe you were supposed to use the moss for starting fires. Dry it out for tinder. Maybe that's what the moss was for. And the telling directions...that was...something else.

David took a deep breath and let it out again, threw up his hands and let them fall to his sides. "Fuck it," he said, and started walking.

Fuck the moss. Fuck the Boy Scouts. Fuck Morse Code, horseshoe knots, trail safety, and proper campsite preparation. And fuck North, South, East, and West. It wouldn't even help

to know what direction he was facing, because he had absolutely no idea where he *was*. So he just picked a direction, and walked in it.

And he continued to walk, pushing his way through sticklers, stumbling over underbrush, and shivering, shivering, shivering, for two full days.

He didn't sleep the first night. He just kept crashing blindly forward with just enough moonlight to avoid gouging his eyes out on a sharp branch or tripping on a fallen log. This was no car-commercial forest, all pristine and picturesque. It was dense, brown, and ugly. No wide open stretches of pine needle carpet through which to drive a Pathfinder with stirring, beat-driven New Age music in the background. Just an impenetrable junkyard of rotting logs, tangled branches, and clinging, thorny underbrush. By the time the sun set on the second day, he was staggering. Face and hands covered with scratches. Exhausted. His mind was a constant shouting match, half of it screaming *What the hell—?* and the other half screaming, *Shut the hell up!*

It wasn't until he finally collapsed on the second night that those screams began to quiet. As he curled up in a tight ball at the base of a tree, the questions in his head faded into the sound of distant crickets. What did it matter how he had gotten here? He was here. He could ask questions all he wanted, but the only thing he could really *do* was keep walking.

Clutching his shoulders tightly, trying to hold back violent shudders, he settled in for his very first night alone in the wilderness. He closed his eyes. In that darkness he could see his new bedroom. The bare walls. The unfamiliar carpet. Boxes marked Clothes. TV. Misc.



...

On the fifth day, the Lord created the birds of the air, and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply, and to fill the skies with arrhythmic, dissonant music, and to wake David up from his hard-earned sleep in the wet mud, propped against a tree, and to defecate on his sweatshirt.

That was what broke him. The bird shit.

After two days of constant walking and two nights of damp, frozen half-sleep, huddled under the dripping trees, he woke up again to the off-key operatics of the birds, and just felt numb. For the first time during this little vacation in the woods, he began to wonder if he was going to die out here. And at that exact moment, a neat, round little puddle of bird shit bloomed in the center of his sweatshirt. *Plip.*

He stared down at his chest, at that little white blotch gleaming in the middle of the black expanse of his sweatshirt. *Birds eliminate liquids and solids simultaneously from the same orifice, he thought. The white stuff is urine. The black stuff is shit. And I am going to die out here, alone.*

It was just barely morning, but he was done with walking. He slid down the side of the tree, and slumped to the ground. He closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

...

When he opened his eyes, something felt different. He wasn't quite as cold. His clothes were a little less soaked. The birds sounded a little less dissonant. Had he actually gotten some good sleep? It didn't seem likely, but his body felt like it.

He got up, then just stood there, looking around. He felt like he should be gathering wood, trying to start a fire or something. Sharpening sticks. Hunting for rabbits. Hunkering over a campfire and thinking, *If I get out of this alive, I'm going to read more, exercise more. I'm going to learn Tae Chi.* But standing there empty-handed, no tools and no knowledge, he was helpless. All he had were useless, half-remembered scenes from “Castaway”. So he just started walking, and tried not to think about anything else.

There was a list in his head of those things he was trying not to think about, and it was steadily growing longer. So far:

a. He didn't know where he was going, and might be walking in circles.

b. He was thirsty. Drinking rain off leaves and out of puddles would keep him alive, but he was always thirsty.

c. He was fucking starving. He started looking at his thighs and wondering what raw human flesh would taste like. Would it be tougher or more tender than beef? Gamier? It certainly wouldn't be Organic. Certainly not Hormone-Free. He thought about his job, his home, his life... Certainly not Free-Range either.

No, he would leave his thighs alone for now. He would need them to keep walking through this forest until he finally dropped. That was the next item on his list, the biggest one.

f. He was going to finally drop.

As he walked, he whistled. He tried to whistle that list right out of his head. The air seemed a little warmer today. The overcast grey sky seemed a little brighter. *See, David, you are whistling. You are smiling. You are taking a walk in the woods. And what a great day for a walk!* He finished whistling “Singin’ in the Rain”, and started “Oh What a Beautiful Morn-

ing!” That one he kept repeating, just the chorus, for about two hours. Then he saw something up ahead, and stopped whistling.

A dark shape flickered through the spaces between the trees. It was backlit by the dim, clouded sun, making it just a vague silhouette against the grey sky. *It's a helicopter!* he thought, ignoring the fact that it wasn't moving. *It's a rescue helicopter! Finally!* He started to run for it, but then the fact that it wasn't moving combined with the fact that it was tall and thin and earthbound to convince him it wasn't a helicopter. No. It was a radio tower.

It rose out of a small, overgrown clearing and soared high above the tree line, tapering all the way up. He was amazed he hadn't seen it on the first day, when he climbed up to get his bearings.

The tower looked old, somehow. It was clean, free of moss, but its thick steel bars looked blotchy, worn, slightly corroded. There was no big facility at the base like you would expect at a broadcast station, or whatever this was. Just a concrete platform, a few pipes and cables, and a little sheet-metal shack with no windows. There was a white sign on the shack that looked like it should have said something like *Great Northwest Broadcasting – Relay Station 8. Authorized Personnel Only.* But it didn't say that. It didn't say *anything*. Except for the rounded black border inside the edges, it was just a blank sign.

That was strange. That was definitely strange. So was the fact that the clearing around the tower was *just* big enough for it to fit, but so close that tree branches brushed against steel girders in places. And the fact that there was no road leading to it, no access trail of any kind. It was just *planted* right in the middle of the forest like a huge, metal tree.

David just stood there at the edge of the clearing, examining everything with a feeling of unease. The subtle weirdness of the scene was playing with his sense of balance somehow. He felt slightly dizzy, but he fought it, trying to stay on task. After all, this was a radio tower, this was *civilization*. Of course, it was probably just a signal relay tower, so it didn't necessarily mean he was close to town or anything, but at least it meant he was still on Earth. *And there's got to be something useful in there somewhere*, he thought. Maybe a phone, or a map. Or even just a caution sign or something that would have tiny lines of info at the bottom. The copyright, the county and state, that sort of thing. Anything. A serial number would do, or a power output rating, he didn't care, he just wanted to see some *writing*, some sign that there were people about. He strode across the small clearing, and pulled open the metal shack's door.

That feeling of uneasy shakiness swelled in him, making his knees wobble.

The shack was empty. Just a bare concrete floor, and sheet-metal walls that were also bare except for a few signs screwed into the metal. They were warning signs like David had hoped for, but not exactly. They were blank. One of them, a large, yellow rectangle with rounded corners, had the word WARNING followed by two feet of blank yellow plastic. A smaller, translucent green one said, NOTICE: then eight inches of nothing. There were a few more on the other wall, and one centered on the back wall. This one was red, like a stop-sign, and had one word printed in white, directly in the center.

HELLO

David felt like the floor was tilting, like he was upside down. He backed out of the shack and shut the door, then kept

backing up until he was on the edge of the clearing. Until he was “a safe distance”.

“What is going on here?” he said under his breath, and it came out annoyed, like someone was playing a stupid joke on him, like someone had hidden his keys or stolen all his left shoes. “Is anyone there?” This came out quietly at first, but then he filled his lungs and screamed it. “*Is anyone there?*” It echoed in the trees once, twice, then silence.

David took a deep, trembling breath. “All right, that’s enough of that,” he said with forced calm. “Let’s get down to business, ok? Let’s get the hell out of here.” It occurred to him that he was talking to himself, but he decided that was forgivable under these circumstances. It also occurred to him that he was talking to himself in action movie clichés, and he wasn’t sure what to make of that. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” he whispered solemnly, testing the words, then cracked a sudden smile. *Ohhhh boy. This is fun. We’re having a lot of fun here.*

His whole life was becoming a bad movie. It had jumped the rails of the real world and spiraled off into some nightmare blend of romantic melodrama and B sci-fi flick, leaving solid ground far behind. When had this happened? How long ago? He realized he had no idea.

Still grinning, he looked at the base of the radio tower again. There were a lot of cables running up and down the steel girders. Some of them ran into the metal shack, where there probably *should* have been a generator or something, but most of them merged into one army-green metal box bolted to the concrete platform. David frowned, then started walking toward the box. *Because I’ve got an idea... and it just might work.*

Out of the back of the box came a thick, black cable as

big as his arm. It ran across the concrete and dove off the edge, disappearing into the ground. It seemed unlikely that a signal relay tower would be connected to the broadcast station by wire, considering the distance, but what did he know? He barely even knew what a relay tower actually did. And maybe the station *wasn't* that far away. It was a possible lead, anyway, and it beat walking in circles. He would face the direction that the cable was running, and walk that way until he dropped—until he found something.

*Let's get the hell out of here! This whole place is gonna blow!* Taking slow, steady breaths, he pivoted on one foot to the direction of the cable, and started walking. Daylight drained away with each step, until he could no longer see well enough to navigate the brush. Still numb from the cold and damp, but nurturing a spark of hope, he curled up on some short bushes, and went to sleep. The radio cable would lead him out of here.

Of course, he hadn't thought ahead much. He hadn't left any markers, so when he woke up the next morning, he had lost his direction. But as it turned out, it didn't really matter what direction the radio cable was running, because when he woke up, the cable (and the tower) had disappeared.

...

It wasn't right away that he noticed their absence. His first thought on waking up was that yes, he was now once again directionless. His second thought was *What the fuck happened to me?* He was covered in small scratches, a few dirty cuts, and small, minor bruises. Except for the bruises, the injuries were restricted to his hands and face, the only parts of him

not covered by clothes. He'd had a few scrapes like these already from crashing through this dense, mean-spirited brush, but he'd been moving carefully, trying to avoid *this*.

But this really didn't matter. The scratches were symptoms. What mattered was getting out of these *woods*. He made for the nearest climbable tree and started working his way up, intending to locate the radio tower, walk back to it, and start following the cable again. This was getting ridiculous. He had been in this forest for three full days now. *Three days!* He had been trying to stuff down the insanity of it so he could concentrate on survival, but it was starting to bubble up. The part of his brain in charge of rationality and logic was screaming in outrage. So was the part that controlled his vital functions. In this constant cold, thirst, and hunger, he was becoming acutely aware of his body's declining state.

So when he pulled his head above the tree-line and saw no sign of a radio tower, just endless trees all around, his surprise was quickly drowned out by crushing hopelessness. He didn't quite fall out of the tree, but he sagged, his arms going limp. He was trying to be brave and adult about all this, but now all he wanted to do was cry. *Radio tower? What radio tower? There's no radio tower. Just trees. Deciduous trees. Alder, birch, maple, oak. Conifer trees. Pine, cedar, spruce, fir. Beautiful trees. Make sure your trees are happy trees. Use brisk, soft brush strokes. It's easy. Now let's add a little shack in this little clearing here. Maybe someone lives here? Maybe someone likes to walk out here in this forest and finds this little shack next to this little radio tower. Yes, let's put in a radio tower. There...that's nice. That's a happy radio tower surrounded by happy trees. Remember to use soft, even strokes. See how easy that is? See how happy these trees are? See how*

*fucking happy all these fucking trees fucking are?*

Once again his mind glided to the cliff on Chuckanut Mountain. He remembered the taste of that moment of freedom, and he wanted to taste it again. His hands started to release, started to fall away—but he clamped them tight again, and pulled himself upright. *What was that?*

He had seen a glitter in the distance. A *metallic* glitter. He scanned the trees in that area, and his eyes caught it. An unnatural grey that did not belong in this sea of green. Steel. A steel girder.

He descended the tree and started running. The underbrush caught at his heels and the taller bushes raked at his hands and face, but what did that matter? He was *already* scraped up, right? He ran faster, and soon the oppressive cover of branches up ahead began to thin. It had to be the clearing, but... Something was different... It was too bright, it was...

He burst out into the open, and stopped. “Oh wow...” he mumbled.

It was indeed a clearing, but not the radio tower clearing. That had been little more than a tiny bald spot in the Pacific Northwest’s rich mane of trees. This clearing here looked like someone had taken the clippers and shaved a line all the way through. It was a power line trail. A wide stretch of clear-cut land that ran straight through valleys and over hills for hundreds of miles.

David wandered out into the open space, his head lolling left and right, staring upward with wide eyes. Twin rows of power lines ran through the middle of the clearing, supported at regular intervals by looming towers of steel bars. The towers were awesome structures, soaring assemblies of perfect geometry, all crisp lines and sharp angles. Standing in the center of



the clearing, he could see them stretching off into the distance, smaller and smaller, perfectly symmetrical, until they faded into the white sky. It was like putting two mirrors facing each other, like looking into infinity.

Breathing hard from his mad dash through the woods, he sat down on a rock in front of one of the towers and stared up at it. It stared down at him, immense, monumental, hissing and crackling with 345,000 volts of electricity.

Despite everything he knew about electricity and its uneasy truce with mankind, David briefly considered climbing the tower. It'd be quite a view. He would climb up there and yell, "I can see my house from here!" Then he'd walk home to his house, take a shower, have a hot meal, and make love to his wife. Was that really so much to ask?

No. It wasn't. In fact, that was exactly what he was going to do. Except he wasn't going to climb the tower, he was going to follow it. This clearing was like a nice, clean highway running through the leafy void between civilizations. Following the buried radio cable had been a long shot, but this was definite. These power lines *would* lead to a city, eventually. The only question was how long "eventually" was, and whether he could keep walking long enough to find out.

He had to admit, those were big questions.

"Oh what a beautiful mooorning!" he sang out into the dead, buzzing air. He picked a direction, and started walking. "Oh what a beautiful daaay! I've got a beautiful feel-iiing! Everything's going my waaaay!"

...

While David was singing in the forest, I was feeding

balls of dough into the Hobart crust-rolling machine, and trying not to think about him. I worked at Papa Murphy's Pizza. I wasn't quite a manager, but I was like an unofficial supervisor. My boss was an asshole. His nose was red and veiny from alcohol. I tried to ignore him too. I was ignoring a lot of things at the time.

It wasn't easy to ignore David, but I had to. I couldn't concentrate on his pain and my pain at the same time. I chose my pain, because I thought it was greater, even though it was temporary. Thanks to David's unexpected move, I was once again in love and alone. What could be worse than that? And while thinking, *What could be worse than this?* I was also thinking *I hope David doesn't die out there. God, I hope David doesn't die.*



“Everything’s going my waaaaay! Eeeeeeverythiiiiing’s  
gooooooooiiiiing myyyyy waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!”

Day Four, alone in the woods.

Moving was much easier now, on the power line trail. The ground was relatively clear; David could pretty much walk straight ahead at a leisurely pace. The power companies probably sent out clearing crews at least once a year to trim trees and keep the brush under control. Maybe now his scrapes could heal. This was one of three or four tiny thoughts that clattered around in his hollow skull with each step. Another one was this: These power lines had not been here yesterday. Yesterday, there had been a radio tower. And the day before yesterday, the radio tower had not been there either. These were all strange facts.

The hunger was starting to get to him. He felt woozy,

lightheaded. He could taste the residue of burned body fat in his mouth, a film on his teeth that smelled like feces when he scraped it off with a fingernail. His breath was sour like rancid butter. He had a headache. His mouth was parched, and slimy with air-dried spit. *Your problem is you don't eat right*, his mother told him. *You don't get nearly enough protein, and you don't drink enough. You should be drinking at least eight glasses of water every day. If you're at work, take eight water breaks. Choke it down, gag on it until your stomach bloats, until you start peeing out your nose, because you must get eight glasses, that's the rule. Otherwise, you die.*

It hadn't rained since his first night out here, but he had been able to get a few dirty sips out of puddles over the last four days. All the sips amounted to maybe two glasses of water. At the very least, one and a half. And there was protein in body fat, right?

That day, due to the clear ground, he was able to keep walking well into the night. The moon and stars provided just enough light to avoid tripping. He was exhausted, of course, but he knew he would die of thirst or hunger long before he died of sleep deprivation. His eyes were glazed, and every natural forest sound had been sanded out of his awareness by the gritty buzz and crackle of the power lines. Toward the end he was barely even walking. He stumbled constantly, taking low, buckling steps like a clumsy limbo walker. Finally his knees gave way and he fell, landed all on his shoulder all at once, and the impact forced the first whimper out of him. Lying there on his shoulder, curled up like a ten-year-old in bed, he released two more strained, choked little sobs. He thought about what a pathetic sight he must be. He imagined a camera view close up on his face, then zooming out and out and out,

the view filling with trees until his crumpled body was just a tiny speck in the middle. Then maybe a lonely wolf howl or something. He imagined rescue helicopters flying overhead, searching the ground, not finding anything, and then just as they fly past, you see David asleep, hidden under some bushes. He wakes up just in time to wave and jump around and yell, "Wait! I'm right here!" but it's too late. He imagined the newspaper headlines when they found out he was missing. HIGHWAY MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE PASSES, they would declare, and then somewhere in a small corner of the Local Interest page, there would be a little box that said, "Some guy named David Martin is missing. We know this because he hasn't paid his subscription fee this month."

He tried to imagine what Julie was doing right now, and found that he couldn't remember what she looked like. He had a vague outline, he knew she had blonde hair and brown eyes and a nice ass, but he couldn't bring up a clear picture of her face. He couldn't think what her voice sounded like either. When she said, "I need sleep," and, "Goodnight," her voice was just the buzz of the power lines forced into vowel sounds.

That rasping, popping voice spoke to him all through the night. And it wasn't Julie, it was something else, something bitter and cruel and relentless. It whispered harshly in his ear like a throat-cancer victim attempting to declare her love through an electro-larynx. *Are you lonely, my love? Don't be lonely. I love you, and I'm here for you. I'll always be here for you.* It beat down on him, clawing at his ears, and he hunched his shoulders tighter, feeling the tears squeeze out of his eyes. *My love, you don't need that bitch, Julie. You don't need that other fucking whore either. You don't need anyone but me. Because I love you. You'll never be alone again. Now go to sleep,*

*my love. Go to sleep.*

Eventually, hours later, David did go to sleep. And when he woke up, he was greeted by a sound that actually drowned out the power lines. A deep, thundering, roar.

...

The moment he heard the sound, he scrambled up and whirled left and right, trying to determine its source. Whatever it was, it was a ways off yet, but he could feel the vibration in the ground. At semi-regular intervals the steady roar was punctuated by an explosive *thump*, like a huge, soft fist striking the earth. David started walking, his head cocked to one side, listening with fascination to this strange new sound. In the background, the power lines seemed to wail in protest, furious that they were no longer the center of attention.

The trail sloped downward slightly, and he could see that it was beginning to curve. Each tower was facing a progressively sharper angle, making a gradual ninety-degree turn to his left. He guessed this was to avoid the steep hills that jutted upward a few miles ahead. It would straighten out again eventually and keep heading toward the city, but David no longer cared. He was mesmerized by this soft thunder. It filled his ears like cool silk, like cold water on fevered skin. He walked straight toward it, and when the trail curved away to the left, he kept walking straight, forcing his way into the woods again. The action-movie star in his head growled, *We're not out of the woods yet*, and lit up a stogie. David didn't smile this time. His face was the face of a brainwashed cult worshiper. Or a sleepwalker.

The trees ahead were thinning. He could see sky through

them. With every step the roar grew louder. He could feel those pounding *thumps* in his feet, and he timed his footsteps so they would coincide, about thirteen steps between each impact. That fourteenth step sent shivers up his spine. He was a giant, he was a god, shaking the earth with his mighty strides. The trees continued to thin, and so did the brush, revealing loose, gritty soil. He could see the sky through large gaps in the tree canopy, a silver-grey playground of huge, puffy clouds. And he could see something of what lay beyond the trees. A wide, flat space. Open sky.

He stepped out from the trees, and stopped. He stood there, absolutely still, like the sole survivor of the Apocalypse, emerging from his cave into a world reborn.

It was the ocean.

He was standing in a field of beach grass, and beyond the grass was an infinite horizon so perfect he could see the curve of the earth.

Breaking into a wild run, he leaped out of the grass and onto the beach. He kept running, kicking off his shoes, letting his feet sink into the cool sand. Just before the tide line he slid to a stop and dropped to his knees, feeling the pounding of the waves vibrate every bone in his body. He was *here*. He had *made it*.

He didn't see any shack in the beach grass, or red-and-white-striped poles, but that didn't matter, he was *here*. All this insanity somehow added up. This was not coincidence, it couldn't possibly be coincidence. He was here because *she* was here, somewhere, he just had to find her, had to somehow *get to* her, had to... He squinted his eyes shut and his whole body tensed, he clutched his skull in his hands, everything straining, trying to somehow make something happen. He curled into a

ball so tightly that he was almost doing a summersault, his head trying to burrow into the sand...but there was no magic flash, no sudden space warp to throw him into her arms. He didn't know what he was expecting to happen. It just seemed like if he could close his eyes hard enough and long enough, when he opened them...

Curled up in the sand, he *made* himself go to sleep. He allowed all the desperate hunger, thirst, and exhaustion to break out of its restraints and flood over him. He experienced a brief freefall into the deepest sleep he had ever known, and then...

*Snap.*

When he opened his eyes, he was on more or less the same beach, but there were differences. Here, the tide was out, and instead of a flat sky of cement clouds, the horizon was aflame with an explosive red sunset. The wind was stronger, but also warmer. He took big, grinning gulps of the salty air, looking out at the bowed horizon, eyes wide with exhilaration. It wasn't easy to say it out loud, but he had to. He said it slowly, tentatively, like trying to stick a needle in a soap bubble without popping it.

"Laura?"

He cringed at the sound of his voice, expecting this whole scene to collapse on itself, but it didn't. It remained solid. But there was no reply.

"Laura?" he said more forcefully, but the ocean roar swallowed his voice. He turned slowly around, scanning the fields of sand dunes and blade grass. He saw the red and white striped poles, but no sign of a cabin, or any people or—wait.

There was a fire. Farther down the beach was the tiny orange glow of a driftwood campfire, like a feeble candle flame



at this distance. David ran. As much as it was possible in the deep sand, he sprinted, kicking up clouds of grit behind him. He ran for his life, heedless of things like composure and dignity, until he was close enough to realize that the figure crouched next to the fire was not Laura.

He dropped to a rolling walk, deflating, feeling like he had just run a marathon instead of two hundred feet. It was not Laura. This didn't make sense. It was *not Laura!* It was a *man*, just some guy, didn't look familiar, didn't look significant or special or anything, it was...just...*some guy*.

This ordinary, unimportant, un*Laura* asshole saw David coming, and when David was close enough, the guy waved. David waved back weakly, still glancing around to see if somehow he had missed her, had been so focused on the fire that he had run right past her or...

"Evening," the stranger said. He was sitting on a piece of driftwood, poking at the fire with a stick, a stocky man in his early thirties with cropped brown hair and wire-frame glasses. David couldn't think of anything to say in reply. He stood there just on the edge of the fire's light with his hands in his pockets, looking at this person who was not Laura.

"Beautiful sunset, huh?" this person said, looking a little uncomfortable. David wondered what he must look like to this man right now. Was his face contorted and feral? Did his eyes twitch and dart around? He probably looked like a guy you don't want walking up to your campfire on a beach at night.

"Yeah," he said, still glancing around, searching. "Beautiful."

"You all right, buddy?"

"Yeah I just... Mind if I sit down for a minute?"

The un-Laura person probably did mind, but after a mo-

ment's hesitation he said (or made himself say), "Sure. Uh, pull up a chair..."

David sat down in the sand next to the fire, and started warming his hands. "Thanks." He couldn't stop looking around. The sun was mostly down now, and it was too dark to see much outside the fire's ring of light, but he kept searching, doing his best to make his roving eyes look casual and not psychotic. She wasn't out there. It was just an empty beach. Everything was so normal and un-fantastical. He had to look at his un-tattered clothes and un-scraped skin to reassure himself that he wasn't still on the same old real-world beach. That he was somewhere *else*.

"I'm Ben," the man across the fire said, and smiled.

"I'm David." Here he was, on the beach. Here he was, sitting by a fire, smiling and nodding, introducing himself.

Ben squinted behind his glasses. "David," he murmured and looked upward, squinting a little, like a guy trying to remember the name of someone he just met ten minutes ago. "Huh."

"What?"

"I don't know, your name just sounds a little familiar." He spun his wheels for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, maybe it's just your outsider-ness. I mean you don't really see many outsiders in Washington, especially not way out here."

The total lack of comprehension in David's face must have looked like drunken stupor, because Ben asked again, "Are you sure you're ok, buddy? You look like you could really use a good night's sleep."

David smiled hazily, looking at the fire. "Actually, I'm asleep right now."

"I know, but you know what I mean? Real sleep."

David looked up at the man, and his brows lowered. Ok, what *was* this?

Ben still looked uncomfortable, but he was trying to keep things light. “So anyway, uh...are you from around here?”

David was still staring at Ben, his face tight with confusion. “I...have no idea.”

A pause. Ben coughed. “Ok...well anyway, it’s a great place, isn’t it? I’m from Bellingham, but I love it out here, it’s a perfect place to get away. I took a week off from work to come out here, visit my sister, just relax, you know?” A pause. “So are you on vacation too or...?”

Still staring, David shrugged. “I—I don’t know, listen, is there a town around here or something? I’ve been hiking in those woods for a while and I’m kind of disoriented.”

“Sure, there’s—well, I haven’t checked the outside in a long time, but in here, Ocean Shores is about a ten minute walk that way...” He pointed back toward the blade grass, and David saw a tiny trail leading back into some grassy dunes. “...so I’d imagine it’s somewhere close on the outside, too. Is this where you are out there, too? Here on the beach?”

David opened his mouth to answer, and all that came out was a stifled, embarrassed little giggle, a quick shake of his head. This was *crazy*. “Yeah I...I guess.”

“Well I wouldn’t try to walk back to town in the dark if I were you. You picked an odd spot to bed down for the night but since you’re already asleep, well...I’d get out of here and get back to that sleeping. No offense but you kind of look like you need it.”

“Yeah...I guess I probably...”

Ben squinted his eyes and rolled them upward again, as if trying to look up at his prefrontal cortex and read the informa-

tion written there. “David...God, why does that sound so...?” He pursed his lips and shook his head.

David stood up and looked around. “Ok, well I’m going to uh...head out, but, um, just wondering...have you seen a shack on the beach around here anywhere? A little cabin like—”

Ben’s eyes suddenly widened. “Oh shit, that’s right! Now I remember...*David*. My sister knows you, she’s been trying to find you for—”

“What?” David blurted in a cracked voice. “Your sister? Who’s your sister? Where is she?”

“You know her. Her name’s Laura, she’s—”

*Oh God. Oh God.*

“—been looking for you, she got a message about you or something, she’s been trying to find you for a few days now.”

At that moment everything flickered, colors desaturated. Ben, the fire, the beach, everything started to distort and lose solidity, not in a visual way, but in David’s awareness of it. Its reality faded, and through its translucency he became aware of another beach underneath. He started to feel sand against his cheek even though on Ben’s beach he was standing up.

“Well,” Ben sighed, “it looks like you have to go.”

“Wait!” David pleaded, desperately holding on, trying to cling with his arms and hands to something that was invisible and intangible. “Where is she? How do I find her?”

But Ben was gone. His beach had been replaced by another one, and Ben was now nothing but an after-image in his mind’s eye. David pounded the sand, refusing to open his eyes. “God damn it, how do I find her?” he whimpered, face down in the sand, blowing grit into his teeth and nostrils. “How the hell do I find her?”

...

Ben's advice was a joke. He couldn't sleep. He *wanted* to more than anything, to let this new, more desolate beach just fade to black, but he couldn't make it happen. His chest felt cinched tight, like there were coils of wire wrapped around him, squeezing.

He rose to his feet stiffly, and turned to face the ocean. It was black, like a vast tar pit stretching out to the horizon. It churned and heaved like a living thing. Breathing. A low, sub-sonic rumble. The deep, constant, sigh of something ancient and weary. He could hear the muffled roars of the monsters out there in the deep, all the sea serpents, Behemoths, Leviathans, calling to him. He wanted to walk out there, sink into that endless black, and lose himself.

Hours passed. He didn't know how many. Slowly, the black sky became a murky gray, and at some point he blinked, turned around, and started walking. He walked to where the fire had been in his dream, and looked around. The trail was a little larger and a little farther down the beach than it had been in the dream, but it was there.

The trail passed through the beach grass, then some sparse trees, and came out at the side of a road. David emerged from the trail into a world he had forgotten existed. There were buildings. Cars. Street lamps. And very few trees.

He had been out of civilization less than four days, and had forgotten it. How easy it was.

A mildewy wooden sign welcomed him to Ocean Shores. The town was little more than one main street of tourist traps, a gauntlet of quaint shops selling ice cream, souvenirs, postcards,

and saltwater taffy. At this hour, they were selling nothing, just row after row of dark windows and “Sorry, we’re CLOSED” signs. There were no people, and no cars. The only sound was the buzzing street lamps, and the distant roar of the ocean. It was a ghost town, and David wandered through it like a ghost. Behind him, the sun was rising. It shone dimly through a gap in the cloud cover, a narrow slit of light at the horizon beneath a warehouse ceiling of clouds. It gave the whole outdoors the strange tint of indoor lighting. As if the sun were just a really big 100 watt light bulb.

As David walked, he had very little idea where he was or what he was doing. He walked in a trance. Like sleepwalking while awake. Morning shadows stretched out in front of him. He felt like a silhouette. The street and shops ahead looked wrong. They were bent, crooked, lit with alien dawn light. The windows were dark, but there were people behind them, staring out at him with fevered curiosity, their faces long and pale and bald like the screamer in that Edvard Munch painting. *Look at that fool*, they were saying, their mouths gaping open. *Look at him. What is he doing here? How did he get here? He should leave. We should kill him. Let’s kill him.* Maybe they had no bodies. Maybe they were just faces in the window, floating, staring faces. No, the windows were empty. There was no one in there. The town was completely empty. Because everyone was dead.

*Finally*, David thought, *some solitude!*

He laughed hysterically.

A pair of headlights were growing in the distance, diffused into big, soft spotlights by the fog that wreathed the edges of town. He didn’t pay them any attention as they approached, lighting the road for some nondescript car driven by

some translucent, screaming ghost. If they wanted to kill him, he wouldn't try to stop them.

The car slowed down as it passed him. It kept driving for about thirty feet, then stopped, and made a U-turn. David kept walking, staring straight ahead. The car pulled up to the curb beside him, and stopped. The passenger side window rolled down, and a face poked out of it but...it wasn't long, or pale, or bald, or screaming. It was skinny, but blocky, naturally tan, and wore a loose, curly mop of black hair. It gawked at him in surprise, and when it opened its mouth, it didn't scream, it just said, "David?"

David stopped walking, and turned around. He had difficulty making his mouth form words, but he managed to get out, "Aaron," in a low, cracked voice. Immediately after saying it, he felt a little better. The streets looked less crooked, the shop windows less menacing.

"What are you *doing* here, man?" Aaron said through an amazed chuckle. David shrugged. Aaron glanced him over, and his amazement took on a note of concern. "And dude, you look like *shit*. What the fuck happened to you?"

David just stared at him with glazed, bleary eyes, like someone who has just woken up from a really bad sleep.

