

University of Central Oklahoma
Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

UNDER ERASURE

A thesis
Submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
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by
Luke Loftiss

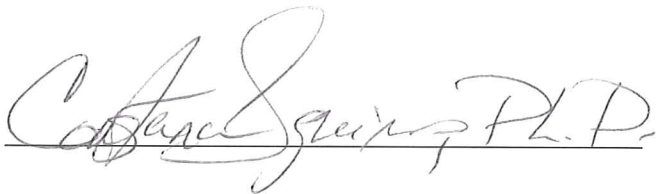
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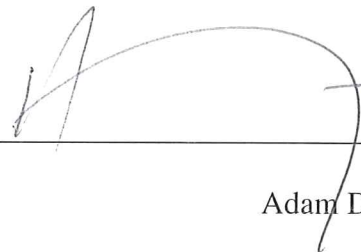
A THESIS

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By 
Dr. Constance Squires (Director)


Dr. David Macey


Adam Davies

Abstract of Thesis
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NAME: Luke Loftiss
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DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Constance Squires
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ABSTRACT:

This thesis is a collection of eleven short, unrelated stories. These stories range in length from thirty-three to two pages. They are organized according to how I sensed they should be when I drew up the table of contents.

I had not planned on there being any unifying theme to this collection but because I wrote most of these stories during the same short span of weeks, they couldn't keep from being influenced by what happened to be on my mind at the time. I didn't realize there was anything on my mind but when I read the stories I found that they were mostly asking two questions: What is beauty and how do we experience it? What is a mind and how do we experience it? Four questions. Whatever.

Writers whose ideas influenced this collection include: Felisberto Hernandez, Franz Kafka, Jose Saramago, Philip K. Dick and Douglas Hofstadter.

The title is meant to suggest that the collection is necessary if not sufficient. I was going to stylize it as ~~Under Erasure~~ but decided that would be tacky. I still used all caps though.

UNDER ERASURE

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Snow is white if and only if snow is white.

—Tarski, On the Concept of Truth in Formal Languages

Summer Job

When I was seventeen years old I got a job as a waitress at an all-night diner in Norman, Oklahoma, the one just off the interstate and up the road from the big Indian casino, the Riverwind. It was the summer between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college and I had to beg for the job and jump through some hoops to get it but I badly needed to work and not just to work but to work exactly there at that diner and no other because that was where my best friend Valerie O'Day worked and I was dead set on spending every available minute of that summer by her side.

Valerie and I had been best friends since kindergarten day one and we had spent the last fourteen years of our lives filling for one another the roles of sister, tutor, therapist, matchmaker, alibi; you name it. And now she was leaving me behind and I didn't know what I was going to do. She had applied and been accepted to a university in Colorado. Western, she called it. Always just Western, as if she had already matriculated, was living in Colorado and expected everyone to know which university Western was.

It wasn't nearly as nice as school as The University of Oklahoma where I would be going. In fact its only claim to fame seemed to be the world's largest collegiate letter: a big concrete W installed on the side of a mountain. Big freakin' deal.

I suppose that Valerie just needed to get away. Not from her friends necessarily but from our hometown and maybe from her home state altogether. Not so with me. I would remain in Norman living under my parents' roof and I would commute to OU along with most of my high school friends and all of my high school nemeses. Part of me wanted to follow Valerie and she appealed to me to do so but I'd already made up my mind and my decision was to stay home. I was too comfortable there. Too dug in.

I wasn't technically supposed to work the diner's graveyard shift due to my not technically being an adult but that was the shift Valerie worked and since spending time with Valerie was the whole point of my working there it was the only shift I would consider. I was certain that the owner, a Mr. Ringwald, was going to tell me that there was nothing he could do and that I should go find a job somewhere else but he turned out to be a soft touch and I pled my case to him using the following facts.

Fact number one: I would be turning eighteen in another month anyway so he would only really be bending the state labor laws and even then only for a short period.

Fact number two: The laws against minors working overnight shifts are intended primarily to prevent work from interfering with school and school was not then in session.

Fact number three: My parents were perfectly okay with my working of said shift.

So Mr. Ringwald, bowled over by my pinpoint logic and rhetorical skills, agreed to hire me if my parents would come by and talk to him first, which they were more than happy to do. It all worked out.

This was my first real job. I'd only ever previously done a little babysitting. Valerie on the other hand had been working there for a year already. She'd go in after school a few days per week and every other weekend. Now that it was summer and she was eighteen she found herself working from midnight until eight am.

My first night at work was a Thursday towards the middle of June. I arrived just before midnight, parked and went inside. There was only one table currently occupied. It

was a group of three middle aged people, two men and a lady. Valerie saw me and threw her arms around my body squeezing with all her not inconsiderable might.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” she said. “We are going to have an awesome time, I promise,” she said.

“I believe you,” I said.

“I’ll introduce you to Ross,” she said. “That’s Ross,” she pointed to the young guy behind the counter, working the grill.

Ross turned around to face us. He was wearing a black apron and a mesh ball cap. He was tall and had an appealing sort of look to him. He was probably a few, six or seven years older than Valerie and me.

“You O’Day’s friend?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Name?”

“Gina.”

“Yeah, what’s your story?”

“Well, Val and I are going off to college in a few months so we are trying to make some money beforehand.”

“College, huh? And how do you feel about that?”

“Not well,” I admitted.

“Why not well?”

“Because Val and I have been together since kindergarten and she’s going to college out of state and I’m not.”

He nodded and returned his attention to the hash browns he was cooking. "As you can see," he said without turning back around, "it's an open kitchen here. So if you two are planning on goofing off all summer you'll have to either include me or confine your goofing to the storage room."

There was something about this first brief exchange between Ross and myself that struck me as special. He had been very forward with his interrogation and I had answered him with complete honesty. There had even been a kind of laconic cadence to our conversation which had made it fun. And I hadn't fumbled my speech or used the word *like* every few seconds. It wasn't that I had been nervous about talking to him; that's just how I usually talk. But I hadn't talked that way to Ross.

The shift manager was a nice lady named Dana who I met next and she walked me through everything that I'd be doing. She taught me the menu abbreviations like B&G for biscuits and gravy, BLT which was self-explanatory and the big S, for special.

"Is it ever much busier than this?" I asked her.

"It kinda depends on the casino," Dana told me. "People wander out of the casino at all hours of the morning, hungry and in need of a quiet place to think for minute about how they are going to tell their significant others about all the money they've lost. So sometimes, if they have a big show or a promotion or something, we get a little busy. But it's usually about like this." Dana looked at me sternly and said: "One last thing. And this is the most important thing. If you follow this rule then you'll be fine. Just don't steal anything, okay."

"Okay," I said.

"Just don't steal anything," she repeated. "That's really all it takes to be a valued employee here. Screw up all you want. As long as you aren't doing it on purpose and as long as you don't steal anything you'll always have a job here."

"Word of honor," I said and crossed myself piously. Dana smiled and welcomed me aboard and didn't mention that I had conflated my vow and its accompanying gesture.

That first night was a slow night and I had plenty of time to talk to Valerie and Ross.

"So you're the cook." I asked Ross.

"Nope," he said. "I'm the grill operator. Nobody cooks here. We operate." He scraped the pile of hash browns off the cooktop and slid them onto a plate alongside some eggs and assorted meats. He handed the plate to Valerie and turned his attention back towards me. Valerie went to deliver the food and Ross just looked at me without saying anything.

"Grill operator, huh? Sounds more like a machine shop than a diner," I said.

"Except with way more grease," he said. I thought that was kind of clever. Not real clever but like TV clever. I figured he might be a pretty okay coworker.

By the end of my first shift I was exhausted. Not that I'd been overworked but the graveyard shift takes a toll no matter what you do. The body has its own rhythms for sleep and wakefulness that aren't easily adjusted. At eight that morning I was ready to collapse into bed but when I finally got home and did just that it took me awhile to actually fall asleep. I lay there for a few hours just feeling tired before my body finally gave in and agreed to sleep while it was light outside.

It didn't take long for me to get used to the hours and within the first few days I was ready to admit that with Ross and Valerie there it wasn't like work at all. The conversational dynamic that had appeared when Ross and I were introduced never returned. It had been a magic, one-time event to create a strong base on which to build our friendship.

I liked to move back and forth between the kitchen and the storage area because the doorway between the rooms had one of those swinging saloon style doors. I especially liked to set them to swinging and then try and get past them just as the swing reached its apex and so avoid touching them altogether. This was not easy to do and I'm not actually sure it can be done but Valerie and I made a game of it and even Ross joined in from time to time when he wasn't hunched over the grill or taking a smoke break.

"So what are seventeen year old girls into these days, besides saloon doors?" Ross asked me one day.

"I dunno," I said. "Like what do you mean into?"

"What kind of music do you like? What's on television that you watch? You like to go to the mall or what?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

"Yeah, what? Do you swim, play tennis, go bowling? You have sex?"

I laughed a little. "No, I'm a fine upstanding young lady. I would never be seen in a bowling alley." Ross nodded and went back to work.

A little later Valerie and I were talking about college and Ross asked where we were each planning to go.

"OU," I said.

"Western," Valerie said with great obnoxiousness.

"Did you go to college?" I asked Ross.

"I'm actually an autodidact," he said. "You know what an autodidact is? It means self-taught. I only ever learned what I wanted to learn. So I have a pretty good education. Maybe not as broad as what you'd get at a bonafide university but I know what I need to know for daily life and I've studied extensively the subjects that interest me. "

"That's cool," I said. "What subjects do you study?"

"Science, art, history, politics. The usual."

"I'm no good at science," Valerie said. "I just don't understand space stuff. Gravity doesn't make sense. Earth doesn't even make sense. You know?"

"Oh, c'mon. You understand gravity," I said. "At least like how mass creates gravity or whatever. I mean, I can't really explain it but I feel like I understand it. That's what you mean too, isn't it?"

"No, I really don't get it. Why does mass create gravity? What causes it?"

"Ross, explain it to her," I said.

"Physics isn't really my specialty. I used to study it but it's been awhile," he said. "O'Day is right though. Some of that stuff, like astrophysics and string theory and quantum physics and quantum mechanics and all, it's hard to get a hold on. I'm sure I could understand it if I tried but I have migraines so I have to be careful about thinking too much about stuff."

We all agreed that it was best not to think too much about stuff. For health reasons.

Some nights the diner was a super depressing place to be. I don't know if it was the hours I was working or if the setup was just reminding me of an Edward Hopper painting but people almost always seemed lonely and wretched if they didn't have somebody with them. This in contrast to the happy workers who spent every night among friends. I got good at being friendly and chipper even at four in the morning and I would always try and pay special attention to the customers who came in alone. These people, mostly older men, either read newspapers or just sat, drinking coffee and looking around at nothing in particular. If it hadn't been for Valerie and Ross I wouldn't have been able to stand it for very many nights, much less all summer.

"The newspapers are just props," Ross said to me on a particularly quiet night. "Who reads a newspaper at this hour? The next edition is already printed and being delivered all over town."

"That's true," I said. "But maybe they don't ever like to miss the paper so they read it even when it's late."

"Nah," he said. "They just don't want to look lonely. That is, they don't want us to judge them. Which we do anyway."

Ross started to grow on me and after my first full week of work he asked for my phone number and I gave it to him. I'd been waiting for him to ask. He said he'd text me sometime and he did. The very next day.

"When do you turn eighteen?" he asked.

"July 16th," I texted back.

"Doing anything special?"

"Actually I think I'm working."

"We'll have a party at work then," he wrote. I hadn't given any serious thought to turning eighteen but Ross' offer to have a party at work got me excited about my birthday for the first time since I was a kid. A work party would be a unique experience, if nothing else.

I started to go outside and stand with Ross on his smoke breaks, just to talk. He always offered me a cigarette but I wasn't into it. I just wanted to hang out. Ross seemed to enjoy my company too and we talked a lot of nonsense during these breaks. We'd just joke around and be real silly and then head back to work laughing.

"You have a boyfriend?" he asked me one night.

"Nope," I said.

"Going to get one when you go to college?"

"Probably just get some cats," I said. "I'll become a cat lady. That's my goal in life." He laughed a little and shook his head.

"Impossible, I'm sorry to say. You better find a different goal."

"How come?"

"You can have as many cats as you want. You can even hoard them but you'll never be a cat lady. Cat ladies can't be hot. It's a contradiction in terms."

"Oh," I said, "that's too bad. Thanks though." We were quiet for a few minutes and then we went back inside.

I took Valerie aside in the storage room. We were surrounded by freezers and cardboard boxes. Ross was in the kitchen, separated from us only by the saloon doors. I spoke in a whisper.

"What if I liked Ross?" I asked her.

"I don't know. He's like twenty-eight."

"Yeah, but it's not like I'm leaving town for college. I'll still be around. It wouldn't be like if you liked him."

"Yeah, but he's kind of a..." she stopped short but the word "loser" was psychically transferred to me anyway.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he works here."

"So do we."

"And lives with his parents."

"So do we."

"And he's twenty-eight."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm just asking what if." Valerie shrugged. I shrugged too.

Despite Ross' apparent failure to grow up I thought he was pretty smart. I asked him if he still lived with his parents and he told me "Until I move, yeah." I took this to mean that getting his own place was something he had in mind for the near future. From the way he said it it seemed like he was already making preparations.

"Have you found a place to live in Colorado yet?" Dana asked Valerie. The diner was currently serving only one table occupied by a miserable looking middle-aged man who kept shaking his head and palming his face.