"Where you staying? You want a ride somewhere?"

David nodded.

"Well hop in."

David got in the car (the beautifully warm, warm car, oh God...) and Aaron watched him with a shaking-head look of amazement and disgust. To David's immense relief, he didn't ask any questions yet. All he said was, "Where we going?" to which David replied, "Home." Aaron accepted this with a nod, and that was the end of it. They got on the freeway, and headed

North.

David felt the solidness of the dashboard and firm embrace of the shoulder strap seeping civilization back into him. He felt reality—or at least a more conventional reality—flooding into him through the seat cushions, the buttons on the radio, and the Wal-Mart oil change reminder sticker on the windshield. By the time Aaron finally did start asking questions, David was coherent. He actually broke the silence himself.

“So...what are you doing in Ocean Shores?” His first full sentence was slow and labored, as if English were his second language.

Aaron glanced over at him, then back at the road. “Vacation.”

“By yourself?”

“Yeah. I was camping out on some rocks by the beach. Work is slow, had a few days off. I was planning to head home tonight, but it doesn’t matter.”

“I appreciate the ride. Really appreciate it.”

“No problem, bro. I’ve got work tomorrow, so I needed to come down before then anyway. Reality’s always a bitch, but it’ll fucking kill you if it hits you off guard, you know?”

“Yeah.”

A pause. “Ok...your turn.”

“What?” David asked, but he knew what Aaron wanted. An explanation. What was *he* doing in Ocean Shores? Alone? Muddy? Wet? Looking like a cat’s scratching post? *Well Aaron, you know, just out enjoying the sights and smells, just taking a stroll through our quaint little outdoors, listening to the birds, that sort of thing.*

“Your turn to tell me what you’re doing out here, dude.



You sure don't look like you're on vacation."

David looked out the passenger window at the trees flying by. Oh the trees. Those happy, happy trees. "Well..." he said, and it was a long, drawn out word. "I guess I just needed to get out." He realized that might not be far from the truth. "You know what I mean? To just...*get out*." Aaron nodded and said nothing. "I've been uh...camping out in the woods for a few days, kind of roughing it I guess. That's why I look so...like this."

Aaron did that jutting lower lip nodding thing. "Ok, right on. So...did you lose all your camping gear or something? Where's your car at?"

David twisted his head further toward the window, and stared up past the trees to the pale, washed out sky. "You know...I'd kind of rather not talk about it. It's been a rough week."

Aaron nodded again. "Ok, sure. We'll just get you home." A pause. "So...is Julie at home or...?"

"I don't want to talk about it," David grunted, and it came out more unfriendly than he liked. He had never thought he was the kind of guy to use that phrase.

"All right...so you want to stop somewhere and get some dry clothes or something?"

"I think I just need some food, really."

"All right, we'll stop at a café. Cool?"

"Yeah. Thanks a lot, man."

"Don't worry about it."

"I mean, you probably saved my life."

"Not a problem."

...

They ended up at a nameless truck-stop café somewhere near Hoquiam, one the countless damp, mossy little towns that lined Washington's coast. They sat on typical, slightly sticky vinyl café benches and ate typical café food. The same overpriced, artificial-looking eggs, hash browns, and pancakes sold in cafés around the nation. To David, it tasted like exotic French cuisine. Soufflé du chevre. Poëlee de grenailles. Crepes au chocolat et noisette.

There was no conversation at the table until David's plate was clear. Aaron took much longer to finish his, partly because he was eating slower, and partly because he kept pausing to watch David stuff entire halves of pancakes into his mouth. It was probably obvious to Aaron by now that David's explanation ("just needed to get out, just out camping") was not quite the full story. There was clearly something wrong with this picture, but Aaron didn't probe, and David was grateful.

David didn't probe either. There were a lot of questions he could ask himself, but he just wanted to forget this whole thing. He wanted to take a shower, get some dry clothes on, and get ready to go to work. He wanted to go home. He wanted to go...home...and then he realized he didn't. He *didn't* want to go home. He couldn't picture what home looked like, couldn't remember what it felt like to be there. When he tried, when he strained to evoke the normal feelings of sentimental homesickness and longing to be with loved ones, all he got was a dry, hollow *click*.

So if he didn't want to go home, where *did* he want to go? Flying down the freeway at 75 mph in a car that took weeks of labor to build, thousands of dollars to buy, hundreds of gears and wheels spinning, pistons firing like doomsday

rockets, burning gallons of costly fuel, propelling the car forward with frantic intensity toward a definite destination, sitting strapped into his seat, all attention focused ahead, on the road, on the destination, David couldn't think of one place he really wanted to go.

"God," he muttered, staring down at his clean plate. "I'm a fucking wreck, Aaron."

Aaron looked up from his food, but didn't say anything.

"I don't know what I'm doing or where the fuck I'm going. I don't even know if I want to go home. I'm tempted to just have you drop me off on the side of the road somewhere and see where I end up, but I can't, because I already tried that, and it sucked, and I ended up nowhere."

Aaron paused, and started cutting a chunk out of his last pancake. "Thought you didn't want to talk about it."

"I don't. So what's going on with you, Aaron? How's your life?"

Aaron shrugged and kept eating, talking through his pancake. "Well...it's there. I'm living, right? Things are great."

David thought about asking more, like how was his job, what did he do with his free time, maybe how was his love life or something, but he didn't. Instead, he flagged down a waitress for the check, and waited in silence. A few minutes later, they were back in Aaron's car, the pistons were firing, and they were hurtling like a meteor toward somewhere David didn't want to go.

There was no conversation for the rest of the way home. David was so grateful that Aaron wasn't the kind of guy who found silence in a small space unbearable. With most people there was this desperate tension, whether in a car, an elevator, or even a living room. Sensing that the other was uncomfort-

able, David would become uncomfortable himself, then the other would become even more uncomfortable, and it would increase exponentially until he'd be willing to point to the upholstery and start talking about textiles ( "Sooo...what kind of cloth do you think that couch is? Canvas?" ) just to break the excruciating silence. But if it was obvious that the other person was fine with it, then David was fine with it, and there was peace on earth.

He drifted in and out of sleep for the rest of the trip. This was usually a good trick for avoiding small-space awkwardness, but this time it was genuine. He floated in that semi-conscious dreamland where the real world is still vaguely present in the background, and noises from it leak into dreams and change them.

Outside the car, the green of the trees grew darker and darker until it was a washed out gun-metal gray. The only light was a weak strip of yellow from the setting sun, and the glowing double oval from the headlights. It was pure chance that David's eyes drifted open at the moment those headlights illuminated a little silver Honda Civic parked on the side of the road.

In his half-dreaming state, he heard his mind whisper, *See it now, David? Getting it now? You don't know where you want to go or what you want to do, but your subconscious does, and it has a lot more balls than you do. It knew exactly where you wanted to go and it took you there. Confused, disoriented trips to the river at first, the piles of mud, the packed up boxes trying to get you moving, all the signals, screaming at you, "Let's go!" but you didn't listen, so it took matters into its own hands. But you got there, and there was nothing there, and what were you expecting? What the fuck were you expecting?*

“Hey, pull over,” he said, tearing himself awake and pointing at the car on the shoulder. “That’s my car.”



The little hatchback sat there cold and lifeless, like old roadkill. It looked alien to David somehow, with its wipers full of dead leaves and those big, cryptic numbers smeared on the window with pink police marker. What did that marker mean, anyway? Did he have to pay a ticket or something? But he wasn't ready to wonder about that yet. Having just recently re-learned speech, he wasn't yet deep enough in civilization to think about tickets.

Aaron stood there next to him in front of the headlights that illuminated the scene. He looked at David with the question in his eyes, but didn't ask it. He just shrugged. "Well, are you good, then?"

David looked in through the window. The keys were still in the ignition. He tried the door, and found it unlocked. He reached in and turned the keys. The engine struggled briefly,

then roared to life. “Yeah,” he said, his tone unsure, surprised. “I guess I’m good.”

“All right, well...get home, dude.”

“Thanks, Aaron. Thanks a lot.”

“No problem. Now get home.”

...

On the way home, somewhere between Seattle and Burlington, it started to rain. The droplets ran down the windshield, projecting wild shadowplay onto the dashboard. It made him think of the concrete wall “screen” in front of the bridge in Mount Vernon. He thought of mermaids and undersea cities, and then forests and radio towers, and shivered.

The rainfall increased until his wipers were flailing frantically, and he could still barely see the cars in front of him. It was the same way inside his head. He worried that he wouldn’t be able to remember how to get to his house. Or what his wife’s name was. *It’s Julie*, he snapped. *Julie. Your wife’s name is Julie, and she has brown fucking eyes, brown!*

He actually couldn’t remember the names of the streets to get home, but he got there anyway, driving on instinct. He sat there in his car for a while, just looking at his house from the curb. That little cookie-cutter home, stuck in the middle of a row of identical buildings like a house-shaped Lego block. Shrouded by gray sheets of rain, it looked anonymous and unfamiliar. It could have been anyone’s house.

He got out of the car and dashed through the rain for the shelter of the front porch. When he got there, he just stood in front of the door for a while, listening to the roar of the downpour. Then he knocked on the door to his own house, and

waited.

The door opened halfway, and Julie stood in the doorway, looking at him.

“Hey,” David said.

Julie kept looking at him, expressionless. “Hey.”

“I’m, uh...I’m back.” He tested a quick smile, but found he couldn’t hold it. Julie’s face remained blank.

“Where did you go?”

“Well...” He hadn’t planned for this moment, and had no explanation ready. “I sort of went camping. Roughed it for a few days.”

“Camping.”

“Yeah. I had to. I can’t explain it.”

Julie stared at him for a moment, then rubbed her eyes and mumbled, “Ok.” David noticed that her eyes were puffy and her hair was tangled like she had just come out of bed. He wondered what time it was. Probably late.

Julie opened the door the rest of the way, and he stepped inside. “How long was I gone?”

“Five days.”

David looked around the dimly lit living room. He felt like a prospective buyer, not a resident. The place felt hollow and cold. The acoustics sounded wrong, as if the room were larger and emptier than it was. Their voices echoed.

“I’m sorry if I scared you,” David said, looking up at the unfamiliar ceiling, not at Julie. “You didn’t call the police or anything did you?”

“No. I assumed you had just...”

A long silence. Julie looked uncomfortable and cold standing there in her bathrobe. She looked like she was anxious to get back to bed.



"I need a shower," David said. Julie nodded, and David headed for the bathroom without another word. He took his shower, and slipped into bed. He had sex with Julie. As soon as he finished that silent coupling, he rolled onto his side, away from Julie, and huddled there, squeezing his eyes shut. In the darkness behind his eyelids, he couldn't see that Julie had done the same thing. Squinting so hard it hurt, he heard this thought ringing in his head:

*This is the end. This is where it all fades to black and the credits roll. Nothing has been resolved, no loose ends tied up, but it doesn't matter, it's fading to black, it's over. All the characters and their conflicts are smothered behind the black screen, never to be heard from again. The audience is outraged, but powerless. No apologies are offered. It's an unhappy ending. Now please leave the theater.*

The darkness in his vision blurred with tears. "The end," he whispered, and fell asleep.

*Snap.*

David was standing on a beach. Next to him was a wooden pole painted with red and white stripes. He stood as straight as the pole, staring out into the waves with an expression so blank and stiff it could have been rigor mortis. *Not the end*, something in him whispered in a voice choked and quivery with excitement. *The beginning.*

"This is the beach," David said out loud. "I'm standing here on the beach." Slowly, he turned around. There was a cabin out in the blade grass. He knew it would be there. He could hear things connecting, a chorus of cosmic snaps and clicks. He started walking toward the cabin. His strides were direct, purposeful, almost military. He marched right up the steps of the cabin's wraparound deck, and knocked on the door.

The wood was *hard* underneath his knuckles because this was *real*, this was so goddamn fucking *real*!

The door opened slowly. Through the crack, David saw two blue eyes staring at him, wide with a kind of slow, frightened surprise. Below the eyes, parted lips began to form an “Oh”.

“Hi Laura,” David said, and found that he could barely get the words out. His chest was turning inside out. His lungs were in his throat.

Laura opened the door the rest of the way, and they stood there on opposite sides of the threshold, just staring at each other painfully. Laura’s face quivered, and a radiant smile suddenly broke through. She let out a choked giggle, gave a frantic little shrug, and threw her arms around David. They embraced desperately, and David closed his eyes, whispering too quietly for her to hear, “Where have you been? Oh God where have you been?”

They recovered themselves at the same time, and stepped out of the embrace. David was glad. It was too much for him, too overwhelming. His head was spinning.

“Hi, David,” Laura replied absurdly and laughed, trying to smooth her hair and straighten herself out. “Do you want to come in?”

David followed her into the cabin, and there was something so ridiculous about the whole situation that he and Laura both wore these strange little smiles that were amused, self-conscious, and incredulous all at the same time. They never broke eye-contact, and their eyes danced with that same mixed emotion that said, *I know, I know this is crazy, but...*

David had never been so unaware of his surroundings. He sat down on something somewhere in the room, across

from Laura. He couldn't take his eyes off hers, except to dart over to her hair, her ears, down to her nose and mouth, her teeth visible through that amazed smile. "Where have you been?" he said, when his mind finally caught its breath.

At this direct question, the room seemed to calm down some, making conversation possible. Laura hesitated a long time before answering. When she spoke, her eyes were on the floor. "I didn't want to start something impossible."

David waited for her to go on, but she didn't. "What do you mean?" he prompted.

Another pause. "When we first met...well, you know how it was, it was...surreal. To say the least." She glanced up at David, then looked back at the floor, twirling a lock of hair around in her fingers. "I knew you were an outsider, and us meeting again was just a coincidence, and chances are you'd wake up and we'd never see each other again. So I...avoided you."

"You avoided me." David sat there listening, but he couldn't process what she was saying. He could actually feel his brain rotating in his skull, faster and faster. All he could do was look at her. Stare at her.

"Yeah. I hid from you. But for some reason...I mean we barely even had a conversation, but...it was hard to keep hiding." She looked up. "Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes," he said, like a vow.

She bit her lower lip and twisted her hair a little faster. "This is really ridiculous, though. I'm assuming so much here, we both are. We don't even know each other."

"Fuck that. I almost died."

Laura looked him in the eyes. There was a pause that might have been overly heavy, which David might have tried

to lighten with a joke, if he hadn't been so mesmerized.

"Anyway," Laura said, "a few days ago...I got this message from someone. It said...well, basically, that it wasn't impossible anymore. It said you were living with my other half now, of all the incredible coincidences."

David just kind of smiled and shrugged. "I don't know what that means."

Laura smiled. "It doesn't matter. Why complicate things? What matters is that you're *here*." A long pause. Then, with a grin, "So. What have you been up to?"

They were sitting in this beautiful little cabin on the beach, chatting. Pale sunlight streaming in through the windows, the distant rumble of the surf mixing with the piercing cries of the seagulls. David was sitting in this cabin across from this woman, Laura, talking, smiling, laughing. They made small talk, but it was different. It had a sharp, vibrating edge of delicious tension, because they both knew it was a charade. They were pointedly ignoring the obvious questions, refusing to bring up the inherent insanity of their situation, and so the small talk became more. When they talked about their jobs, their houses, etc, they barely heard the words coming out of their mouths; there was another level of communication taking place.

Hours passed, and the ocean horizon changed from pale blue to pink to deep red and gray. They walked out onto the beach and stood just out of reach of the waves, watching the sun slowly submerge like a flaming Titanic. As Laura looked out at the horizon, David studied her profile, slowly looking her up and down with an almost scientific fascination. This whole scene seemed too perfect to be real. The beach, the sunset...it was so corny it *had* to be a dream, but Laura... She

didn't fit with the scene. No full, flowing dress flying in the wind, no sultry glances framed by windswept curls. That was what gave David chills, looking at her. The un-dramatic, matter-of-fact *reality* of her. She stood there in loose Capri pants and a zip-up sweater with a high collar, her arms folded tightly, her face tilted down, burying her mouth in the collar. Her eyes squinted against the wind that fluttered through her short, layered hair. Her bare feet wriggled deeper into the cool sand. She was just *there*.

Noticing him staring at her, she lifted her face out of the collar and smiled. David suddenly felt a flicker in the opacity of the beach around him, and Laura's smile turned regretful. "Well," she said, "it looks like you have to go."

*No!* "Wait wait wait wait," he pleaded, his hands grasping the air. "Wait, don't leave yet, don't leave, please don't leave, or don't let me leave or—I don't know how to get back here or—or how to find you or—"

"David." She reached out a hand and touched his arm, smiling as she looked up at him. "Don't worry. I'll see you again soon. I promise." And with that, she was gone. But she had promised.

David snapped awake alert and electrified, and started moving before he even knew what he was doing. *She's real!* That thought swelled in his head with the thousand joyful voices of a townsfolk choir in a Disney musical. *She is reeeeeeeeeaaaaa!* There was somebody lying next to him, still asleep, but she didn't stir when he climbed over her in his rush to get out of bed. He grabbed something off the floor, pulled it on, zipped it up, and rushed downstairs. Still tugging a shoe onto one foot, half hopping, he jumped into the car and started driving somewhere, but all he really knew right now was that

she was *real*.

He had to talk to someone about this, just had to tell someone. He needed to talk to Josh, *right now*. No more phone calls, no notes, no more fucking emails, he needed to *talk*. He climbed Josh's porch steps in a daze, and knocked on the door. As he waited for an answer, he finally paused to consider how early it was, but he didn't care. Josh would understand. He always did.

The door opened, and Josh stood there in his boxers, peering out at David through puffy, squinted eyes. "What the fuck, man," he mumbled.

"She's real, Josh," David said, and it came out so intense that he hoped his eyes weren't all wide and crazy. "The girl from the bus, I saw her again tonight, and I know she's real. I don't know what's going on in my head or how any of this is possible, but I know she's real." He hoped he wasn't panting.

Josh just stood there looking at him for a minute, then he pushed the door open and went back into the house. David followed him in.

"You mind if I put some pants on?" Josh muttered, but he didn't sound truly upset with the intrusion. There was some tired crankiness in his voice, but it sounded fake, with something else buried under it.

David took a seat on a couch in the living room, and a minute later Josh came in wearing sweat pants and a tattered white undershirt. He sat in a chair opposite David and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Ok," he said, and gestured with his palms

"Ok, so this girl—you know, the girl I told you about that I met on the bus back then?"

"Yeah..."

“Ok, and you know how I told you I’d seen her a couple times since then? Well the last time I saw her was the night after that party at Brandi Noel’s house, and she kind of told me...well, goodbye, basically. That she was leaving, that she couldn’t see me anymore. That was about a year and half ago, and I never did see her again after that.” He hesitated, his mind spooling through all the torment that had transpired between then and now, skipping over it all for his story. It wasn’t easy to skip. His mind lurched over it like a big, angular speed bump. “Last night, though... I go to sleep and *bam*, there I am on the beach, there’s her cabin, I walk up to the cabin, and there she is. There’s Laura, waiting for me in the cabin, and she’s no fucking dream, Josh, I swear to God, she’s *real*.”

“She’s real,” Josh said blankly.

“Yes.”

“This girl in your dream is a real person.”

David nodded and smiled defiantly. “That’s right.”

“How could that be, David? How’s that possible?”

David threw up his hands in an exaggerated shrug, and leaned back in his chair. “I have no idea. Absolutely no idea. But I know that I sat in that cabin and talked to this girl, this woman, we had a conversation, I looked in her eyes, we laughed, we made small talk, we went down to the beach and watched the sunset, and as crazy as it is, I *know* that there is no way this woman could have been fabricated out of my subconscious. She is a real, individual person. Her name is Laura Chamberg—yes, she has a last name, and it’s not even a very pretty one. She’s a nurse’s assistant at the hospital in Bellingham, lives in a duplex in town, and vacations in a little cabin on the beach that she inherited from her grandfather. She has tiny feet, a pierced ear lobe, a little Celtic knot thing tattooed

on her calf, and she plays with her hair when she talks.”

Josh just looked at him for a long time with a slight, thoughtful frown. David waited patiently with that defiant look on his face that said, *Go ahead, call me crazy.*

“So what do you think?” he said finally. “What’s your diagnosis?”

Josh leaned forward, burying his mouth in his fist, but still didn’t say anything.

“I’m already on the couch, do you want me to lay down and talk about my mother or something?” A pause. “Look I know it’s early, and I’m sorry to barge in here and wake you up, I just had to talk to somebody. So what do you think?”

Josh remained silent a little longer, then he sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes, letting out a gravelly sigh. “David, man...I don’t know. I’ve never heard of anything quite like that before. But remember I’m no doctor. I’ve got a lot of school ahead of me still, I’m practically just getting started. But I can tell you right now...” He glanced up at David, and chuckled with brows arched. “That’s some pretty weird shit.”

“Yeah. I’d have to agree.”

“Yeah. But give me some time to do some reading. I’ll see if I can find anything, ok? That’s about all I can offer at this point.”

David nodded. “Ok. Thanks, man.”

“All right. Now David, buddy...it’s 4:00 in the morning. Get the fuck out of my house.”

David made some quick thanks and apologies, and left Josh’s house in a truly unique state of mind. His whole world was swirling, but he had the peculiar idea that things were looking up. That everything was about to change.



...

D major. G major. A major. D major. David smothered the keys to the only chords he knew, over and over, different patterns, but the same chords. They were nice chords, cheerful chords. He played them with a dreamy smile on his face, staring out the balcony window with glazed eyes. He had moved the organ from the garage into the walk-in closet upstairs, so he kept the volume low, not wanting to wake up Julie. He stared out the multi-paned window of the balcony door and smiled contentedly, his mind in another world.

He had taken his camping trip right at the start of a three-day weekend, so he had only missed two days of work. After a little careful explaining, everything was smoothed over, and he was back on the job. The workday had passed in...well, nevermind. It doesn't matter, he wasn't even there. He was in a trance all day long. When he got home from work he drifted around the house for hours, floating from room to room, gazing out the windows and humming to himself. Eventually he had slipped and slid his way up to the organ, and had been sloshing out woozy melody for hours. Julie had come home from work and found him there. She said something to him, a greeting or maybe a question, but he never looked up, and after a while she went to bed. A couple hours later, he concluded his three-chord symphony, and fell into bed next to her. He wasn't nervous, he wasn't afraid. She (Laura) had promised he would see her again soon, and he believed her. And he believed *in* her. *I believe in fairies*, he thought, and giggled, and went to sleep.

He opened his eyes on the ocean, and she was there, waiting for him. He saw her further down the beach, crouched against a driftwood log with her arms crossed over her knees,

looking out at the waves. He recognized her even so far away, recognized the gravity and grace that dominated her form even in a crouch. They greeted each other simply, with a “Hey there” and a “Hey”, and then they locked eyes for about three seconds, and said a lot more.

They walked down the beach, not quite hand-in-hand yet, but almost. “I missed you,” David said.

“Since yesterday?”

“Yeah. Since five minutes ago. Since right now.” They walked a little farther, and David glanced over at her. “That didn’t really make sense, did it?”

She released a restrained laugh. “No, not really. But that’s ok.”

“None of this makes much sense.”

“No.”

“But that’s ok.”

Laura smiled, and they kept walking.

Though I couldn’t actually watch them, I could watch David sleeping, laying there with this tiny, sublime smile on his face, and I could imagine what was happening in the world behind that smile. The relief it brought me was immeasurable.

Julie and I went to a coffee shop in Burlington, and sat there just looking at each other for a while, sipping at our drinks now and then. I thought about David, and it was like the steel fingers of some giant killer robot had released their grip on my chest. I could breath again, and allow myself the thought that maybe this would actually work out. *Maybe we’ll actually get away with this.*

A two-man acoustic band was playing soft, bittersweet songs in the corner. The warm yellow lights glimmered on the polished wood of their guitars. Details like that still amaze me.

And I remember things like that, the little details. I can't remember to take the garbage out on Mondays, but I remember the lights on the guitars, and the way the warm air from a floor register toyed with Julie's hair.

"I should get my guitar out sometime," she said, watching the band with a thoughtful frown.

"You play guitar?" For some reason I was astonished.

"Well, I *have* a guitar. That's about all I'm saying. I took lessons for five months and then I sort of lost interest."

I grinned. "I bet you can wail."

"Not really," she laughed. "I can play like half of 'Hotel California' and that's about it. I only know maybe four chords."

"You know four chords? You could be a *killer* punk guitarist!"

I don't think she got that one, but she chuckled and shook her head. "Yeah, I don't know. I don't think I ever showed much promise, but I'd like to start lessons again someday. Whenever I see groups like these guys, it makes me want to start playing again." She cocked her head and smiled. "You play drums, right? We could start a band."

"That's a great idea," I said with a grin, and reached for my jacket. "Let's get out of here and start practicing." Julie started laughing again.

All we'd been drinking was coffee, but we felt drunk as we stepped out of the coffee shop and strolled down the sidewalk, making delirious music. I was the human rock n' roll beatbox, and after much pleading from me, Julie was the human electric guitar. She growled out just one riff and then dissolved into laughter, but it was enough, the moment was realized.

We walked back to my apartment and spent the rest of our time just sitting around, talking. I can't remember exactly what we said, but I remember what we didn't need to say. Just like with David and Laura, much of our communication took place in the undercurrents. See, there's David again. Why is so much of my memory filtered through his eyes? I suppose we were in the same mess. Our predicaments mirrored each other so closely, they were interchangeable. So maybe it's just easier this way. Put the spotlight on him, and leave me out of it.

...

The following morning, David experienced a rare and wonderful phenomenon. He woke up feeling good. When his mind dropped back into his head from sleep, he found a smile already there on his face, like a porch light left on all night. His first conscious breath was a deep, satisfied one, and he didn't need an hour of hitting "snooze" to wake up. Almost immediately he sat up straight and thought, *Yes. I am going to make it through the day.*

There was a pain in his chest, that familiar longing, but it was different now. It wasn't an empty burning, it wasn't hollow. It was full of energy and light, a crackling, sparkling kind of pain that was exhilarating. This was the hungry excitement of any budding relationship. The pleasure-pain of falling in love.

It was early still, hours before he had to go to work, but he started getting ready anyway. He threw on his bathrobe and stepped out onto the porch to grab the newspaper, and immediately noticed two things. First, a sound in the air. A swirling, resonant tone that seemed to come from everywhere, from the

air itself, the omni-directional sound of something very loud and very far away. He had heard this sound before, but it had been sour then, a warbling, dissonant noise. Now it was musical, a perfect harmony of at least two, maybe three notes, forming a sweet major chord, something like D or maybe G. And then, below the glow of the sunrise, below the singing horizon and musical air, on the welcome mat at his feet was a cassette tape. On the label, in big, crude letters:

HELLO AGAIN

There was no fear this time. He stared at the tape with a squinting, quizzical, “What the hell?” smile, then picked it up and took it inside. Julie was still asleep, so he took the tape and tape player into the bathroom, shut the door, and sat down on the toilet lid. Holding the player in front of him with one finger poised on the volume knob, he pressed “play”.

Blank tape hiss. A pop, then the sound of breathing. Just breathing for half a minute, then a deep intake of air, and a voice, strained just above a whisper.

“I’m not trying to scare you.”

Silence.

“I wish I could just stop by...go out for a beer, and talk about this. But I can’t.”

Silence.

“But I want to help you out. This just...isn’t easy. Me talking to you like this...or me helping you.”

A pause.

“But let me tell you something.”

Silence. Breathing. The words came slow and labored, like a third-grader reading a newspaper. “This isn’t science fiction. Fantasy. Supernatural thriller. What’s the big difference between fiction and non-fiction, biography and adventure yarn?

Everyone thinks they know, but no one knows anything. Better yet, no one knows shit.”

“Get to the point,” David muttered.

“But let me get to the point,” the voice mumbled, dropping into a toneless whisper. “No one knows shit except you. You know at least one thing.”

“Oh yeah?” David whispered. “What’s that?”

“You know she’s real.”

He felt a chill run down his spine, but he wasn’t afraid, he was elated. Someone had just *told* him she was real. Some mystery voice on a cassette tape had actually said it out loud, confirming the truth of it in a manner that fit the insanity of it.

“How is she real?” David demanded of the tape player, not even quieting his voice anymore. “Where the fuck *is* she?”

“And now I have to go,” the prerecorded message declared, completely ignoring his desperate questions. “But there’s a lot more. When I get the chance...” The breathing quickened briefly, then a loud pop, and blank tape hiss.

David looked at the tape player in his hands. He frowned, and rewound it slightly. “—knows shit except you. You know at least one—” He stopped it again, and continued staring at it. Then he chuckled. The mystery voice on that tape sounded vaguely *familiar*. “All right,” he laughed. “Yes. Great. Fucking-a!”

It just couldn’t get any better than this.

He stashed the tape player in the bottom drawer of the sink cabinet, and left for work. On his way out the door, he noticed an unfamiliar car parked against the curb in front of his neighbors’ house. An old, white Honda Accord with tinted windows, the do-it-yourself kind, bubbled and peeling. He noticed it because he had never seen a car parked there before.

The neighbors were an old couple in their eighties who rarely left the house and never had guests, much less guests with do-it-yourself tinted windows. He shrugged again, and got in his car.

At work, he performed his basic duties, but he wasn't there. He was in the future.

He would meet Laura's family.

It would be less awkward because he had already met her brother, Ben. Ben would help introduce him. The family would be skeptical at first, but then quickly warm up to him. They would all be sophisticated and classy, living in a nice house like Brandi Noel's parents', but also quirky and funny, and her mother would have a wild and risqué streak leftover from her hippie days that they would all find hilarious and endearing. They would be disappointed that they could never meet David's family, but they would understand.

He and Laura would travel.

After "dating" for several months, they would feel stuck in a rut, but not yet ready to suggest marriage. They would cash in their vacation time at their jobs (David would have gotten a job at the Bellingham shipyard where Ben worked, starting out doing crude mechanical work, but with the promise of upward mobility.) and take a trip to Europe. Having never had any burning desire to travel before, David would find that Laura's presence changed the whole world and made everything everywhere an adventure.

After making their way through Italy, France, England, and Germany, and promising themselves to make a more daring circuit through places like India and Africa before they were thirty, they would arrive back in Italy for their return flight. Two days before, they would take a train to the Amalfi

Coast, and on a warm, cloudless night with a full moon and an impossible spread of stars, David would take her to a beach that would bear an uncanny resemblance to the Washington beach where they met, and ask her to marry him. And of course, she would say yes, because they would have both known all along, and as it always should be, the question would be rhetorical.

They would return home glowing so brightly that Laura's mother would know before they even told her. They would start planning right away. It would be a small ceremony since only the bride's family would be present, but David would have made many friends by then, and...

Gravel snarled and popped beneath the tires as he coasted into the driveway, a sound like the gears of some massive clock slowly grinding to a halt. Looking at the front of his house, its bleak, featureless façade of white vinyl siding, his face went blank. Not wanting that blankness inside him, he made an effort to recover the dreamy smile he had worn all day up until this moment. He recovered about sixty percent of it, and went into the house.

He could hear Julie moving around in the kitchen as he hung up his coat. He wasn't ready to see her yet. He didn't want to have to kill his dreamy smile so soon after reviving it. He headed straight for his room and was about to shut the door when the phone rang. He paused in the hall, trying to decide whether or not to answer it, but on the third ring Julie came out of the kitchen and picked it up. He watched her from just inside his door, she at the far end of the downstairs hallway, holding the phone, her back to him.

"Hello?" she said. "Oh hi honey, are you almost h—" Pause. "Oh God, I'm sorry, Josh! You sounded just—" She



laughed. "Yeah, that's it. Uh huh. Well no, David isn't home yet. Yeah. Ok, well I'll have him call you." A pause, listening. "Well...I think we should—"

"I'm right here," David said, coming down the stairs.

Julie looked startled, then she smiled. Looking at David but still holding the phone to her ear, she said, "Josh? I guess David was here after all. Yeah, I didn't hear him come in. Ok, here he is."

She handed it to David and went back into the kitchen.

"What's up, Josh?"

"Hey man. How's the dream girl?"

"Obviously I can't talk about that right now."

"Right, your wife. Sorry."

David winced. "Don't do that."

"What?"

"I don't know." And he didn't. "Just... It's not like that, ok?"

"What?"

"I don't feel like it's like that."

"What's not like what?" Josh sounded genuinely confused, and even David wasn't sure what he was talking about.

"Nevermind. So what's up?"

"Well, I was just wondering how things are going. You know, in your head."

"Like I said—"

"I know, you can't talk about it right now because your wife is there." David winced again but Josh kept talking. "So why don't you come over here again? I've been thinking a lot about your scenario. I want to ask you some more stuff."

David glanced into the kitchen, but Julie wasn't there anymore. "Ok," he said. "I'll see you in a few minutes."

He hung up, and grabbed his coat. "Julie? I'm going over to Josh's place for a while." He heard Julie say something from behind the bedroom door, but it was too muffled to understand. "See ya," he said, and went out the front door.

Glancing across the street at the neighbors' house, he noticed the Accord with the tinted windows was gone.



“So you want something to drink?” Josh said, heading toward the kitchen. David went into the living room and flopped onto the same couch he had last time.

“Sure. How about a Long Island Iced Tea.”

“Yeah. How about a beer.”

“Ok.”

While Josh rummaged through his fridge, David lay back into the cushions and observed Josh’s house. It was nicer than his was. It was just a ground-floor apartment, much smaller than David’s little one bedroom duplex, but the feel of this place was infinitely more settled, more natural. He had matching furniture. He had green plants in the corners. He had a coffee table with interesting magazines on it. David’s house, despite having the much vaunted “feminine touch”, still felt like a storage unit.

“Your place looks great, by the way,” David said. “I didn’t notice it last time I stopped by, but yeah. Last time I really hung out here, probably four or five months ago, it was pretty bare.”

Josh came in with two open bottles of Orchard Street porter and two glasses. (Of course he *would* keep his fridge stocked with the best local microbrews. David’s was full of discount Henry Weinhardts and Julie’s Zimas.) He managed to set all four items down on the coffee table without spilling a drop. “Yeah, I’ve fixed it up a little since then. I figure, I’m a twenty-six-year-old bachelor working at Office Depot, it wouldn’t hurt to at least make my place look a little more respectable.”

David smiled. He himself was a twenty-six-year-old bachelor working at Red Robin, and his house was a warehouse. Technically he was married, but that hadn’t changed much. He was a married bachelor. He was in pretty much the same boat as Josh, so why was it that for him, life was all about the struggle to survive, making ideas like decorating his house feel like building copper skyscrapers during WWII?

“So basically you wanted to impress women.”

“Exactly.”

“Is it working?”

Josh took a drink of his beer. “So like I said, I’ve been thinking about your scenario, but I need more information.”

“Ok. Shoot.”

“So you said you first met this girl...what was her name?”

“Laura.”

“You first met Laura on the bus, then you saw her twice the night of that party, then again the day before yesterday.”

“Right.”

“Have you seen her at all since then?”

“I saw her last night.”

Josh paused, nodding. He got up and grabbed a pen and notebook out of a cupboard, then sat down again. “You’ll have to excuse me, but I’m going to get kind of professional here, ok?” He scribbled a few notes on the pad. “It’s good practice.”

“You should save this stuff for school next year. I bet I’d make a good masters thesis.”

“Well...” Josh started, then trailed off as he made a few more notes and took a swallow of beer. “So again, pardon my professionalism, but can you describe these dreams at all for me? By the way you’ve talked about this girl, am I right to assume they’re somewhat...romantic in nature?”

David hesitated. “Yeah.”

“Ok.” A pause. “How does that work exactly? Considering the circumstances. What is your relationship like? I mean, what do you talk about? Or is it just surreal, like events and feelings just happen without necessarily having logical causes?”

“No, see that’s just it.” David set his beer on the table and leaned forward. “It’s not surreal at all, it’s totally realistic. It’s not blurry in there, things don’t just float around. If anything, it’s sharper and more vivid than it is *here*. As far as our relationship, yeah it seems pretty strange, we have a few brief encounters and suddenly it’s all mad romance, yeah it sounds like a fantasy dream, but it’s...it’s just *simpler* than you expect a ‘real’ relationship to be. We talk about normal stuff. There’s a lot I don’t know about her and obviously I don’t understand how I’m even *there* with her, but I mean, hey, maybe I’ll ask her eventually and she’ll explain it, I don’t know, but the thing

is, those are *details*. A lot of relationships start based on details—oh, we go to the same school, oh, we like the same bands, oh, we’re both republicans or democrats, whatever—but with Laura there’s that *spark*. It’s been there every second from the moment I first saw her, and it’s not just that’s she’s beautiful, it’s not just physical attraction, it’s *deep*, it’s *her*, all of her, and with that the details don’t matter because all I have to do is look in her eyes and feel that spark, and that’s enough. All the rest, the details...that can come later.”

They looked at each other for a long moment, David leaning forward, hands clasped in front of him, Josh leaning back in his chair, rubbing his chin. Finally, Josh picked up his notepad and started writing, reading each word aloud as he wrote it. “Patient...is...nuts.”

“I know, I know!” David laughed, throwing himself back into the couch. “So what are you gonna do about it?”

“Well...I’m definitely going to have to put some more time into it. It’s tough to research this because I barely know what to look for, but I’ll see what I can find.”

“Well, thanks man. It’s not that I want to get ‘cured’ or anything. I just want to understand what the hell’s going on in here.” He tapped his forehead.

“Right. I do want to ask you one other thing, though.” He moved his eyes away from David and looked at the wall. “Can you tell me why you married Julie?”

A pause. “What?”

“I mean, why so suddenly. You were just starting to hang out and then *boom*, you were getting married. You didn’t invite anyone, you barely even told anyone. It was bizarre. What happened?”

David bristled. “Why drag things out, Josh? Why beat

around the bush? I needed Julie. I was dying without her, so I acted.”

“Did you love her?”

“Of course I loved her! I fucking married her didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you did.”

“Josh, what the fuck does this have to do with what we’re talking about? Are you saying I didn’t love Julie, that I just married her out of desperation, and now I’m inventing fantasy women to replace her?”

Josh looked startled, as if that was exactly what he’d been thinking, but had had no intention of saying it aloud, and certainly hadn’t expected David to say it for him. “Well shit, David, if you say you love Julie, your *wife*, then who the hell is Laura? What the hell is this *spark*?”

David looked at the floor, and his voice dropped to a murmur. “They’re just dreams.”

“They are?”

“You can’t be held responsible for your dreams.”

“But I thought these were more than dreams. I thought it was real, that Laura was real and it was all—”

“Josh,” David stopped him, and there was silence. David looked down at the floor again. His head was suddenly in a fog. He couldn’t navigate any of these logic trails. “I don’t know. Ok? I don’t know.” He swallowed the rest of his beer, and stood up, grabbed his coat.

“So...I’ll keep looking into it,” Josh said, standing up behind him.

“Thanks Josh,” David said, heading for the door. “Any clues you can find would be...yeah. See ya.”

...

Once home, David found himself gravitating around his porch. A basic small-home porch, a single concrete slab protruding from the bald face of the house, a mailbox next to the door, a year-old welcome mat that appeared brand-new for lack of use. He hesitated there before going inside, looking at the mat. (No tape.) He lifted up the mat, seized by the sudden idea that the former residents had left some secret key there, then remembered that he had bought and placed the mat himself. He sighed, and turned around, looking out at the street, the fences, the factory buildings beyond. He surveyed the neighborhood slowly, left to right. Everything was the same as when he left for Josh's, except the sun was gone, leaving only a pale yellow stripe at the bottom of the dark horizon. The white Accord was gone too. He noted this with a mixture of relief and disappointment.

Turning back to his porch, he checked his mail, pulled out great wads of postal spam. Small postcard-style ads and "Have You Seen Me?" cards slid out between envelopes and fell to the ground, never to be recycled. He would have to sift through all of this to make sure there was no real mail mixed in with all the coupons and special offers. He took the whole mess inside and spread it out on the kitchen table, sorted through it, found a few bills, tossed the rest, started thinking about the porch again. He opened the door and looked down at the welcome mat. There was still nothing on it. He stepped onto the mat, planted both feet in the middle, and surveyed the neighborhood again. "Welcome," he said to himself, sounding a lot like the voice of America Online. Looking slowly left to right, panning like a security camera, his face remained blank until his eyes reached the next-door neighbors' house, and he



saw the white Accord there, parked exactly where it had been earlier.

Staring at the Accord, at its bubbled tinting, its cracked windshield, he thought about walking by it to look through the windows, to see what was inside, who was inside. Instead he decided to call the neighbors.

“Hi, Mrs. Kelley?”

“Yes.”

“Hi, this is David Martin next door.”

“Oh, hello.”

“I was just wondering, do you by any chance have some guests staying with you this week?”

“Guests? No...”

“Ok...then do you know whose car that is that’s been parking in front of your house?”

“We always park in our garage.”

“Right, but there’s been a white Honda Accord parked on the curb outside your house off and on for a couple days. We’ve had some weird stuff happening around our house lately, and I was just wondering if you have any idea who that car belongs to.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Ok, thanks Mrs. Kelley.”

David hung up and stood there in front of the phone. He could see the car through the kitchen window, now lit by a street lamp. It was just sitting there. Maybe parked and vacated. Maybe still occupied

“Who was that?” Julie asked, just entering the kitchen, and David jumped a little.

“Mrs. Kelley. She lives next door. I was asking about that car parked outside their house.” He expected that she

would ask why, that he would have to think of explanations, but she just nodded distractedly and started unloading the dishwasher.

...

By 11:00, David's mind was still revving in neutral, roaring and spinning but not really going anywhere. He flopped down in front of his computer and stared at the screen, trying to think of something he could do to settle his thoughts. After checking his email and exploring his few bookmarks, he decided he would do some research. He went to Deja.com, and began searching the newsgroups for a story similar to his own. For someone writing a psychology group to ask about recurring lucid dreams, or a counseling group to ask about out-of-control romantic fantasies, or something. Sci.med.nutcase. Sci.psych.delusional. Alt.psych.fucked-up. Anything.

But as clear as the question was in his head, he couldn't think of a way to ask it. He couldn't think of a way to phrase it so the internet would understand. He tried "real person in my dreams" and got no matches. He tried "girl in my dreams", and got a bunch of poems and song lyrics. He tried "woman in my head" and got an alt.christnet debate about masturbation. The closest he came was with "recurring person", which got him a post from a woman asking if anyone had dreams which consistently featured people they didn't know from real life. This made his eyes widen, but all the follow-ups to the post were disappointing, describing vague, symbolic recurring characters, or "spirit guides" that led them on cosmic journeys. Nothing remotely similar to the concrete reality of Laura, the calluses on her feet, the sparse freckles on the tops of her ears.

He was stumped. He gave up and disconnected, then began the task of pulling up and closing all the pop-up ad windows that had accumulated behind the browser during his twenty minutes online. Most of them were things like “The Best Way to Make Money Online!” or “Hit the Monkey With A Coconut and WIN 10,000\$!” or best of all, “This Amazing New Software Blocks Pop-ups!” But there was one that caught his eye.

“Wireless video just got a whole lot easier, with the X10 Xcam2! The Xcam2 is a tiny wireless video camera that easily installs anywhere around your home, delivering live color video to your TV, VCR or PC, affordably priced at just 99\$ for the complete kit!”

Below the text was a line of large, bold letters reading *FOR FUN AND SECURITY!* next to a picture of an unsuspecting woman in a sexy negligee with one strap hanging off her shoulder.

Of course it was the woman that had first caught his eye, but then he started reading the ad, and thinking. He clicked where the ad said “Click Here!” (he hated doing that) and within a few minutes he was typing in his credit card number and clicking “Place Order!”. The camera would arrive within 2 weeks. Then maybe something would happen.

He finally went to bed (Julie was already asleep) and lay there with his eyes closed, hoping and waiting. About twenty minutes passed, and he drifted off.

The next thing he was aware of was Julie hissing at him. “David!”

“What?” he mumbled and tried to roll over to face her, then realized something wasn’t right. He couldn’t roll over because he wasn’t lying down, wasn’t even in the bed. He was

kneeling on the floor next to it. It felt surreal, like he was still halfway dreaming.

“What are you doing?” Julie whispered.

“What?” He slid back into bed and lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling.

“You were talking to yourself.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

A pause. “Well, I guess I was sleep-talking. That kind of thing has been happening to me a lot lately.” *What do you want now, subconscious? You want me to pack up the house again? You want me to go back to the ocean? What?*

“It has?”

“Yeah. For a while now. It’s no big deal, Julie, it happens to a lot of people. Probably just stress or my diet or something. I had a calzone last night.” He rolled onto his side, away from Julie. “I’m really tired. Goodnight.”

Sounding a little reluctant, Julie said goodnight, and there was silence. Just as David felt sleep fumbling with the off switch in his brain, Julie’s voice pulled him out again. “David?”

“What, Julie?”

“Who’s Laura?”

His eyes slid open, very much awake now. “Who?”

“Laura. You’ve said that name in your sleep a few times.”

Silence.

“I’m just wondering.”

David was a bad, uncreative liar. “I have no idea,” he said. “I don’t know anyone named Laura.”

“Hm. Ok.”

Now watch him grossly overdo it: “It’s just sleep-talking. It doesn’t mean anything. You can’t be held responsible for what you do when you’re asleep.”

“Ok, David, ok. Goodnight.”

...

To David’s dismay, he woke up the next morning. He had spent the night alone. Somewhere, in the fifth dimension on some other plane of existence, Laura was on the beach, watching a sunset, or in her cabin, reading, or in her Bellingham, at her hospital, dashing around in scrubs, maybe wondering where he was. *I don’t know*, David replied as he got up and attempted to get ready for the daunting task of facing the day. *I don’t know where I am*.

There was no tape on his porch. Just a welcome mat sitting on the porch of the world, welcoming him out of his house into a city made monochromatic by overcast clouds. Even the garish reds and shiny gold that surrounded him at work seemed like vibrant shades of gray. He couldn’t find his grin mask today, and being falsely friendly to the customers seemed impossible. His co-workers stole puzzled glances at him, and his Employee of the Month portrait glared down at him. *Snap out of it, asshole*, it growled.

But he couldn’t. *This* was the feeling of being in love he remembered. The giddy bliss he felt on that beach was all new and alien to him, but this, the stomach-churning longing of not being with her...this was familiar, this is what he had always known love to be about. *But prove me wrong*, he pleaded to no one in particular. *Oh God, prove me wrong, please, please prove me wrong*.

On his way home, he ran out of gas. Under that overcast sky like concrete, the car began to stutter, the tension in the accelerator fluctuated, and he groaned loudly. The sheer number of times this had happened to him made the situation desperate, not because it was all that bad (he wasn't far from a gas station) but because, God, not *again!* He feathered the gas, trying to think what the nearest station was, but it was no use. Lurching down Burlington's main drag, then pulling onto the shoulder, the engine finally gave up, and he let it coast as far as it would go, thinking, *Every foot I coast is one less foot I have to walk holding a gas can.*

What a comical sight that is, a guy walking down the street with a little red gas can in hand. Oh sure, it's for his chainsaw. Sure, he lives just down the street, just getting some gas for the lawnmower. No. Everyone knows he ran out of gas on the road. The gas can is a bright red flag proclaiming to the world, "I Am a Dumbass".

He approached the pump sheepishly, standing there amidst all those cars driven by much more prudent people. He was just starting to fill the can when he heard a dry, familiar voice.

"Run out of gas?"

It was Charlie. He was standing at the pump opposite David, filling his car and watching David with that ever-present wry smile.

"No, no," David said, "just filling my invisible stealth car here." He mimed patting a roof.

"Oh yeah, I hear those cloaking devices are real gas hogs."

David forced himself to play along. "Well, at least the gas prices are low enough today. I'm actually filling up extra

cans.” He raised the one in his hand. “For the new stealth submarine, you know.” Ah, banter. Ha, ha, ha.

“Of course,” Charlie said, and David thought he was going to keep it going, but he didn’t. He just looked at the pump screen, then down at the gas-stained pavement. He cleared his throat. There was silence. With Charlie it felt so awkward that David was about to make some idle comment about the music coming out of the pump speakers, or maybe even go back to the invisible car thing, but Charlie spoke up.

“Hey, I want to apologize for the other night at my house,” he said, raising his eyes to look at David, then past him, at nothing. “When you came over to get that organ?” David nodded. “I was pretty tired...I think I said some pretty harsh things.”

David was a little shocked. “Ok...”

“So...forget the whole thing?”

“Uh, sure...”

“Ok.”

There was another awkward silence. Actually, this one was a lot more awkward, and the only thing David could think to ask was, “So...how’s the novel going?”

Charlie shrugged, his hands in the pockets of his long coat. “Oh, you know. It’s coming along.”

David nodded, and was about to ask about something else, but Charlie wasn’t done. “Actually it’s not really a novel. Fiction doesn’t interest me much. It’s nonfiction, sort of a biography, but, like, the biography of everyone in the world—”

David’s pump clicked off as it started to overflow the gas can’s spout, and he eagerly broke away to deal with it.

“So...yeah,” Charlie said, his volume diminished a little. “It’s coming along.”

“That’s great,” David said, and went inside to pay for the gas. When he came out, Charlie was done pumping, but he was still standing there, leaning against his door.

“So you want a ride back to your car?” he offered.

David hesitated, but could think of no polite way to decline. Besides, he didn’t relish the walk back, proudly waving his Dumbass Flag to the city of Burlington.

They drove in silence. Charlie turned on some music. David noticed a copy of the Seattle P.I and Everett Herald on the dashboard. Next to those was a recent issue of *Popular Science*, with a cover photo featuring two scientist types, and the headline *Debunkers: Explaining the Unexplainable*.

David’s eyes rested on the magazine for a minute, then he suddenly looked over at Charlie, at the side of his head. “Hey Charlie.”

“What?”

“What do you think about Sasquatch?”

Charlie glanced at him and laughed. “What?”

“Sasquatch.”

“The music festival?”

“No. The ape thing. Bigfoot.”

Charlie laughed again. “What do I think about Sasquatch. Ok, well it doesn’t exist, so I *don’t* think about it.”

David nodded to himself, looking out the front window. He was silent for a few minutes, then he said, “What do you think dreams are? What do you think really happens when you dream?”

“Where are you *getting* this bullshit?”

David shrugged, smiling slightly, and said nothing. They reached David’s car and Charlie pulled onto the shoulder behind it, but David didn’t get out yet. Still looking out the wind-



shield, he said, “I don’t see any reason why Sasquatch couldn’t exist. Small numbers, extremely reclusive...why not?”

“Are you serious?”

“I’ve seen stranger things.”

Charlie shook his head. “If you believe in Sasquatch you’re insane.”

David chuckled abruptly and performed an exaggerated shrug. Charlie eyed him warily.

“Well here’s my car,” David said, still grinning, and opened the door to get out. “Thanks for the ride.”

...

When he got home, the Accord was gone, and so was Julie. There were no lights on in the house, and it was cold. When it’s late February, heavy coat weather, with a constant, bitter wind clawing at your ears under a flat, unsympathetic sky, there’s something heartbreaking about coming home to a cold house. Something that screams, *This is wrong! It shouldn’t be like this!*

David cranked the thermostat all the way up. That wouldn’t help it heat up any faster, of course, but it felt like it would.

“Julie!” he shouted, just to make sure. His voice reverberated in the house’s inexplicable warehouse ambiance.

He found this note on the fridge:

David,

Went out to run some errands. Be back later tonight.

Julie

Breaking into the liquor cabinet for the first time in a while, he mixed himself a gin and tonic and sat at the organ. He drank, and played simple chords with the volume so high he could hear the vacuum tubes overdriving. Finally, he fell into bed, so unnaturally large with just one person in it, and went to sleep thinking, *You promised, Laura. You promised.*

When he woke up, he was on the beach, and the cold house and empty bed and white Accord and Red Robin and cassette tapes and Charlie all disappeared.

He knocked on her cabin door, and she opened it, and they embraced with that electrifying mix of uncertain reserve and careless need. Neither of them mentioned his absence yesterday, it didn't matter anymore, there was no yesterday anymore.

"How about a walk?" Laura asked, the first spoken communication since David arrived. She grabbed a jacket and slipped on a pair of sandals. David had gone to bed in nothing but his boxers, but now he found himself wearing jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, all ready to go. He started to wonder just where the clothes came from, the details of them, why a navy blue sweatshirt, why these particular shoes, they looked old, did they have brands...? But it didn't matter. It just didn't matter.

They walked, side by side, just out of reach of the waves. It was late morning here, with the sun ripping bright holes through a wildly textured cloud cover. They both looked out at the ocean horizon as they walked, so close their elbows bumped, and Laura reached out and wove her fingers into his. They walked a little farther like this, hand in hand, then she looked over at him and grinned, and took off running down the beach. He ran after her, laughing, and it was adolescent and a little corny, but wonderful.

They ended up on the streets of Ocean Shores, strolling down the sidewalk past all the cutesy little shops and cafés. It was the same sidewalk he had walked down about a week ago, lost and starving, surrounded by fog and screaming ghosts—was that awake or asleep? He couldn't even remember. He knew he was asleep now, though, and here, at this hour, the place was no ghost town. It looked exactly like a beachside tourist town should: full of smiling families, dogs on leashes, kids with ice cream cones, parents with souvenir fridge magnets. Where did all these people come from? Were they all as real as Laura and her brother? He looked sideways at her, noting that she had a very small Adam's Apple, (or is it Eve's Apple for women? And isn't there a more modern, civilized term for that gland?) and a million questions about this place spooled through his head. The scientist in him was going nuts, but he held him back, tied him down. In a dream, as soon as you start thinking hard and analyzing your surroundings, that's when you wake up. He didn't want to burst the bubble, so all he said was:

“I love it here.”

“Ocean Shores?”

“This whole place, this *world*.”

She looked over at him and smiled. "Why?"

"It's just so...it's..." He frowned, searching, then thought of something. "Ok, I saw this commercial once. It was on a TV in some office store and the sound was off so I had no idea what it was about or what it was for, but I just started watching it. Everything was filmed in soft focus, really vivid colors. It showed this little black kid running toward the camera with a paper airplane in his hand, all in super slow-motion, with a really low angle looking up toward the sky. You watch him plant his feet in the ground, he reaches back, all slowed down, like he's moving in molasses, and throws the paper airplane, and you see it go up, up, and out of the frame. And this whole scene, the colors are so brilliant and everything is so soft and slow... You can see it in the kid's face, this huge, carefree grin, that he's in a dream world, somewhere where everything fits in its place and everything just makes *sense*."

David had been gazing off into the distance, and now he glanced back at Laura to make sure she was still with him. "So I'm standing there in the middle of this aisle in Office Depot or wherever, watching this commercial repeat over and over, and I wanted to *be* there *so bad*. I wanted to see what was beyond that kid's yard, all the soft-focus beaches and wild dream landscapes. I remember standing there thinking, *I want to be in that world. I want to rocket out of this place and spend the rest of my life in that world.*"

Laura raised her eyebrows in a warning smile. "I hope you're not saying..."

"Yeah, exactly. I feel like I found that place in the commercial, like this is it, this is that dream world."

Laura burst out laughing, leaning over and looking up at him in disbelief. "Oh come on, David, I have to work forty

hours a week just like everybody else.”

“But look at this place!” David said, gesturing around in a quick 360°. “Your sky is bigger, your air is warmer, your sunsets are more spectacular, and I could swear your colors are more vivid in general.”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Sure, it’s beautiful, absolutely. This is a beautiful part of the country. But it’s not fantasy land, David. All these people buying ice cream have to go home and pay the bills, and so do I.”

David twisted his head to the side to give her a small, squinty-eyed “I’ve got you figured out” smile. “You don’t even realize how amazing it is here, do you. You’re used to it. You’ve lived here so long you don’t even know you’re in paradise.”

She shrugged. “Well...you could be right, I mean I’ve never actually walked around on the outside so I can’t say for sure this isn’t paradise by comparison. But it’s probably like that for everyone everywhere, right? I doubt many Hawaiian natives wake up every morning thinking, ‘God I’m lucky to live in Hawaii.’ ”

“Well they should. And so should you, living here.”

“And so should you, living where you live.”

“Where I live is *not* paradise, not by any stretch.”

“The guys who muck out the sewers in the slums of India might disagree with you.”

David paused, and his eyebrows went up a little. “Wait...are we fighting?”

Laura laughed and shook her head. “I don’t think so. I’m just saying...” She shrugged. “I don’t know... Don’t always be running away trying to find someplace better, I guess. Appreciate where you are.”

Something in what she said bothered him, like a phantom itch that you can't locate to scratch, but he didn't want to argue. The day was too beautiful for arguing. "I'll try, but it's a lot harder to appreciate anything out there now, after seeing all *this*." He waved his hand around generally at the ocean, the trees, the sky...Laura's face... She noticed and laughed, and he felt smooth. "When I'm out there, all I can think about all day is getting back in here."

"Hey," she said, her smile inverting into a warning frown. "Careful."

"What?"

"Just be careful."

He was pretty sure he didn't know what she meant, but he let it go. They walked in silence for a while, past countless souvenir, novelty, coffee, and candy shops. They stopped for some ice cream, and since David didn't have any dream-world money, he let Laura buy. And even though he was walking with the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, who would most certainly order some sophisticated flavor like "amaretto gelato swirl" or "cappuccino tiramisu", he ordered bubblegum, because it was his favorite. Laura smiled when she saw that neon blue glob on his cone, and he thought she would laugh, but she rolled her eyes, gave his cheek a sarcastic little-kid pinch, and ordered peppermint candy.

As they walked and slurped their ridiculous blue and pink ice creams (boy and girl, aww...) David felt a thinning in the scenery around him, and knew he wouldn't be here much longer. He wasn't waking up exactly, he didn't feel his bed fading in underneath the sidewalk, but his mind was drifting into actual unconscious sleep. He could feel it, but it was happening slowly, and he still had some time.

He lowered his cone and looked over at Laura with a kind of puzzled, slightly suspicious smile. "So when I first met you, way back in seventh grade, and you came running up to me babbling about being chased by a bunch of guys or something..."

Laura started to laugh, and covered her face with her hands.

"What was that all about? Who was chasing you?"

"Oh God," she said, embarrassed. "This is so stupid, but nobody was chasing me." She rolled her eyes upward. "I was out walking with some friends...I saw you standing there...I wanted to meet you..."

"Did you know I was an 'outsider' or whatever?"

"Of course. You guys practically have neon signs on your heads."

David squinted. "So you knew that's what I was, but you still wanted to meet me? What about not wanting to 'start something impossible'?"

"I wasn't trying to 'start' anything at the time, I just...wanted to meet you. I came up with that dumb story about being chased because I knew dreamers enjoy that kind of stuff. I wanted to give you a little adventure, maybe have a little myself too. I don't know. I just saw you standing there, and I knew I wanted to run up and talk to you. So I did. I was twelve."

David could feel the flavor draining out of the ice cream, along with the color of the sky and the hardness of the sidewalk. He ate faster.

"I never expected to see you again after that night," Laura continued, twisting a lock of hair in her fingers. "But...well, you know the rest."

They had reached the end of the storefront sidewalk, and they stopped. David licked the blue off his lips, and looked at Laura. It hit him again suddenly, as it did every few minutes, and he shook his head. "This is crazy."

Laura smiled apologetically. "I know."

...

He didn't know exactly how much of the night he spent on the beach and how much he spent actually sleeping, but eventually he woke up from both. He could hear The Sound outside, the D major chord, now richly harmonic with 5ths and 7ths, diminished and sustained and whatever, clearly audible even through the walls of the house. He didn't eat breakfast or brush his teeth first this time, he didn't even get dressed, he just got up in his boxers, and stepped out onto the porch. A cassette tape was waiting on the welcome mat. Its laboriously scrawled label read: RUSSIAN DOLLS

He wasn't sure if Julie was up yet, but it didn't matter. He took the tape into the bathroom, locked the door, and turned the fan on. While the stated purpose of bathroom fans is ventilation, everyone knows their real purpose is to produce fart-canceling white noise. David figured it would work just as well for muffling the voices on cryptic stalker tapes. He put the tape in the player, sat down on the toilet seat, and pressed "play".

The usual tape hiss for about a minute. Some shallow breathing. Then: "Ok. Let me ask you some questions. Are you convinced that Laura is a real person?"

"Yes," David whispered.

"Do you understand how your brain works?"

"No."



“After all the Discovery Channel shows you’ve skimmed past and Popular Science articles you’ve browsed through and interesting factoids you’ve stumbled into on the internet, do you have the slightest idea what actually goes on in that big chunk of boiled gray hamburger in your skull?”

“I don’t.”

“Do you remember hearing or reading somewhere that people only use about ten percent of their brains?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Have you ever wondered about that ninety percent that doesn’t seem to be doing anything? And did you know that they can’t *really* measure brain activity? That it’s a very inexact science?”

David said nothing, and the tape kept rolling.

“Have you ever wondered if maybe there’s enough room in that ninety percent to fit another whole person?”

Breathing. *Click*. Blank tape hiss.

...

I knew we were ascending the incline of a roller coaster. We were about to spiral down a track that probably wouldn’t hold our weight, but I threw my hands up anyway.

We were at my house, on the couch, and she was sideways, with her head resting on my lap, and I was almost at peace, running a hand through her hair. She was smiling. Her eyes were closed. There was a bottle of wine and two emptied glasses on the coffee table, because I sometimes like to play at being classy, and do things like drink wine and put on soft music. I’m cheesy like that. Julie was fooled, though, and I let her be, and that was fine. We were both almost at peace.

Almost. “What about David?” Julie murmured. Her eyes were open now, staring at nothing.

“He’s happy now.”

“This feels wrong.”

“It’s not.”

“Where are we going with this, though? How is it going to end up?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t think it’s wrong.” I stroked her hair, trying to reassure her. “I’m pretty sure it’s not wrong.”

Silence, except for the smooth music I’d put on earlier. Nothing over-the-top like Barry White or anything, but smooth. Smoove, even. “Julie,” I said.

“Mm?”

“I love you.”

Her eyes were closed again, and she smiled. “Mm.”

We were clumsy children toying with hearts, minds, and sacred vows. All so fragile, all so jagged-edged when broken. Deep down, I knew we wouldn’t get away with it. There would be consequences. People would get hurt. Maybe killed. But none of us wanted to hear that. We were sprinting with our eyes closed. We were having fun.



Breakfast, Red Robin, customers, table #20, car, traffic, dinner out, drive home, porch, hall, room, bed and—sleep. Blackness. Elsewhere.