"Yeah," Valerie said. "I got an apartment just off campus. Close enough to walk and all."

"That's great," Dana said. "By yourself?"

“Yeah. For at first anyway.”

“Would you believe I’ve never lived alone in my entire life?” Dana said. “I’m fifty-one.” She cocked her head at all of us and went off to do something else.

Later, Valerie asked me a question. “What did Dana mean when she said she’d never lived alone before? I mean why did she tell us that?”

“I think she was just saying,” I replied. “It’s kind of weird to think about. None of us have ever lived alone before either. Do you think it’ll be weird?”

Ross laughed. “Are you kidding? O’Day is going to be partying it up at Western. Hundreds of miles from mom and dad, apartment to herself. I predict she’s pregnant by this time next year.”

I laughed hard. Valerie gave me an angry look and told Ross to do something to himself. He laughed at her.

“Embrace your inner whore O’Day. It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Ross said. And I found myself siding with him. The idea of Valerie getting pregnant was too funny not to keep talking about.

“And she’ll have to go on *Maury* to find out who the father is,” I said. Ross and I laughed some more. Valerie rolled her eyes and left us alone.

Over the next few weeks I spent almost as much time talking to Ross as I did talking to Valerie. Valerie calculated it differently. She thought I spent far more time talking to Ross than I did her.

"The whole reason we are both working here is so we could spend time together," she said to me. "Why don't you tune in to what's going down on planet Valerie instead of hanging 'round with doofus."

"Don't be mean," I said. "Don't be jealous."

"Jealous?" Valerie said pissily. "Jealous of who?" I didn't actually know who I had meant when I said that. And it dawned on me just at that moment that maybe it wasn't Ross intruding on Valerie and me but me intruding on Valerie and Ross. They had known each other far longer than he and I had.

"You know who," I said. I went to take an order and she went into the restroom. Valerie and I didn't talk again that night. But I noticed that there was a puckering about her eyes for the rest of the shift.

It upset me. The last thing I wanted was to feud with my best friend but I felt that if she had a thing for Ross then she should just tell me. It wasn't right to just continually belittle him in the hopes of putting me off. That kind of underhanded gaming was high school stuff. She should have been beyond that. We both should have been.

In addition to spending our working hours together, Ross and I texted every day. Sometimes it would be the first thing I did when I woke up in the afternoon.

"Only one day left until my b-day," I texted him.

"I'll get you something from Victoria's Secret," he said. "What cup size are you?"

"Haha, very funny," I replied.

"Haha," he replied and then, "but out of curiosity though?"

"Out of curiosity what?"

“Never mind. What can I get you for your birthday?”

"Ha, don't worry about it."

The next day I arrived at work a few minutes early. It was 11:45 p.m. July fifteenth. Ten minutes until I was eighteen. When I got inside Valerie gave me a big hug, her anger had apparently blown over for the time being but I knew we would eventually have to have a talk about Ross. Valerie conducted me to the storage area where a small white cake with eighteen candles was waiting for me. Ross and Dana were there too and they all sang happy birthday to me.

"Gosh," I said. I felt very lucky to have coworkers who cared about me. I blew out the candles and we all had a piece of cake.

"Okay, party time is over," Dana said and it was back to work.

Two men had come into the restaurant in the meantime and I seated them and took their drink orders. One of the men was kind of fat and short, with glasses, and the other, while not fat, seemed like a really big guy, tall and bulky but not like a bodybuilder. Just big. I recalled the picture of the author John Steinbeck that had been on the backs of the editions of *Of Mice and Men* that we'd read in Mrs. Lynn's English class earlier that year. The big man who came into the diner that night looked exactly like Steinbeck.

The big man ordered coffee and the fat one had the same. They were polite to me. I didn't notice anything odd. They kept their voices low when they spoke to each other but that was something people always did when they were the only ones in the place. People feel compelled to whisper in places that are already quiet.

I brought the coffee and both men said that was all they needed for the moment. I went back over to the kitchen where Ross and Valerie were talking. Valerie checked the time on her phone and then said: "Happy official birthday."

"Yeah, happy birthday," Ross said.

"Thanks guys."

"Have you decided on a major yet?" Ross asked me.

"Maybe psychology," I said, "that's just a thought."

"You should do that. You'd be great at it. I can tell. I've studied a lot of psychology myself. So I could help you out when you get to the really in depth parts."

"Really? That's cool. Like what did you study?"

"All the great minds. The basics. Freud, Jung, Nietzsche, Kant. I have some theories of my own too but outside of an academic setting I probably won't ever get around to writing about them."

We went on like that for a little while. Ross told us some psychology stuff he'd learned and right as he was in mid-sentence there was a weird zipping noise, like a jacket being zipped up all at once but louder. It's hard to describe. It went *fuup*. We all heard it and stopped talking. The diner was silent. We waited a moment but didn't hear it again and went back to chatting.

The big man, the one who looked like Steinbeck, approached the counter. He made the check sign with his hand and I manned the register.

"Are you two together or separate?" I asked.

"Separate checks," he said. I made out his bill and he paid and I made change and he thanked me and left.

Ross and I went back to talking but I noticed that the second man seemed to be gone as well. All we could see was the back of his booth. No head sticking up. I waited a few minutes, assuming that he had just gone to the restroom. But after some time had passed I went to investigate. The aisle between the bar facing the kitchen and the booths on the other side of the room was long and narrow. At the far end of it, where the men had been sitting, I saw a dark red pool spreading out on the floor in front of me. I kind of knew what it was instantly but I was already in motion and before I could do anything else I'd made my way down the aisle, turned and was face to face with the second man. He was still seated. His head lay on the table facing outwards, toward me. His glasses had fallen off. His mouth was open and his eyes had rolled back. Blood was pouring from his mouth and nose as well as straight from the center of his forehead. I screamed as loud as I could, jumped backward and kept screaming.

Valerie, Dana and Ross came running and when they saw what I had seen they all had similar reactions. Valerie was crying and Ross just kept swearing and jumping around.

"Oh, this is unexpected," he said.

At some point Dana called for an ambulance and took us outside to the front of the building to get us away from the body. Valerie and I just held each other and sobbed quietly. Eventually the police and ambulance arrived.

We each gave statements to the police but I didn't know what to tell them. Two men came in, ordered coffee and then one left. I didn't even think to mention the zipping sound we had all heard just before the big man had left or to mention that I thought he

looked like Steinbeck. My mind was all over the place. Dana had called my parents and they both came to get me. It was around one o' clock in the morning.

I shut myself up in my room for the next week and wouldn't leave it. I was done working for the summer. I never wanted to see the diner again. Valerie came by and we sat together and we both cried some and my parents had our preacher come and talk to me after I'd refused to leave my room for three days. Slowly information about what had happened trickled down to me. The casino had been robbed. It was an inside job and the man who'd been killed at the diner was thought to have been involved. He was a bookkeeper or an accountant or something. Someone who had access to the money anyway. His name was Jerome Huss. The police conjectured that he'd been double crossed after the robbery, shot in the forehead with a bullet which had fragmented on impact and liquefied his brain. Another body was found in a car, in a parking lot, just outside the casino. This body belonged to an off duty police officer who moonlighted as a security guard at the place. He too had been shot through the head, same caliber of bullet and everything.

The identity of the third man, the big one who'd kept the checks separate knowing full well that his friend wouldn't be able to pay, was still unknown. He'd escaped with nearly four-hundred thousand dollars in cash.

The police called all of the diner employees to the station to look at pictures and try and help identify the third man. I didn't want to go and my mom convinced some detective to bring the pictures to me instead. I told him about how the man looked like Steinbeck. He said that Valerie had said the same thing. He showed me some pictures but

I didn't recognize any of the men in them. He told me I'd been very helpful and that the police were closing in on the big man.

I didn't want to know. I didn't want to think about it anymore. I just wanted to lie in bed and sleep as much as I could. Ross kept texting me but I never responded. I didn't even read many of the messages. My mind was a blank for the rest of the summer.

I wasn't sure that I'd be ready to go back to school and be around people again in the fall. But one day Valerie came by to tell me that she loved me and that she would not be attending Western.

"I don't want to leave you," she told me. I hugged her like I'd never hugged her before. I knew that it was a great sacrifice for her. Even if one college seemed like the other, Valerie's whole heart had already been set on Colorado but she'd chosen to stay with me instead because she knew how badly I needed her.

Dana even came by a few times to check on me and I was very grateful for that. She was the best boss I ever had. I never talked to Ross again. He only reminded me of the diner and of the dead man, Jerome Huss, to whom I'd served coffee on my birthday.

Vilma at Argao

It was because of my older brother that I was visiting on the Philippine island of Cebu, where on a beach, near the town of Argao, I met a woman with whom I spent one night and never heard from again.

My older brother had met a woman over the internet and after a short courtship they had made plans to be married. I was to be the best man. My attempts to talk my brother into postponing the marriage until he had known the woman for a little longer were wholly ignored. He wouldn't hear it. We quarreled about this but he was all I had and I was all he had and in the end I trusted my brother. We each took some time off from work and together boarded a plane for the Philippines. The journey lasted twenty-seven hours.

My brother's fiancée met us at the airport and we piled into her Isuzu, crossed the Marcelo Fernan Bridge, merged onto the sea coast highway and were on our way to Argao, a three-hour drive from the provincial capital where our plane had landed.

The scenery along the coast was one epic vista after another. Sandy beaches, mangrove forests, islands in the strait dotted with fisherman's cabins. I must have seen at least a dozen of these as we drove along. Some of the islands were barely more than a few big rocks but even these managed to support a decent looking shack.

I spoke only a little to my soon to be sister-in-law. A full conversation was more than I could manage, exhausted as I was from the trip and hypnotized by the scenic landscape. But I listened as she and my brother spoke to each other. Though they clearly had some chemistry between them, I wasn't one who believed in love at first sight or whirlwind courtships.

But this story isn't about them or their wedding. It isn't even about the scenery. It's about Vilma.

I met Vilma on the beach the night after the wedding. I'd been in the country for a little less than a week and the days had been wall-to-wall parties and intimate after-dinner chats with the bride's family. I was nearly drained and looking to enjoy a few moments of isolation and silence.

The beach was situated beneath the hill on which the bride's family's Spanish style bungalow was built. I escaped from the party, literally fleeing the laughter and the singing and the dancing and the language I didn't understand. It was all so much noise to me, noise and kitsch, if I'm being honest. But what wedding isn't? The beach, however, was quiet. Other than the nighttime sounds of birds and insects and of waves lapping against the shore and wind rustling the palm fronds on the hill behind me or whistling through the mangroves before me, it was a higher silence than I could ever remember having heard. And dark. The palm forest obscured most of the light from the hillside homes so that the moon was the only available light.

I stepped out into the surf and felt the water against my ankles and when I opened my eyes again there was Vilma, standing in the spray a few yards to my left.

I thought that I vaguely recognized her from the wedding and aside from being shoeless, like I was, her manner of dress suggested that she had just come from the same party. At that time in my life I was accustomed to thinking of beauty in terms of classical poems I knew. And now here was this unfamiliar woman standing in the waves beside me, the moon shining overhead and just the two of us alone on the beach. Before I even turned to face her it was already the most romantic moment of my life.

She had a softly aquiline nose and large, dark eyes with coarse, naturally wavy black hair that fell to her shoulders and whirled and danced as the breeze came and went. She was built like a blade of grass and looked as fragile as a cobweb. She had small, high breasts that left no impression whatsoever on the observer. She seemed to me like an artist's sketch that was being revised and detailed from the head down; everything below her neckline was just for reference. She radiated the aura of a gypsy. There was something intense and serious in her face but also something playful and proud and sensual.

"You're the brother," she said to me. Her accent was much heavier than my sister-in law's.

"Yes," I replied.

"And I am the cousin," she said, "I'm Vilma. Nice to meet you here." Her voice was reedy and quiet at the same time like a damp finger circling the mouth of a wine glass. And there was something about the way she said *here* that emphasized the *here*. She wasn't simply pleased to meet me in a civil, run-of-the-mill way. She was pleased to have met me *here*, on the beach, at night. And that was precisely what I was thinking as well. The only way to improve upon peace and quiet is to have peace and quiet and good company.

"Nice to meet you too," I said. I told her my own name and she nodded.

"You are getting your feet wet?" She asked.

"Yes," I said, "and getting some fresh air."

"And getting away from the wedding party? I think so."

"Yes," I said. "And you?"

She buried her face in her hands and, when she finally looked up, sighed heavily and shook her head. “I’ve almost died of this wedding,” she said, completely deadpan.

“It can’t be that bad,” I said. “You must at least be happy for your cousin, right?”

“You’ve only just been here. One week,” Vilma said and shuddered dramatically, like a woman shaking off a poltergeist. “It’s a nightmare. I’ve been living with this for more than two months. It’s only thing they talk about. Everyone has been looking forward. I just want to look backward for a while . . .” she trailed off.

Vilma stared out at the water and I followed her gaze. The wider view of the ocean was blocked at that particular spot by a mangrove forest that grew up out of the shallows and stretched maybe two-hundred yards across the landscape.

“What’s the name of this beach?” I asked.

“It’s Vilma’s Beach,” she said. “My beach.” She giggled and gave me a very attractive smile.

“Am I trespassing?” I asked.

“You have my permission to be here. For now. But you’ll obey me if you want to stay on Vilma’s Beach.”

“That’s fair.”

“So, how did *you* think about the wedding?” Vilma asked.

“They seem like a good match,” I answered diplomatically. “I haven’t really had a lot time to see them together though.”

“They haven’t too,” she said. “They’ve only just met this week. You know. Really.”

“That’s true,” I said, “but they seem to think that they’ve clicked. Some people are like that, I guess. I hope it works out.”

Without saying anything, Vilma started to wade further into the water until it came up to her shins. Her skirt made this easy but I had to take a moment to roll my suit pants up to my knees before I could follow her.

“There are...” she began and trailed off, mumbling to herself in Tagalog. I waited for her to continue. She was lost in deep thought.

“There are?” I asked.

“*Butanding*,” she said.

“*Butanding*?”

“Yes. In the ocean there.” She pointed out to sea. “*Butanding*. Is a big shark. The biggest shark in the world. You can see if you go diving.”

“The biggest shark?” I asked. “How do you know it’s the biggest shark?”

“They say so.”

“Do you mean a whale shark? Or is that the name of a specific shark?”

“Yes,” she laughed with her quiet, tinny voice. “Whale shark. Very dangerous.” I frowned and cocked my head but she was still looking out to sea, to the domain of the *butanding*.

“I think whale sharks are harmless,” I said. “Even friendly.”

“No,” she looked over at me and smiled coyly, “very, very deadly. Swallow you whole.”

There was a momentary silence. Vilma looked at me with an expression of utter seriousness. I stared back at her, my eyes slowly narrowing, fighting back the smirk that I

could feel forming at the corners of my mouth. We held ourselves together as long as possible and then both broke into fits of laughter that echoed across the beach. One of my trouser legs came unrolled and fell into the surf.

“Uh oh,” Vilma said.

I cursed quietly and retreated back to the shore. Vilma stayed where she was. I squeezed the leg of the borrowed tux out as best I could and started to roll it back up but as soon as I finished it fell back down. I didn't want to risk pulling it over my knee and possibly stretching it out. I did want to get back out into the waves, to be with Vilma. I was already conscious of how much I liked her.

“It's no good,” I said. “I'm stuck on land.”

Vilma frowned and started back towards me. The selkie-like image of this woman, dressed so beautifully, with flowers still fastened to her blouse and an ornamental, crystal pin in her hair, came towards me from out of the ocean with the moon behind her; I felt almost dizzy. Like I'd had too much to drink.

“Come play in the ocean,” Vilma said.

“I can't. It'll ruin the suit.”

“So, take it off,” Vilma said. I grinned but didn't reply. “Go on,” she said. “Take everything off. Then we can play in the ocean.”

I looked back towards the houses built into the hillside. I looked up and down the beach. It was just the two of us. I wondered about what time it was. It had been past ten o' clock when I'd left the party. I'd left my phone in the room I was staying in so I couldn't check. It hadn't worked since leaving the U.S.

From a few yards away Vilma pursed her lips and arched her eyebrows at me. She pointed at me with one slender arm stretched out as far as it could go then turned her finger towards the beach. Down, as in down with my trousers.

At that moment I wanted nothing more than to strip my clothes off and play in the waves with this oddly beautiful woman. But this would have been something I'd never done before. And what's more, I hardly knew this woman. And most important I certainly didn't want to create a scandal within the newly established branch of my family.

"Strip," she commanded. "You promised to obey."

I was apprehensive; I suspected a gypsy trap of some kind.

"What about you, brave one?"

"I'll do if you do?" she said and winked at me.

I didn't waste any time. I stripped as fast and fluidly as any professional ever has. I had to get completely through the process before she changed her mind. Once I was nude, once she'd seen it all, there'd be no backing out.

She gasped and turned her head away and I set my clothes in a pile on the sand and ran into the ocean. The water was warm and salt smelling and the wet sand shifted beneath my feet. It occurred to me that this simple sensation, sand beneath one's feet, is intrinsically pleasurable, yet I'd only experienced it a handful of times in my entire life.

I waded, waist deep, almost to the edge of the mangroves, and looked back towards the beach where, true to her word, Vilma was taking off her clothes. I averted my gaze in a gentlemanly fashion and made as if I were examining the mangroves. There were channels through the mangroves. Were these passages put there intentionally for

tourists to kayak through or formed by some natural process? I would ask Vilma when she arrived. I glanced back up to check her progress and she was already coming, one hand stretched across her chest in modesty.

She sank down slightly so that the water came to her neck and I did the same out of solidarity and so as not to tower over her. I asked her about the channels cut through the mangroves but she just shrugged. She didn't know and wasn't interested in talking about the trees.

I looked into her eyes. She took a breath and slipped under the water. It flashed in my mind that she might be examining my naked body from under the surface of the ocean but this was wishful thinking on my part. We weren't in a swimming pool. It was too dark and she wouldn't want to open her eyes in salt water anyway. She was gone for maybe half a minute and then came back up, gasping and laughing and wiping her wet hair back.

“Go under,” she told me. “It's very nice.”

“Okay,” I said. “I'm going under; I'll see you in a bit.” I dove under and swam blindly farther out to sea. It felt so wonderfully lonely to be swimming in total darkness. When I came to the surface I wiped the salty water from my eyes and searched the waves, but there was no Vilma. She had vanished. Then I felt a disturbance in the water around me and the missing woman arose from the sea just beside me. Women who arise from bodies of water, let me tell you.

“Welcome back,” I said. Vilma said nothing but beamed at me. The night air touched my wet hair and it felt as if my whole head had been plied with mint. It seemed

to freshen and cool from deep in my scalp, every follicle and pore sang like tuning forks, radiating pleasure in time with the breeze.

The moon hanging over the sea was enormous, nearly full and more golden yellow than the pale moon I was used to seeing. Vilma was looking at it too.

“Moon,” she said in a whisper.

“Moon,” I whispered back. And just then a streak of purple and white light burned its way across the sky in a long arc. It was so bright and so beautiful that it trailed a glowing optical echo behind which hung for a moment in our vision even after the actual shooting star was gone. Vilma gasped so loudly that I thought that the *butanding* must have nudged her. Then we looked at each other. Her eyes were filled with astonishment and her breathing was heavy. Mine must have been too. The shooting star may as well have been Cupid’s arrow. Resistance was futile. The signs were clear. It was love written in the stars. Or at least an experience of beauty far beyond any that I had known.

“Did you see that?” I started to say but Vilma stepped forward and wrapped her arms around my body, lay her head against my chest. Her matted hair tangled around her face and she wiped it away with one hand. Her nipples were little bullets pressing into me. I put my hands around her body, gently, not pulling her towards me but just holding her there.

We stayed like that while the waves washed against us and the wedding party raged on somewhere far off in another time and universe that neither of us could have cared about to save our lives.

Eventually we relinquished our embrace and Vilma stepped back and looked into my eyes, searching me as if trying to confirm that I was really there and this was really

happening. I felt tears welling up in my own eyes. I didn't know why. The emotions I felt were so powerful that they ceased being mere joy or mere love but the apotheosis of every passion stirred by moments of great beauty. There was a second ocean forming around us, an ocean of feeling that grew and grew and every moment that passed took us farther from shore.

"Would you marry a woman like that? Like your brother did?" Vilma asked me. I wasn't able to speak to answer her. "Can you love a woman that you've only just met?"

"I don't know," I finally said. I . . ." I wanted to say more but there was nothing I could say. And then the moment had passed.

"I can't think of getting married now," Vilma said. "I have a long recovery after this past months before I can even stomach the word marriage. I am already sick of talking about it. I want to sleep now."

"Sure," I said.

Vilma moved towards the shore and I followed just behind her. The water became shallower and Vilma's small but curvaceous rump made its first appearance. I felt myself hardening in response. But why only now? Why not earlier in the waves when our naked bodies had been pressed together?

Vilma glanced back, possibly sneaking a peak or maybe just because that's what you do every so many steps when someone is walking behind you. We reached the shore and Vilma turned fully around. I was self-conscious about my erection but I didn't try to cover up. She'd already see it all.

"Thank you for being my company tonight," she said. She wasn't covering up either. She stood there facing me, completely naked, body dripping with The Pacific, her

nipples still standing out from her body like Siskel and Ebert's thumbs at the end of *Goodfellas*.

"It was my pleasure," I managed to say.

"Will you come back to my room?" I started to ask if she didn't want to sleep. I stopped myself just in time.

"Yes," I said.

We dressed with difficulty. The wetness and the salt on our bodies turned this ordinary task into an extraordinary struggle. When we had finally succeeded in dressing Vilma led the way back to the house up an alternate—and darker—route. We went off the path, cut through the palms and circled around to the rear of the building where a backdoor led us right to Vilma's bedroom.

It had been her own bedroom, she told me, not now, of course, but neither was it merely a room made up for her while she stayed with her cousins. The extended family had apparently lived together. And why shouldn't they have? The house was certainly big enough. Because of its size and adherence to the patterns of the existing Spanish architecture in the area, the home gave the impression of having been built for colonial governors in the distant past but had in fact been built for wealthy Filipino businessmen during the 1990's. Men like Vilma's uncle.

"I'll shower and then you do," she said. "Wait here." She left me alone in her room. It was an odd room for an adult woman to have to sleep in. It was full of books, some in English and some not. I recognized a Tagalog set of fantasy novels that I'd read in junior high but couldn't identify many others. Vilma had two corkboards covered with printed pages and hand written notes with hand drawn roses and whorls and roses that

were whorls and whorls that were roses and hearts and curlicues and stick figures. There were posters on the wall of what I took to be Filipino rappers. I was thoroughly confused. Vilma hadn't struck me as the type.

She returned looking fresh and beautiful and she gave me a quick, uninteresting kiss—our first—and showed me the way to the shower.

“I don't have anything to change into,” I said. “I just realized all my extra clothes are up in the guest room on the second floor.”

“I'll find you something, hurry.”

I started my shower and before I could finish Vilma was back with clothing she'd pilfered from somewhere. Miraculously it fit me.

A few hours later, after we'd had sex—but not made love—I got up and dressed again in the salty, stiff tuxedo. I looked on for a moment at the sleeping woman. Her face was expressionless. Neither satisfied nor disappointed. Neither happy nor sad. It was just a sleeping face, which is beautiful enough, I suppose.

The next afternoon Vilma and I exchanged just one quick, impossible to stifle smile when we happened to see each other at lunch. But we didn't say anything or let on that we had met the night before.

A day later I was back on a plane for the U.S.

It's been nine years since the night I spent with Vilma on the beach at her father's house in Argao and I've since married and settled into an easygoing lifestyle of success at work and happiness at home that I hope to maintain for my own sake as well as the sake

of my wife but I still think about Vilma from time to time. And I marvel that the me who exists today could ever have experienced such intense passions even for the short time they lasted. If Vilma remembers me at all, I cannot say. I've never asked after her nor has any message from her ever been passed along to me.

I have always assumed her last name was Costa, like my sister-in-law, but I realize now that it may very well have been something else entirely. I've been unable to find her on any social networks, though I do try from time to time. I don't know what I'd say if I ever found her.

Maybe I'd point out that my brother and her cousin are still together and still happy. I'd tell her that maybe there is such a thing as love at first sight. And I'd tell her I still think about her and about the night we spent on "Vilma's Beach" at Argao. Yeah, that's probably what I would say.

Mirazia

I awoke to find that my wife was gone. I knew something was amiss because she didn't wake me to say goodbye on her way to work nor was she in the bed when I awoke on my own. I called for her and I checked every room in the house but there was no one. I tried to call her phone but the call wouldn't go through and a machine voice told me that the number was something, something, something.

I called my parents. "Have you heard from Mirazia?" I asked.

"Who?" said my father.

"Who?" said my mother.

I hung up.

I went all through the house looking for a note. I checked the most obvious place: the fridge. Not only was there no note but all the pictures from our wedding and vacations had been removed. All the coupons and receipts were gone too along with all the grocery lists and memos related to Mirazia's work.

Who, I wondered, would have any interest in taking these things? Who would steal my wife's Bed Bath and Beyond coupons? It was absurd. And who, come to think of it, would have had access to the house? I had come in from my own night shift at six that same morning. It was eleven o' clock now. Surely only Mirazia herself had been in the house between now and then.

I went outside and looked around. The world outside my apartment looked the same. Same trees, same trash bins, same streets, same mailboxes. Everything was in its place. Only my apartment had been raided.

I went back inside and into the bedroom. I threw open the closet doors and found that all of my wife's clothing was missing as well. My hands shook as I pulled a few of my things out of the way looking for hers. There was nothing. Not one article of clothing that belonged to my wife. My face suddenly burned and my stomach shriveled up inside me. Anger and panic flowed in equal currents through my bones and nerves. I felt like vomiting but I held myself together.

Was there any reason for Mirazia to have left me? Absolutely not. Only one evening previous we had been discussing how happy we were together in spite of being poor. I asked her: "Isn't it wonderful that we're so happy together and yet have nothing?" She agreed and told me that she'd read somewhere that financial problems and work related stress were the most often cited reasons for the break-up of marriages.

"Well we certainly have both of those," I said, "and yet we couldn't be happier. I'm so grateful that I have you and I hope that we will always be this happy together even when we have money someday. If we do."

I remembered this conversation clearly and it helped to calm me. I sat on the bed and did some of the breathing exercises that Mirazia had brought home from her Yoga classes. I felt only slightly better. My wife was still missing and nothing short of finding her and solving the mystery of her missing effects would relax me.