It wasn't the beach this time. David opened his eyes from deeper unconsciousness to find himself standing on the shoulder of a small, worn-down highway, in the middle of a wide open expanse of grassy hills. He noted with great pleasure that the hills were almost entirely treeless, except for a few sparse clusters of birch, but those were ok. (Even after his big camping trip, he still liked birch trees.) He didn't know exactly where he was, or why, but he wasn't concerned. He knew he was in the Magic Kingdom, and here the sun was shining in a yawning, liquid blue sky. He picked a direction, and starting walking down the road. He actually whistled.

He began to notice things as he walked, odd little inconsistencies in the surrounding scenery. A butterfly flew by

sistencies in the surrounding scenery. A butterfly flew by his face, and just as it reached the outskirts of his periphery vision, he was almost sure it simply vanished. He looked over to where it should have been, and sure enough, it was gone. Half a second later, before his very eyes, it reappeared, still in flight. Something about a patch of daisies caught his eye, and he watched them flicker back and forth between perfect realism and a blocky, base-color abstraction that reminded him of a crude computer drawing. Occasionally the scenery in his periphery vision would go blurry for a moment until he looked straight at it, then would snap back into focus. All this transient reality felt familiar to him. He had certainly seen it on the beach, but probably just hadn't noticed it with Laura standing next to him. She had a way of distracting him.

The highway wasn't very busy, but he watched at least five or six cars and one Maersk semi-truck go by. He thought about putting his thumb out, but what would he say when they asked "Where you headed?" He decided to walk and wait. Within five minutes, an old, boxy, blue-gray Volvo sedan drove past him, then slowed down and pulled onto the shoulder. The window rolled down, and Laura's head popped out, grinning, her hair fluttering over her face in the breeze.

"Morning!" David called, squinting in the sun.

"It's afternoon!"

David jogged the rest of the way, and executed a thrilling, cop-like roll over the hood of her car. He tried to carry the motion through into opening the passenger door and slipping inside, but it wasn't nearly as smooth as the roll. "So where are we?" he asked. He noticed her back seat was full of blankets, bags, a few boxes, and a microwave.

"Well, we're about two hours southwest of Bellingham."

“Are you moving back into town?”

“Yep. Gotta go back to work. Even in dream land.”

They drove down the highway with the windows down and the sun streaming in, the wind dancing through their hair, and Wilco on the stereo. Waking or sleeping, it was a beautiful world that allowed moments like this.

They passed the time chatting about this and that, movies and music, their families, their childhoods, etc. When a topic dried up and there was no immediately obvious replacement, they just listened to the music, and watched the scenery go by. It was comfortable silence. Its implications were profound.

Soon enough their rural highway intersected I-5, and they headed north into Bellingham. Laura’s single-bedroom duplex was part of a large student neighborhood on the northern outskirts of town. David knew it was a student neighborhood as soon as he got out of the car. In the bright afternoon sun, even though winter’s chill still clung to everything, the air was thick with that carefree, shorts wearing, Frisbee tossing, friend making, party throwing, beer drinking, drug doing, sex having “college town” atmosphere. A heady scent of adventure, growing up, living life, and learning the hard way. He knew this atmosphere was probably 90% of the reason most students actually went to college, and missing out on it was his only regret for not having moved on from SVC.

He helped Laura move her stuff from the car to her house, hefting more boxes each trip than was practical, until Laura looked at him struggling up the porch steps, and gave him an affectionately amused smile that said, *David. It’s not necessary.*

He set the stack of boxes down on the porch, let out a deep breath, and picked up the top one. “I’ll come back for

those,” he said, and Laura nodded and laughed.

The ocean cabin had most of its own furnishings, so aside from the few things she had taken, like toiletries, bedding, books, etc, the duplex was still in normal living condition. As David moved through the rooms to drop off the boxes, his eyes roved all around, gawking openly like a tourist in a cathedral. The atmosphere in here was vastly different than the one outside. There were no cases of Coors Light laying around, no rock posters on the walls, no stuffed animals or Hello Kitty stickers. This was not a college girl’s dorm, it was a woman’s house. It exuded class and sophistication (the walls had framed prints of intelligent modern art, the living room had a mahogany bookshelf full of hardcover books) but also charm and a sense of fun. (One of the art prints was a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic panel, the bookshelf contained *The Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe* back to back with *Deep Thoughts* by Jack Handey.) The place hadn’t been lived in for over a month, but it radiated warmth from every corner.

“Well, this is my place,” Laura said, putting both hands out, palms-up, in the classic “this is my place” pose.

“I love it,” David said, and had a screeching-to-a-stop-at-the-edge-of-a-cliff moment when he almost blurted out, “When can I move in?”

Laura opened a box of kitchen utensils and started putting them in drawers. “So how long do you expect to be around today?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he said. “If I had any say in the matter I’d be here forever.” As soon as he said it, he realized it was a pretty weighty declaration, but he couldn’t take it back, and didn’t really want to. “But I guess I have to actually sleep sometime.”

“Well, if you’re still here by 6:00, you can come see where I work, if you want. I have to go in and get my new schedule.” While she was speaking, David saw one of the forks on the counter suddenly flicker into a spoon, then back into a fork as soon as she picked it up. He was sure the curtains in the living room had been red when he came in, but now they were a deep orange.

“You saw that fork become a spoon, right?” he asked slowly.

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “That stuff happens now and then.”

“Things just change into other things?”

She nodded.

“Wait...how can anyone conduct business here—especially something delicate like running a hospital—if everything’s so unstable like that?” The scientist had snapped one of his arm bindings and was flailing around, clawing at the other straps. David fought to keep him restrained.

Laura put the last fork/spoon in the drawer and started on the plates. “Things aren’t really as unstable as they look. Anything important, anything anyone is focusing on, stays solid. A scalpel isn’t going to suddenly turn into a cranial saw in the middle of an operation. It’s just the details that tend to drift, things that don’t matter.”

“Ok,” David said, nodding. He glanced at the curtains again. “By the way, your curtains are orange now.”

She looked at them, and they were red again. She smiled. “Your world is as chaotic as ours, David, ours is just more honest about it. Our world doesn’t pretend to make sense.”

David thought a moment, then nodded. “Well, that makes sense.”

“No it *doesn't*,” Laura said with an exasperated teacher’s frown, and then laughed, turning back to the dishes. “Anyway...who needs sense?”

David began to feel that familiar washing-out of the reality around him, a slow loss of brightness and contrast. “Laura, I don’t think I’m going to be around by 6:00.”

She sighed and set down the dishes. “If you got more sleep, you’d have more time here. You should start going to bed earlier or sleeping in later. I need my man to be able to last longer than this.” She said that with a little smile, and David, a twenty-six-year-old man, found himself blushing.

“Yeah I’ll...try that,” he said, and headed for the front door. Laura went with him, and they stopped in the entryway, presumably to say goodbye. He looked down into her eyes, that insane, paralyzing, phosphorescent blue, and she looked up at him, half a foot shorter but infinitely superior, mysterious, terrifying. Somewhere, a spark jumped, and they were kissing, deep and hard, hands on the back of necks and tangled in hair, pressing, and David wanted to die and live forever at the same time.

It might have been five seconds or five minutes, he was lost in it, he was gone. Then at some unseen signal, it ended. Their lips made that delicious little smacking sound as they pulled away, and Laura’s instantly curved into a smile, her eyes still closed.

“Goodnight, Ms. Chamberg,” David said, the words barely making it out of his throat.

Laura’s eyes slid open slowly. “Goodnight, Señor Martin.”

It was all he could do to keep the surges in his chest from boiling out into crazy laughter. “Goodnight,” he said again, and



turned to go. Of course, instead of walking down the porch steps to his car, maybe waving, and then driving off, he just took a few steps, thought about the absolute, laughable, horrifying, beautiful, ecstatic absurdity of it all, and disappeared.

...

He woke up to the D chord again. But this morning, he was in no desperate rush to hear what the tape had to say. He threw on a bathrobe and slippers, and fixed himself some hot tea. It was just after 6:00 AM, the sun was still just a glowing smear on the horizon, and the rest of the world was still asleep. He sat at the kitchen table, drinking his tea, looking out the window with puffy morning eyes, and smiling a wide, satisfied smile.

Eventually he got around to investigating the porch. There was indeed a cassette there on the welcome mat, but he didn't pick it up just yet. He stood there gazing out into the morning-gray neighborhood, listening to the harmonic tone that filled the air. It wasn't really all that loud, not loud enough to be a nuisance in the wee hours, but it carried as if the atmosphere conducted it, like electricity through water. Dressed in his bathrobe and slippers, still holding his mug of tea, he started walking, following the direction of the sound as best he could.

He didn't follow the streets, he just walked in a straight line, through alleys, across parking lots, and through people's yards. He had no idea what to expect. The way his life had been going lately, he figured it would probably be some kind of shimmering portal to another dimension, or something. So it was a strangely pleasant surprise when he found himself stand-

ing outside a wood mill. The sound was pouring out of an open shop area full of wood-working equipment. It seemed to be coming mostly from one large band saw, with the harmonics provided by a nearby air compressor. It was *motor noise*. Through overwhelming coincidence, the whirring buzzes of two motors were producing two solid, harmonic notes, and the workings of the saw, the spinning wheels and bars, the blade biting wood, were all filling it out into a full, lush chord.

Standing there in his bathrobe, staring at that accidental mechanical orchestra, he thought, *What an incredible world*, and walked back to his house.

The tape was waiting there on the mat. He picked it up and took it into the bathroom like a newspaper. In that labored, childlike handwriting, the label read: BILL NYE SCIENCE GUY

David sat on the toilet seat, turned the fan on, and pressed play. There were the usual muffled noises, some breathing, and then that vaguely familiar voice:

“I’m not myself when I’m on this tape. I don’t even know what I sound like here, probably like a nut case, and I think I’m more articulate than this, it’s just so...it’s awkward.”

A long pause.

“There are people within people. But you know that already. Probably at least two thirds of the people in the world have another person living in that empty ninety-percent of their brains. Those people have their own world in there, one vast lucid dream shared by millions. They share it like a network of radio towers, relaying signals from brain to brain all across the outside world, making the inside world consistent. They all share the same lucid dream, so that dream stops being a dream. It becomes a reasonably solid, reasonably coherent reality. Everyone you see in there is real. You aren’t dreaming them,

they're all real, individual people with their own lives, hopes and dreams, births and deaths. This isn't sci-fi fantasy supernatural X-files bullshit. For billions of ordinary people, this is all as everyday obvious as dirt and sky. Got it?"

David's mind was tripping over itself, scrambling to keep up as questions begat questions, dividing and multiplying. "Getting it" seemed a ridiculous, hopeless idea.

"Listen to me," the tape said, and there was a new urgency in its voice. "I have just told you everything you need to know. The inside is a real world, blended and interconnected with the outside in a million ways no one will ever fully understand. So don't try. Black holes are what they are, the inside is what it is. Don't try."

The voice became conversational again. "Ok? Got it?"

David took a deep breath and let it out. "Got it," he whispered, and for a moment he worried that the tape would detect the lack of certainty in his voice, and reprimand him.

It didn't, of course. It just played empty air noise for a few seconds, then the pop of the stop button being pressed, then silent hiss. He put the player in the drawer, and went to work.

Somewhere beyond the grey sky, galaxies spun around black holes. Somewhere out in the neighborhood, a woodworking plant produced beautiful, accidental music. On the curb across the street from David's house, a white Honda Accord sat motionless, idling quietly in the cold.

...

He worked a long shift, made even longer by the state his mind was in. When he got off, it was after 7:00, but he didn't

want to go home yet. He drove aimlessly through Burlington, into Mount Vernon, and out onto the country roads, past tree farms and empty tulip fields. It was twilight. The sky began with a tiny slice of white at the horizon, then blended into copper, then a rich blue that deepened and darkened all the way across the sky until it hit the opposite horizon. There, behind the Cascade Mountains, it brightened faintly, anticipating a daybreak that was still a long way off. It was a work of art, that sky, its smooth gradient of vivid colors, the deep blues and burnished copper, all pierced here and there by intense points of brilliant red from distant radio tower lights. He was still gazing at it when he found himself pulling into Josh's driveway in West Mount Vernon. Considering the hour, he decided he shouldn't just walk in unannounced, so he called Josh on his cell.

"Hello?"

"Hi Josh, it's David."

"Hey, what's up?"

"You have some time to chat? Mind if I stop by?"

"Sure, come on over."

David considered doing the thing where you're outside someone's house talking to them on a cell phone, and you say you're coming over, and then you hang up and walk right in, and it's funny because you were just talking to them on the phone and now you're here already, how did you get here so fast, ha ha ha, technology is crazy! But he knew that joke was at least three years dead, and he wasn't really in the mood for jokes anyway.

"Um, actually I'm kind of here already. In your driveway?"

"Oh. Ok."

“So...I’ll see you in a few seconds.”

“Ok.”

Josh pushed the door open as David was approaching the porch and left it open, retreating into the kitchen. David followed him in.

Josh started digging through the fridge. “You want a beer?”

“Sure.”

He popped the caps on two fancy microbrews, and poured them into glasses. *Frosted* glasses from the freezer. “I think every social interaction needs at least one beer,” he said. “Making conversation, being charming, being pleasant company and all that...human beings just can’t quite cut it on their own. They need that little one-beer nudge to get them up to par.” He handed a glass to David. “I think if everyone had one beer’s worth of alcohol in their system all the time, the world would be a much better place.” He concluded his speech with a long pull followed by an exaggerated “ahh”.

David clapped. “Fine words, sah, fine words.”

“So what did you want to talk about? If it’s casual we can stand around in the kitchen, if it’s serious we have to sit in the living room.”

David finished his swallow and smacked his lips. “Well, I guess it’s serious.”

Josh led him into the living room and had him sit on the couch. Josh sat in an easy chair opposite him, the same arrangement they had for their last talk. “When are you going to get a real couch?” David wondered, giving the one he was sitting on a disdainful glance-over. “The curvy kind that points away from you so I don’t have to look at you when I talk?”

“When I get my Masters. They hand those out at the

graduation ceremony. Hold on, I have to piss.” He went down the hall to the bathroom, and as soon as the door shut, the phone rang in the kitchen. “Can you get that?” Josh yelled.

David picked up the receiver, thought about possible funny ways to answer, rejected them all, and said, “Hello?”

“Hey dude it’s Aaron. Hey, how long do you think you’ll be needing that—”

“Aaron. This is David. Josh is in the bathroom.”

“Oh. Ok.” A pause. “Well hey bro, how’s it going?”

“All right.”

“How are things ‘up there’?”

“Well...improving, I guess. But hey...” He lowered his voice. “Don’t say anything to Josh, ok? About Ocean Shores?”

Aaron’s tone became oddly knowing. “Sure. You had a boring weekend at home.”

Josh came out of the bathroom and stood next to him, waiting.

“All right, well here’s Josh. See ya, Aaron.”

He handed to phone to Josh, and returned to the couch. Josh talked for five minutes or so about a topic David couldn’t identify by listening, then took his seat again, pen and notepad in hand. “Ok,” he said, and waited.

“Ok. I think I might have some ideas about my situation.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. A possible explanation. Sort of.”

Josh wrote on his note pad, mumbling out loud. “Patient...thinks...he is not...nuts.” He looked up. “Let’s hear it.”

“Ok. I don’t know if any of this is possible, and it’s definitely going to sound crazy, but that should be obvious by now.”

He proceeded to regurgitate everything he had heard on the tape that morning. He was careful to obscure the source, and made it sound like a crazy theory he had just come up with but didn't put much stock in. All the while Josh just listened, straight-faced. But there was something about the way he nodded at all the right times but never said anything. Like someone trying to be polite while hearing a story for the tenth time.

When David finished, he leaned back in the couch and said, "So what do you think?"

Josh took a deep breath and released it slowly. "So Laura lives in someone else's brain, someone walking around out here in the real world." His tone wasn't sarcastic, he was just recapping. "She lives in a society of...uh...'non-physical people', all inside other people's brains, all living in this big, shared, lucid dream. Which is all held together by some kind of...psychic communication, or something?"

"I don't know if I'd say 'psychic', it's probably just some kind of brainwave thing, but something like that anyway. Is it possible?"

"It sounds like science fiction to me."

"It's *not* science fiction. For billions of ordinary people this is—I know it sounds ridiculous, but if we could just suspend our disbelief for a minute...is it *possible*?"

Josh shrugged. "Well...I guess." He leaned forward in his chair, folding his hands in front of him. "But David, man, I've got to wonder... How's your relationship with Julie right now?"

David blinked. "It's fine."

"Fine?"

"Yeah."

"This little dreamland romance you're having doesn't af-

fect it at all?”

“Well...I mean...I just kind of...” David realized he was trailing off into a cartoonish display of guilt, and it irritated him. “No,” he said firmly. “It doesn’t affect it.”

“David,” Josh said, shaking his head and chuckling in disbelief, “you do know what you’re doing is adultery, right? You’re having an affair.”

“Oh *come on!*” David said, violently adjusting his posture, crossing his arms and scooting as far back into the couch as he could go. “That’s so fucking ridiculous. You’re not even convinced that Laura is a real person.”

Josh held up his hands, palms upward, and shook his head. “Whether she’s real or not, if *you* think she is then you’re having an affair.”

“I haven’t even slept with her, Josh, all we’ve done is talked.”

“David, I hate to break this to you but infidelity doesn’t require a penis going into a vagina. Every time you *see* her, you’re sleeping with her, morally. And I guess in this case, literally too.”

David looked intently at Josh, his lips tight, and there was a long silence. Eventually, David’s stare wavered, and dropped to the floor. Josh sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I’m sorry, David, but I just don’t understand cheating. I never have. If you’re not satisfied with a relationship and you want to see someone else, you tell the person, you break up with them or separate or whatever. You don’t go behind their back and start fucking around just because you have an urge and can’t make a decision. That’s animal.”

David’s eyes stayed on the floor, unfocused, motionless, like discarded marbles lost under a couch. He said nothing.



“You can’t have it both ways. If you feel that you absolutely can’t give up this dream girl and be Julie’s husband, well...get a fucking divorce.”

David’s gaze still didn’t move. He sat there, arms at his sides, staring. Josh was silent, waiting for him. The room was like a wax museum for six elongated minutes. Then David grabbed his beer glass and stood up, keeping his eyes on the floor or off to the side. “Thanks for all your help,” he said, moving into the kitchen to put his glass in the sink. His voice was hollow and expressionless, like a fifth grader reciting lines in a school play. “I have a lot to think over. Thanks for the beer. I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah,” Josh said, his voice low and quiet. “Have a good night.”

“Thanks,” David said, grabbed his coat, and left.

He drove with the same blank, unfocused expression, changing only when he squinted from approaching headlights. He stared into nothing, and when his vision flared white from the high-set lights of an oncoming SUV, it was like the energy flare of a rift in time, and he was in the future again.

He and Laura would stake out a life for themselves.

After the wedding and the two week honeymoon on a tiny Caribbean island, paid for by Laura’s father, a doctor, they would return to Bellingham, and try to get their life in order. Agreeing that they both wanted children but not yet, they would live in Laura’s duplex for a few years, while David worked his way up at the shipyard, and Laura continued to earn a steady income at the hospital. After two years, David would be promoted to some kind of managerial position, and they would have enough money to buy a small three bedroom rambler on the outskirts of Bellingham.

Relatively secure, he and Laura would travel again.

By now David would be twenty-nine and Laura twenty-eight, their deadline fast approaching, so they would embark on a low-budget, poorly planned journey through India, South Africa, and Egypt. They would be robbed twice in India, losing mostly supplies but also some cash, and Laura would get malaria in South Africa. David would have to stay by her side in a local mission, trying to care for her, which he would find sort of romantic, but which she would inform him was not romantic at all, and then vomit on his arm. But she would recover quickly, and they would continue into Egypt, which would turn out to be overly touristy, especially at major sites like the Pyramids, but nonetheless awe-inspiring. One evening, they would stay in a rustic, mudbrick hotel with a balcony overlooking the Nile, with white curtains for a door. The heat would be sweltering, so they would lay on the bed together in their underwear, dusty and sweaty. Laura would rest her face and one arm on his bare chest, and they would lay there until nightfall, watching the white curtains dance in the warm breeze until they eventually fell asleep. On their flight home, they would recount the trip and conclude that it wasn't always pleasant, and they should have brought more money, but it was worth it. When asked what their favorite moment was, both would say the evening in the hotel in Egypt.

A year later, they would begin having children.

The first would be a girl, and on Laura's insistence, they would name her Sara. Sara would be a noisy, difficult newborn, and one sleepless night, David and Laura would swear to each other to make her an only child. But by the time she was one year old they would forget that promise, and find themselves once again in the hospital, with Laura sitting up in the

bed, trying to blow out invisible candles and crushing the small bones of David's hand. It would be a boy, and David would grin and want to name him something like Chuck, or Bill—not Charles or William, but actually put his name down as “Chuck”, or “Bill”. Laura would, of course, make him listen to reason, and they would name him Levi, after Laura's grandfather. When Levi was two, they would decide that two kids were enough, a perfect little nuclear family. But an unexpected birth-control failure would...

The car eased into the parking spot, and continued to idle forward until the jolt of collision with another car made David hit the brakes. He swore under his breath, still distracted, and quickly backed up, staring at the parked car in front of him. He had hit it bumper to bumper. No damage. He would walk away and forget it. He got out of the car and headed toward the towering brick entryway of the Burlington Haggen, with only a vague idea of why he was here. To get milk, maybe? He couldn't remember.

He stepped through that entryway blast of climate-controlled air, like stepping through a space station airlock, and headed for the dairy aisle. On the way there, he passed a wide variety of attractive, fashionable people. This wasn't garish, red and white Safeway with its towering ceiling of white girders and exposed ductwork. This was earth-toned Haggen, with its organic health food section, its wooden wine aisles, and its full-size, built-in Starbucks. He passed beautiful, college-age girls buying hair products and organic snacks. Stylish, middle-aged mothers with children and classy hairstyles buying wine and fancy marinades. Groups of two or three good-looking, intellectual, college-age guys with tasteful facial hair browsing the expansive selection of local microbrews and obscure im-

ports with intriguing labels and shocking price tags. He passed all these people, wanting their lives, but he was just here to buy milk.

When he reached the dairy aisle, he stood paralyzed before the array of choices. Skim. 1%. 2%. Whole. Dairy Glenn. Haggen Brand. Lucerne. Darigold. He didn't know what the difference was, all the brands tasted the same, so if he bought Darigold what was he getting for the extra two dollars? Sanitation? Did those two dollars pay for not having to drink uddersore pus? He didn't know what to do; he didn't want uddersore pus, but four dollars for a carton of milk? And as he stood there empty-handed, a silhouette against the wall of white milk and fluorescent light, the music on the store PA changed.

Normally, grocery stores all play the same stuff. The same elevator music, oldies, and soft rock favorites. Since walking into the store, he had heard Michael Bolton's "Said I Loved You But I Lied", Santana's "Smooth", and that one Kenny G song. But as Kenny blew his last note, something unfamiliar began to play. It was different. So different that David stopped where he stood, and looked up at the ceiling, listening. The song streaming out of those tinny little speakers was not soft rock or easy listening. It was soft and slow, but not soothing, not relaxing. It was insistent, tense, driving, and dramatic. It was slowly building in complexity, becoming larger, more forceful. It was powerful and moving. David didn't know who it was (Mogwai? Sigur Ros? In a fucking grocery store?) and he didn't know how it had found its way onto the store PA system (Some kid from the deli slipping his own CD into the system? A freak XM Radio programming accident?) but it was affecting him. To hear something so powerful while standing in the grocery store dairy aisle, so severely out of context in this

brightly lit world of coupons and Super Savings announcements...it stunned him. It knocked him off balance, and he thought of that fraying wicker basket that was reality, and of Laura. *Your world is as chaotic as ours*, she had said. *Ours is just more honest about it*. David wanted honesty right then. He wanted the basket to come apart. He wanted the world to show itself for what it really was. He closed his eyes and grabbed a gallon of milk, letting pure chance decide between money and pus.

At the checkout, he noticed a few little cardboard shelves full of candy. Chocolate bunnies, foil-wrapped eggs, marshmallow Peeps. He realized Easter must be coming soon. He had never been able to remember what holidays came when, so he relied on the appearance of themed merchandise, like clockwork, to let him know when one was around the bend. So...Easter. It was almost spring. Soon the world would be all pastels and sunshine. Where had last year gone? What had happened to all those winter months? Had he slept through them? What year was this?

"Wake up, David," said a familiar, brittle voice behind him.

David was reluctant to turn. "Oh hey Charlie," he said, feigning surprise and a smile.

"Lost in the headlines of the Enquirer?"

"No, just...spacing out."

"Is Bat Boy back from Iraq yet?"

"I don't know. I wasn't reading the Enquirer, I was just..."

"Spacing out, right."

Silence. Both of them nodding slightly. In one hand Charlie was holding a basket of groceries, in the other, a copy

of today's *Skagit Herald*. He nodded toward the front page and grunted. "So can you believe this shit?"

David glanced at the headlines. *Economy Still Sinking* followed by *Middle East Violence On the Rise*. He shrugged and looked away. "Yeah I don't know." His eyes drifted back to the Easter candy. "I haven't really been keeping up with the news lately."

Charlie smirked. "Yeah. Sad. What was your excuse again?"

"I'm just...pretty busy."

"Busy. What, searching for Sasquatch?"

David looked at Charlie's smirk for a long moment. Tilting his head slightly, he said, "What do you know about black holes, Charlie?"

"Oh is it black holes now? You're flying through space hunting black holes? With Bigfoot and Nessie at the helm? That's why you're too busy to keep track of the world around you?"

David's face didn't change. "What are they? What are black holes?"

"They're collapsed stars that are so dense they distort space. God, what the—"

"Shut up," David said.

Charlie shut up. There was eerie silence.

David said, "I don't live here anymore." He smiled. "I don't want to. I can't. See, after I buy this milk, I'm going to drive home to my porch, which won't have a newspaper on it, go up to my room which doesn't have a TV, and close my eyes, and go to sleep. Then..." He snapped his fingers. "Poof. You and all this will just...disappear."

Charlie stared at him, unreadable. David countered his

stare. In the background, pushing through the noise curtain of shoppers, that music played, urgent and beautiful and out of place. The checkout line advanced. Groceries moved on conveyor belts and bar codes passed through laser beams. Totals appeared on digital screens. “Ok...” Charlie said slowly. He adjusted his posture, letting out a held breath. People swiped debit cards and keyed in PIN numbers. People walked out of the store, and more groceries moved down the conveyor. “Well, I guess you’re not feeling so great today. I obviously caught you at a bad time. I’ll see you later, ok?” His grocery basket still in his hand, he stepped out of line and walked back into the store. Before he disappeared into an aisle, he glanced back at David. The look on his face was complicated, several subtle shades of expression. David couldn’t decode it.

On the PA, the incongruously beautiful song came to an end. Amy Grant’s “House of Love” faded in to take its place. David paid for the milk, and drove home.



He wanted to see the white Accord when he got home. He wanted to see its window down a crack with some kind of surveillance scope sticking out, wanted to rear-end the car, then get out and rip open the door and pull out the government agents inside, throw them down on the ground and yell, “Who sent you?” But the car wasn’t there. Just a little oil stain on the pavement to confirm that it had been.

Julie’s car was in the driveway, but all the windows in the house were dark. David stepped in through the doorway—*fuck*, it was cold again. As cold or colder than outside. “Julie?” he called up the dark staircase. There was light in the bedroom, showing out through the cracks in the door. He hung up his coat and started toward the bedroom, but the door opened and Julie came out, all dressed, shoes, jacket and purse. She had a piece of notepaper in her hand.



"Hi," David said, almost a question.

"Hi," Julie said. "I was just on my way out, um..." She looked at the note in her hand, then at David. "Here," she said, and handed him the note. He read it as she walked past him.

David,  
Went out to run some errands. Be  
back later tonight  
Julie

He turned around as she was opening the front door. "Errands?"

"Yep. I'll be back later tonight. Bye." She waved, and shut the door behind her.

David looked at the clock. It was 9:45.

He faded from room to room in his empty house, looking around, sitting down, standing up, pacing. He started drinking. Why was it so fucking cold in here? Why didn't Julie have the heat on? What was wrong with her? Nevermind. It didn't matter. It would be warm in bed, under the covers. It would be warm on the inside. It always seemed to be warmer there. Julie's errands didn't matter there. The white Accord didn't matter there. The cold, dark house didn't matter there. Laura was there, and she was warm and bright. He finished off his fourth drink. His eyes drifted and drooped. He wobbled to the bedroom and fell into bed, the covers smothered him, and he was gone.

Warmth and noise flooded in around him. The steady

roar of traffic, the random yips and yaps of human voices. He was standing in front of a crosswalk on Holly Street, in Bellingham. He had appeared next to a group of people waiting to cross the street. They all looked at him, and one of them, a woman in her fifties, smiled and gave him a friendly nod. As if to say, "Welcome", David thought, and almost laughed. He was a tourist in Hawaii being welcomed off the plane.

"Aloha," he said to the woman. "Can you tell me how to get to the hospital from here?"

It was all the way over on Sunset, which was a pretty long walk. He considered getting a taxi (he had never done that before) but he didn't have any inside money (That was a problem. He was going to need to get a job soon.) and besides, he wanted to explore. The streets were all familiar to him, but there was a newness to everything here. It was exhilarating just feeling the firm pavement beneath his feet, running his hand over the rough wood of a telephone pole, riddled with poster staples, sucking in deep breaths of this alien air, feeling it ruffle his taste buds, just knowing that this was actually real and he was actually *here*. He walked the sidewalk down the steep hill that was Holly Street, past so many people he had never met, and observed the transient nature of this place with a giddy fascination. Concert flyers on windows and telephone poles flickered in and out of existence, or the bands advertised on them shuffled. Cracks in the pavement rearranged themselves or disappeared. Cloud formations abruptly distorted as if buffeted by hurricane winds, then snapped back to their original shapes. This whole world was in perpetual motion. There were no inanimate objects.

It took him over an hour to get to the hospital. He hated to waste so much precious inside time without seeing Laura,

but it was wonderful to be able to really see her world, to just stroll through it by himself, observing its trembling, erratic beauty.

Making his way through the hospital parking lot, he saw Laura's battleship-blue Volvo, and felt that familiar nervous rush of spotting a girl's car. It would have been the same rush even if it wasn't actually her car. He had always been like that. As soon as he met a girl, he would start noticing cars like hers all over town, they would suddenly be everywhere, and each sighting would bring the same thrilling jolt. He wondered when his heart was going to graduate from junior high, but it didn't matter, he was having fun now. He was convinced he was getting closer to happiness by the minute.

He went to the front desk and asked to see Laura. The receptionist told him she was cleaning out the rooms right now, but she would page her on the intercom and let her know someone was here to see her. David sat in the waiting room and flipped through out-of-date Newsweeks and car magazines, until he saw her coming.

Striding into the room in slow motion, smiling, her hair bouncing with each step, while the Monkees' "I'm a Believer" filled the air in David's head.

He stood up to greet her, there was a brief, uncertain hesitation, then he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him, she threw her arms around his neck, and they kissed, breathing hard through their noses, eyes closed, heads tilting side to side while firmly connected at the mouth, stumbling backward a few steps from the impact. All the while, the only thought running through David's mind was *Holy shit! Holy shit!*

The receptionists, two Hispanic women about Laura's

age, stared at them with wide-eyed, jaw-dropped delight. “Laura Chamberg!” one of them said in a high-pitched, accusatory wail, grinning. She threw an upturned palm toward David. “Who the hell is this, girl?”