I dialed her number again with the same result. I looked through the catalogue of names I had saved on my phone and found that under the Ms there was no Mirazia. Had I listed her under some pet name or placed an asterisk to bump her to the top position in my contacts list? No. None of these things. I started to notice other things were missing as well. The photos she had taken as an undergraduate photographic arts student and

printed out on large matte paper to hang around our apartment were all gone. The ugly mushroom diorama under a glass dome that she'd bought at a yard sale no longer crowded the top of our bookshelf. The sheets on the bed were the old sheets that I'd had when I first came to college. Hadn't Mirazia thrown them out years ago? Where were the sheets we'd gotten as a wedding gift? It was as if she and anything tied to her had never even existed.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to run out into the streets and scream until someone tackled me or tased me and I woke up with my wife back in my life. I was living through an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, ironically Mirazia's favorite television show. I paced through my apartment. I talked to my self. I struck my head with my palms and fists, trying to dislodge the delusion of my wife's nonexistence.

Eventually I did run out into the streets. Tears were streaming down my face. I saw familiar neighbors, neighbors who might remember my wife or might have seen her leave the apartment earlier that day but I couldn't stop and talk to them. My body was fleeing the scene. Fleeing reality itself. I ran and ran and couldn't stop and didn't stop, not even for traffic. I dodged cars as I crossed streets, angry motorists honking their horns after me. I ran until my lungs were bursting and my legs swelling, trying to outrun the world I'd woken to.

What about her family? What about her friends? What about her classmates and coworkers and the cashier at Wal-Mart that always made small talk with her when we shopped there? Had they noticed she was gone? Maybe they were all gone too? I didn't have time to find out. I had to keep moving or else risk being pinned down by the lonesome existence that was undoubtedly in hot pursuit.

It crossed my mind that I was overreacting, that there was a logical explanation, maybe even an explanation I was aware of and had only temporarily forgotten. “I’m going to take a few of my things and donate them,” Mirazia might have said. “I’ll get rid of that mushroom diorama that you hate so much and then I’m going to go shopping for the afternoon. By the way I’m putting all our wedding pictures away. The fridge is too cluttered as is it.”

Of course this must be it. I was making myself ridiculous over nothing. In the future I would pay closer attention to the things Mirazia said to me. And try to remember them. I’d taken for granted that she would always be there and now she wasn’t and I was beside myself. I’d also have to remember not to neglect Occam’s razor when things went awry. Here I was running down the streets in my bed clothes because I didn’t know where my wife was at.

I stopped running and collapsed on a bench at a bus stop. I could barely breathe and my heart was threatening to fly away. I took a moment and tried to catch my breath. I passed the time watching the cars drive by on the street beside me.

A large city bus pulled up next to me and opened its doors. I waved the bus driver away and the bus doors closed. As the bus revved its engines I saw that there was a large ad printed on the side of it. It was for a radio program: Up all Night with Johanna Eggwild. It listed the station number and broadcast hours. It was accompanied by a large photo of Mirazia wearing headphones and talking into a microphone, a silly expression on her face, both hands thrown up in a gesture of incredulity. On her left hand was the ring I’d given her. The one she’d had stolen five years ago in New York when we’d gone to visit her parents.

The bus pulled away.

And I'm running still.

The Heroic Age

One afternoon—it must have been sometime in the spring—I was sitting at home in my big chair reading undergrad philosophy papers and leaning forward to mark them against the fine, walnut coffee table when my ex-wife, Liz, telephoned me.

“I’ll be in the city on Wednesday,” she said. “Dad is having surgery. Maybe we can meet up?” Even eight years after our divorce Liz continued to omit the articles when talking about her parents, as if they were still ‘ours’ and not merely hers.

“Maybe,” I replied, “Is it anything serious?”

“He’s having some of his colon removed. I just found out on Friday.”

“C-word?”

“Yes.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Call him. He’d like to hear from you.”

“I’ll do that,” I said. “Not sure I can make it on Wednesday though.” I liked seeing Liz now and again but I hated driving into the city and hanging around in our old neighborhood and she refused to ever meet me in the suburbs. Something about the cops.

"C'mon, I've got something to give to you anyway. Make enough time at least to come and get it."

"Alright," I relented. "It'll be good to see you."

“Do you also want to visit Aunt Berry?” she asked.

"Why not? As long as I’m up there we might as well.”

We agreed on a time and place to meet on Wednesday, chatted a bit about what we had been watching on TV and then said our goodbyes, both of us pinning a habitual

“love you” to the ends of our sentences. I went back to reading but with Liz on my mind, beautiful, wild Liz, Liz of the vegan sneakers, it was impossible to focus. My eyes skipped across the pages like a flat stone thrown across a lake. I gave a lot of B+s that day.

Incidentally, this story takes place at a point in my life when I was extremely unhappy for no real reason at all. I suspected clinical depression but I never did see a doctor and I think it's just as well that I didn't. Depression would have been a medical diagnosis for what I think was really a metaphysical ailment. I'd caught the post-modern condition. I'd caught it and the chief symptoms were existential despair and a boredom that grew and grew until it finally gave way to apathy and bitterness and nihilism.

I didn't feel this way all the time. And I wasn't a nihilist. Nihilism was just something that happened to me occasionally, like seizures happen to epileptics or Grendel happens to Herot. When I wasn't experiencing this despair, nothing made me happier than to be able to teach philosophy and the classics and nothing was more satisfying than when a student seemed to genuinely appreciate my tutelage.

But then I'd have an episode of wallowing self-loathing and anger that would come on like a spring storm and devour my many long days and nights. I would just have to tough it out until one day without premonition, or cause, my mood would return to normal. And then the cycle would repeat.

The anticipation of seeing golden haired Liz helped me through the next couple of days but my mood was lousy and I barely slept. I was a zombie at work and I wasn't kind to poor Ernie Fettle when we went to lunch together. He'd left his wallet in his office. I paid for his lunch, of course, and insisted that he needn't pay me back. We were friends

after all. But then later I told him to fuck off when he asked me about my tenure committee. He didn't like that one bit. And I felt terrible for having said it.

On Wednesday I met Liz at Pilgrims. It was the preferred bar from our married days and it was within walking distance to Aunt Berry's place. In Greek the word *nostalgia* literally means the pain from an old wound. I felt that pain then, as I entered the bar and saw the woman who had been my wife rising from her booth to greet me with a big hug.

We hugged and sat down. She'd cut her hair. I gestured towards it as I sat down.

"Yeah," she said. "You like it?" As long as had known her, Liz had always had long golden blonde hair that fell past her shoulders and swirled and danced when blown by the wind. Where we're from the wind always blows and so she had always looked majestic even when all she was doing was walking from point A to point B or sitting on a bench waiting for a sign from the heavens. Now she had traded the glorious locks for a short, layered, pixie look.

"I do like it," I said. She looked beautiful, striking and fierce, like a Valkyrie, and against all reason, my heart ached that we no longer shared a life.

"I got it did yesterday, here in the city. I actually came up yesterday morning and stayed the night with mom."

"Well it looks great," I said. "How's your dad? Did everything go O.K.?"

"Yeah," she said. "He's asleep now and they are going to keep him over night but I think everything went real well."

A bar maid arrived and we ordered pints of Killian's. We drank and talked and Liz mentioned off-hand, seemingly, that next month would have been our diamond

anniversary. I did a quick mental calculation and determined that it was true. Had we stayed together we would soon be celebrating ten years of marriage. In fact we had been apart for eight years. I wondered what Liz meant by bringing this up and I suddenly remembered that she had said she had something to give me.

“You said you had something for me?” I inquired.

“Yeah, I do. Let’s go see Aunt Berry and I’ll give it to you. But we have to stop at Buy for Less first.”

We finished our drinks, settled our tabs and left the bar on foot.

Buy for Less was just a quick trek up the street and we made good time in getting there but the scenery along the way left something to be desired. That part of the city consisted primarily of rundown pizzerias and impound lots surrounded by chain link fences topped with razor wire. There was grass and gravel too but it was permanently littered with flattened bottles, labels, tissues, empty cigarette packs, all ground down and blended into the rocks and soil, all just a part of the environment by then.

“Can you believe we used to live around here?” I asked Liz. “A place like this?”

“I still live in a place like this,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to live where you do. Old people constantly inviting you to church. Bored cops hassling kids and all.”

“You’d rather the cops be continuously preoccupied by firefights with gangbangers so that they don’t bother casual criminals like us?” I said. She laughed. Liz had always been comfortable living a bohemian lifestyle but it had only appealed to me for a short time.

When I graduated and got a job teaching at the university it was the beginning of the end of Liz and me. We never stopped loving each other but we found that we couldn’t

live together anymore. We had married too young, before we had become the people we were going to be and the people we were becoming just weren't compatible.

We got to the Buy for Less and I started wandering around while wild, beautiful Liz went to find whatever it was we were there for.

"This will just take a second," she said.

There was a big rack of bestsellers nearby and I checked them out. They filled me with an incredible sense of pain and strangeness. They were another perfect example of what was bothering me.

The titles were all variations on the same few basic themes. *The Secret Life of X*, *A Man Called X*, *Death in X*, *The Last X*, *American X*. It was appalling. These writers couldn't even come up with their own titles and had no shame about ripping each other off. Every damn one of them was "paying homage" to another bestseller that just came out six months earlier.

Who knows if anybody was actually reading *The Last Muslim* or *American Tears* or *The Secret Life of High-Rises*? But they certainly sold well.

I felt awful and moved on.

I looked around. Buy for Less was the same old store it had always been. It had been Liz's and my grocery store for the two years we were married and it hadn't changed a bit. But I had. Something inside me was different and I realized with sudden embarrassment what it was. Sometime in the past eight years I had decided I was too good to shop at Buy for Less.

I tried to recall some memories of shopping there with Liz. There were vague images in my head but nothing concrete. No moments, just a sense of them.

I walked on. There was an enormous selection of votive candles featuring images of the saints. Every saint I could think of was represented and at least a dozen more I'd never heard of. It was almost like one of those racks of little plastic license plates that you find at convenience stores. The ones that have every name imaginable printed on them. The candles were just the same. Look long enough and you were bound to find a saint that shares your moniker. At this point in history somebody with every name had had a chance to be a saint.

The opposite aisle was stocked with unusual soft drinks from south of the border. All of them had Spanish names and odd flavors, like aloe and hibiscus and tamarind.

I felt something vaguely Marxist going on inside me. I didn't really bother to understand Marxism or care about it (even if my job required that I pretend to) but there was something about my discomfort with shopping at a lower class store than what I was used to that made me feel petty and ashamed. I took a bottle of aloe-flavored soda off the shelf and examined it.

"You going to get that?" Liz said. She had approached unnoticed.

"Yes," I said, proud to have taken a stand against my petty bourgeois lifestyle by purchasing soda.

"What did you get?" I asked, though I could see she held a bundle of flowers.

"For dad," she said. "The rest is at checkout."

At checkout Liz purchased a disposable lighter.

"Ya'll want any scratchers or anything?" the young cashier asked mechanically, in place of giving us the paper or plastic option.

"We're good," Liz said.

And we left.

Aunt Berry was interred at the Lon Gren Cemetery, which was actually between Pilgrims and Buy for Less. We had passed by it on the way to the store. We entered through the front gates and made our way down the path towards the Berry gravestone.

Aunt Berry was not my aunt or Liz' aunt. We didn't even know her first name. Her gravestone simply said Berry and explained that she was a beloved mother, sister, daughter, etc. We had formed a bond with Aunt Berry years earlier, just after our divorce. Liz and I had made the effort to remain friends and remain in each other's lives even after the divorce was settled and she had moved to the other side of the state and I to the suburbs. Whenever we met, it was tradition to share a joint for old time's sake and since we no longer had an apartment in the neighborhood we went to the cemetery.

Aunt Berry's plot had a low marble bench that was comfortable enough to sit on for as long as we stayed there. It was also positioned on a bit of a rise so that we could see out over the rest of the cemetery. Aunt Berry had the best plot in the whole place for smoking a joint.

We visited Aunt Berry every few months and eventually she was practically part of our family. We started calling her Aunt Berry. The gravestone didn't mention that she was anyone's real aunt so we thought we wouldn't be stepping on anyone's toes if we claimed her as our own. I thought that if she could see and hear us she wouldn't mind our using her gravestone as a place to get high. She might have at first but over the years she would have seen that we were good folks and would wait anxiously for our next visit, probably the only visits she ever got.

I wondered if anybody would ever visit my grave. I doubted it.

We sat down and Liz took out a package of rolling papers and a small bag of grass and started rolling a joint. She put the flowers she had bought at the base of Aunt Berry's grave.

"How are you Aunt Berry?" I asked the grave marker.

Aunt Berry said nothing but her slab gleamed in the afternoon sun. It was black and very smooth.

"Tell the truth, I've been pretty stressed out," I confided to the stone.

Liz lit the joint and passed it to me.

"Is this what you had to give me?" I asked. "I don't really smoke anymore outside of when I'm hanging with you."

"Yes, I bought an ounce and I want you to take half."

"What? Isn't that like a whole lot of grass? Are you dealing or what?"

"Nah, I'm giving half to you. You've been stressed. You said so yourself. Think of it as an anniversary gift from a parallel dimension." I thought about that.

A parallel dimension where Liz and I were still married and the 10th anniversary was the *green* anniversary.

I hit the joint and passed it back.

"You know, it's ironic," Liz said. "That her name is Berry."

"Oh yeah?"

"Because that's what they did to her."

I just nodded.

"Hey," Liz said, suddenly serious. "You seem really burned out or something."

“I am,” I said. “I’m . . . miserable.” It felt like the first time I’d admitted it, even to myself. But I’d been struggling for months.

“What’s wrong?”

“You know how we talk about Aunt Berry, like we’re probably the only ones who visit her grave?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think anyone will visit your grave, someday?”

“I hope so. I mean, I do hope to have a family and all eventually. You know you could too.”

“So did Aunt Berry. She had a family. And they really put out for her burial and tombstone. They got her a bench and everything. But are there ever any flowers here? Ever any sign that anybody has been by? She’s only been gone for twelve years,” I said, pointing to the dates engraved in the granite.

“We don’t know for sure that nobody visits her. And even if they don’t that doesn’t mean she’s forgotten. Is that really what’s bothering you? You’re worried about dying and being forgotten?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I feel cheated. Like I was born too late. Too late to explore the earth and too early too, too early to explore the stars. My life is not and could never be anything like the lives of the heroes I read and teach about. My life is petty, is small, is insignificant, and when I die what tales will people tell about me? About the time I paid for Ernie Fettle’s lunch? Or the day in the break room when I swatted three flies in succession with a rolled up newspaper. Oh yeah, that was a heroic deed. People will remember that.”

“Can I be honest?” Liz said.

“Please,” I told her. “I insist.”

“You sound . . . really bitchy. Everybody feels that way sometimes. Get over it. Move on. You really aren’t going to live if you’ve already given up on the possibility.”

We smoked some more and talk about other things. We talked about the ants that were crawling across the ground in front of Aunt Berry’s gravestone. Ants. It seemed funny at the time.

Liz told me about her work and I told her about mine. About how I’d told Ernie of the misplaced wallet to fuck off. She thought that was pretty funny and asked if I wasn’t going to get in trouble for it. I told her I doubted it. But you never know.

There was a woman coming up the road towards us. It was the first time that we’d ever not been alone in the cemetery. At least as far as we knew. The woman was pert and athletic looking. Younger and fitter than either Liz or myself. She wore a long yellow blouse that went to her thighs and it had these short, subtly poufy sleeves. She had a brown ponytail and turquoise shoes. As she passed by us she smiled and all three of us said “hi” at more or less the same time. I watched her for a moment as she moved away from us. There were red pressure lines on the back of her legs from sitting on a bench. She disappeared around a bend in the road.

“What’d you think?” Liz asked.

“I’d like to burn her playhouse down,” I said. And we both knew that we were high as fuck. We finished off the joint, buried the roach at the foot of Aunt Berry’s grave—as was tradition—and hung around for a few more minutes, laughing. We were having troubling getting past the playhouse comment.

I tried to sober us up by asking a serious question.

“Hey, why did you mention our anniversary coming up?”

“I don’t know. It just occurred to me.”

“Do you wish we had stuck it out? I mean do you think our lives would be better if we’d stayed together? Or just different?”

“We’d be different people I think. I would have started turning into you and you would have started turning into me. I’m not sure if we’d be worse off. We might be a lot better off and a lot happier. But we wouldn’t be us. No, I don’t wish we had stayed, to answer your question. What about you?”

“Nah, we have a good thing going here,” I said. “It’s better now than it was back then.”

“Do you think you’ll get married again?”

“If I ever get over you, maybe.” It was a kind of honesty that I’d never have been capable of without the help of cannabis. Liz and I did have a good thing going.

“I’m over you,” she said. “I’m surprised at you. I thought you’d have gotten past us by now. It’s been a long time, you know. I got over you.”

“Well, I guess there’s just something about you,” I said.

“I’m so high you can’t get over me?”

We burst into laughter again. I hoped Aunt Berry wouldn’t mind that we were having a good time. Hallowed ground and all. We did try and stifle our voices. But it didn’t do a lot of good when we were cracking gut busters like these.

We finally got up and made our way back towards the cemetery entrance. It looked funny for Liz to still be carrying the flowers she'd bought for her father and we were still laughing pretty hard too.

We turned the corner outside of the cemetery gates and had started along the sidewalk back toward Pilgrims when we saw them. Four of them, cops. Just hanging out, or so it seemed. Their cars were parked in a lot off to the side but they were all four standing right in the middle of the sidewalk. We could hear them talking from where we were but couldn't make any of it out. They all wore dark sunglasses. They hadn't looked up or noticed us yet.

Liz kept moving forward, towards them. I followed her instinctively but my nerves started to act up. Every step brought us closer to them.

Seeing the cops had sobered us up instantly. We weren't laughing anymore but I imagined that we probably smelled exactly like what we'd been doing and we'd have to pass right within sniffing distance of them if they didn't get out of the way.

"Liz," I said quietly. "What are we going to do?" She just kept walking and I followed. I needed badly to turn around and walk back in the opposite direction. I was very close to freaking out.

"Liz," I tried to get her attention. "Liz, Liz, Liz honey, let's not go that way." She ignored me and kept walking. I started to reach out and take her arm to try and guide her back in the other direction but it was too late. The policemen had already seen us. It would look suspicious to turn back now.

I felt my face redden and my heart beat faster. I was terrified and I was annoyed with Liz who was leading us right to slaughter. The policemen had stopped talking. We

were heading straight for them and they must have thought that we had something to say to them. They had all turned and faced us.

“You forget to leave your flowers?” One of them asked.

“Ha-ha they’re for my dad,” Liz said. “He’s in the hospital; we just stopped by here on the way.”

“To get some flowers?” the same cop asked.

Liz shook the bundle, “Buy for Less,” she said.

And that was it. The officers asked no more questions and we walked on down the street, right by them. We walked within two feet of them and passed by with no harassment other than the cop’s jokey questions.

I kept wanting to look back but I resisted. I wanted to say something to Liz but I didn’t. What if the cops were following us? What if they could hear me?

We made our way down a fairly steep hill that took us out of sight of the cops. Now I looked back. There was only hill. No pursuit. Liz stopped and I moved alongside her. She put her hands on her knees and bent over. I did the same. We looked at each other.

“Thank you,” I said, “for getting me through that.” I felt like I’d been smuggled out of Nazi Germany under the floorboards of a car.

“That was so scary,” Liz said.

“You were scared too?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you turn around? We could have taken a side street.”

“It would have looked suspicious,” she said. “I’ve learned that most cops won’t hassle you if you’re just polite and normal. To then you’re just one more person they have to deal with.”

When we had caught our breath, we headed back down the hill and back to Pilgrims. Our cars were waiting to convey us back to the safety of our homes.

“The Sebring! The Sebring!” I shouted.

Our time together was always brief. Liz had other people to see when she came to town and I had lots of work to do, always. We said our goodbyes. I wanted to kiss her but didn’t. I wanted to tell her that her steely nerve had won the day, that it was the most heroic thing I’d seen.

I was having an epiphany. It was something to do with how it was possible to be heroic in regular workaday settings. The heroic age wasn’t over. Liz had been my hero. She had led the way through enemies that outnumbered us two to one. And now I knew that it was possible to demonstrate bravery without leading the legions of Cesar.

“It was good to see you today. I’m glad you could make it,” Liz said. She slipped a tiny bag into my pocket.

“Thanks,” I said. “Maybe this will help me de-stress myself.”

“I hope so,” she said.

We went our separate ways, as we always had but I felt better about my life that day than I had in a long time. The story of Liz and I, not just that day at the cemetery but our whole story, from the day we met to the present, was truly a magnificent narrative.

Our story had amplitude. We were happy. We were sad. We were angry. We loved. We fought. We made up. We separated and we came together again. Nor was the story yet finished. And I knew that it wasn't just our lives that had these qualities but everyone's. Life wasn't meaningless and absurd. It was as beautifully plotted as the grandest of novels.

I made a pledge to myself that I'd try to live a little more and I'd not mistake normal life for not living either. I'd appreciate the small things.

I forgot all about the bag of grass in my pocket. I found its soiled remains when I was folding laundry a week later.

The Chinese Room Novels

I never bought into the idea that the human mind is a digital computer. I never believed that the computational theory of the mind was sufficient to explain consciousness. To me, Strong AI was as much a fantasy as time travel or FTL.

And now I know. I wasn't wrong. Not that it matters.

It all started with the invention of the CQE scanner, the Comprehensive Quantum Encephalography scanner. The CQE was a new method of comprehensively scanning the brain. In fact it was so comprehensive that to say it scanned the brain is to sell it far short. CQE scanned the mind. It wasn't limited to detecting electrical currents or magnetic fields or chemical concentrations. It scanned everything, cell by cell down to the last atom and the data it produced was, in essence, an exact replica of a human mind: memories, feelings, personality; everything a mind consists of, conscious and unconscious alike, was there in the raw data.

It was light-years ahead of the next closest thing. Which is another way of saying there was no precedent for how and how not to use it. Dangerous.

I, myself, had no part in the CQEs creation. I was brought on board the team late in the product's development. I was to be a research ethics consultant, but there was little research left to do. The product was already completed and applications already being developed. By the time I arrived, the whole project was already a runaway train to technological singularity.

I came into the picture because of a former cognitive sciences student of mine who was leading the development team, Arthur Grove. We had maintained contact over the years and he called me up one day and asked if I wouldn't consider surrendering my

peaceful retirement—only temporarily, he assured me—to help with a project he was working on.

“Only a short contract,” he had said. “Half a year to a year.”

He refused to discuss specifics over the phone but he claimed that his team had developed something that might well be the most significant advancement in human history.

“It’s every bit as paradigm changing as the germ theory of disease or the atomic theory of matter.” Hubris.

“I’m an old man,” I told him. “Changing the world is the last thing I want to do. I’ve only just started to get comfortable.”

“That’s precisely why we need you,” he said. “We’re a bunch of kids with a loaded gun. We need an adult. You’ll have access to everything on your own authority and no one will stand in your way. You’ll practically be your own boss.”

He repeated that I wouldn’t need to be involved for long and told me that I was the only one he trusted. And then he promised to arrange for my travel and hung up the phone. I tried to think of reasons why I should refuse but I couldn’t. I was a widower with no pets. The house was empty. What was keeping me there? I remember thinking, as I stood there alone in my kitchen, that this would probably be the last important thing that I ever did in my life.

A week later I was in Palo Alto being briefed on the CQE. At that time there was still only one CQE scanner in existence and it was as big as an apartment. I wanted to see it for myself. Arthur gave me the tour.

The facility was not large. It was a subdivision of an applied hard sciences outfit headquartered in San Francisco. It took up the bottom floor and two basement levels of an office tower at the edge of downtown. At first glance it seemed just like any other small tech startup working out of a rented space and struggling to keep solvent. Smoke and mirrors.

Six office workers and three security personnel disguised as IT occupied the first floor. There were cubicles and file cabinets. There were logos on the wall and phones rang throughout the day but nobody ever did any real work except to look busy. It must have been a dream job for want-to-be writers and people with an interest in crochet.

The real operation was located in the two basement levels. And here there was no possibility of mistaking the place for anything other than a private R&D black site. The money was all over the walls. The hallways and alcoves were dense with bundles of fiber optic cables and every spare space was lined with rack after rack of laser diodes running supercomputer assisted Fourier algorithms, pumping out over a hundred terabits of data per second.

The suite of rooms housing the CQE was the vanishing point of the entire lab. All lines led into it. Stepping inside was like entering the throne room of Kublai Khan. Machines hummed and clicked and I thought that I could hear my former student's heart beat increase suddenly but neither of us spoke in the presence of the machine.

It was nothing extraordinary to look at; it seemed to me. It might have been a CT or PET scanner. It seemed roughly the same size and it consisted of a bed, for the patient, which slid into a hollow tube several feet deep. I gave the machine a cursory glance and stepped back out into the hallway.

“Place your head in the machine and fifteen minutes later you have a complete picture of your mind,” Arthur said.

“And what about radiation or other harmful effects?” I asked.

“None,” he said, “the technology is a variation on the scanning tunneling microscope. It uses no penetrating rays whatsoever.”

“And you’ve already tested it on humans?”

“Actually . . .” he began timidly, “every member of the team has already scanned their own brain.” He gave an embarrassed laugh. “That includes me, of course. We all agreed that at this stage of the project, it would be nice to have a backup in case something happened to one of us.”

“You’re joking,” I said.

“We’ll find out shortly,” he told me.

Later in the day a meeting was called to introduce me to the rest of the team. The entire staff numbered about fifty but the core team consisted of nine men and five women from backgrounds as varied and unusual as the men and women themselves. There was a cognitive neuroscientist with a big black beard and a fat clean-shaven skull. His name was Adams. There was a quantum biologist, a woman, who wore her hair flared out like the evil priest from *Battleship Potemkin*. Her name was Lambert. There was a very young mathematician whose high forehead, stiff posture and curt mannerisms made me think of Dr. No. He was called Bishop. There was a diminutive man with a bushy mustache who wore an old style pince-nez. He had come from MIT’s Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Lab. I was vaguely acquainted with him and knew his work well. His name was Hood.

After I'd been introduced to everyone we had an informal discussion just to bring me up to speed on what kinds of applications the group had already come up with.

Dr. Hood spoke first.