Laura twisted her head around to face them, her arms still dangling around his neck. “This is David.”

“Hi,” David said, unable to suppress a boyish grin. The two women just stared at him, hands on their hips, their mouths still hanging open a little.

“I’m going on break,” Laura said. “I’ll be back in forty-five, ok?” The receptionists nodded, and she and David exited the hospital as quickly as they could, almost running.

They drove downtown, parked in the first spot they found, and started walking with no clear destination. Laura asked where he wanted to go, he told her to lead on, it was her town, so they just walked. The sky was full of wild, deeply textured clouds, and there was a light mist tossed around by a cold breeze. David watched it bead in Laura’s hair, drip off the corner of her plastic nametag badge. He picked up the badge to get a closer look at the ID photo, and shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

“What?” she said, snatching it back.

“Even your ID photo is beautiful. Who has good ID photos?”

She smiled and tucked the badge into her scrubs. “Give me a break.”

“It’s a small group of special people who have good ID photos, Laura. You have to have something really extraordinary for that to be possible. You’re like the Chosen Race, the Blessed People.”

“Oh God,” she laughed, rolling her eyes. “That’s

enough.” Her smile turned devious. “So let’s see yours. You’re part of a chosen race too, you know.”

“I doubt it.”

“I’m serious. Not all outsiders can get into the inside, and you’re here, so you’re special. So let’s see it.”

David smirked. “Sorry to deny you the pleasure, Madame, but I don’t *have*—” He stopped. “Wait. Maybe I do...” Checking his back pocket, he was surprised to find his wallet there. No money in it, but his driver’s license and Safeway card were present. Apparently some things tagged along from the outside, or at least his brain reconstructed them here, added them to this lucid dream’s global database of minds. Or something. He pulled out his license and reluctantly handed it to Laura, frowning. “I was trying something—” he started to say, but Laura’s burst of laughter cut him off. “I was trying to do this certain face, but I only got like halfway there before they took the picture, so it just ended up...”

“Oh my God,” Laura said between bursts, still holding the card in front of her.

“...looking really stupid. Give me that.” He snatched it out of her fingers and stuffed it back in his wallet.

Laura wiped her eyes. “Well apparently good ID photos aren’t one of the requirements for your particular chosen race.”

“I guess not.”

“But you’re almost twenty-seven, right? So it’s just a little over a year till you can try again.”

“Right.” He stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and looked out at the horizon. “That’s right.” They were coming downhill toward the main drag through downtown, and he could see the bay from here, the evening sun giving a platinum edge to the steel gray of the sky. “I can’t believe how fast time

is going lately,” he murmured, not taking his eyes off the bay. “Especially these last few years. Time has always seemed really slow to me, but lately it’s like I wake up and a year’s passed.” He glanced over at Laura. “Time doesn’t move faster here does it?”

“Not really, no. But I know what you mean, I feel like that whenever I’m coming down from a vacation. Every time I drive back into Bellingham from Ocean Shores, I feel like Rip van Winkle.”

David nodded. “Yeah. I guess I’ve just always looked at the future as something that’s fun to think about but is never really going to happen, you know? I always thought it was pretty much impossible that I’d ever live past thirty; I just figured I’d die in a car crash or the sun would go nova or Armageddon or something before that ever happened. But now...I mean, there’s Easter stuff in the grocery store already, it’s almost Spring.”

“Do you *want* to live past thirty?” Laura asked.

That brought him up short. “I’m not sure. I never used to think I did. But...I don’t know. Things have been changing a lot for me lately.”

“That’s good,” Laura said, and smiled at him. “Having a death wish probably isn’t very healthy for the start of a relationship.”

That brought him up short, too. It was pretty obvious that there was something between them beyond friendship (friends don’t let friends suck face), but they had never actually talked about anything, so the word “relationship” was startling. And yet it was amazing how Laura could make such a clinical word sound so beautiful.

“But honestly, I’ve had the same thoughts,” she said.

"I've wished I could die young and healthy. Getting old sounds like such a nightmare, you know? The joint problems, the menopause...wrinkles, getting fat, stretch marks, stretch pants, Metamucil and all that... It just doesn't sound like much fun. But at the same time...well..." She glanced up at him with an embarrassed smile. "I've always had a big soft spot for that old picket fence fantasy." She looked out at the bay, tilting her head slightly to the side. "You know, getting married, settling down... Well, some adventure first, be crazy for a few years, *then* settle down, have a few kids—two would be perfect, but who knows, maybe three—and then...the rest of it." She looked at David for his reaction, and he nodded, feeling an eerie sense of déjà vu.

She looked back at the bay, playing with a lock of hair between two fingers. "I know we hip, modern women aren't supposed to think that way, but that all sounds pretty wonderful to me. It seems like it wouldn't be so bad growing old and fat and arthritic if at the same time, I could watch my children growing tall and strong and beautiful. Like it would reverse the process for me, and I'd stay young forever."

"And when your children start to get old and fat..."

"Right, then my grandchildren are there to carry the baton, for me *and* my children. It's the Fountain of Youth."

David looked over at her with a kind of amazed smile, then looked forward again. "Yeah. Well...maybe Armageddon will wait a few more years."

Laura squeezed his hand. "I think you'll make a fine old man."

They walked in silence for a while. Just walking, trading glances, smiling now and then for no reason. Laura seemed to have some destination now, as she didn't hesitate at corners or

intersections, so David followed her, walking at her side, and let his eyes roam. He still couldn't get over the absolute realism of this dream world. Billions of memories of sights and sounds combining to form what he saw around him, every detail shared, confirmed, and remembered by billions of minds.

Other than the inconsistency of minutia like sidewalk cracks and band flyers, the reality of this place was undeniable, but at the same time, he noticed something odd. How similar the inside Bellingham was to the outside one, and yet how subtly alien. He noticed it in the details. Posters for unfamiliar movies starring actors he had never heard of. A strange, foreign look to some of the fashions he saw on the street. And most bizarre, music he had never heard before being played on pop radio stations. But it wasn't the differences that confused him, it was the similarities. It made sense that there would be different actors and different musicians here, but when he saw a car drive by with a Radiohead sticker on the trunk, that did not make sense. A bus-stop bearing a poster for the new Jackie Chan movie, that did not make sense either. He could hear the voice of the cassette tape, telling him, *Black holes are what they are, the inside is what it is. Don't try.* But it was hard to stop himself. The scientist had somehow managed to snap his arm restraints, and now he was working on the legs.

They rounded a corner, and approached Bellingham's hub of bohemian activity, Stuart's Coffeehouse. Stuart's was the favorite watering hole for the city's liberal arts crowd, which seemed to compose at least sixty percent of the population. The place had an art gallery, a jazz night, an open-mic poetry session, and live music acts every few days. It had been converted from an old house, and it maintained that homey feel with its couches, coffee tables, and lived-in atmosphere of



comfortable disrepair. David had always thought Stuart's pretty much embodied the essence of Bellingham, it's whole culture and feel. Whether that was a good or bad thing, that was a matter of taste.

Laura ordered some soup and a mocha. David ordered a raw Americano, because since coffee was all bitter and unpleasant to him anyway, it might as well be strong and cheap. They took their food and drinks up to the second floor mezzanine, overlooking everything below, and took a table next to the railing. Laura began eating her soup, and David blew on his coffee, waiting for it to become drinkable.

The walls all through the place were covered with the work of local artists on a monthly rotation. This month's featured a lot of nude women, which was no surprise. Nude women had to be the most popular subject in club and café art around the country. Even the most abstract pieces had to feature at least a few obligatory bare breasts. The only explanation David could think of was that painting *naked chicks, dude!* was how all the lonely, tortured artists got off, since they were too sophisticated for actual porn.

"What do you think of these?" he asked, waving a finger at some of the paintings behind his back.

Laura moved her gaze from one piece to the next, considering. "You mean as a woman?"

"Well...not necessarily, but sure. As a woman. Do you find it demeaning or offensive or anything that women always have to be painted naked? That bare breasts are apparently so important to making successful art?"

She shrugged. "I don't find it demeaning, just a little ridiculous. Like when you can tell the nudity was just thrown in to grab the eye, like those girls on car magazine covers? I love

that one by Delacroix, 'Liberty Guiding the People'. Have you seen it?" David shrugged. Laura put a hand over her eyes, laughing. "Ok, it's a battle scene, dead bodies on the ground, soldiers clashing and everything, and the woman Liberty is leading the army with a French flag in hand, all very inspiring and heroic, but of course..."

"Her breasts?"

"Right, she's wearing a full dress, but *naturally*, her blouse is down and her boobs are hanging out. It's just funny to me."

David chuckled and took a careful sip of his coffee. It burnt the tip of his tongue. "I wonder how I'd feel if everywhere I went the walls were covered with dicks."

Laura laughed and then leaned in with a slightly embarrassed smile. "I always thought it would be funny to redo that painting of the signing of the Constitution. Make it an exact copy, except that all the founding fathers' pants are down."

David laughed. "Naturally."

"I actually started painting one like that a long time ago, but I got sidetracked on some other piece. It would have been great to hang in the bathroom, though."

"Do you do a lot of painting, then?" David wondered, leaning in with interest.

She shrugged one shoulder. "Not really, not a lot anyway. I have an easel in Ocean Shores that I set up now and then, but it's just relaxation for me. Some friends took me to Vegas for my twenty-first birthday, and we went to the Guggenheim Museum there. I guess you could say it inspired me. I came home thinking 'I want to try that' and I guess I've been 'trying it' for five years now."

"Wait a second," David said, holding out a hand, "there's

a Guggenheim here? On the inside?”

Laura frowned, not understanding. “Of course.”

“What artists did they have there?”

“Well, there was some Morrow, some S. Benjamin, some Rauschenberg...”

“Wait, there were actual Rauschenberg paintings there?”

“Sure.”

Without warning, the scientist broke free, knocked over the orderlies, and began ransacking the hospital in David’s mind. “How is that possible? How can there be actual Rauschenberg paintings on the inside if Rauschenberg himself lives on the outside? And if the inside is its own world with its own population, completely separate from the outside, then...well how do you have a Wilco CD in your car? If there’s no Mel Gibson here, how does the video store have Braveheart for rent? Do you see what I’m asking?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And going back even farther, I mean...there was no Genghis Khan here, no Columbus, no George Washington—there *were* no founding fathers, no signing of the Constitution...how is this even remotely the same world?”

Laura sighed, giving him a long look. “David...you ask a lot of questions.”

At the look on her face, he felt shrill and annoying, like the kid in high school who asks questions through the whole lecture and then reminds the teacher to assign homework. But the scientist was loose, and he stood his ground.

“The inside isn’t exactly ‘independent’ of the outside,” Laura said. “All the touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell in this world originally came from yours, obviously, but there’s more to it than that. The inside is a little like a mirror of the outside.

It doesn't change and develop on its own quite like the outside does. Your world, the culture and everything, it bleeds into ours, and we inhabit it. Does that make sense?"

"So does that mean you can't really do or accomplish anything here? Everyone here is a real person capable of free choice, right?"

"Yes, and people can do whatever they want, but as far as the very, very broad scheme..." She groped for words, then sighed. "Ok, everyone in here is conscious of what's happening on the outside. It bleeds through from our other halves. So as your world changes, ours changes with it. Cause and effect doesn't always apply here. Sometimes things just...happen, and we shrug and move on."

David opened his mouth to ask a hundred more questions, but Laura stopped him. "David," she said slowly. "Let it go. I can't explain exactly how the inside works any more than you can explain exactly how the outside works. Things happen, we shrug and move on. That's the bottom line. If you keep analyzing everything and trying to get everything organized in your head, all you're going to do is drive yourself crazy. You'll ruin the whole world for yourself."

David took a drink of coffee, feeling it tingle on the burned tip of his tongue. He looked over the railing at the people below. Three college students and an old, burnt-out hippie, reading *The Stranger* and *What's Up!* magazine. The hiss of an espresso machine rose up from the kitchen.

"So can we let it drop?" Laura asked gently. "Please?"

David took another drink, and kept the cup near his mouth, rotating it in his fingers. He smiled. "How's your soup?"

"Delicious."

“What kind is it?”

“I think it’s corn chowder. You want a taste?”

“Sure.” She spooned a bite into his mouth, and he chewed thoughtfully. “Mm. That’s really good.”

She took a spoonful herself, then fed him another. They sat there looking at each other, chewing, both of them smiling, lips closed to keep the soup in. Laura had the proverbial “smile that lights up a room”, even while chewing. It was a smile that warmed her whole face, squinting her eyes into dark sapphire crescents like Arabian jewelry.

“Do we have time to go to the park?” David asked.

Laura checked her watch. “Sure. Let’s go.”

The sun was on it’s way down now, proverbially “glittering off the water” like a proverbial “thousand diamonds”. The bay seemed as big as the ocean as they wandered through the park, the horizon made bigger by sunlight and haze. Tiny waves made by boats and breezes lapped against the narrow shore of gravel that lined the park. They walked through the grass, between man-placed boulders of various sizes, some of which were sliced off in parts as if with a laser, perfectly flat cuts, polished smooth. From some angles, the sun reflected gold off these planes, making the rocks look molten.

On a sudden whim, David threw an arm under Laura’s legs and picked her up, proverbially “sweeping her off her feet”, and set her up on one of the taller boulders. She giggled like a high school girl, and David loved it. He climbed up another boulder within arm’s reach of hers, and sat down facing her, arms crossed over his knees, grinning like a high school boy. The last of the sun’s direct rays were sweeping over the park on their way up to the mountains, bathing the two of them in warm light. “This is nice,” David said.

“Yeah.”

Laura stood up, turning to face the water. David stood up too, only a couple feet away from her but slightly lower, making them the same height. He looked out into the water, and thought about mermaids. He could take Laura’s hand, and they could both jump into the waves. They would sink like stones, trailing bubbles, until the mermaids came and swept them away, smiling at David and shooting Laura dirty looks. Oh they’d be so jealous of Laura. None of them, even with all their legendary, sailor-storied beauty, would be able to compare to her.

“We’d probably better get back to the hospital,” David said reluctantly, turning to face her. “Your break is probably almost over, right?”

Laura closed her eyes, smiling, pixie-like, put her arms out at her sides, and let herself tip over, falling toward David. Startled, he caught her under the arms and pulled her onto his rock with barely enough room to stand. Without opening her eyes, Laura clung to his neck and kissed him soft and slow. When she pulled away, she opened her eyes and looked into his. “I was ten minutes late when we left Stuart’s.”

Looking at her face, still inches away from his, smiling that room-lighting smile, eyes crescented like two blue moons, David had a sort of epiphany:

He needed Laura to live. Nothing else—literally *nothing else*—mattered.

With this new knowledge buzzing in his head, burning mad new possibilities into his brain, he walked her back to her car, then just stood there on the sidewalk, staring at the horizon, until he woke up.

And just like that, he had lost himself. The point of no re-

turn was a mile back. He was climbing the tower.

...

He woke to a hideous combination of sounds. The buzzing shriek of his alarm clock mixed with the sound of Julie yelling his name. "David! Wake up!"

"God, I'm up, I'm up," he mumbled, throwing out a hand to smother the alarm clock.

"David get up and get dressed, you're going to be late for work!"

He rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock. It was 9:20.

In the manager's office at the Burlington Red Robin, in a dark desk drawer, in a folder, on the weekly schedule sheet, today's box was marked "David M., 9:30-5:30".

David looked straight at Julie. "I don't have to work today."

She stopped her frantic motion and looked at him. "What? Yes you do. It's Wednesday, David."

"Last minute reschedule. They called me last night."

A pause. "Oh." She straightened up away from the bed.

"Ok. Well...sorry for waking you up, then."

"It's ok, I was about to get up anyway." He sat up, stretched his arms, yawned, but didn't move.

"All right well...*I* do have to go to work, so..." She grabbed her purse off the nightstand and slipped her jacket on. "I'll see you tonight."

David listened to her footsteps down the stairs, the creak of the door opening, the click of it shutting. The moment he heard that click, he was on his feet.

He was coming rapidly awake now. He had just been

jolted out of sleep, but 9:20 was late for him, so his body was done with sleep, it was filling with energy, getting ready to face the day.

He opened the medicine cabinet, pulled out a bottle of Nyquil, and swallowed three doses.

Standing there in his boxers, he leaned against the kitchen sink and gazed out the window with a lazy, serene smile. The sun was up. The horizon was still misty. Traces of morning frost remained on the grass where the house cast its shadow. Birds chirped, just a few of them, singing calmly, taking turns. On the curb next to the Kelley's house, a white Honda Accord idled, its exhaust exaggerated by the morning cold into a huge, white cloud.

He looked hard at the car for several minutes, then dropped his gaze to the floor and just stood there, arms dangling at his sides. He could feel the drug syrup burning in his stomach, seeping through his veins. On a sudden impulse, he picked up the phone and dialed Josh's number. It rang five times, and Josh's overly professional answering machine kicked in. "Hello, you've reached Josh Miller, I can't get to the phone right now", etc. David hung up, and called Aaron. They seemed to keep in touch; maybe Aaron would know where Josh was. Aaron's phone rang and rang, but no answer. And, big surprise, no machine. David hung up, took one last look at the Accord, and went back to his room. He toppled over onto the mattress and lay there on his back, staring up at the ceiling, waiting.

The green tide of Nyquil washed over him, and he sank. For a long time he just slept, empty and dark. He came partially awake a few times, and dimly noted the passage of time, from morning to afternoon to evening. At one point a desperate



thought appeared uninvited in his head, shouting, *This is crazy! What the hell are you doing?* But David shut it out, he threw it down on its knees and executed it gangland style. Fuck introspection. He refused to give in to it this time.

Some unknown length of time passed, and he heard a distant murmur that sounded like Julie, her voice filtered through three feet of cotton. Eventually, he drifted off again. That familiar snap, like a quick blink, and he opened his eyes to Bellingham in another world.

He was on Laura's street, just a few blocks from her house. He jogged up her porch steps feeling powerful, swelling with release and freedom. He knocked on the door, grinning the grin of someone boarding the plane for a month's paid vacation to the tropics.

When Laura opened the door, she looked caught off guard. "David," she said in surprise. Her hair was wild, her eyes puffy and without makeup, but she still looked beautiful. She was one of those rare women who simply lacked the capacity to look bad. No matter what she did to herself, she would never be less than reasonably attractive. David didn't know if this was true objectively, it might just have been infatuation performing its magic cosmetic surgery, but it didn't matter.

He started to say, "Good morning," and then noticed a clock in Laura's living room that read 6:20 AM. "Oh shit, I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't realize what time it was. Did I wake you up?"

"No, but...you kind of surprised me. You're back so soon."

"I'm surprised too, but, you know." He shrugged. "The inside works in mysterious ways."

Laura smiled, making her puffy eyes squint almost shut. “Right. Well, come in.” She opened the door and he stepped inside. “I have to leave for work pretty soon, but I have about twenty minutes. Do you want some tea?”

She put a kettle on the stove, and David sat on the couch while she went about getting ready for work. He browsed through the reading material under the coffee table. A few women’s magazines, a pile of back-issues of *The Onion*, and the obligatory fashion magazine: a massive *W* tome thicker than *War and Peace*. He flipped through an issue of *Cosmopolitan*, and wondered why magazines aimed at straight women contained so many photos of scantily clad females in sexy poses. But he knew there were some mysteries that would never be solved. Shrug and move on.

Laura came out of the bathroom looking stunning again. (Attractive to stunning was the extent of her range.) She poured the tea and sat on the couch next to David. They spent a few warm minutes talking and sipping hot chai, and then Laura had to leave. She offered to leave her house open for him while she was at work, but he told her he had plans in town, and left the house when she did.

And he did have plans. His epiphany last night had changed everything.

He walked down to the bay, to the head office of Pacific Shipyards. Since this place didn’t exist on the outside, he had to ask some directions, but he eventually found his way to the office building, sandwiched between huge warehouses of rusty metal siding. At the front desk, he asked the receptionist to page Ben Chamberg. About twenty minutes later, Ben came in through the door, and David found his hand being crushed in Ben’s calloused grip.

“Good to see you again, buddy!” Ben said, grinning, his eyes squinty behind his glasses.

“Yeah, you too,” David said, attempting to match Ben’s handshake. “You probably have a weird impression of me from the last time we met, but really...”

Ben shook his head. “Forget it, I totally understand. You were in a weird situation. My sister says you’re a really great guy.”

David paused, slightly caught off guard. “Oh, ok. Well...” He laughed. “...good!”

“So what brings you to the shipyard? What can I do for you?”

David scratched his neck, a little uncomfortable. “Well...partly I just wanted to apologize for being a psycho when I met you on the beach. I didn’t want you to think that’s who your sister is getting involved with...”

Ben shook his head again. “Don’t worry about it.”

David nodded, and continued. “...but also...I was wondering if you have any job openings.”

Ben raised his eyebrows. “Here at the shipyard? You want to work here?”

David nodded, and unconsciously straightened his posture, slipping into job-interview mode. “Yeah, I really need a job. I can’t keep living off of Laura.”

Ben seemed confused. “Well...I can check if we have any openings, but...”

“Do you hire outsiders? I mean, is that something that’s done?”

“Well...I myself wouldn’t have a problem with it...” He drummed his fingers on the desk. “But the question is, would you actually be around long enough to work a shift?”

Behind the desk, a series of windows overlooked the shipyard below, a spider's nest of ropes, cranes, and heavy machinery. Beyond that was the water, then the sky. Beyond the sky was the cotton weave of David's pillowcase, then the headboard of his bed, then the walls, then the roof. Then another sky. David stared out those windows, thinking hard.

"I might be," he said eventually. "I'll have to get back to you on that."

He left the shipyard with his mind humming. The ghost of that uninvited thought he had executed kept whispering, *What are you doing, David? Honestly. What are you doing?* But it was only a ghost. He ignored it easily.

He still had his wallet but there was no money in it, so he sold his watch at a pawn shop for fifteen bucks, and bought a book at a thrift store. He sat on the concrete steps of Laura's porch, reading, until she got home. He closed the book and looked up at her, smiling at the look on her face. She looked even more surprised to see him now than she had that morning. "How was work?" he asked.

"Fine," she said, and stopped in front of him. David stood up. "You're still here?" she wondered, cocking her head.

David nodded, then shrugged.

She moved past him and started unlocking the door. "You seem a bit more...permanent all of a sudden."

"Well...I guess I've been getting more sleep."

Laura opened the door a crack, and looked back at him, eyeing him slowly. Then a bright smile broke through. "Do you think you'll have time for dinner? I'll make some pasta."

David pulled out his remaining \$13.50. He held the bills up in front of him like opera tickets, and grinned. "I sold my watch at a pawn shop. I've got \$13.50. I want to take you out."

Slowly, Laura stepped forward and gave him a peck on the cheek. “You’re a prince.”

“Get out of those scrubs and we’ll go paint the town,” he said, waving the bills as she disappeared into her bedroom. “We can share a pizza in *style*.”

While he waited for her to get ready, he stood just inside the doorway, smiling. This was good. This was so good. This was going to work out fine.



“David!”

*R-i-i-i-i-i-i-ng.* An awful, shrill noise, a blood-curdling, staccato scream. *R-i-i-i-i-i-i-ng.*

“David answer the goddamn phone!” Another awful, shrill noise. Julie yelling from the bathroom, tired, angry. David filled his lungs with air, but didn’t move.

*R-i-i-i-i-i-i-ng.*

“David!”

*R-i-i-i-i-i-i-ng.*

The bathroom door flung open and Julie grabbed the phone. “Hello? I’m sorry, he’s not available right now.” A pause. “You’re sure he was scheduled? He said it was his day off.” Pause. “Well, let me give you to David. One second.”

David felt the phone being shoved in his face. “It’s your boss.”

David sat up in bed and cleared his throat. "Hello?"

"Hi, David, this is Mark from Red Robin?"

"Hi."

"I was just calling because...well, you weren't at work yesterday?"

"Uh huh."

"And...you know you were scheduled from 9:30 to 5:30, right?"

David stared down at his blankets through crusty eyes. He cleared his throat and blinked rapidly, trying to clear his vision. "I thought I had yesterday off."

"Well, nooo, it says right here, 'David M., 9:30 to 5:30'."

"Oops."

"Yeah, 'oops'. We had to pretty much *drag* Dale in to cover for you, and he wasn't too happy about it."

"Sorry."

"Yeah... So do you think you're going to join us today?"

"Yeah, I'll be there."

"All right. 9:30 sharp, ok?"

"Sharp. 9:30, gotcha. I'll be there."

Julie came out of the bathroom in jeans and a bra and started digging through the closet. Her movements were quick and brusque. "So you missed work yesterday?"

"I guess there was a scheduling mistake or something."

She stayed with her back to him as she slipped on a sweater. "Well you'd better get moving if you're supposed to be there by 9:30 today." She rushed back into the bathroom and shut the door.

David got out of bed and got dressed. He washed his face and combed his hair. He put on some coffee, and stood next to the percolator, waiting.

At 9:20, Julie left for work. David turned off the percolator, got undressed, swallowed another triple dose of Nyquil plus four melatonin supplements and two sleeping pills, and collapsed on the bed. Within ten minutes, he was gone.

...

"...but it's so worth it. It's too beautiful here to let this place go unused. And it's really not that long of a trip, it only takes..."

Evening, some time around 8:00. All that was left of the sun was a faint orange stain on the very bottom of the horizon. The beach was dark, everything was a silhouette. As they approached from a distance, the light from the cabin windows looked like tiny beach fires.

"It's still so cold. Hard to believe it's almost spring time."

"You want my jacket?"

"We're almost there, I'll live."

"Here."

"...Thanks."

The propane fireplace blazed warmly inside, its flames licking the ceramic logs, setting the chunks of asbestos fiber alight in happy imitation of glowing coals. The only other light was a lamp in the corner of the kitchen area.

"...some water boiling. You want some tea?"

"Sounds perfect."

Outside, the wind picked up and moaned against the window panes. The ocean rumbled, the gentle snore of a planet-sized lion.

"...out here every weekend?"



“If I can. If I’m not doing anything else.”

“What do you do? How do you spend a day here?”

“Well...do you want to see some of my paintings?”

The drive had consumed most of the day, but they still had Sunday ahead of them. It was getting late now. The other beach houses, scattered sparsely across the grassy eastern horizon, were all unlit. The sky was wide open and dark, a pot of blue ink.

“These are amazing, Laura.”

“Thanks.”

“My paintings are shit.”

“Come on, you just started. Give it some time.”

“This is a self-portrait, right?”

“Right.”

“Really incredible. It totally looks like you, but there’s more in there, it’s like...I don’t know. Did you do this from a photo?”

“No, I like doing portraits from memory. Sometimes I even close my eyes.”

“Really.”

“I think you can get something deeper that way, beyond just the face. You can sort of capture thoughts and emotions, personality, even. I like to imagine you can, anyway.”

“I’ve got to try this. Closing my eyes could only improve my technique.”

“David, that’s no attitude...”

The wind was almost alarming. Outside, it thrashed the beach grass around, and knocked over stacks of driftwood. It rattled the loose window panes, and whistled through the cracks in the door, but the cabin stayed warm.

“This is really good tea. What kind is it?”

“I put a lot of sugar in it.”

“Ah.”

Laura set her mug on the coffee table and stretched out, dangling her legs over the love seat’s armrest and resting her head on David’s thigh. Tilting her head back, she looked up at him and smiled. He smiled back. Suddenly, her smile inverted. She sat up and looked at him hard. “David...” she said slowly. “You don’t look well. Is everything ok?”

David grinned. “Everything’s fine.”

...

He awoke to the sound of screaming, and found his face stuck to the pillow in a puddle of dried blood. He jolted upright with a strangled gasp, and it peeled off him in a gooey, reddish-brown mass like a giant scab.

Julie was on the bed, kneeling over him, shrieking. “David! David wake up!” When she saw him come awake, she stopped screaming, but she was still frantic. Looking down at that red pillow, David was equally alarmed. He stumbled into the bathroom dripping a trail of blood, and stared into the mirror in shock. His whole face was smeared with it, most of it brown and crusty, some of it fresh and red. He started feeling his face for cuts, then he saw the rivulet trickling out of his nose, a bright, vibrant crimson, and it clicked.

*Nyquil.* “The nighttime sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching, stuffy head, fever, so you can escape reality medicine.” It was a decongestant, and he wasn’t congested, so it had decongested him way too far. His sinus walls were now dry and paper-thin, but that wasn’t the only side effect. His head pounded in agonizing rhythm with each heartbeat, and he was

so reeling dizzy he had to grip the sink to stay upright.

He splashed some water on his face and watched the crusted blood dissolve and flow down his face in red streams. It was obvious he couldn't go on like this. This had to stop.

He washed the rest of the blood off, dried himself, and stuffed a wad of toilet paper in his nostril. He took a deep breath, and smiled decisively. No more Nyquil. From now on, it was melatonin and straight sleeping pills all the way.

Julie met him coming out of the bathroom, and danced around him anxiously. "David, what happened? Where did all that blood come from? Are you ok?"

"It was just a nosebleed," he muttered, trying to steer away from her restless path of movement. She followed him back into the bedroom as he tossed the bloody pillow in the garbage and replaced it with a couch throw-cushion.

"I've been trying to wake you up for the last fifteen minutes." Her excitement was starting to fade now that the blood was gone. "I was shaking you and hitting you and screaming in your ear but you didn't even twitch. With all that blood I had no idea what—"

"Just a nosebleed," David said again in an annoyed sigh, and walked back out into the hall. Julie stopped at the bedroom doorway and stared at him.

"*David.*"

He stopped and turned around. "Look, I haven't been feeling very well the last couple of days and I really need some sleep. I took a couple pills last night to help me rest so that's probably why you couldn't wake me up. Because I was *trying* to sleep, because I took some pills because I didn't *want* to wake up. Because I didn't *to be woken up*."

"David..." She was incredulous. "Your face was covered

in blood!”

“All right, if you see my face covered in blood again then wake me up, but otherwise, *don't*, ok? Please, just *let me sleep*.”

She just stood there, looking at him. He brushed past her in the doorway and crawled back into bed. He barely made it across the room without falling on his face. His eyes burned, and his head felt like a double kick drum at a metal concert. He buried his face in the throw-cushion, and let himself go. He heard Julie moving around the house for a little longer, then the door slammed, her car started up, and faded into the distance. David let out a long breath, and sank beneath the waves.

He drifted through different stages of unconsciousness as the hours passed, from deep sleep to waking dreams. At some point, the shrill alarm bell of the phone forced him to the surface. He would have let it ring, but the cordless was sitting on the nightstand right next to his head, and it was deafening. He flung out a hand and grabbed it, turned it on, muttered something incoherent into the receiver. There was a pause, then the voice of Mark, the Red Robin supervisor.

“David?”

“Uh.”

“David where the hell are you?”

Silence.

“Where were you yesterday? You’ve missed two days, and you’re already late today. This is strike two for you, David, I mean it.”

David grunted something, not words, and dropped the phone onto the pillow next to his face. At that distance from his ear, the voice coming out of the speaker was scratchy and small, insignificant.

“Are you coming to work today, David, or do we have to take further action?”

“Uh huh, strike two, gotcha,” David muttered, and flung the phone out into the hallway. Within seconds he was asleep again.

The hours floated by in empty sleep, broken occasionally by brief rises into semi-consciousness. He heard Julie banging around in the kitchen, the sink running, the microwave. The daylight illuminating the inside of his eyelids faded from bright red to blue-black, and then, once again, the hideous shriek of the phone dragged him out of the depths. Julie answered it after three rings, and he hovered near the surface, listening.