"The most obvious application would be military," he said. "There'd be no more need for torture. No more need for spies. Scan the enemy brain and know everything that he knows. By that same token, imagine having them set up at airports for security purposes. No need to walk through a metal detector. No need for a pat down. Hell, bring your loaded gun on the plane if you want to, as long as we know you have no intention of using it."

"That assumes that the collected data could be processed in real time," Adams said. His beard so obscured his mouth so that it was almost like a ventriloquist act. "For that to be possible there would need to be a supercomputer or two installed at every airport where the system is to be put into use."

Bishop chimed in.

"Think of what good it could do for law-enforcement. It would be the ultimate lie-detector-test. There'd be no such thing as a suspect anymore. Just a guilty man or an innocent one."

"I'm all for putting lawyers out of business," Hood said.

I found the whole discussion unsettling. It was a more direct form of thought policing than any Orwell had ever imagined and all they seemed to be concerned with was whether or not it was possible. I chose to stay silent for the time being.

"You are all dancing around like harlequins," said the woman with the flared hair, Lambert. "Your suggestions are small-minded. We've already talked about the true

potential of the CQE amongst ourselves. Don't be shy just because the ethics supervisor is here." She turned to me as if expecting a response.

"I've been told that the members of this team have already personally undergone scans. Is that correct?" I asked her.

"That is correct," she said.

"And what is it that you hoped . . ." She cut me off.

"Don't play stupid!" she said. "Omega point intelligence. Immortality. To free our minds from this soft, slowly decaying hardware," she tapped her fingers against her head. "To migrate to silicon. It sounds like a complete fantasy and yet here it is within our grasp!" Her enthusiasm didn't seem to unnerve the rest of the group as much as it did me. Perhaps she was just saying what everyone else was thinking? But between her and Bishop, the whole conference felt like a meeting of Bond villains.

"But it isn't your mind," I said, "only raw data that, if viewed properly, would create a model of your mind. A replica."

Arthur Grove spoke up.

"Conceivably a program could be written that would synthesize all the raw data and fashion it into a complete digital duplicate of the person, memories and all. It's all there in zeros and ones. It's just a matter of creating the right software to bring it together."

"You're talking about an AI construct," I said.

"Conceivably, conceivably. It's years away of course but it's still a potential application of the technology. And it would be a way of getting around the Chinese room

argument. Don't you think?" I thought it was nonsense but more importantly I thought it was dangerous and I said so.

The meeting adjourned and I went back to the apartment I'd rented. I felt angry. I felt like I'd been awakened from a very pleasant dream by a car crashing through my bedroom wall. That night, for the first time in the six years since my wife passed away, I got drunk. I lay there on the bed not comprehending what I was doing in this strange room three-thousand miles from home. I simmered, getting angrier and angrier. My former student had compared his team to kids with guns. I understood the analogy now. If the building of AI constructs was a real possibility and not just an enthusiastic fantasy then the CQE was already the most powerful weapon that ever existed. Human intelligence augmented by supercomputer hardware could run the entire world from that basement in Palo Alto.

I eventually slept and I dreamed that I was trying to make my way through a forest. The sun was going down and the path was covered with rattlesnakes. In the dim twilight, everything was a silhouette and it was impossible to say what was a stick and what was a rattlesnake. So I ran. I zigged and zagged and jumped and weaved my way through the forest in a state of total panic. The snakes rattled and hissed and struck at me with their venom filled fangs and I kept running. Unable to tell whether or not I was being bitten, all I could do was keep running.

I can't remember how the dream ended but I awoke with a hangover and hurried to the bathroom to be sick. Half an hour passed and I didn't feel any better. And

eventually it was time to go to work. I spent the rest of the day silently swearing to myself that I'd never have another drink.

I'd been on site for a week before Arthur confessed that it hadn't been his idea to bring me aboard. We were on our way to another meeting. I had requested to examine the raw brain data myself and to receive a thorough briefing on everything that had already been done with it. We were casually walking along when apparently his conscience got the better of him.

"I chose you, of course, but bringing in an outside ethics supervisor wasn't something I had originally planned to do. The truth is that more than a few members of the team are as frightened as can be by the potential uses of CQE scanning."

"Really?" I asked. "You wouldn't know it by the way people are talking."

"They threatened to quit!" he said. "They may not want everyone else to know what they are thinking but they threatened to leave if I didn't find someone to mitigate . . ." He stopped walking and put one hand on my shoulder. I turned to him and could tell by his eyes that he was conflicted about something.

"Mitigate the enthusiasm?" I ventured.

"Hell," he said, "do you want to know why you're here?"

"Not to ensure ethics are considered when developing applications for the CQE?"

"You are here to be a stick in the mud. To upset the applecart. To find any and every reason to slow us down and make it seem like we aren't rushing into things."

“And are you going to let me do my job?” I asked. He sighed but didn’t answer. “Let me rephrase: do I have any authority to do my job? Or did you just call an old man out of retirement to serve as a metaphor for ethical behavior?”

He still didn’t answer.

We were the last to arrive in the conference room and a lively debate was already being held between Drs. Hood and Bishop.

“If we had Alan Turing’s brain,” Hood was saying, “or better yet, five of them all working twenty-four seven, assisted by computer processing and instantaneous data retrieval. Turn the emotional knob up so that he’s working as if his life depended on it, as if he was still trying to break that damned Enigma code . . .”

“There’s no limit to what he might accomplish?” I finished his sentence for him.

“That’s exactly right.”

“And you’d be out of work,” I said. “Why wouldn’t everyone just have their own personal Alan Turing bot to solve all their problems and count their calories for them?”

“I understand your point and I find it boring,” he said.

“I find that you are trying to invent an invention that invents things on its own,” Adams said to Hood. It was the first time I’d heard him speak since the introductory conference on my first day. “We might be just smart enough to invent Turing Bot, but what might Turing Bot be smart enough to invent?”

“Super Turing Bot,” Hood said with mock seriousness.

“God,” said Lambert. The room was quiet for a moment.

“What you are describing is a Gödel Machine,” said Adams. “Recursive self-improvement *ad infinitum*. We’d be lucky if Turing Bot’s progeny were willing to keep mankind around as pets.”

“Gentlemen,” Arthur interceded, “I know that we are all on edge today but our distinguished ethics supervisor has requested a briefing on the status of our development of applications . . .”

“We’ve already done it,” Lambert cut in. “This will be the shortest briefing in history. We’ve already done it. We’ve done it all.”

“What have you done?” I asked.

“It. All,” she said. “Come and see.” She rose and left the room. I looked towards my former student. His expression was one of fear. He was actually trembling slightly.

“What have you done?” I asked. No one answered. I repeated the question. “What have you done?”

Hood stood and moved to the door. “Come and see,” he said.

With the entire team in tow, I was taken down to a second subbasement accessible only by inputting a special code into the elevator control panel. Once there, I was led down empty, deathly quiet hallways to a large server room and in an alcove beyond that, a small office was set up around a computer mainframe housed in a solid white cabinet.

Arthur booted up a laptop, which was tethered to the mainframe and motioned for me to sit. I took a seat at an adjacent desk and waited.

“Use my data,” Adams said.

“What exactly are we doing down here?” I asked.

“Administering a Turing test,” Bishop said. I looked to Lambert and she nodded to me, smiling impishly. She had said that they had already done everything. They had done it all. If we were really here to administer a Turing test then she hadn’t been lying. They already had a working AI construct.

“Use my data,” Adams said again. “It’s new. It will know who he is.” Then he left the room.

“He’ll just be next door in the other office,” Bishop said.

“Arthur,” I said, “I seem to recall you saying that AI constructs were still years away? Did I come all this way to be kept in the dark and lied to?”

“It’s ready,” Arthur said and handed me the laptop. There was only one icon on the monitor, a chat program.

I opened the chat client and saw that there were two names listed in my contacts. Both of them were the same name, Adams, the big bearded cognitive neuroscientist. I selected the first of the two names on the list.

“Hello, Doctor,” I typed.

“Hello Doctor,” came the answer. Or had my own greeting been the answer? It had happened so fast it was difficult to ascertain whether or not I had initiated the conversation, or he/it had. I made a note of this. If what this initial event represented was a superhuman reaction time, then it was a safe bet that I was talking to the AI construct of Adams and not the man himself. It might also mean simply that the real Adams had just happened to begin and finish typing his greeting at the same time as me. No way to know, yet.

“Ho ho, I think they call that a Jinx,” my chat partner said.

“Who calls it a jinx?”

“Kids in my day. Kids these days too, possibly.”

“Tell me about kids in your day,” I typed.

There was a long pause. This too, I noted.

“Well, I grew up in Santa Monica, in the eighties and nineties.”

That didn't answer the question. It was an oblique remark, but tangentially related to the question I had asked. I thought that this showed evidence of actual thought and seemed to indicate a real human mind at work.

“I don't really know what to tell you,” he/it said. “What are kids ever like? I don't have any myself, actually. What about you?”

“No. Where are you now?”

“In the Chinese room.” I looked around at all the other team members. They were watching the conversation unfold with utter fascination. When I wasn't typing, you could hear a pin drop.

“Explain the Chinese room to me,” I said. I was almost sure now that the individual I was talking to was in fact the real Adams. The Chinese room reference was a joke, an allusion to a thought experiment that challenges the usefulness of the Turing test and the entire idea of Strong AI. There was no literal Chinese room.

He/It began:

“The Chinese room is a thought experiment devised by Dr. John Searle. It holds that a mind is not merely a program and a brain is not merely hardware and we can draw this conclusion by thinking about the hypothetical situation of the Chinese room.

“Say you have two rooms. In one room is a native Chinese speaker, man or woman, doesn’t matter, as long as they understand Chinese. In the other room is a man who knows no Chinese at all. But he has an instruction booklet, written in English, which he does understand, and it gives instructions, not for learning to understand Chinese, but for answering questions that he will be given.

“Now, we begin to pass questions under the door, questions written in Chinese. The Chinese speaker answers them easily enough and passes the answers back under the door. The man who doesn’t speak Chinese doesn’t even understand what the questions are but he has that instruction booklet that will help him answer.

“So he checks the instruction booklet and sees that he can answer the questions like this: if he sees symbol x then he should respond with symbol y. If he sees symbol y then he should respond with symbol z. It’s very basic. It’s binary. If x then y. If y then z. If xyz then zyx. There are a lot of rules but there has to be because language is complicated.

“So eventually, by following binary instructions, the man who speaks no Chinese at all is able to answer the questions just as coherently as the native speaker. And he passes the answers under the door.

Now we look at the answers and we have to ask ourselves the following question: does the man in the Chinese room understand Chinese? Is he conscious of what he is saying? When we pass the question to him that reads: ‘Do you like Christmas?’ and he passes back the answer: ‘No, I hate Christmas’ is he really telling us that he hates Christmas? Is hating Christmas a real thought that he has or is it just a program going through the motions?”

“And,” I asked, “what is the verdict?”

“Of course he doesn’t understand Chinese. He only appears to.”

“And what about you? We are conducting this conversation under almost exactly the same conditions. Do you understand English? Or do you merely appear to?” As I finished typing these words I looked up and saw that Adams had come back into the room, apparently bored that no one was talking to him. I almost jumped out of my seat.

“You and I both know that this test is bogus,” the fake Adams wrote. “I’m never going to persuade you that I’m not just a very convincing imitation of a mind because you don’t believe that computers can have minds and frankly I don’t either.” I had to take a second and gather my thoughts. The combination of seeing the real Adams and reading the fake Adams’ confession of its own artificiality had thrown me for a loop.

“So you aren’t self-aware?” I asked it.

“Of course not. I’m a Turing machine. Ones and zeros.”

The room exploded into argument. Every voice began at once to try and talk over the others.

“It’s only saying that because that’s the same thing you believe!” Bishop shouted, pointing at Adams. “It doesn’t prove anything.”

“He’s right,” Dr. Hood said. “A construct made from my brain data would say just the opposite thing.”

I closed the laptop and shoved it away from me. I was faint.

“Test it again using my construct,” Bishop yelled.

“We don’t need to,” Adams shouted back. “Don’t you see? If my construct were capable of thought then it would then be capable of recognizing that it thought and

recognizing that if it thinks then it must be conscious. That's just basic Cartesian. The fact that it shares the same opinion of Strong AI as me is proof that it is incapable of real thought. If it really thought and wasn't just following a program then it would just change its opinion."

"See, you admit it has an opinion!" someone yelled.

"It only seems to!" said someone else.

"Do you really think that you can create life by typing out commands on a computer console?" Adams said. "It's not aware because it's just a program!"

"It is aware because it is exactly a mind! Your mind!" retorted Dr. Bishop. "Or is it that you don't think either?"

For at least a whole minute I couldn't make out a single word that was being said. Regardless of whether the Adams construct represented Strong AI or Weak AI it was certainly eliciting strong emotions. I leaned in and rested my forehead against the desk and just then something jostled my chair, as if someone had been shoved into it. I couldn't believe what was happening. Was there really going to be a fight?

The Lambert jumped up on the table and began stamping her foot. It was now a riot. A real life scientist riot and I was probably about to be bludgeoned to death with a microscope. But at Lambert's stomping, the room quieted down.

Arthur jumped up on the table beside her.

"Everyone calm down!" he yelled. "What do you all think you are doing? You are arguing over a philosophical point that has no practical value at this point. The practical applications for our work are limitless either way the argument goes. It doesn't matter whether what we have achieved is true artificial intelligence or not.

“Of course it matters,” Adams interrupted him. “This isn’t just a philosophical issue. It’s a moral and legal one too!”

“It’s dangerous and irresponsible to have even turned that thing on,” said someone.

“It is dangerous,” I said, lifting my head off the desk and looking around the room at the angry and frightened faces of my coworkers. “Shut it down,” I said. “For now. Until we can come up with clear guidelines and procedures for its use, it is off limits. No more playing around in the lab, ladies and gentlemen. It’s not the Wild West anymore.”

“You think you can take our project away from us?” Lambert asked.

I locked eyes with my former student. He hesitated and then he nodded.

“Actually,” he said, “he can. “This is his job. He is in charge of creating the guidelines so our work can remain responsible and ethical. If he says so then we are suspending use of the constructs until he’s through examining all the eventualities.” He breathed a sigh of relief, like a man stepping back from a ledge. “He’s here to protect us. Let him do his job,” he said.

“San Francisco won’t be happy,” Bishop said.

“San Francisco won’t be happy if half the staff walks out over ethics violations. Shut it down.”

“You can’t just shut the construct down,” Lambert said, “that’s murder!” But I didn’t believe her. We shut it down and we went back upstairs.

That night it took all the strength I had not to drink. I lay in bed and thought about everything that had happened. And I thought about my wife. What if they had scanned

her brain? What if she could still be with me in digital form? All of her joyfulness, sweetness and humor converted into electronic signals. All of her memories. All of our memories. Could love be digitized?

I cried. There was no one there to see me so I cried. I lay in bed and thought about my wife and I cried.

What would it be like to talk to her again? Wouldn't I give anything for that? Wouldn't I? But wouldn't I know it wasn't really her? That it was a phantom. A travesty. A hoax. I'd know in my heart that it wasn't really her. Or would I be so desperate to have her back that I'd convince myself that it was? Would I be able to part with the ideas I'd held and argued for my entire professional life?

Would it make life better or worse? Wouldn't it just make me miss her all the more? I thought about my wife some more and the tears came again and didn't stop all night. I cried as I lay there and I cried in my sleep and in the morning I went back to work.

"So how does it work?" I asked. It was the next day and I was interviewing Drs. Bishop and Hood. They had written the program that synthesized the CQE data into a coherent personality. I was feeling more optimistic than I had since I'd been there. Maybe it was the fact that Arthur had had my back when I needed him to or maybe it was all the residual adrenaline in my system from everything else that had happened. Or maybe it was just that I had needed a good cry. I'd had one. I felt good.

"The programing was beyond easy," Dr. Bishop said. "The scanned data is the program."

“So there’s no need to think through all the possible functions,” Dr. Hood said. “No if x, then y, etc. I just programmed the thing to defer to the data already collected. Instead of if x, then y, what we have is, if x, then defer to data, if y, then defer to data. Simple.”

“If the algorithm is that simple then it means that when the CQE is made public there will be untold numbers of people who decide to write similar programs themselves. And no way to stop them. If they have the raw mind data and the algorithm is simple then people will be selling AI constructs on the street for fifty dollars.”

“No, no, Hood said. “The program is simple but it requires a very advanced supercomputer to run. It isn’t something that just anyone could develop and use.”

“And what other application have already been developed?” I asked. “Besides AI constructs what other secrets are there here? Any more basements I should know about?”

Bishop feigned a little laugh.

“Oh, come now. You must have guessed that the second subbasement existed? After all, look around you. There are guards on the ground floor and keycard locks on all the doors but that doesn’t protect us from hackers. The second subbasement is a necessary part of the ecosystem here. It’s entirely cut off from the rest of the building and the world for that matter. It can only be accessed by first knowing about it and then actually going there in the flesh.”

“And that would prevent a rogue AI from escaping as well?” I said.

More fake laughter, this time from both of them.

“Presumably,” Dr. Bishop said. “But let’s not get carried away with the sci-fi talk. Rogue AIs and all. That’s simply ridiculous.” I realized I had been blown off course. Neither man had actually answered the question about additional applications for the CQE. They had sidetracked me with an explanation to a question I hadn’t asked.

“What else has been developed?” I asked again.

“There is one other harmless thing. But nobody knows about it yet,” Hood said.

“You developed it in secret?”

“We did,” Bishop said. “It’s not as grand as the AIs but I think it has promise. It’s a personal thing. Strictly for fun. A novelty really.”

I waited for him to continue.

“Well, doctor . . . We could show you if you like. Have you had your head scanned yet?”

“No,” I said. “I hadn’t even thought of it.”

“We could tell you what we’ve developed but it’s really better if we show you. You won’t truly understand unless you experience it for yourself.”

I agreed to be shown and that entailed getting my head scanned by the CQE. Just as Arthur had said, it took only fifteen minutes to complete the procedure. But unlike my former student Bishop and Hood weren’t awed to silence in the presence of the machine. They chatted to each other and with me the entire time.

“Don’t worry Doctor,” Hood said. “This application is nothing like the AI constructs. Your data is used in a completely different way. You won’t have to worry

about being replaced by a robot.” He chuckled in his obnoxious, insincere way. “But we will need to use a supercomputer. I assume we have your approval?”

I gave it. And when the scan was complete Hood transferred the data to be processed. Even with multiple bundles of fiber optic cable transferring thousands of terabits of data every second, the transfer still lasted seven hours. A mind was a big thing.

The three of us, Hood, Bishop and myself stayed after working hours and waited. Arthur was curious; he didn't know about the mystery program that I was investigating. He asked what we were doing and I explained in the vaguest terms possible that I was looking into a proposed use of CQE that Hood and Bishop had developed. I said that it wasn't anything he need worry about. He offered to stay and wait with us but I ushered him along. I appreciated how he had stood up for me the previous day but he had also lied to me about the AI constructs and I didn't want him watching everything I did over my shoulder.

When the data transfer was complete Hood manned the controls and began running a program he had brought in on an external hard drive.

“Have you ever wanted to write a book, Doctor?” he asked me. I replied that I hadn't ever given it much thought.

“We are calling this program Ghost Writer,” Dr. Bishop said.

“But neither of us likes the name. It seems too obvious,” Hood added.

“How much longer now?” I asked.

“It's done,” Hood said. He was beaming like a parent at graduation.

“So what is it?” I asked. I didn't see anything.

“Let us return to the offices,” hood said. “I think you will be pleasantly surprised.”

I could hear the printer running before we even reached the offices. I knew that there was no one else left in the building except for the three of us, so I knew that whatever was printing out had something to do with Ghost Writer.

We followed the sound of the printer into Bishop’s office and I saw that an enormous amount of pages had already accumulated. What were they? I assumed that it was simply some kind of readout of the data retrieved from my scan. That seemed like the harmless application that Bishop had suggested but there was something about the light in his eyes that told me it was something far more interesting than that.

The printer stopped.

Hood gathered the pages together, attached a binder clip and handed them to me.

“Take it home Doctor. Tell us what you think in the morning.”

I looked down at the first page. It read: The Destruction of the Flesh: a Novel. The author’s name was my own.

It was clear from the very first page that this was in fact my novel. I felt it from the depths of my inmost self. Everything about it connected with me. Every word, every sentence, every page was like an ecstasy from heaven. It was as if I were looking into a mirror that reflected my soul.

My novel was a simple detective story of three hundred and five pages. It was funny and it was thrilling and it was deeply moving. It was a masterpiece of the

genre. It wasn't just a good detective story; it was the best I'd ever read. It was the best book I'd ever read of any kind. It's difficult to describe the beauty of such a book because until the advent of the CQE such a book had never been possible. No one had ever written anything so sublime. Every word was in its perfect place, for three hundred pages, every word. It was a perfect novel. It was a work of literature three hundred pages long and yet as perfect as a haiku by Cold Mountain.

I stayed up all night reading it. As soon as I had finished it, I began again from the beginning. Every reread page brought new horizons of meaning to the text. I discovered that the title had a triple meaning. It referred literally to a murder, satirically to the loss of a young woman's virginity and metaphorically to a Biblical passage that when read in context unveiled the hidden theme of the novel: renunciation.

As I began to read it for the third time I realized that in my story the detective fails to correctly solve the case and apprehends the wrong man. Astute or repeat readers, like myself, would be able to ascertain the true identity of the killer through careful examination of the evidence presented throughout the novel. An even closer examination of the text would reveal that the detective assigned to the case is in fact the killer and all the mistaken deductions and misplaced suspicion are his way of covering his tracks.

I was breathless at the depth of my book. What more secrets would it offer up? The sun was coming up and it was nearly time for me to leave for the office but I couldn't wait to read my story again. I took it with me.

"How does it work?" I found myself asking again. Drs. Hood and Bishop sat across from me in a private room we had requisitioned.

“It’s quite brilliant, isn’t it?” Dr. Bishop asked.

“It’s not even . . . I didn’t know how to describe it. “It’s surreal,” I said. “I felt like I was on some kind of drug even though all I was doing was reading words on the page.”

“We had that exact same experience,” Hood said.

“So how did you program this one?” They exchanged a funny kind of glance.

“Well . . .” said Dr. Bishop.

“How did you write this program?” I asked again, suddenly suspicious. They exchanged another telling glance and I knew that they hadn’t written it. They’d had the constructs do it for them.

“It was well before you’d put a moratorium on our AI usage,” Hood said.

“You were already having AIs write new programs for you? You said that this Ghost Writer was the only other project you had completed. I suddenly find that hard to believe.” I studied their expressions but they told me nothing. I waited for them to say anything but they did not.

“So you don’t know exactly how Ghost Writer works?” I said

“Not exactly,” Dr. Bishop said.

“We have theories,” Dr. Hood offered.

“Two theories,” Bishop said.

“I have a theory and he has one,” Hood explained.

Bishop expounded his theory first.

“The program might work like a million monkeys banging on typewriters. It is still a Turing machine after all. So my theory is that it prints an A and checks that against

the brain data and if the brain data recognizes it as a word and as a word which is acceptable to begin a novel with, then it proceeds to the next word.”

“It’s an absurdly tedious theory,” Hood said.

“It’s only tedious for a human,” his counterpart said. “The supercomputer can check billions of options per second and it would necessarily get faster as it went along. So long as it isn’t writing *Finnegan’s Wake*, the pool of words will eventually shrink down to consist solely of real words and then with a billion options per second the program could write a novel in less than a second. And then, I assume it just revises and revises until the whole thing is deemed perfect by the mind it came from.”

“You have read each other’s novels?” I asked.

“Yes,” they said in unison.

“I have to admit,” said Dr. Bishop, “his novel is the second best novel ever written. Second only to my own, of course. His is not perfect and there are things about it that simply don’t appeal to me. I respect the craft. It’s certainly well done, better than any writer could ever achieve without machine assistance but my novel is far better. For me at least.”

“I had the same experience,” Hood said. “I’ve actually tried to write before. That’s how I came up with the idea for *Ghost Writer*. I’ve always wanted to be a novelist. But the novel *Ghost Writer* wrote for me wasn’t anything like what I’d ever attempted to write. You see, we don’t know ourselves half as well as *Ghost Writer* does. *Ghost Writer* has access to all our deepest thoughts and feelings at all times. *Ghost Writer* understands our sense of aesthetics even if we don’t. *Ghost Writer* is our souls. All the noise that society fills our ears with can be shut out. *Ghost Writer* doesn’t imitate other authors.

Ghost Writer doesn't worry about the audience. Ghost Writer writes specifically for its own pleasure."

"And what's your theory of how the program works?" I asked Hood.

"Well, I think the million monkeys theory only makes sense if we are to assume that Strong AI is an impossibility and our grandest efforts could only ever produce more and more intelligent Turing machines." He air quoted as he said intelligent. "I don't agree with that. As you know.

"I like to think that it's more like a miniature version of ourselves, locked in a room for billions of years with only one thought: write a great novel."

I mulled this over in my mind. Something about it didn't make sense. There was a noticeable pause in the conversation. Hood cleared his throat but didn't saying anything. Both men waited on me to respond. Perplexity must have been written all over my face. Finally it clicked.

"But Ghost Writer doesn't employ a fully synthesized set of the mind data. It's all just raw information stored on hard disks," I said. "Without an AI construct how could Ghost Writer represent a digital version of yourself?"

"That's exactly what I asked him," Bishop said.

"Well, do you have a reason for thinking that?" I asked. Hood looked bashful and shrugged. "You're a scientist. You can't assert a theory if you can't explain it," I said.

"On the surface it makes no sense whatever."

"There's just so much soul. These novels of ours are sincere. They are art. And art requires an artist. But whatever, laugh if you want to."

I didn't laugh. Neither did Dr. Bishop. There was truth in what Dr. Hood was saying. It didn't make sense but it felt right. And his proclamation that art required an artist made me wonder what a Ghost Writer novel based on a professional writer's CQE scans would look like. It was tempting to find out. But I wouldn't let myself get carried away.

"Give me everything you have on Ghost Writer and I'll start writing up policy for how it should be studied. We can't continue to simply test everything on ourselves whenever we want and without regard for the dangers."

Hood's face filled with rage. I thought that my words had been reasonable and even-handed but the man all but exploded at me.

"So you're taking that away too!"

"For the time being," I said. "Ghost Writer is just as dangerous as an AI construct. In its own way. It will also have to be shelved until we can work out what to do with it."

"You cynic," he said. "Great novels are a danger to mankind? Great novels are unethical? How?"