“Hello? Dav—Josh, hi! How are you? Good. Um, actually David’s in bed right now. He’s been kind of sick for the last couple days. Yeah. Ok, sure. I’ll have him call you when he’s up and about.” Following the conversation in his mind, David heard her say, *Ok, goodbye*, and then hang up, but no...she went off the script. There was a long pause, then, “Yeah, I’m just heading out the door. Bye.” The click of the phone hanging up and then, shortly after, the click of the front door opening and shutting. The house was quiet now. David curled up on his side, and went back to sleep.

His dreams were dark and empty. He came awake one more time when Julie climbed into bed, then he drifted down again. This time, when he opened his eyes, he was standing on Laura’s doorstep.

It was late Sunday, and Laura had just gotten back from Ocean Shores. She had to work early the next day, but she wanted one more nice evening before she went back to the grind. They drove down to Boulevard Park, and strolled through the rows of laser-cut boulders. The park was set about

two hundred feet lower than the street, with a steep hillside sloping down in large terraces. The main access was a loopy road that led into the parking lot, but there was also a huge wooden structure on the other end of the park, a vertical tower of zigzagging stairs that ended in a wooden bridge to the street. It seemed like an impractical way to get from point A to point B, but its weirdness made it compelling. Each level of stairs was like a tiny room, and its “walls” of wide-open wire fencing offered a glass-elevator view of the bay. David had been here a few times on the outside. On his way up or down the staircase, he would always see a young couple standing in one the rooms, holding hands and watching the sunset, or sitting cuddled in the corner, arms around each other, stars in their eyes, completely oblivious to his presence. He had always hated those couples, and dreamed of being them.

He and Laura were the only people in the tower, almost the only people in the whole park, it seemed. They sat in the corner of the highest level with their backs to the sunset, letting the warm light seep into them through the fencing. The air was still frigid, so they draped David’s coat over their knees, leaving only their feet exposed, and huddled against each other. Laura was dressed a little bit punk today. Her black Converse looked adorable sticking out underneath the coat. She was leaning her head back against the fencing, her eyes closed, a slight smile on her face. David stared at her profile. “Can you sing?” he asked.

Her eyes slid open halfway, and her smile widened. “No.”

“You can’t or you won’t?”

“Can’t.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very.”

“Bullshit. People always say they can’t sing when they can.”

Laura took a deep breath and started to sing, very softly. “Come away with me...in the night. Come away with me...and I will write...you...a song.” Her voice was beautiful. It was smooth, silky, delicate. Angelic. And she couldn’t hit a single note.

“Ok, well...” David said, and Laura burst into laughter. “So just say something, then, just talk.”

“Talk?”

“Yeah, I just want to hear your voice. It’s beautiful.”

She rolled her eyes at him, but she was smiling. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—”

“Come on, *say* something.”

“All right, how about this? David Martin is an ass. Keep going?”

“Keep going.”

“David Martin is such an ass. I can’t believe what an ass David is.”

David shook his head in wonder. “*God*. The female voice is just incredible. Just to hear you talk...you don’t even have to sing melody, just your voice is music, it’s like... That soft reed sound, like...I don’t know, a flute or something. A flute made by God.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” Laura muttered, but there was still a touch of amusement in her disgust, and when her eyes turned back to his, she was still smiling. He stared at her, as starry-eyed as any of the couples he had seen in this place before, then something occurred to him. It flared in his mind with a sudden certainty, and the stars fell.

“It’s Julie, isn’t it?” he said, still staring at her. “Your ‘other half’. It’s Julie. You’re inside Julie’s brain.”

She smiled wistfully and turned her head, looking out onto the sunlit bay. “Julie. Is that her name?”

”You don’t know?”

She shrugged. “I stay out of my other half’s mind. Most people do. But anyway, yes, the woman you live with is the woman I share a brain with. She’s the reason we’re able to be together.”

“What do you mean? Why?”

“Well, I share her brain, and you sleep somewhere near that brain every night. That’s why I’m able to pull you in.” David didn’t immediately respond, and Laura took his silence for confusion. She rolled her eyes skyward and sighed, still with a hint of a smile. “But I suppose you’ll want me to elaborate on that.”

He wasn’t sure if he did. His priorities were shifting. Right now all he really wanted to do was sit here just like this, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, sharing warmth and discussing random inanities like Etch-a-Sketch and Kobe Bryant. He thought about it, and shrugged. “If you want to.”

“It’s pretty simple. Remember when we first met, when we were kids?”

“Of course.”

“Popping into the inside like that ‘uninvited’ is a pretty rare thing. For you to find your way here more often than the occasional, twice a year fluke, it takes effort from both sides. If you’re pushing, someone on the inside has to be pulling. And for that to happen you have to be sleeping somewhere near that insider’s *outside* brain.”

David nodded, but he had stopped listening halfway



through. He *made* himself stop listening, as a test. To see if he could really do it, just shrug and move on. And he found that he could. It was easy. He heard what she said and understood it, but he wasn't really paying attention. These details, these technicalities didn't matter. He stopped listening and became fascinated with the contours of Laura's ear, all the curvy ridges, the piercings, the light sprinkling of freckles on the upper lobes that seemed to be the only freckles she had.

They sat there in silence for several minutes. David closed his eyes and listened to the noises, the wind whispering through the wire fencing, kids in the park below calling to each other, rustling leaves, distant birds. Then he became aware of a slow change in Laura's physical demeanor. A tightening, a tensing. He opened his eyes, and saw it in her face too. She was leaning slightly forward, staring straight ahead with a blank expression that looked forced.

"She's your wife, isn't she."

She said it without tone. Not a question, not an accusation. A statement. David felt a shiver crawl down his spine and into his groin, like cold leeches wriggling through his veins.

He nodded.

Laura didn't look at him, she kept her eyes straight ahead, blinking a little too rapidly. Then she bit her lower lip, and nodded too.

Several more minutes passed in silence. Finally, Laura looked over at him and offered a smile. "So. Ben told me you were asking about a job."

"Yeah. He said he'd watch for openings."

Thirty seconds of silence. "Well, it'd be a good job. Good place to work."

"Yeah. Ben seems like a good guy."

Another thirty seconds. Slowly, hesitantly, Laura turned and kissed him. It was brief, but tender. She didn't smile as she pulled away, but there was warmth in her eyes. "I love you," she said.

David didn't smile either. He just forced his heart out of his throat, and whispered, "Thank you."

...

He didn't know how much time had passed when he finally woke up again. He didn't know what day it was. His eyes just came open against his will, and he crawled out of bed in search of something to make them shut again. His brain was overstuffed with rest, choking and gagging as he tried to feed it more, but his body still felt sound asleep. He floated in a translucent sack of sagging bones and jellied muscles.

The house was dark and colorless. Most of the drapes were pulled shut. The outdoor light seeped through the fabric in the shape of the windows, pale rectangles of grainy light like TV screens with static. He watched the kitchen get closer, the cupboard expanding in his vision. Everything was washed out, almost black and white. The kitchen looked cold and hostile, but he knew what was inside that cupboard, and it was benevolent. It was his ticket home.

He grabbed the pills and swallowed a handful dry, with nothing but spit for a chaser. They hit his stomach like a pound of hot lead, and he puked. The nausea gripped him so suddenly he didn't even think of running to the sink, he just leaned over slightly and heaved a pint of chunky acid soup onto the kitchen floor. It dropped from his full height, and hit the linoleum with a loud *splat*.

“Oh fuck,” he gasped through a burning, gagging throat, his lips drooling fluid that he didn’t want to lick away. “Oh God.” He leaned over the sink and dry-heaved for nearly five minutes. When the spasms finally subsided, he was covered in sweat from the effort. “Oh God,” he said again, now a hoarse whisper, and put his head under the faucet, letting the water pour over his face and rinse out his acrid mouth.

This wasn’t the pills’ fault. The pills were kind and generous to him. It was his own fault, his own stupid carelessness. He had forgotten to *eat*. He had ingested nothing but drugs this entire time, however long it had been, three days at the very least. He had eaten well enough on the inside—Laura’s cooking one night, \$13.50 worth of pizza another night, he could still taste it— but out here, he was starving.

He grabbed a cinnamon Pop-Tart, and ate it as fast as he could. Then he poured another handful of pills, and swallowed them.

The nausea oozed through him again, but it wasn’t as strong now, and as long as he could hold down the pills, it didn’t matter. Neither did the throbbing headache, cottony mouth, or burning eyes, as long as he could get back to sleep.

Leaning against a wall, waiting for the relief to kick in, he noticed that the front door was ajar. He knew Julie always locked it when she left for work, so this was unusual. He was still standing there, thinking about going and shutting it, when a gust of wind blew it the rest of the way open, like an omen. And of course, there was a cassette tape waiting on the welcome mat.

From the moment he saw the label, an uneasiness began to build in him. A kind of nervous dread tinged with rage. In that large, scrawled handwriting, the label simply read: *STOP*

*IT!*

David shut himself in the bathroom, even though no one else was home, and played the tape. There was not much blank tape hiss this time, no twenty seconds of shallow breathing. The voice was there the moment David hit play, and it was angry.

*“Stop it! You can’t do what you’re doing, you’re going to kill yourself! You can’t just run away like this, you—”*

Without warning, David burst into tears. “Shut the fuck up!” he screamed, and smashed his fist down on the tape player as hard as he could. The plastic casing cracked, and the tape squealed to a stop. He picked up the player and threw it against the wall. It popped wide open, exposing the mechanical guts, and the tape flew out, trailing brown ribbon through the air. He stomped on the tape, shattering it. He barely felt the plastic shards gouge his bare foot.

Walking through the house, leaving red footprints on the carpet, red smears on the white linoleum to go with the pinkish-orange splatter of vomit, he heard the beep of the answering machine. He pressed “Play Messages” and waited expectantly while the tape rewound. It felt like it should be something special, this message. Something revelatory. An alien intelligence calling to explain the whole mess. Or God Himself, in that booming, dramatic voice, made slightly less so by the machine’s tinny speakers, telling him, *DAVID...HERE IS WHAT YOU MUST DO...* But it was Mark, the Red Robin manager, telling him he was fired.

“I tried to work with you, David, I gave you plenty of warnings, but this is strike three. I don’t know what the hell’s wrong with you but we can’t afford to have the Incredible Sleeping Man on our payroll so—”

David knocked the machine off the table stand, picked it up and threw it against the wall, picked it up again and hurled the shattered mess of plastic and wires down the hall. He pulled the plug out of the phone, then pulled the other end out of the socket, then went out in the front yard, picked up a big rock, and smashed the phone connection box on the side of the house. He went back inside, and left a note on the fridge.

*Something happened to our phone  
lines and it might be a month  
before we have service again*

While at the kitchen table writing the note, he saw a small pile of mail that included this month's bills for energy and water. He threw them in the trash, then called the post office and canceled their mail service. When the woman on the line asked him, "And how long would you like your mail held?" his reply was, "Indefinitely."

He could feel the sleeping pills starting to take effect. He let out a slow sigh, and collapsed onto his bed, feathering downward into those soft blanket folds. His head hit the pillow, and it was like a color-reversed nuclear explosion, a burst of inky black expanding outward and obliterating everything, smothering the whole world. He was gone, and pain was a memory.

...

Time began to lose its solidity, and the world stretched out into an elongated smear. He spent a lot of time with Laura and he kept asking Ben about a job, but everything became a blur. He woke up occasionally, after unknown lengths of time asleep, but only stayed long enough to grab a couple bananas and a few sleeping pills. Julie didn't try to wake him up again. Sometimes he would wake up in the middle of the day and find her asleep next to him. That was odd, but he didn't give it much thought. Nothing mattered anymore. Right now, in this strange and wonderful whirlwind, he was actually happy.

During his brief rises into consciousness, he became distantly aware of a lack of noise in the house. No steady hum from the alarm clock next to the bed. No droning purr from the gas furnace firing up. No refrigerator buzz. The power had been cut off. A part of him in the far back of his mind wondered when the rest would catch up to him. When the men in black suits would kick down his door and drag him away. He told himself, *Cross that bridge when you get to it. Tomorrow will worry about itself. Don't worry, be happy.*

It could have been years, months, or just a few days. He lost all concept of outside time. Then one evening, he came back from the store with his arms full of groceries. Laura had loaned him some money until Ben got him the job, and he decided to surprise her by using it to take care of her grocery list. He had everything on her list plus a bottle of wine. He rang her doorbell with his foot. She opened the door, saw him standing there with the bags nearly obscuring his face, smiled, and opened her mouth to say something. But before any sound came out, the world around David jolted, jarred from side to side like someone had bumped the camera, and flickered in and out of monochrome. He saw Laura's smile disappear, and then

nothing but the weird, glittering blackness of the inside of his eyelids. As he vanished from Laura's porch, he imagined the groceries falling. The eggs cracking and oozing. The wine pouring down the concrete steps.

"David! Wake up you dick!"

Before he realized what was happening, before he was even fully awake, he found himself being dragged out of bed, into the bathroom, and then freezing water was spraying down on him. He let out a garbled scream and tried to shield his face, but it ran down his arms and into his armpits, down his bare chest. Electrified, he dove out of the shower and caught himself on the sink countertop. Josh was standing over him, leaning forward like an angry drill sergeant. "What are thinking, David? What are you thinking? You think you can just *escape*?"

"Josh what the—"

"No. Shut up. Listen to me. You can't do this. You're dying. Look at yourself." He grabbed David by the shoulders and pulled him upright, facing the mirror. David looked, and then quickly looked away. His face was pale and gaunt, his cheekbones protruding, corpselike. His eyes were bloodshot, watery, and so heavily caked with sleep crust that it hurt to blink. His lips were white with peeling dried spit, and cracked like ancient leather from...dehydration? "Oh shit," he said in a mumbling, delirious giggle. "*Water*. I knew I forgot something." His eyes were slowly drawn back to the mirror, and as he looked at that Halloween mask that was his face, he felt everything crashing down around him. A cruel, evil, heartless voice deep inside whispered, *It's over*.

*No!*

*You know it's over.*

*It's not over, motherfucker!*

*You know it has to end. You knew all along. What were you expecting to happen?*

Gripping the sides of the sink as if about to vomit, David choked back a sob.

Josh crouched down to his level. His eyes were hard. He stabbed a finger in the direction of the bedroom. "You have a wife in there, David. She's in there right now, sleeping. Whatever your fucked up reason was, you *married* her. Do you even know her? Do you have any idea what she's been going through? Do you realize how much you don't deserve her? And here you are, fucking around in some fantasy land, sleeping yourself to death... Well you're going to lose her, David, but maybe you don't even care, so let's leave her out of the picture for a minute and talk about you. You don't live on 'the inside', you live *here*. You are *stuck* here, just like me, just like all of us. You can't just 'run away'!"

"Why not?" David screamed into the sink. "Why the hell can't I?"

Josh pointed at the mirror, at David's reflection. "*That's* why."

David's eyes followed Josh's finger involuntarily. He saw the deathly visage in the mirror once again, and his head dropped lower into the sink. Fresh tears seeped through the crust in his eyes.

"You're killing yourself," Josh said, softer now. "How long did you expect to keep it up? Did you expect to spend the rest of your life asleep?" David made no reply. Josh shook his head. "What you're doing is more selfish than suicide."

When David spoke, his voice was low and flat, muffled by the sink. "You think I'm being selfish." The words cracked



and broke, barely making it out of his dry throat. “Look at me, Josh. Do I *look* like I’m being selfish?”

Josh hesitated at that. He stood up away from the sink.

“Ok,” he said with a slight nod, and took a deep breath.

“Ok. So then what the fuck *are* you doing?”

David just stood there with his head hanging in the sink, chest heaving slowly, mouth open and drooling.

“Come on,” Josh sighed, and slapped a hand on his shoulder. “Time to clean up.” He turned the faucet on cold, and walked out of the room.

The water poured onto the back of David’s head and pooled in his hair, running down the sides of his face. He watched it spin in the sink, spiraling down into the black hole of the drain. Josh was right, of course. So was the cruel voice in his head. Of course it was over. Of course it had to end. Of course it was impossible for him to live in the inside. This was all so obvious. There was no way around it.

And Laura? That was obvious too. She would haunt him. Every moment spent with her would be agony, because it would have to end. Every moment of sleep would be torture, because he would have to wake up. Every moment of the rest of his life would be a nightmare of uncertainty, dread, and hungry, blood-curdling *need*.

He raised his head and looked in the mirror at that pale, wasted face, those hollow, blood-shot eyes. This all made perfect sense, didn’t it? Wasn’t this why he had been put here on Earth? Why shouldn’t he keep being flogged? It wouldn’t matter. He wouldn’t feel it. He would do what he had to, and he wouldn’t feel it.

Looking in the mirror, he forced a smile, and a trickle of bright red blood darted down from his cracked lower lip, pool-

ing on his chin. It was obvious. He would do what he had to.

**SPRING**  
**AGE 27**  
**LOVE / SUICIDE / RADIO TOWERS**



When David came out of the bathroom, he wore a strange little half-smile. A look that was somehow both triumph and ultimate defeat. Victory and surrender mixing together, curdling. Josh was waiting for him in the living room, watching him expectantly. His eyes on the floor, David said, “Ok.” It came out dry and breathy, a white flag. “Ok.”

Josh nodded. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

David took a shower and got dressed. When he came out, he found Josh waiting with breakfast from a nearby café laid out on the kitchen table, along with three very large cups of coffee. Josh sat there and watched him eat, sipping on his cup of coffee while David double-fisted his two cups. They didn’t

talk. The only sound was the scrape of silverware on the plate, the slurp and squish of David drinking and chewing. While David was finishing off his last sausage link, Josh took a deep breath, stood up and started putting on his jacket. "Well, I'd better get going."

"Wait," David said. Josh waited, but David just sat there, staring at his plate. He wanted Josh to leave, he wanted to be alone, but he seriously doubted his ability to function right now. He had to put his life back together, and without someone to push him, he was afraid he would just collapse under the weight of everyday tasks. Overwhelmed, he would just give in to the pull of gravity and slide downhill back into his bed. He didn't say anything more, but Josh read it in his face. He took his jacket off and sat back down.

"What do you need to do next?"

David thought for a while, then mumbled, "The power."

"Ok, is your cell phone still working?"

"Should be."

"You can use that to get everything reconnected. Where are your bills?"

"...Gone."

"Ok, well all we need are the phone numbers. Where's your phone book?"

With Josh prodding him along like this, David slowly began to reassemble the wreckage. The power was back on within a few hours. The phone box would be repaired within a few days. He restarted the mail, and sent in his water/sewer/garbage payment. The only thing left to fix was his job. He called Red Robin and tried to explain his absence, but they just gave him some unconvincing apologies and told him the position had already been filled.

“Well, they won’t take me back,” he said as he hung up. “They already hired somebody.” Josh didn’t reply. David looked at the wall, letting out a slow breath. “Fuck.”

“You should call Aaron,” Josh said after a minute. “He’s been working around contractors for a few years now. Those guys are always looking for more help.”

David let out a half-hearted chuckle. “I don’t know, Josh. I’ve never really seen myself as a hard hat and jackhammer kind of guy.”

Josh shrugged. “You don’t have to make a career out of it. Just make some money while you look for something better.”

David crossed his arms and leaned his forehead against the wall, his eyes closed. How was he doing this? How was he out here paying bills and looking for new jobs when... *When what?* He suddenly remembered a joke he had heard somewhere. It wasn’t a funny joke, he couldn’t even find a punch line in it, but for some reason, it had stuck in his memory.

A guy walks into a hardware store covered in blood. He’s got two bullet holes in his stomach, slashes across both wrists, and a knife sticking out of his heart. He walks up to the manager and says, “Hey, I’m looking for a job.” The manager says, “Sir, you’ve got bullet holes in your stomach, you’re bleeding to death, and there’s a knife sticking out of your heart. Why the hell are you out looking for a job?” And the guy shrugs and says, “I’ve gotta eat, don’t I?”

“All right,” David murmured. “What’s Aaron’s number?”

Josh gave him the number and he called, but there was no answer, and of course, no answering machine. David set the phone down on the table and sighed. “I’ll try again later, but

anyway..." He looked over at Josh and smiled weakly. "I should probably let you get out of here."

"You'll be ok from here, right?"

"Sure."

Josh stood up and put on his jacket again. "All right, well..." He looked at David, and it was obvious there was a lot to say, but he left it hanging in the air. "See ya."

"See ya, Josh. And thanks."

Josh nodded, and walked out the door.

A few hours later, a little after noon, Julie woke up. David heard her taking a shower, getting dressed. While he sat on the living room couch with the phone, she entered the kitchen, grabbed a banana and a grapefruit, and started putting on her shoes.

"Hey Julie," he said.

She glanced at him as if just noticing him. "Hey. I'm off to work. Have a good day." And she was gone.

...

After a few hours of doing nothing but sitting there calling Aaron, David wandered into his bedroom, and his eyes fell on his easel. He had all his painting supplies piled up in one corner, his cramped little 5'x6' "studio". He stopped and stared at it from across the room.

*These are amazing, Laura.*

*Thanks.*

*My paintings are shit.*

*Come on, you just started. Give it some time.*

He set up the easel and sat on the edge of the bed, looking at it. He could hear her voice in his head as clear as life.

That divinely constructed flute played by cherubim and seraphim. The way the high notes were so liquid soft they took on an almost tactile quality, smooth like warm milk. The way her words often ended in a lower register like a throaty, cracking whisper. Unintentionally sultry. She could talk about algebra and sound sexy.

*...portraits from memory. Sometimes I even close my eyes...something deeper that way...thoughts and emotions, personality, even.*

*Are you going to stop, Laura?* he wondered, and started painting. *Are you ever going to stop torturing me?* He sketched out a basic outline, then closed his eyes. *You're not, are you. You're never going to stop.* He could feel the brush strokes forming a vague shape, copied from a vague image in his head. "So I have to defend myself," he whispered, so quietly it just barely rose above thought.

He put his brushes away. Without looking at what he had painted, he walked back into the kitchen, and called Aaron again. After six rings, he heard Aaron's voice, groggy and cracked. "Hello?"

"Hey Aaron, it's David."

A low grunt.

"Were you asleep or something?"

"Yeah."

David glanced at his watch. "It's almost 2:30."

"Yeah."

David clearly had no right to accuse anyone of sleeping in too late, so he let it go and went straight to the point. He asked if Aaron knew anyone who needed workers, and Aaron gave him the number for a heating and AC installer. The conversation was over in about three minutes, and it sounded like



Aaron was asleep again before he even hung up the phone.

David called the contractor, told him he had absolutely no construction experience, but the guy was desperate, and told him to come in for an interview early tomorrow. David supposed this was good, but he couldn't help feeling like the world was ending, making all this exertion utterly pointless. Like he was wasting time job hunting while mushroom clouds bloomed on the horizon.

...

Julie came home around 8:00 with Chinese take-out for one. David was sitting in the living room reading a magazine. He looked up at her when she came in, but he couldn't catch her eye. She laid out her food on the kitchen table and started eating in silence, looking at nothing but her plate. When David got up and went into the kitchen, she glanced at him, flashed him a brief smile, and returned to her food. David rummaged through the fridge for some leftovers, and took a seat across from her at the table. He poked at his congealed macaroni and cheese, trying to spread the microwaved heat through the center, and looked at Julie. "I'm feeling a lot better now," he said.

"Good."

"I got fired from Red Robin, though."

"Oh."

"But I have an interview for another job tomorrow. For an HVAC company. Heating, ventilation, air conditioning."

"Hm."

"We'll see how it goes."

A nod. Silent chewing. "I'll be home late tomorrow."

"Oh?"

“Errands.”

“Oh. Ok. How late?”

“I don’t know exactly. Late.”

“Oh. Ok.”

More silent chewing. Julie had a plate of chow mein and some spring rolls. It was still hot, and the steam and aroma wafted across the table. It smelled like burnt bridges.

“I’m going to turn in for the night,” David said, and put his dishes in the sink. “Goodnight, Julie.”

Julie nodded, and kept eating.

David fell into bed, and stared up at the dark ceiling. The situation had become clear to him now. Tonight, when he did what he had to do, he wouldn’t be leaving one world and returning to another. He would just be *leaving*. He no longer had a world to return to. This was a painful realization. But it changed nothing.

“What do you think it is about the ocean?” Laura asked, her eyes squinting against the wind that flew across the beach, kicking up sand and playing in her hair. “What makes it so hypnotic?”

David shrugged. He didn’t know. He didn’t care. It was water. It was just...water.

“I don’t know either,” Laura said. “I’ve always been drawn to it, though, ever since I was a little kid. My family used to come out here for vacations every year back when Grandpa lived in the cabin. Every time, even back then, the first run down to the waves was always...almost a *spiritual* thing, you know? I’d listen to those waves crash and I could just stand in awe.”

Sitting in the sand with his arms crossed over his knees, David stared out into those waves. His eyes were squinted too,

but not from the wind. He felt tight. The skin of his face felt like it weighed a hundred pounds, like that weight was squeezing these tears into his eyes. Looking out at those waves, all he saw were oil spills, rusty drilling rigs, shipwrecks, rotting fish, chemical waste barrels, fish shit, whale shit, walrus shit, mermaid shit.

“Are you ok, David?” She was looking at him with a quizzical, slightly concerned smile, her head tilted to one side. God, why did she have to be so beautiful? David looked away from her.

“Keep talking,” he said, and found that he could barely make his voice work. It took effort to force the words out of his mouth. “Just talk for a while. Please.”

Her smile gave way to deeper concern, but she didn’t ask any questions. She turned her face back to the ocean. “When I’m standing by where the big waves break, and I hear that cosmic boom of them hitting the earth, I like to close my eyes and imagine those are the footsteps of God.” Her smile faded back in as she spoke. “Like I’m in the Garden of Eden and that’s the sound of God walking through. Sometimes, I wonder if...”

Her voice faded. The enunciations diminished, the vowel and consonant sounds smoothed and leveled out until her voice was just pure tone. And then that faded too. David stared at her profile with eyes that were hungry, desperate, lunatic, and res—

He and Laura would grow old together.

After the birth of their unplanned third child, another beautiful girl, they would decide once again that enough was enough. But this time, they would really mean it, and David would get a vasectomy. They would debate the new baby’s

name for six of the nine months. In one-quarter seriousness, David would suggest they name her something like Latifah or Shaniqua, but they would eventually settle on Rose. By now David would be thirty-six and Laura thirty-five. Their house would be warm and full of noise and life.

Just as David had always been told but never believed would happen, the years would fly by. The kids would suddenly be in school. David and Laura would have to cross their fingers and wait to see if all their training would stay intact through the fiery forge of adolescence. Since Levi would be the only boy in a family of girls, David would make sure he got plenty of manliness during his formative years. He would buy him a BB gun, and take him fishing and hunting even though he had no idea how to do either. He would buy him a whole wardrobe of Carhart gear. He would introduce him to Metallica.

Then, just as he had always been told but never believed would happen, he would wake up one day and be fifty years old. But like Laura had predicted, watching the kids grow up would counteract the aging process, and he would feel younger and stronger than ever. Then, after suffering through their fair share of romantic theatrics with Sara and Rose and all their potential husbands, David and Laura would watch them marry and start their own families. At both weddings, David wouldn't even try to resist, he would cry like a baby, filled with a kind of pride and joy that can't be expressed any other way.

The night after Levi's wedding, David and Laura would make love, and afterward, as they lay there in bed, David would smile, and let out a long, slow breath which he would have been holding for almost sixty years. His job would be done. That day would be the last page of the story of his life.

The rest would all be the epilogue, and he could finally rest.

Laura would age beautifully. She would never grow fat or jowly. She would be frail and wrinkled, but the young woman would always be faintly visible in her face and frame, and her eyes would never lose their electric-blue intensity. When it was finally time for her and David to go, they would leave with one last act of classic, melodramatic romance. One of them would pass on, and the other would follow that very same day. But of course, *none of this would actually happen*, because—

David stared at Laura's profile with eyes that were hungry, desperate, lunatic...and resigned. "Laura," he said, and she stopped talking and looked at him. He flinched at the sight of her eyes, but made himself look into them, burning the image of her face into his memory with a masochistic glee.

"I love you," he said, and her face warped and distorted through the tears in his eyes. "But this is killing me."

He took one last look at the ocean horizon, closed his eyes, and woke up.



When he crawled out of bed that morning, the world had changed. He dressed himself and ate his breakfast in a monochrome shadow world where everything moved like tar. Time had become heavier, too heavy to move. It dragged behind, groaning. And there was a suffocating silence, as if the air had become cotton. His movements made no sound. No wrinkling of cloth, no crunch of breakfast cereal. No footsteps. Everything was absorbed in a soft, muffled thunder, like the sound of earplugs in ears. His eyes were half closed. The air squeezed around him and clung to his limbs as he put on his jacket and picked up his keys. For the first time in several days, he opened

the door, stepped out onto the porch—

The earplugs ripped out, his eyes snapped open, and he went into shock. The noise roared in from all sides, and he craned his neck back, gaping at the incomprehensible new world that had sprouted up around him. Gigantic houses surrounded him, leaning in at crazy angles. Telephone poles loomed like terrible monuments. Factory buildings across the street towered over him, miles high, invincible, their windows glittering in the sun like steel. Behind them, a crazed sky of time-lapse clouds hurtled past, twisting and undulating wildly, burning with sunlight that was pale, cold, and blinding. The noise was deafening. The cacophony of traffic, laughing children, screaming children, squawking crows, thundering jets, jangling ice cream trucks... David couldn't move. He stood there like a deer in headlights, trembling. When had this happened? When had the world become such a terrifying place?

He ran for the car, jumped inside and slammed the door shut. He took deep, slow breaths for several minutes, trying to calm down. Had the world always been like this? Probably. He had just been away so long, he'd forgotten. He'd been dreaming so long, reality had become a nightmare.

He started the car and turned the radio up loud, blinking hard, trying to clear his head. It would pass. He would make it pass. He had no choice.

So he made it pass. With the radio blaring rock music and commercials loud enough to drown out thought, he drove to the HVAC company's office, and did the interview. It was short. The contractor pretty much just asked him what hours he could work, if he could lift at least sixty pounds, and then hired him. He would start right away, at 7:00 the next morning. He signed a W-4 form, shook the contractor's hand, and left. He

felt no sense of triumph as he walked back to his car, no feeling of having “made the kill”. He felt defeat. He felt like the kill that had been made. He didn’t want this job. He hated it already. It was an act of desperation.

It was still early morning as he drove over the bridge into Burlington, and the blood-red sunrise had an apocalyptic look to it, like a city on fire. He drove through the sparsely populated, early-morning streets, past buildings silhouetted black in front of that Dresden sky, and the future came to him again. Laura was gone. Sara and Levi and Rose were gone. The hotel room in Egypt was gone. He had a new future now.

David would grow old alone.

After working a long series of entry-level, dead-end jobs, he would finally be too old for physical labor. He would “retire”, and find some way to survive on government handouts. He would feel every second of his age. He would actually *feel* the brittleness of his bones, the erosion of tissues, the deadening of synapses. He would spend his days shuffling around his tiny apartment, eating Pop-Tarts and frozen pizzas, sitting in front of the TV, watching reruns of reality shows from the ‘10s, and ‘20s. Then, when he ran out of food, he would step out of his apartment into a world tinted brown by veils of red and black smog. He would drive on crumbling streets obstructed by piles of burning tires, past blistered craters in the concrete, past the smoldering wreckage of other cars. He would stop at the grocery store, get his groceries, and drive home, barely flinching at the sound of missiles shrieking across the sky or fireballs exploding from the sides of buildings. He would try to avoid looking at the abnormally large smears of road-kill on the asphalt, sometimes with only a booted foot or half a head (with tire tracks where the mouth and jaw should



be) to show that it was human. When he got home, he would heat up a pizza, sink into his recliner, and maybe tune into the twenty-seventh season of *Survivor*, which would have finally, inevitably become a blood-sport show.

He used to fear that he wouldn't live past fifty. Now more than anything, he feared that he would.

...

When he got home, he found another cassette tape on the porch. He had been too distracted this morning to notice it on his way out, but it was right there on the welcome mat, as usual. He was tempted to just throw it away. He didn't need any reminders of what he had left behind, he needed a clean break. But he couldn't help himself. He took the tape into the bathroom, jammed it into the cracked, battered tape player, and listened. This time there was no preamble.

"You're doing it again you dumb shit. I can't believe you're trying to do it again. You *can't just run away*. Why can't you understand that? Are you going to just stay awake forever? Deal with your problems like an adult or—"

"Shut up," David said quietly, and stopped the tape.

He put the player away and sat down at the kitchen table to catch up on his mail, which he had picked up from the post office on his way home. He turned the post office's plastic bag upside down, dumping everything onto the table. It formed a small mountain of junk mail, coupon books, letters for the former residents, and bills. But on top of the pile, there was a box. On the shipping label, the "sender" area was marked "X10 Home Surveillance".

David smiled. No more flashlight tag. No more hide and

seek. He'd had enough. He didn't want to play anymore. It was time for Mr. Cassette Tape to show his face. He knew Mr. Cassette Tape had all the answers, he just had to catch him. David would catch him. He would be waiting, and when this little elf pranced up onto the porch, he would let the cage drop. Then he would grab the little elf and squeeze. He would hold him out in front of his face and scream, *Tell me everything you little fucker! Answer all my questions and fix all my problems or I swear to God I'll squeeze you like a rubber stress ball until you fucking pop!*

He opened the box, and began to set up the cage. The kit came with two cameras, so he set up one in the corner above the doorway, pointing down at the porch, and the other under the gutter overhang, pointing at the curb across the street where the white Accord always parked. Maybe he could kill two elves with one stone.

He hooked the receiver unit into the VCR, popped in a six-hour blank tape, and started recording. Then he waited. Six hours passed, he rewound the tape, and kept waiting. He sat on the couch in front of the TV, watching grainy footage of his front porch for the rest of the day. He watched the shadows stretch across the concrete steps and then blur together as daylight traded places with light bulb light. He sat there until he heard Julie's car in the driveway, then he switched the TV to a fuzzy local access channel and pretended to be watching a Seinfeld rerun. It was the one where Jerry steals a girlfriend from a guy in a coma.

Julie eventually went to bed, and David switched it back to the Porch Channel. He rewound the tape again, and sat there until morning, waiting.

...

As the sun was just starting to crest the Cascades, he splashed some cold water on his face, drank an entire pot of coffee, and went to work. There were few things he hated more than starting a new job, but this time it was almost unbearable. He couldn't concentrate while the boss told him how to do the work. When the boss explained how to put ductwork together or use a reciprocating saw, David's eyes lost focus, he saw double, and the explanation muffled into nothing. They were installing a heating system in a new, unfinished house in Mount Vernon, so they were exposed to the elements. Even by noon the air was jagged cold, and David couldn't feel his fingers. He half expected the sheet metal to stick to his hands and peel the skin off. Was he really working here? It felt so surreal. Maybe he was still dreaming. Maybe all he had done was exchange a beautiful dream for a nightmare.

Around 1:00 they broke for lunch. David took his warm Cup O' Noodles out into the dirt front yard and sat on a pile of lumber in the sun. He slurped down half of the noodles, then just sat there with his eyes closed and face upturned, trying to milk some warmth out of the feeble sunlight.

"Hey David."

Startled, David opened his eyes, and saw Charlie standing on the sidewalk, bundled up in a long, wool coat and stocking cap. His face was red from the cold, like he had been out walking for a while.

"What are you doing?"

David nodded his chin in the direction of the house.  
"Working."

"What? Construction?"

David took a bite of noodles, and just looked at him. Charlie waited, then gave a politely affirming nod. "Huh. Well...that's cool. You like this better than Red Robin, then?"

"It's money."

More positive nodding. "Right, right." David was sitting on the lumber pile, and Charlie was on the sidewalk about fifteen feet away, but neither moved to reduce this awkward distance. Charlie stuffed his hands into his coat pockets. His face took on a studied blankness. "So...you feeling any better?"

"What?"

"Since you 'told me off' or whatever in the grocery store."

"I felt fine when I told you off in the grocery store."

Charlie stayed decidedly expressionless. "Oh."

"If anything, I feel worse now than I did then."

"Oh." Silence.

"My break's almost over. What can I do for you?"

Charlie shrugged, and David realized he looked uncomfortable. He was squirming. "Nothing, I was just walking by and I saw you there, wondered what you were doing, thought I'd say hi."

David looked at him, not without a hint of suspicion. "Hi."

"How is everything?"

"Oh, not good, how about yourself?"

"It's all right. So...what have you been up to?"

David eyed him warily. "Not much, but hey..." He got to his feet. "...I've got to get back to work."

"All right, well...have fun." He waved, and started walking. "Maybe I'll call you sometime."

David didn't reply, he just waved and went back into the

worksite, but he was mystified. Charlie Fransen. He had just wanted to say “hi”?

The workday finally ground to a halt, and David drove home in a daze. His eyelids were drooping, so he stopped at an espresso stand and choked down a quad-shot Americano and two of those caffeinated Rocket Chocolates. His hands began to tremble on the steering wheel, but he was alert now.

It was dark when he pulled into his driveway, and cold. He stopped on the middle step of his porch and looked down at the bare concrete. No tape. He went inside and fast-forwarded through the six hour video he had started recording that morning. He saw himself leaving, then Julie leaving, then nothing. He had set it up as a split screen showing views from both the porch camera and the curb camera, but the curb was as vacant as the porch.

He just sat there frowning at the screen for a while. Stupid little elf. Goddamn little pixie. Mr. Cassette Tape. Crafty bastard. Mr. Accord, too. But it didn’t matter. He would get them both. Then he would squeeze until the world made sense again.

While he was setting up the VCR to record another six hours, the phone rang. It was Charlie.

“Hey David. How are you?”

David was pretty sure this was the first time Charlie had ever asked how he was. “How am I?”

“Yeah. It’s a greeting. How are you?”

“Why?”

A pause. “Ok...anyway, I was just calling to see if you’d like to come over to the old house tonight and watch some movies.”

“Watch some movies,” David repeated flatly.

“Yeah. You know, films. Motion pictures. I got *Fahrenheit 911* and *Other Documentary*.”

David lowered the phone away from his face and looked out the kitchen window. It showed nothing but darkness. Might as well have been volcanic glass. He raised the phone again and mumbled, “Thanks for the offer, but I can’t. Sorry.”

“Why not?”

“I just...can’t.”

“What, you’re too busy? Doing whatever the hell it is you’re doing?”

David paused. “I have some shit going on right now.”

“Some shit, huh?”

“Yeah. I’m kinda dying.”

Silence.

“And those movies, your CNN tapes and magazines and everything...I just don’t think I could handle your whole...world right now.”

Silence.

“So...no thanks.”

More silence. “Okay...well...bye.” His tone was a mixture. There was confusion and irritation, but mostly...disappointment. David was about to hang up, but then something flashed in his brain, and he stopped. “Wait, Charlie?”

“What?”

“What kind of car do you have?”

“*What?*”

“What kind of car do you have? What do you drive?”

“A Datsun, why?”

“That’s the only car you drive?”

“Yes, *why?*”

“I was just... Just wondering. All right, talk to you later.” He hung up before Charlie could say anything more.

Later that night, after Julie had gone to bed without a word, he stood in the bedroom in the dark and stared. Not at Julie. At the bed. At the sheets, the threads, the cotton fibers, the atoms and molecules in the cotton. And then a pristine blue sky, a sunlit cityscape below... A sob jerked out of him without warning, a single, inelegant bark. It was a deeply pathetic sound, and it startled him. He put a hand over his mouth and backed out of the room. No tears, just that one strangled whimper, jumping out of him like vomit. He mumbled, “Where did *that* come from?” but of course he knew.

He didn’t sleep that night. His body screamed for rest after the last all-nighter, but he tightened his jaw, drank another pot of coffee, and sat in front of the TV watching the cameras as the hours crawled by. He couldn’t go back. He knew he wouldn’t survive the trip. So he sat there in the sickly white glow of the screen, and tortured himself with Laura’s face. He still had the snapshot in his mind, that moment on the beach when he told her, “I love you, *but...*”, her innocent smile withering into confused fear. He turned that snapshot in his hands, caressing it, running its paper-sharp edges across his mind, slicing thin, angry lines, bloodless but deep.

When the sun finally came up, there was no tape and no Accord, and David was delirious. He stepped onto the porch, his bloodshot eyes darting wildly. “Where are you?” he whispered through his teeth. He walked out into the street and screamed into the muted morning air. “*Where are you, motherfuckers?*”

He saw neighbors’ heads poking out of doors, and tried to reign himself in. He put out his hands, smiling at those wary

faces, and went back into the house. He didn't need the neighbors calling the police. He didn't need those headless pillars of uniformed flesh towering over him again, dragging him off to whatever netherworld they had come out of.

He shut the front door and then slumped against it, his face smearing into the unyielding wood. How did they *know*? How did Mr. Cassette Tape and Mr. Accord know he was watching for them? He had seen no sign of the car when he put up the cameras. Could it have been parked somewhere else, watching him from a distance? Maybe from an orbiting satellite or UFO? Had Mr. Accord warned Mr. Cassette to lay low? Were they working together? Were they the same person?

David's head was spinning painfully. His eyes kept trying to roll back into his head.

He needed more coffee.

...

From there, 6:20 AM, standing with his face squished against the door, things continued steadily downward.

His second day of work was a spiraling hell straight out of Dante. They were working on an old house now, replacing the baseboard heaters with a gas furnace system. It started in the dingy interior of the house, cutting holes through stained, stinking carpet and floors, trying to work around mounds of dirty laundry, discarded toys, and the maddeningly inquisitive presence of the house's trashy owners. Then it went underground to the crawl space, a sixteen-inch-high tomb of dangling fiberglass insulation, choking dust, cobweb curtains, rat shit, rat poison, and dead rats.

In the dark hours of that morning, that crawl space felt



like a metaphor for his life. He was so sick of this. So sick of living the low life, of being poor and blue-collar and desperate. Lying on his back, staring up at a yellow fiberglass sky, he dreamed of other lives.

He wanted to be metropolitan. He wanted to drive a European car to exclusive clubs with brushed-steel furnishings and cold blue lights. He wanted to lounge about at private tables with small groups of attractive young people with sculpted hairstyles and angular clothing, sipping Skyy Vodka and discussing European fashions. He wanted to dance with a tall woman in high leather boots, then take her home to his stark, modern high-rise apartment and stand there looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the city skyline, making sarcastic remarks. Or he wanted to be an intellectual. He wanted to live in New York and have glasses and always wear black. He wanted to listen to NPR in a sleek, comfortable car with no wind noise. He wanted to subscribe to literary journals, and know and care about wine. He wanted to stroll briskly down the street in a long black coat and gloves. He wanted to tell people he was working on a novel about the human condition. He wanted to attend cocktail parties full of classy women and stylish, effeminate men, and stand around in small groups sipping Chardonnay, quoting Faulkner, laughing extravagantly at sarcastic quips, and discussing art galleries and avant garde plays.

And he wanted to be respected by people he hadn't met. He wanted something he did to land him on the cover of a magazine. He wanted to live in a lighthouse, without phone or mail service. He wanted to wash up on the shore of a deserted island. He wanted to be abducted by benevolent aliens. He wanted *anything*.

He smiled, closed his eyes against the cobwebs, and wriggled deeper into the crawl space.

...

That night, after work, he grabbed a beer and some potato chips, and lay out on the couch in front of the TV with the remote in hand. It was a classic man-comes-home-from-work scene. The only difference was that he wasn't watching sitcoms or sports, he was watching his own front porch.

He had every intention of laying there all night, getting up only for caffeine boosts, but he was interrupted. Around 7:00, his drooping eyes snapped open to the sight of someone standing on his porch. He had a brief surge of maniacal exhilaration—*That's it you fucking little gremlin, I've got you now!*—and then he realized it was Charlie.

The doorbell rang, and David got up on leaden feet to answer it. Charlie. No elves. No answers. Just Charlie. David opened the door and just looked at him.

"Hi David."

"Hi."

Standing there on the porch, with David looking out at him from behind an only partially opened door, Charlie looked genuinely uncomfortable. "How's it going?" he asked, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"It's going."

He nodded. "So, what are you up to tonight?"

"Just going to watch TV for a while."

He nodded again. "Cool, cool." Silence.

"What can I do for you, Charlie?"

"I was just...I don't know, bored. Thought I'd stop by

and see if you wanted to go out and have some drinks or something.”

David glanced over Charlie’s shoulder at the curb. The car parked in front of the yard was a green Datsun. “Well I’m actually kinda busy tonight...”

“Come on, man.” Charlie’s voice took on an almost pleading tone that made David uneasy. “No one else is around.”

“Where’s all your friends?”

He shrugged. “Eh.” His hands pushed deeper into his pockets, and his eyes wandered. He didn’t seem to want to say anything more, but David just waited. “Well,” he said finally, “one of them is out of town, the...another one is working—they’re just busy, you know? It’s a weeknight.”

David looked at him and didn’t say anything. The guy was practically begging him. What was this sudden attachment? *Are you trying to pull me in? Are you trying to drag me back? A rescue operation? Or are you just fucking curious? A rubberneck at an accident?*

“Come on, Dave. We can go down to the Marketplace Bistro, have a few drinks, just an hour or two. Come on. TV rots your brain.”

David tried not to sigh. “Fine.”

“Good man.”

“Yeah. Let me go get my coat.”

He went back inside, rewound the tape, turned the TV off, and started recording. He put his coat on, and drove to a bar with Charlie, thinking about burning buildings and human road kill.

The place was rowdy for a weeknight. They took stools at the bar, ordered drinks, and stared at the TV. It was playing

the news. CNN. Too quiet to be heard over the crowd noise. Just silent monologues from mannequin faces intercut with images of shipwrecks, political campaigns, cancelled TV shows, hostage situations, celebrity divorces, mideast violence, Grammy Award winners, the latest model automobile...

David took big drinks of his beer, thinking. He knew he should try to converse—he had come this far already—but he couldn't think what to say. He waited for Charlie to break the silence.

Charlie took a sip of his martini. "So...how's the new job?"

"Sucks."

"Why'd you quit Red Robin?"

"I got fired."

Charlie nodded slowly. "I see."

"This job was...a desperation move."

"Well...construction work..." He shrugged. "It's less corporate at least."

"...Yeah."

There was a pause as the topic dried up, and awkward silence swelled in to fill the void. David could see Charlie visibly searching for something to say. His eyes twitched around the room. Then he reached into his messenger bag and pulled out a magazine. A copy of *Newsweek*. The cover was a picture of a car crushed against a concrete wall. In bold block letters, the headline declared:

**YOU ARE GOING TO DIE IN 12 HOURS**

David blinked hard, and stared at the magazine. No, he had read it wrong. The headline said:

**THERE IS NO ESCAPE**, and the cover was a photo of his front porch as viewed from inside the house, the streets, the

fences, the factories beyond, and the welcome mat that no longer said “welcome”, it said “DIE SLOWLY”.

“What the fuck...” David whispered, leaning in closer. Charlie opened the magazine, and the cover disappeared, folded face-down on the bar. Charlie started to read, then noticed David staring and looked up, closing the magazine again. “What?” he said, but David ignored him. There was no picture of a porch on the cover. He must have misread it again. It was a picture of a man in a suit watching a large TV screen that showed the earth from space. The headline was *Personal Globalism: Plugging Yourself Into The Global Economy*.

“What?” Charlie said.

David looked away. “Nothing.”

Eyes fixed downward, he saw colored flashes of light from the TV reflected on the glossy surface of the bar. Something was going on inside that box. A murder trial. A controversial initiative. Something in there, out there. Far away.

Charlie set the magazine down and looked at him. “What is your deal, David? What’s going on with you?”

“What?”

“Where *are* you? Where do you think you are?”

Charlie chuckled uneasily, not sure how to take David’s straight face. David softened a little, and cracked a brief smile to suggest he was joking around. Bad actors poorly cast. The whole scene was too tragic. David felt ill.

His voice started to crack. He felt himself losing his grip on coherent discussion. “I told you before, Charlie, I told you I don’t live where you live anymore. Every morning I get up and go to work at any one of the dozens of shitty jobs I’ve had, and I watch the clock all day. It feels like noon and I look and it’s

not even 9:00 yet. Now I spend the day buried alive underneath houses, and I haven't slept in three days because everything that matters to me now is in another world, and if I go to sleep, I'll see it again, and if I see it again, I'll die. Every day I'm gasping for air, I'm treading water, just trying to keep my eyes and nose above the surface, so do you think I give a *fuck* about Starbuck's business practices or how poppy this band is? I don't have time! Life is short, it's cold and dark and *short*, so when I look around, I *want* to like what I see, I want to actually make an *effort* to appreciate the world—as fucking awful as it can be—while it flies by me. Ok? Ok Charlie?"

Charlie looked at him with that perfect poker face for a long moment. Then he slowly lifted his hands, and clapped. Once, then again, then again, a little faster, and again, faster, until he was fully applauding. He jumped to his feet and added more vigor to the applause, looking left and right, nodding, smiling proudly, adding a small whoop here and there. Everyone in the bar was staring at him, but he looked at them like members of the crowd in the scene he was acting out. They would join in one by one until the whole room erupted into applause. The slow-building clap. It was a classic movie cliché.

"Fuck you," David said, and walked out.

On the street, he moved with a quick, purposeful stride, but he wasn't going anywhere. He changed directions every few blocks, weaving through the red brick buildings of Mount Vernon's old downtown in a pattern that suggested a rat in a giant, invisible maze. It was phenomenally cold out. His breath billowed upward in clouds like car exhaust, and his fingers stung no matter how hard he stuffed them into his coat pockets. This was supposed to be Spring? The day after tomorrow was Easter, and it was colder than it had been all Winter.

He walked with his head down and shoulders hunched, trying to compress himself into a denser, warmer shape. He couldn't see more than five feet in front of him, and had lost all track of where he was. He had a vague, periphery sense of shape and distance, but he refused to look up to get his bearings. He just walked. Then about an hour later, he stopped, eyes still on the sidewalk.

He felt something. There had been an incline, an increase in elevation, and then a low buzz in the back of his head. He turned to his left, and looked up.

He was standing on the river bridge from downtown to west side Mount Vernon, facing the railing. In front of him was a flat concrete wall, the terminating end of a long strip mall. As traffic poured across the bridge, headlights passed over cars, shot through the bridge's crisscrossed steel girders, and projected onto the wall a collage of amorphous shadows that stretched and warped as the headlights moved. David moved closer to the edge, leaning against the concrete railing, and watched.

He saw an endless procession of shadow cars gliding over a twisting backdrop of shadow cassette tapes, bleeding together, merging and separating. He saw a shadow assembly line rolling out dozens of '89 Honda Accords. He saw the cars in auto showrooms, with silhouettes of perfect families from 1950s advertisements leaning in the windows, beaming—"Gee whiz!"—listening to the salesman expound on the car's features, which include an in-dash cassette player. He saw the perfect shadow family on a Sunday drive in their brand-new car, the dog's head out the window, little Bobby pointing at everything, the husband driving with an easy, manly smile. He saw the husband start playing with the cassette player and become

distracted. He saw the car drift out of its lane and sail off a bridge and explode. Then just more cars, breaking through the railing, plummeting through space and sinking into the river, or bursting into flames, or crumpling like tin cans against hard, unforgiving concrete.

He made himself look away. It was getting late. And it was cold.

...

About an hour and a half later, he plodded up his porch steps with shoulders hunched, hands jammed into his pockets, face red and stinging. He reached for the frosty doorknob, then stopped. There was something on porch. Not a cassette tape. A newspaper. He didn't have a subscription, and this didn't look like a free sample. It wasn't even rolled up, it just lay there open to the middle, and there was something handwritten on it. He picked it up, and stared at it with mounting incredulity.

Certain articles were circled in red marker. Business scandals. Democrat/Republican political turmoil. Doonesbury. And there was a handwritten note scrawled across the front page:

WAKE UP FEEDBACK FAN!

David crumpled it up and tossed it toward the trash can. "I *am* awake, Charlie," he whispered. "I *am so awake*."

He slammed the door behind him and started to take his coat off, but then the cold hit him. The indoor cold, a dry, motionless chill that was somehow worse than outdoors. He wig-



gled the thermostat knob at 70 degrees, and nothing happened. Was the furnace broken? Maybe he should dive into the crawl space and fix it. Or maybe he should buy a whole new house. Maybe he should move to Hawaii. Or Egypt.

The bedroom was dark, but he could hear Julie in the bed, her shallow breathing. He could actually *see* her breathing, tiny puffs of vapor in the slice of hallway light coming through the door. She had piled extra blankets on the bed. Her shape was almost completely buried.

Making a feeble effort to be quiet, he snuck around the bed and picked up his painting supplies. He set up the easel in the living room and started painting, barely even watching the canvas. The only light came from the upstairs hallway, and in this weak illumination, colors blended, shapes became hazy.

*Sometimes I even close my eyes,* Laura said. *I think you can get something deeper that way, beyond just the face. And if you close your eyes, you can go to sleep. You can come back to where I am, and I'll—*

“No,” David blurted out through gritted teeth, a firm, decisive whimper, and the voice stopped.

He painted for a little longer, but the weight of his eyelids was becoming too much for him. The barbell was sinking down on his throat. He needed a spotter.

He poured himself a cup of coffee, and used it as a chaser for a triple helping of No-Doze.

For some strange reason, he was starting to feel a little shaky. His bones were becoming rubbery. His muscles vibrated, and his hands trembled almost constantly. And he'd been having heart flutters. Brief spells where his heart lost the beat, went off on its own little drum solo. It was a nauseating sensation, and frightening, much harder to ignore than the other

symptoms. But he managed.

He flipped on the TV and collapsed on the couch. He could see the Accord's curb through the window, so he kept the screen focused on the porch, and watched with glazed eyes. Since the view of the porch was mostly dark, the TV didn't provide much illumination, just that strange "dark light" of a black screen. It caught on the sharp edges in the room, giving everything a ghostly, photo-negative look.

He laid back in the chair. He leaned forward, resting his chin on his palm. He took a deep breath and held it, then blew it out through his lips. He scratched his ear. He rubbed his eyes. He stood up and turned toward the kitchen—there was a face in the window.

His throat hitched in a strangled gasp, and he jerked backward, stumbling on a chair. By the time he recovered his balance, the face was gone, but he could see a blurry afterimage in his mind, a gaunt thing with wide, staring eyes, gazing at him through the lower left corner of the window. He wanted to scream something, some long stream of profanity, but all he could do was stand there, gasping for air.

He looked at the TV, but there was no movement on the porch. He would be able to see most of the yard if he got closer to the window, but he couldn't make himself move. Instead, he suddenly decided it was very important that he clean up his painting mess immediately. He packed up the paints and easel, and rushed them back into the bedroom, where he sat on the bed and listened to the reassuring sound of Julie breathing.

An hour passed. He lay on his back on top of the covers, and stared up at the ceiling as he often did. Another hour passed, and he heard a wet, trembling sound from the mound of blankets at his side. He looked at Julie's sleeping face, and saw

something strange. Pools in her closed eyes, brimming through her lashes. Glistening trails running down her cheeks.

He sat up and looked down at her. “*What?*” he whispered loudly, scowling in confusion. “What are you crying about? What’s wrong with you?”

She didn’t stir, and eventually her sobs faded. The tears would dry on her face. She would wake up with crusty, stinging eyes. She would find salty stains on her pillow.

David sat there watching her for a while, then he went back downstairs. He took one more No-Doze for good measure, pulled the drapes shut, and sat on the couch, watching the ghostly black screen. He could still feel eyes on the back of his neck. He could hear his body screaming for rest. Gritting his teeth, he ignored them both.

*Just a little longer*, he told himself meaninglessly. *Just a little bit longer.*



The next morning he drove to work, and laughed the whole way to the jobsite. It was a joke that he was here. The idea that he was expecting to go in there today and actually concentrate on measurements and angles and good workmanship....it was pure comedy. Dark comedy.

Working outside in the stinging cold or inside in the hellish crawlspace, he tried his hardest to stay with it, but his mind worked against him. It tried to insulate itself from reality, and the world took on a dreamy feel. Things became denser, weightier, and seemed to make soft, whooshing sounds when they passed through his vision. He saw objects in microscope detail, the complex wood grain of the floorboards, individual

fibers in the insulation. At every opportunity, he tried to escape, to put himself as far away as possible. He was useless.

The boss noticed this. David had just cut a hole through the attic ceiling for the furnace vent. The CD-sized circle of wood dropped out, and a shaft of sunlight pierced the musty darkness of the attic. Through the hole he could see deep, rich blue, and it pulled him. He put his face against the hole and just stared, imagining his body squeezing through that hole and spinning up into that azure expanse. That was when he heard the boss calling. Asking what the hell he was doing. Not getting any answer. Sighing, shaking his head, and asking David to come outside for a minute. Telling him in kind but firm tones that this just wasn't the right job for him. His final check would be in the mail. Smiling an empty, faraway smile, David went home a little before noon.

He found another highlighted newspaper on his porch, and this time there was a music magazine bundled in with it. It was folded open to a review of Army Airforce, and Charlie had circled key phrases like “well-worn rock clichés” and “obvious hooks” and “insipid themes of love and heartbreak”. And another handwritten note:

THAT SPEECH LAST NIGHT,  
SO BEAUTIFUL! SO INSPIRING!  
I AM GOING TO TURN MY  
LIFE AROUND!

David crumpled the magazine and newspaper together,

and kept squeezing until it was as hard as a baseball. His body tensed as if about the chuck it across the neighborhood, but then he just let it drop. It fell softly into the grass. He smiled, and went to the front door. He thought he was totally calm. Unaffected. But when he tried the knob and found it locked, he pounded a fist against the door so hard that the hollow wood crunched inward.

He just stood there for a moment, breathing through his teeth, his fist still inside the door. Then he straightened, took a deep breath, pulled out his key, and went inside.

The remainder of the day passed in a blur of grainy video, trembling muscles, and bitter black coffee that tasted like cigarettes and nursing homes. At some point well past midnight, he opened the medicine cabinet and found his box of No-Doze empty. This was bad. He could barely keep his eyes open, and there was no way he could drive to the store for more pills in this condition. This was very bad. He had to do something to hold sleep at bay just a little longer. He thought about poking himself with safety pins or sticking his tongue in an electrical socket, but finally settled on a cold shower. That had worked when Josh made him do it. Woke him up real good.

The shock was almost enough to kill him this time. It was so cold outside that the water coming through the pipes was like fresh glacier runoff. His skin turned bright red, but he held himself in there, pretending to wash his hair, rotating slowly like a rotisserie chicken, making sure it got him from every angle. He even attempted to sing, belting out a shivering, strangled, “Ohhh what a beautiful moooorniiiiing, ohhh what a beautiful daaaay! I’ve got a beautiful feel-iiiiing, everything’s going my waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!”

He held the last note until he ran out of breath, and as he

sucked in air, his heart began to flutter wildly off-beat. It felt like there was a flock of angry birds trapped in his chest cavity, flapping around and beating on the walls in a desperate struggle to get free. It subsided quickly, but he felt dizzy, and slumped against the shower wall, letting his stomach sag out in front of him. A horrifying image of his inner workings flashed in his head, a murky cavern of fluids and squirming, fleshy mush. That was what he *was*, what kept him alive, just these shapeless piles of meat, pumping and squeezing and secreting as commanded by a part of his brain he could not control. And it was dark in there. Not awash with soft pink light like in those medical videos. *Dark*. What were the odds that this horrifyingly complex system should keep running? Why shouldn't a valve jam or a tube burst? Why shouldn't his organs shrivel and rot like the offal they were? Why shouldn't his heart just stop?

And at that moment, his sagging belly burst open. His navel just popped like a champagne cork and a garden-hose stream of blood shot out like red piss, then coils of intestine, chunks of liver—"Oh God," he sobbed, and stumbled out of the shower clutching his abdomen, which was pink from the cold water, but otherwise normal. He staggered out of the bathroom, across the hall, and collapsed on the bedroom floor, wet and naked and shivering.

He lay there with his eyes closed in his patch of wet carpet. He could see his hot breath in the cold air. He could almost feel the water freezing on his skin.

"David."

Despite his body's numbness, he felt goose bumps rising on his back. The voice of that whisper was Julie's, but at the same time it wasn't. The tone was different, the cadence, even

the timbre was slightly softer.

He pulled himself up to a crouch, and saw Julie sliding out of bed. She swung her legs over the side and slowly rose to her feet. She moved around the side of the bed with slow, unsteady steps and then just stood there in her panties and t-shirt, eyes slightly open, but looking downward.

*She's sleep walking*, David thought hopefully, and stood up, careful not to make any noise. But then Julie's eyes came up to meet his, and they were awake. Alert. And not her own.

"David," she said again. Her voice was unsteady, and just barely above a whisper, but he recognized it, as well as the curve that had come into the squint of her eyes. "Why are you doing this?"

David took a few steps backward, and didn't answer. His eyes were as wide as golf balls, and he was shivering uncontrollably.

Julie put her hands out toward him, and her eyes—*Laura's eyes*—were pleading. "Come back. *Please*."

"I can't."

"We can find a balance. It doesn't have to be impossible."

David shook his head, tears mixing with shower water. "No."

"David. *I love you*."

*"I can't go back!"* he screamed hoarsely, squinting his eyes shut, bracing himself against the bedroom doorway. "It would kill me!"

He turned and ran. Into the bathroom to throw his clothes on, and then out the door, into his car.

...



He called Josh as he drove. The answering machine picked up, but David knew Josh's phone was in the hall just outside his bedroom, so he would be able to hear.

"Hey Josh—I know it's like six in the morning, but I just figured you'd—I'm not holding up well at all, and I really need to talk, I'm just—I'm losing it, I'm freaking out. I need to go for a drive and talk, so if you—I'm on my way to your house right now, so—I'll be there in a few minutes."

When he knocked on Josh's door, Josh answered it fully dressed. They stood there looking at each other. "Well," Josh said. His voice was low and toneless. "Let's go."

They got in David's car, and drove west on Highway 20 in complete silence. They stopped in Anacortes at a late-night doughnut shop and got some doughnuts, but as they sat there eating them, David didn't say anything, so neither did Josh. They doubled back on Highway 20 and headed toward Deception Pass. When they reached the bridge, a vast span of steel arching high above the water, David parked. He walked out onto the bridge and leaned against the rail, looking out at the Puget Sound horizon. The sky over there was just starting to turn from black to gray as the sun approached from behind. Radio towers on distant hills pierced the gloom with bright red pinpricks.

Josh got out of the car, but stood partially inside the doorway, leaning on the roof. He had the heat on full blast and aiming out the door. Still leaning on the rail twenty feet away, David turned his head to look at him. "What do I do?" he yelled.

Josh didn't respond. After a few minutes, David walked back to the car and stood outside the passenger door, looking at

Josh.

"I'm tired," he said. "I'm exhausted." Josh nodded. "I know I've fucked up. I've made stupid choices and I know there are consequences for stupid choices." Josh nodded again. "But don't I get to rest someday, Josh? I think I'm dying. When do I get to rest?"

Josh folded his arms, expressionless. "I don't know."

They got back in the car, and drove home in silence. The only sound was the wind roaring against the windows.

...

The roller coaster slowed. The steady *click click click* reduced its tempo. The buzzing voices of the children in the cars quieted into a tense, unnatural hush as the track disappeared in front of them. A kid in the front car started to cry. It advanced one more *click*. The kid screamed. The cars dropped.

...

David stopped at a gas station on his way back from Josh's house and picked up a new box of No-Doze. He downed three of them on the spot with a cup of gas station coffee, but he couldn't feel them. He felt no charge, no boost of energy. All he felt was a steady *downward* sensation, like dropping in an elevator. And it was picking up speed.

"Come on," he mumbled over and over as he drove home. "*Work.*" But they didn't.

By the time he got home, he could barely walk straight. He could see the flat ground in front of him, but the rest of his senses told him he was walking down a steep slope, as if grav-

ity had tilted to a forty-five degree angle. It was a nauseating, carnival ride feeling. He staggered through the front door wanting to puke, feeling like he was falling, like his legs were sinking into the floor. He felt himself drop to his knees in the hallway, but he kept going, lumbering forward, upright but crawling. By the time he reached the living room, he had sunk up to his chest. He could almost feel the floorboards closing around him, swallowing him. He grabbed hold of the couch arm and tried to pull himself up, but it was hopeless. Absurd. He laughed bitterly at the effort, and his hand dropped away.

He felt his head hit the floor. He saw the ceiling light getting farther and farther away as he sank down into the deep, dark earth. Shadow closed around the light, and it winked out.

Total darkness. At last.

And then...*snap*. Elsewh—"No!" he screamed, and ripped himself free.

He was awake. His blood was pounding. He heaved himself off the floor and started to run for the kitchen, but his foot hit something, and he stopped. There was a tape on the floor. And on the coffee table...the tape player. He picked up both and sat down on the couch, looking at the two objects in his hands like alien artifacts. He turned his head to look out the window—there was a face looking back at him, right next to him, barely two feet away, those gaunt cheeks, those wide, staring eyes.

David screamed something wordless, and put a fist through the window. He didn't see a man's body ducking the punch, getting up and running away. There *was* no body. No neck. It was just a face, like a mask, and it didn't duck, it just vanished. It was there, and then it was gone.

And it looked familiar.

David refused this whole scene. He rejected it. He ran out the front door expecting to see the owner of that face running down the street, maybe climbing into a black government helicopter or something. But he didn't see that. He didn't see any secret spies diving for cover, and no little elves sprouting wings and flying away. What he *did* see was a white '89 Honda Accord pulling up to the curb.

He didn't think twice, or even once. He dashed across the street at full sprint. The car lurched forward and pulled a sharp u-turn, leaving a patch of black rubber, but David was there before it could get going in the other direction. He grabbed the passenger door handle, running alongside the car as it accelerated, but the door was locked. Sprinting with his final reserves of sleep-deprived energy, he smashed his elbow against the passenger-side window. The safety glass shattered into a dense web of white cracks, but remained in place, and before he could hit it again the car sped away from him, leaving him in a cloud of blue-white exhaust.

It was a day for breaking glass.

He stumbled and fell onto the neighbor's lawn, gasping for breath. His head spun crazily. The downward sensation hadn't slowed. He was fighting it with everything he had, but he was still falling.

Somehow, he made it back to his house, and collapsed onto the couch. With trembling hands, he picked up the tape player, and put the tape in. (There was no label this time.) He briefly took note of the fact that his entire right arm was red and sticky with blood. It glittered with chunks of embedded glass like some gaudy piece of casino statuary. He filed this information away in a distant corner of his brain, and turned his attention back to the tape. He pressed play.

The moment he pressed play, the phone rang.

"I don't think I need to convince you," the tape voice said, that maddeningly familiar voice. "You *know* you can't keep doing what you're doing."

The answering machine clicked on, the message spooled through, then the beep. "Hey David, it's Josh." His voice was muffled somewhat by wind noise and passing cars. A cell phone.

The tape: "You have to find a balance or you're going to die. If you would just stop running, you could find a balance!"

Josh: "Hey, um, listen..."

Tape: "Listen to me! Please don't throw this tape away. I'm trying to—"

Josh: "We need to talk."

Tape: "—talk to you about—"

Josh: "About Julie."

Tape: "—Julie, and Laura—"

Josh: "And Laura, and you—"

Tape: "—and you—"

Josh: "—and me."

Tape: "—and me."

Drumroll....*ding*.

"Oh you son of a bitch," David whispered. "It's *you*."

He swung his bloody fist down on the stop button and shot to his feet.

"...so, give me a call as soon as you get this," Josh was saying when David picked up the phone and mashed it against the side of his face. "Josh you motherfucker, it's you," he said in a wobbly, seething giggle.

"David listen—"

He slammed the phone down and ran out of the house,

straight into his car.

...

The gravel of Josh's driveway snarled like a wild animal as David skidded to a stop in front of the house. It all made perfect sense, didn't it? Josh always seemed to know too much. He always understood what David was going through a little too well. And fifteen years ago. Shelley Kent. Things Josh had said.

*You had as many chances as you could want, and you blew them all.*

*Sometimes you've got to ignore logic and just plunge ahead. For her I would've done that, but what does it matter what I would've done? I'm not the dark handsome stranger who has her—had her—drooling all over him.*

And more recently...Julie.

*You have a wife in there, David. Do you even know her? Do you realize how much you don't deserve her? Well you're going to lose her...*

*Can you tell me why you married Julie?*

*...get a fucking divorce!*

Such obvious parallels. And a million other little things over the years, comments and sideways glances that David had noticed but dismissed without thought. It was so fucking *obvious*! Josh wanted to steal his wife! And all this, the tapes and the spy car and all this bullshit, it was all some kind of... Some kind of trick. Some elaborate psychological trick.

David had to laugh when he saw the Accord parked right there in plain sight. He got out and looked at the cracked window for a moment, then put his foot through it. Just to finish

the job. And while he was at it... He backed up, and kicked out the rear passenger window. It felt so good it was almost scary. The delicious crunch of the glass under his foot. The exquisite catharsis.

“Dude!”

David looked up and saw Aaron running down the porch steps, looking back and forth between David and the car, his face wide and startled.

“What are you doing here?” David said, unable to believe in coincidences at this point.

“I was just about to take my *car* back,” Aaron said, moving around the side of the vehicle with his hands out at his sides and mouth slightly open, incredulous.

“This is your car?”

“It’s my brother’s but yeah, it’s mine. Josh was borrowing it for a while but he’s done with it. And I guess *you’re* fucking done with it too, at least I hope you are.” He looked up at David. “Shit, dude, what happened to your hand?”

David noticed that Aaron looked like he had just gotten out of bed. Familiar features like dark, puffy rings under blood-shot eyes, dried spit like dead skin on his lips.

“Been sleeping a lot, Aaron?”

Aaron’s face grew very serious. “I’m close with her brother, man. I’ve heard all about your shit. She needs you. You should go back.”

David’s face contorted into an intensely sarcastic smile that squinted his eyes almost shut. “Yeah thanks I’ll take that into consideration,” he snapped, and pushed past Aaron on his way to the front porch.

He felt it boiling up in him again, the need to break something, but he held onto himself, focusing his momentum.

“Josh!” he yelled, and heard movement in the living room. He stormed toward it with military strides, and saw Josh standing there in front of the couch. Josh backed up at the sight of David’s face.

“David listen to me,” he said, and David said,

“No.”

He grabbed him by the shirt like he had seen so many movie thugs do, and slammed him against the wall. When he spoke his voice was calm, but dangerous. “Why have you been spying on me, Josh?”

“David—”

“This is all about Julie, isn’t it? You’re trying to make me lose it. Ever since I told you about those dreams, you’ve been spying on me and Julie and figuring out ways to drive us apart, leaving those tapes to fuck with my head and—”

“Woah wait,” Josh stopped him. “The tapes?”

“Yes the tapes!” David shouted into his face, shoving him against the wall again and then stepping back away from him. “Those fucking tapes with all your cryptic little messages and heavy breathing! You’re trying to pull some big psychologist trick, you’re trying to get into my head and fuck it up so my home and my marriage and my whole life falls apart so you can fucking *step in!*”

He stood with his shoulders hunched and hands slightly out in front of him, breathing hard. In spite of all his shouting and shoving, he had the stance of a hunted animal.

Josh stayed against the wall. There was no fear in his face now, if there ever had been. He looked at David with an absolute, granite composure. “Let me tell you some things,” he said. His voice was very measured, low and soft. His eyes were hard. “I have loved Julie for three years. Since the day I met



her, at that party. I have loved her longer than you have, because you never loved her at all. You married her to fill a hole. To cover the bruise you got when you fell asleep on that school bus. All she ever was to you was a Band-Aid.”

He paused as if to give David a chance to refute him, but David remained silent. Josh continued. “I’ve had to live with the awful fact of your marriage for all these years, but I have *never* done *anything* to try to break it.”

“Why did you spy on—”

“I wasn’t spying on you, David, I was *observing* you. I started way back in grade school, remember?”

“What?”

“When we were on the bus, and I told you you blew it with Shelley Kent? I told you right then that I’d been watching you, remember? Well I never stopped. I didn’t see you for a few years after the bus thing, but when I met you again a couple years ago, I started right up again. I couldn’t help it.”

David squinted at him, baffled. “*Why?*”

“Because you’re so fucked up!” Josh replied, shaking his open hands in front of him eagerly. “The bus, the sleep walking, the *inside*... You’re my best friend, David, but you’re a case study for the whole fucked up world.”

“So you just decided to borrow Aaron’s car and park it in front of my house and watch me through the windows every day? Who’s fucked up here?”

Josh shook his head. “Julie asked me to do that.”

“Excuse me?”

“David...Julie has been coming to me for help for a few months now. Same as you have. For...therapy, I guess.”

“Therapy for what? What’s wrong with her?”

“Well...at first she just wanted counseling. You know,

marriage counseling. She saw you were having problems, you wouldn't talk to her, you were in your own world, and you were doing some weird stuff at night, so she thought maybe I could help. She asked me to watch you and observe some of your patterns. But then she started having her own problems."

"What problems?"

Josh didn't seem to hear. He closed his eyes. "Do you have any idea how hard it was to sit here—" He pointed at the chair and then the couch. "—with this woman who I've loved forever, and try to help her *fix* her marriage with *you*? And then she tells me about this *new* guy, and wants me to help her figure out all this shit that's happening to her..." He let out a cold, jagged laugh. "Sound familiar?"

David ignored the question. "This new guy? So she *is* having an affair?"

"Of course she is. Just like you are."

David was still puzzled. "But not with you?"

"Fuck you, David. Don't even say that to me." His face was still composed, but his eyes glistened, and his voice was unsteady. "Don't you get it? Julie's never given me a passing glance. I'm a *friend*. I'm harmless. She comes to me for help because she's in love with someone else."

"Who?"

He smiled bitterly. "Someone from the inside."

David's mind went blank.

"That's right. Just like you. Quite a nice little love pentangle, huh?"

Lines began snapping together in David's head. All the emotion drained out of his face and voice. "Thanks Josh," he said, eyes unfocused and faraway. "I'll see you later."

If Josh said anything in response, David didn't hear it.

He drove home, and took note of stupid, irrelevant things like his battery gauge and the weather. Huge blankets of clouds. Like steel wool.

When he pulled into his driveway and got out of the car, he almost screamed. It was insanely, apocalyptically cold. Not the kind of cold you bundle up for, not the kind you stand around in rubbing your arms and breathing on your hands. It was *emergency* cold, the kind that people die in, the kind that's a physical *attack*.

He scrambled up the porch, feeling his life-heat draining out by the second. When he slammed the door behind him, the draining stopped, but there was no relief in here. It wasn't much warmer.

He saw the tape player on the coffee table, and picked it up. *The tapes*, he murmured to himself. *He never answered you about the tapes. Why didn't you press him about the tapes? Why didn't you press him?* He hesitated at the top of the staircase.

*Because you already know?*

He took a few steps into the bedroom, and felt the floor opening up to swallow him again. He sunk up to his knees and stumbled forward, collapsing beside the bed. By strange coincidence, he happened to land directly in the patch of wet carpet he had created the night before, lying there wet and naked. As if in solidarity with that earlier self, he began to shiver. And then he saw the tape under the bed.

It was sitting there in the dark, next to an old pair of socks he thought he'd lost. Like the last one, it had no label. Just black plastic.

With surprisingly little effort, he lifted himself up onto the bed. His body suddenly felt light, bird-boned. Hollow. He

took out the last tape, and put this new one in its place. When he pressed play, it stopped automatically. It was at the end. He had to rewind it. For some reason, he smiled slightly as he waited, listening to the battered gears grind.

It stopped, and he pressed play. He heard the usual noises, and then that familiar voice. He had been so sure it was Josh's.

"Ok. Let me ask you some questions. Are you convinced that Laura is a real person? Do you understand how your brain works? After all the Discovery Channel shows you've skimmed past and Popular Science articles you've browsed through and interesting factoids you've stumbled into on the internet, do you have the slightest idea what actually goes on in that big chunk of boiled gray hamburger in your—"

The voice was interrupted by another voice, this one female. It said:

"David?"

There was a loud *clunk*, then the other voice, but different now, startled, confused. "What?"

"What are you doing?"

"What?"

"You were talking to yourself."

David stopped the tape. He felt a familiar sensation of being watched, and turned toward the source of the feeling.

His "self-portrait" stared back at him. But it was all wrong. Gaunt cheeks. Wide eyes. Thin, reddish brown hair scattered on the head like straw.

It wasn't his face. It was mine.

And not a bad likeness, I might add. The gauntness and creepy staring eyes were a bit exaggerated—I'm not the fucking Unabomber, for God's sake, Julie seems to think I'm even

kind of cute—but overall...

“Deep in the ocea-a-a-an...” he sang, then his voice cracked, and broke off.

He stood up, and strode into the walk-in closet, and switched on the electric organ, and sat down, and waited for the tubes to warm up. He sat stiff and straight on the bench, hands hovering over the keys. David Martin, organ virtuoso, would now perform the concert of his life. The audience would applaud for a full hour. Flashbulbs would explode like automatic gunfire. Monthly music journals around the country would feature him in front-page articles.

The tubes crackled to life, and he began to play.

D, G, A, D.

D, G, A, D

D, G, A, D

He swayed from side to side with eyes closed. He struck the keys with great flourishes. He was magnificent.

Then he heard something that distracted him. An awful, atonal noise, a clanging rumble. A car pulling into the driveway. It disrupted his rhythm. He struck a sour chord, and the spell was broken. His playing lost its joy. The chords sounded weak and simplistic, the transitions predictable.

He stood up and switched off the organ. He grabbed an extension cord off the closet shelf, and plugged it in between the outlet and the organ cord. Then he opened the balcony doors, and slowly worked the heavy organ out onto the balcony, walking it forward a foot at a time. He pushed it against the railing, and stopped to look down. He could see a green Datsun down there, parked against the curb. The door opened, and Charlie got out, holding something in his hands.

David went back into the house, and got some tape. He

began taping down the organ's keys. He formed a D chord. Then a G. Below, he saw Charlie walking toward the porch. He was carrying what looked like a newspaper, maybe some magazines, and a home-recorded VHS tape. David taped down an A.

When Charlie climbed the porch steps, he disappeared from view, but David could hear him directly beneath. The rustle of flipping pages, the rattle of plastic being dropped on concrete.

Crouching down and bracing his feet against the balcony doorway, David heaved the organ up onto the railing.

The movement below stopped. "David?" Charlie called.

David switched the organ on.

Charlie stepped off the porch, out from underneath the balcony, and looked left and right.

David pushed the organ over.

At that exact moment, the tubes warmed up, and the three chords squealed to life. Blended together, they sounded warped and discordant, but somehow beautiful, like the saw mill noise, that ethereal harmony. Charlie heard it, and looked up—

David watched the organ fall. He saw it plummeting through space, through vast distances, through stars and icy wisps of cirrus clouds, then disappearing into the cottony heart of a towering cumulus, and he thought of Chuckanut Mountain. That cliff. That sweet freedom as he dropped, floating, weightless, careless, cut loose from the world. He wanted that again. He wanted to rest.

Before the organ hit, he turned around and walked back into the house. In his mind, he saw a view of his porch from the ground, as if he were standing on the curb, watching. He saw

Charlie standing directly in the center, in perfect symmetry with the house and the ground.

The organ falls, and Charlie simply disappears beneath it.

David passed through the bedroom, and heard the tape still running. It was just blank hiss, but as he walked out into the hall, it spoke again.

"Where are you going?" it said in its muffled, analog voice.

"For a drive," David replied, not stopping.

"David, stop this!" the tape said, shouting now as he walked away. "You have to stop this!"

David kept walking.

"Goddamnit, David, I'll make you if I have to. I don't know how but I'll make you!"

David paused on the staircase, and looked back toward the tape. "Why?"

"*Because I need her!*" I replied savagely.

David hesitated, then squinted his eyes shut and shook his head. "I can't," he said, and kept walking.

"I *need her* you son of a bitch!"

"It'd kill me."

"You're killing *yourself*! You're killing *me*! You're killing *Laura*!"

"I'm...going to work now," David mumbled, and shut the front door behind him. The distant voice of the tape disappeared.

He walked down the porch steps, past the shattered remains of the organ. The wooden frame had smashed completely open and the ancient guts of the thing popped and sparked, but it still emitted one warbling, squealing note. Charlie lay on the grass next to it, groaning, bleeding lightly from

the head. His shoulder looked wrong. David stepped over him and kept going.

Just as he was starting to get into his car, Julie pulled into the driveway. She got out of her car, glanced at Charlie and the organ, then at David. “What *happened?*”

“I dropped the organ on Charlie,” David said, and got into his car.

Julie noticed his blood-smeared, glass-studded hand, and her face went white. She ran around to the passenger side and got into the car with him. “David where are you going?” she said in a low, frantic whisper. “Please, listen to me.”

David started the car, and pulled out of the driveway. He heard the voice of the tape as if the speaker was pressed against his ear, deafening. *DAVID! WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU GOING? YOU CAN'T RUN!*

He slammed down on the gas. The car lurched forward. It hurtled through the neighborhood and then out into the busy streets of downtown Burlington, careening around corners, running stoplights, exceeding the speed limit. Doubling it.

And then it began to snow.

Big, loose flakes, drifting lazily downward like white butterflies. Everything in magical slow-motion. It fell on plastic Easter Bunnies and baby chicks set up in yards. It stuck to windows featuring murals of smiling suns and tulips. It piled up on a storefront sign with a marquee that said: “Welcome Spring!”

I lost control. I was screaming at him. I don't know exactly what I was screaming, or what I even wanted him to do. I just saw the woman sitting next to him, who I could no longer live without, and I knew this man was keeping her from me. I don't know what I wanted. I wanted to kill him/myself. I



wanted catharsis.

So maybe he did, too.

Flying down West Division Street, on the edge of old downtown Mount Vernon, David saw the concrete wall. It was the middle of the day, but he saw shadows projected onto it. The abstract collage of light and shadow slowly twisted into a realistic landscape. A wide, flat horizon. Crashing waves. A sandy beach.

He smiled, and swerved the wheel.

The concrete railing crumbled soundlessly. For a moment, they were airborne, and David closed his eyes.

Free.

The ocean swept in around him, and swallowed him.



I don't know where David went after that. For me, there was just blackness for a long time. I don't know how long. Days or weeks.

Eventually, I became aware of a distant light, and the sound of voices. I crawled my way towards the light, towards my little window into the outside world, and opened David's eyes just a crack. Pale fluorescent lights gleamed through his eyelashes. I breathed in with David's lungs and smelled the dry odor of medicine and sterile blankets. David was in a hospital. Again. Because of Laura. Again.

Love makes you do crazy things.

The hours passed, and I heard visitors enter the room. I

heard their muted conversations with the doctors, mostly too muffled to understand. But I was able to catch a few words.

“...vital functions are stable, but...”

“...severe head trauma and oxygen deprivation can often...”

“...they’ll live, but...”

“...hanging on right at the edge of...”

I noticed the doctors using the word “they”, and realized that Julie was in the bed next to David’s. When there was no one else in the room, I could hear the faint hush of her breathing. I wanted to dive back into the blackness and try to find her, but I held myself here. If I let go of my fragile hold on David’s vacant consciousness, I didn’t know if I could ever find it again, and I felt like I needed to be here. The thought of leaving this body here teetering on the edge and just crossing my fingers...it was too scary. So I stayed.

Most of the voices I heard were not very familiar to me. Probably David and Julie’s relatives. But after what seemed like an eternity, probably a few days, I heard one I recognized. With great effort, I opened David’s eyes again. A tiny crack, just wide enough so I could see without being seen seeing.

I saw Josh standing over David’s bed, looking down at his face. There was no one else with him. The room was quiet.

“Hi David,” he said. “I don’t know if you can hear me but...I don’t know. People always talk to unconscious friends anyway. So...what the hell.” His voice was very soft and tired. He shook his head. “God, David. How many vehicles are you going to crash for this girl?” There were chairs all along the wall, and one next to the bed, but he stayed standing. He sighed, and smiled wearily. “Love’s a bitch, ain’t she?”

He turned and moved to the other side of the room. I

couldn't turn David's head, but I could crane his eyes enough to get a periphery view of Josh standing over Julie's bed.

"Hello, Julie," he said in a flat, businesslike tone. "Nice to see you again." He just stood there looking at her for several minutes. Then he dropped to his knees in front of the bed, and grabbed ahold of her limp arm. I strained David's eyes a little farther, and caught a glimpse of his face. The whole of it was trembling. His eyes were glistening slits.

"I don't think you ever knew," he said, his voice just above a whisper. "You couldn't have or you wouldn't have kept coming to me to talk and smile and cry and be warm and open like that. Because that was torture, Julie, that was fucking torture, and I know you're not that cruel. You're not cruel at all, you're just naïve and oblivious, but I don't hold that against you. I forgave you for that." His fingers pressed into the skin of her arm. "But you're killing me, Julie. Whether you know it or not, just the sight of you—just the knowledge that you're out there, that you're *in this world*..."

The moisture in his eyes became actual tears, the kind that run down your face and keep going, down your neck, pooling in the clavicle. Then he straightened up, wiped a hand over his face, and took a deep breath. "Nevermind," he said in a steady voice, and got to his feet. "That's not the point. The point is that I love you, and I just want you to be happy." He laughed. Loudly. "Oh my God, what a classic line for the jilted lover. What a classic bullshit line!" He slapped a hand over his eyes and giggled, but the laughter trailed off, and when he put his hand down, his face was stony again. He looked over at David, then back at Julie. "But anyway, it's true."

With a look of tender sadness, he put a hand over Julie's mouth, and pinched her nose shut with the other.

I lurched wildly in David's head, but his body barely twitched.

"You're not happy," Josh muttered. "Neither of you are. I just want you to be happy." And then he began counting. "One... two...three...four...five..."

I threw myself against the walls of David's head, straining with all my might to get ahold of his motor functions like I had done so many times before, but he was too far gone.

"...minute six...minute seven...minute eight..."

He was counting seconds. Why was he counting seconds? I was screaming now, thrashing like a man on fire, but then—something occurred to me. I stopped fighting, and looked at Josh.

"...two minutes ten...two minutes eleven...two minutes twelve..." On the count of two minutes, he pulled his hands away, and listened. I heard it. The soft whoosh of Julie's breath, slower and quieter than before, but steady. Josh heard it too, and smiled sadly. He bent down, and kissed her on the forehead. Then he came over to David. He leaned in close, and whispered something in David's ear. It thundered and echoed like a gunshot in a cave.

"You fucked up," he whispered. "But I'm going to fix it for you. So rest."

It was then that I realized what he was doing. Inside David's head, I smiled.

Josh covered David's mouth and nose, and began counting. I felt the change. I was still present in David's conscious mind, but I felt it shrinking, the walls closing in, the door sealing off, pushing me out.

He was sending them back.

Coma. Permanent sleep.

He was making them citizens.

I opened David's eyes the rest of the way, and Josh saw. Julie knew that I was David's other half, and she had probably told Josh. So when he saw David's eyes open, I think he knew it was me. I hoped the look of peace in those eyes would tell him that I understood. And that I was grateful.

Josh nodded. I nodded. Then I closed David's eyes for the last time, shut the door, and went home. Julie was waiting for me.

"...two minutes fifty-four, two minutes fifty-five..."

...

David ran as fast as he could in the dark, holding out his hands to shield his face from the whipping branches. Thorny bushes ripped his clothes and caught at his skin. Underbrush tangled his feet, and he fell flat in the mud every ten or twenty steps. The mud was thick and deep, and flowing with water as the rain thundered down in huge, heavy sheets. It was coming down so hard David could barely see. He couldn't keep it out of his eyes.

There was no moon out, and if there was, it wouldn't have given much light in this tangled mire of brush and cedars. The only light came from the flashes of lightning that ignited the horizon, giving birth to thunder that was closer every time.

In the thick, wet darkness ahead, he saw a pinprick of red light. It was a radio tower.

He ran in that direction, slipping in the mud and tripping on logs, but never slowing. He stopped at its base and looked up, running his eyes up the endless height of it. Falling rain drops streaked around him like stars in hyperspace. While he

was standing there, mesmerized, the sky flashed white, and the thunder followed almost immediately. David jumped onto the tower's metal ladder and started climbing.

Fueled by panic, he ascended like an elevator. He watched the treetops recede below him. His head spun with vertigo at the sight of raindrops falling past him and disappearing into the distance. And then he felt something change. A pressure swelled in the air, squeezing him. Somehow, the sky grew even darker.

*...two minutes fifty-six...two minutes fifty-seven...*

He looked up to see how close he was to the top, and saw that there was no top. The tower was being swallowed by a rippling curtain. Light refracted in it. It was like the surface of a lake viewed from below.

He dashed for it. He moved even faster now—he felt weightless, like invisible hands were reaching down and pulling him up.

*...two minutes fifty-eight...two minutes fifty-nine...*

He reached the last rung of the ladder before it disappeared into the watery curtain. He closed his eyes, and heaved himself through.

He was underwater. It churned around him, spinning him like a piece of driftwood, but he kicked himself up until his head broke the surface. He had just enough time to take a gasp of air and hear someone calling his name, and then a wave crashed down on his head like an avalanche.

He sank. The dark ocean depths went darker. Silence. Stillness.

Rest.

...

The sounds faded in slowly. It took several minutes. First he heard the blood moving in his ears. Then his breathing. Then the gentle thrum of the ocean. The clean, piercing calls of seagulls.

His eyes were still closed. He saw the glimmering red and yellow of sunlight filtering through the lids. His clothes were wet, but the wetness had been heated by the sun. Even when a light sprinkle of rain misted his face, he felt warm all the way through. He lay on his back on a bed of dry sand, just breathing.

Then he felt motion at his side. He felt breath on his cheek, and then...a quick, gentle nibble on his earlobe. He felt a rush of warmth go through his body, and smiled.

A whisper in his ear, a soft flutter of hot breath. "I missed you."

He opened his eyes, and turned his head. Her face was there, resting on the sand next to his, so close their noses almost touched. He thought he might die right there. Those eyes...

"I'm glad you're back," she said, smiling.

"Am I back?"

Her eyes never left his, and her smile widened, showing teeth, turning her eyes into those incredible blue crescents. "You are."

He turned his head to look up at the sky. There were dark clouds rimming the horizon, but most of it was clear. The sun streamed through and around the thunderheads like noon-day light through a window. And there was rain. A light spray fell through the golden air. It glittered in the sun like diamond chips.



A slow smile spread across David's face. "That's good," he said.

Laura followed his gaze skyward, her face still glowing. "Yeah."

...

And we were still running parallel. It happened to both of us. And now I sit in my living room with this beautiful dream woman laying her head on my shoulder, eyes closed, but not asleep. I sit here holding a glass of my stupid wine, and thinking back. I can't remember what triggered this. I've been sitting here staring at the wall for probably five minutes now. Julie is bound to notice soon, and ask me what I'm thinking about. Sometimes I hate it when she does that, but this time I won't mind. I won't have an answer, but that will be ok.

She senses my stillness, and looks up at me, shifts her position, smiles. "What are you thinking about?" she asks.

I shrug, and say, "I don't know. A lot of things."

...

6:45 AM. In the grey pre-dawn, David drives Laura up the tiny road that spirals to the top of Little Mountain. He parks in the neat little parking lot, and hauls a step ladder and an old piece of carpet out of the trunk. He checks his watch every few seconds. According to the newspaper forecast, it's now almost time. He moves like a giddy kid on Christmas morning. Laura watches him in quiet amusement.

He takes the ladder and carpet to the Little Mountain radio tower. He sets the ladder against the fence, climbs it, and

throws the carpet over the barbed-wire top. He vaults himself over and then urges Laura onward, checking his watch constantly.

Laura gets to the top, and after much encouragement, she drops off the other side. He catches her, and almost forgets to set her down before running over to the tower ladder. Laura goes up first, and David follows close behind.

When they finally get to the top, they sit down on the narrow platform—facing east—and lean up against the signal light in the center. Their backs are lit by steady flashes of brilliant red. They realize they have no good way of getting out of here now that the ladder is on the other side of the fence, but they don't care. They will sit here until the park ranger finds them. What they're about to see will be well worth any fines they incur.

At exactly 6:55, the swelling glow on the eastern horizon bursts into flames. The sun crests the mountains, and David and Laura are the first living things its rays touch. From there it moves down the length of the radio tower and hits the trees on the mountain, then spreads into the valley below.

David looks at Laura as if to say, "See?" and she nods, grinning, then turns back to the awesome display in front of them.

David's eyes turn upward from the burning horizon, toward the peaceful blue-gold above it. As he stares, the sky opens up like a vault. Inside it, he sees the future.

He sees a starlit beach in Italy. He sees a hotel room in Egypt. He sees two beautiful little girls named Sara and Rose. He sees a beautiful boy named Levi, wearing a tiny Carhart coat, head-banging to Metallica. And he sees two granite headstones side by side, each carved with a date, a dash, and then

another date, exactly the same on both stones.

He sees the future, and it's exactly what he expected. It's senseless, impossible, illogical, absurd, melodramatic, clichéd, and beautiful.



Dear David Martin,

Hi.

You don't really know me, but I'm hoping this letter might help break the ice. A lot has happened. I haven't quite figured out if I owe you an apology, but I do at least owe you an introduction and, if you want, a conversation. I think we should meet sometime. Considering the circumstances, it would be awkward - on quite a few levels, ha! - but I can handle it if you can. If it's possible, I'd like us to be friends.

So what do you say, David? If you'd like to even the scales on your old stalker, let's go have a drink sometime. If not, then have a beautiful life, and just take this letter as my way of saying "Welcome to the neighborhood!"

Sincerely, your very closest acquaintance,

Mr. Cassette Tape

a.k.a

Kevin J. Richardson





To contact the author, visit [www.burningbuilding.com](http://www.burningbuilding.com)