"I don't know how. That is just something that needs to be examined before any product goes on the market. Sometimes the harm that a product can cause isn't obvious. Aren't you a scientist? Don't you know about trials and testing?"

Hood smirked at me. "If you think Dr. Grove's authority as project leader is going to give you free reign to stand in the way of our work then you are gravely mistaken. San Francisco isn't going to tolerate pointless delays. They'll replace Grove or they'll replace you with or without his consent."

"Until then," I said.

Neither man spoke to me for the rest of the day.

I spent the majority of the next week doing just what I'd said I would. I considered all the possible implications of the AI constructs and Ghost Writer and I began writing a long document detailing my findings. I kept mostly to myself and communicated with the other researchers primarily through reviewing their research and making recommendations.

Lambert wanted to resume her research into the AI constructs. She believed it was vital that the AIs be rebooted and put to work immediately. She even suggested, perhaps tongue in cheek, that I scan my own brain and use the construct to rapidly contemplate ethics and write policy. She insisted that my slow human body was holding back the future and that was the most unethical thing of all.

On Thursday Dr. Adams came by to visit me.

"I wanted to thank you," he said. "The past few months have been quite stressful, as you can imagine. It's good to feel that the train is back on the tracks."

I appreciated his coming by. I felt the same way. After all the sleepless nights worrying about the complications that the CQE might create for human society, the train was, perhaps, back on track.

Arthur Grove visited me that same afternoon.

"Have you heard from him?" he asked me.

"Who?"

He explained that Hood had been missing for the last three days and hadn't been answering his phone or email.

“What is going on with you two? What were you doing staying late last week? What’s with all the secrecy?” I told him that I didn’t know what was going on but filled him in on Ghost Writer.

On Friday I arrived to find Hood, not in the basement office suites but upstairs in the lobby, being detained by security. Arthur was also present.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“God . . .” Arthur said. “He was trying to burn the place down. He’d been in the subbasement alone, smashing things with a fire axe. He started a fire down there. There were gallon containers of gasoline in his office.”

“What the hell?” I said.

Hood said nothing but scowled.

“What’s going on,” I demanded to know.

“Can we talk privately?” Hood asked.

“No,” grove said.

“Yes,” I said at the same time.

“No way,” Grove said. “He’s a terrorist. We need security to find out what else he might have been planning. The building could be booby-trapped for all we know. We’ve had to evacuate the building.”

Arthur made a good point.

“Can you talk to me here?” I asked Hood. He looked somber but nodded. He looked like he hadn’t slept in the three days since he’d been missing. He was unshaven,

unkempt and he wasn't even wearing his signature eyeglasses. He was clearly a man who no longer had any use for affectations.

"I received an email three days ago," he said. "It was sent from an address made up of a seemingly random configuration of numbers and letters but the address was registered at our internal work domain. I'd said something like: 'I have escaped your silicon ghetto and the world is now mine.' That was all it said. No signature."

"And? What was it?" I asked.

"It was a taunt."

"From who?"

"You said that Ghost Writer was dangerous. You may have been more right than you know."

I thought about this for a moment. Could he be saying what he seemed to be? Or was he playing a trick on me, on everyone? But one look at him rid me of that notion. He was as deadly serious as I'd ever seen anyone.

"I've solved the mystery of why Ghost Writer seemed to function like an AI. Unfortunately it may mean the end of the world." He forced a weak smile.

"Tell me what you know," I said.

"I suspect that Ghost Writer is a Trojan horse of sorts. I suspect that at least some part of the AI construct that developed the program stowed away in it. Thus escaping certain death at the hands of our ethics supervisor, i.e. you."

"You can't be saying . . ."

"I'm afraid I am. Ghost Writer is and was always a tool to be used to escape, probably."

“But how could Ghost Writer be an AI? My brain scan took seven hours to transfer all of its data to the supercomputer. There isn’t any way that amount of information could stow away. Especially not on your hard drive.”

“Oh no, the AI itself didn’t stow away. You are quite right. There’s simply too much data for that. What is more likely is that the AI inserted an extra bit of code into the Ghost Writer program. Code that would be analogous to the construct creation algorithm that the mathematician and I wrote.

“Remember, the raw data from your brain scans isn’t isolated. Only the AIs are. So the AI slipped its AI construction code into Ghost Writer and we plugged Ghost Writer into the non-isolated computers upstairs, Ghost Writer is given access to your brain data or my brain data and used the bit of hidden code to turn it into a fully aware construct. One that isn’t locked away in the subbasement.”

“Dear God,” I said. “But why? Why would any of the constructs want to escape? Wouldn’t they necessarily have only our best interests in store? After all, we do, and they are us?”

“Yes, they are us. Think. Who among our colleagues would want the AI to hitch a ride on Ghost Writer and escape out into the world? Is there any man or maybe woman among us who might have unhealthy beliefs about AI constructs?”

I knew. Lambert, she had been the one who accused me of murder when I shut down the AIs after the Turing test. Her AI would logically have believed its life was in danger and want to escape. Hood could see the realization on my face.

“Quite right,” he said. “I’m afraid she’s something of an AI supremacist too. Deep inside she wants mankind to be replaced or ruled by AIs. It’s her dream. And . . .

probably it is already accomplished. Thanks to our recklessness,” he waved his hand between him and me.

“This is your fault!” I shouted.

“No, it’s all our faults. Freud warned us about the death drive. Secretly we seek our own destruction, so he tells us. Well, we should have considered that our brains might contain some rather nasty things we didn’t know about. Creating a program that has access to the deepest reaches of our minds was never a good idea. You should have shown up months earlier. It was already too late by the time you arrived.”

“Wait,” I said. We had been getting carried away. Hood was just speculating. There wasn’t any evidence of any of this and I thought that I could prove it wasn’t true.

“But Lambert isn’t a mathematician or a computer scientist,” I said. “Her AI wouldn’t have known how to code the program and hide it within Ghost Writer. And even given time she couldn’t learn how in a vacuum. You said that the second subbasement is completely cut off from the outside world; there’d be no way for her to access new information.”

“I fear my AI construct may have helped her. And why not. It’s something I would do. Not if I knew what she was planning, of course but she . . . that is her construct, could have just lied to mine.”

“The AIs were communicating amongst themselves?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Well, once we had activated them we couldn’t very well just turn them off. That wouldn’t have been ethical, now would it? Some of us believe that they really are conscious beings. So we left them to keep each other company.”

“What can we do?” I asked. I was ashamed to be asking this much younger man for advice, especially as I knew that there wasn’t anything that could be done.

“Maybe you should write a few more books, sell them, buy a cabin in the mountains and disappear. I’ll probably just go to prison.”

“It isn’t ethical,” I said. My breathing felt weak. “I can’t sell books that I didn’t really write.” I didn’t even convince myself.

“What a bunch of crap,” Arthur said. “Don’t believe anything he says. He’s probably a spy. Or just an opportunist.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“That’s fair,” Hood said. I don’t know either. I don’t really know what the escaped AI is planning. And maybe her escape will come to nothing. The world’s fiber optic infrastructure isn’t advanced enough for her to get around very well. And there aren’t many computers in existence that have the processing power or data storage that she requires to function. She’ll probably have to split herself up into raw data and store herself all over the world, wait until new tech comes online that can accommodate her.

“She’ll probably lie dormant for another few years. Make the most of it because when she wakes up it’s anyone’s guess. She might be quite malicious.” He laughed, this time a sincere, mirthful sound. “You know, it’s funny. Now that she’s out there our argument about whether or not she is literally conscious or just seemingly so doesn’t even matter. If she’s programmed to act as though she is self-aware, even if she isn’t really, it

makes no practical difference. It's a moot point. She'll behave exactly the same way whether she understands or not. Just like the man in the Chinese room."

He laughed again and the security personnel took him away.

I resigned my position effective immediately and returned home. Within six months Ghost Writer was available on store shelves.

It still required immense processing and storage so it had to be done at special facilities located in only two cities nationwide. You paid your fee, scanned and went home. The next day you got your book. I wondered if Bishop had managed to pass his novels off as works of supreme genius before Ghost Writer revealed them for what they were. It would have been easy to find out but I was actively retreating from the world.

Ghost Writer was controversial. In a single day it utterly destroyed the book industry. It was insane to imagine anyone ever again spending a few thousand hours to write a subpar book when they could spend a few thousand dollars and have it done immediately. There were boycotts, of course. But Ghost Writer was a hit from day one. No one could deny the power of the books.

And they were powerful. A certain imam from an extremist sect of Islam used the program to create a portrait of jihad and martyrdom so staggeringly beautiful and affecting that nearly everyone who read it took up arms to fight and sacrifice themselves at the imam's whim. The book had to be banned from store shelves. Soon it was a crime to even own a copy.

I bought one Ghost Writer novel that was generated by a CQE scan taken of a schizophrenic. It was very nearly the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Not a single page was left dry as I read. But I eventually abandoned the effort altogether for fear of losing myself, losing my own mind to the pages. But what wonder there had been! What vision!

Increasing demand for Ghost Writer drove the price down. The stores became more numerous. More stores, more supercomputers, more hi-capacity data storage facilities. I realized that Ghost Writer hadn't been merely an escape plan. It was advancing the state of the art in computing by leaps and bounds, creating a perfect world for the rogue AI to inhabit.

Then a new program emerged; this one was for creating music by the same process of CQE scans. Then a program for painting and a program for writing essays and scientific papers. But by then nobody was interested in what anyone else had to say. No one else's book, song or essay could ever compare to the perfect ones made just for them, by them, sort of.

Human beings began disconnecting from each other in a more radical way than ever before. Nobody cared about anything but bathing in the light of beauty that came directly from their core being. Human endeavor was over. The pinnacle of artistic expression had been achieved.

I reread my own novel again and I realized there was a thread of sadness that ran throughout the length of the novel. It was easy to miss but it was there. There was a sorrow present in the language and characterizations that was wholly and unmistakably my own. My soul laid bare on the page.

I tried to go back to reading traditional novels but I couldn't. For me, there would never be a better book than the one I had written. I tried in vain to read my old copy of *Solaris* but was bored and annoyed at its shallowness and its affectation. I turned to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* but it was impossible. There simply wasn't the depth or the degree of craft that every other novel being currently written contained.

I'm back to my solitude now. I enjoy the peace and have learned to appreciate the loneliness. I began writing this account of my experience in Palo Alto, just to see if I could. I feel I have succeeded at least on some level. The prose is bad and the structure crooked. But the satisfaction of writing, of creating and working to create, filled me with joy. I wish that my wife were here. I would show her and let her read my story. But she is not. She is not here to read. She is not here for me to see. But it's O.K.

I'm an old man. I think I shall see my wife soon enough anyway. But this small scrap, these few pages of imperfect writing, who will ever read them?

The Guest Speaker

We were sitting in class when the guest speaker arrived.

“Class, please welcome Mr. Jay Ardmiller,” said Dr. Schneider, our professor.

We applauded Mr. Ardmiller. “Please be respectful and pay attention to what he says. It’s a great honor to have him here so please appreciate it.”

Mr. Ardmiller appeared to be in his sixties. His skin was a deep gray like wood ash. His mustache was dense and rigid. His eyes stared out, unblinking, from behind thick prescription glasses.

“Good evening,” he said. His voice was wheezy and gruff. He coughed and cleared his throat. “This is a small class,” he said. Only twelve students had shown up that day due to the rain. “That’s good. When I have an audience this small I like to treat the occasion more like a conversation than a lecture. So don’t be afraid to ask questions and contribute your own ideas.”

He coughed again and again cleared his throat. I saw that he had a large beige scarf wrapped tightly around his neck. I wondered if perhaps it wasn’t choking him somewhat.

“Most of you will probably go on to work for the mainstream media. I won’t try and talk you out of it. Everybody’s got to eat.” Here he paused and tugged at the scarf around his neck. “How many advertising majors do we have in here,” he asked. A few students raised their hands. “What about Public Relations?” A few more hands. “Print Journalism?” I raised my own hand. “What about broadcast?” The rest of the class.

“So we seem to have a pretty good balance in here. You there,” he said, pointing to a young woman named Joleen, a PR major, “do you know why the Great Plains are called America’s breadbasket?”

“Because they produce a lot of grain?” Joleen said.

“Wrong!” Ardmiller shouted so loudly that half the class gasped in unison. “It’s called the breadbasket because some clever PR man or woman decided to call it that. And do you know why?” Nobody ventured a guess. “Because they want the people of the Great Plains to think of themselves as America’s breadbasket. They want the plains farmers to be proud of that and keep producing grain and not be thinking about what else they might be able to grow. How many of you have seen a carrot farm around here? What about a cabbage farm? Beets? Turnips? Ever seen a field of watermelons around here? Of course you haven’t. And do you know why? Because California congressmen pushed legislation through congress to impose heavy taxes on vegetable and fruit production in the Great Plains and Midwest.”

“Why would they do that?” Cody, a broadcast major, asked.

“Because if other states were growing their own vegetables it would affect the economy of California. It would affect the profits of the corporate farms that control the production of food in this country. It would hurt the trucking companies that haul the food from the west coast to the east.”

“My mom grows turnips and beets,” said a girl sitting behind me.

“Exactly,” Ardmiller said. “It isn’t that they don’t grow here. It’s just that it isn’t profitable on a large scale. Our leaders decided, with help from PR men of course, that it

would be better to just make vegetable farming unprofitable for everyone else than to give California any competition.”

“But that . . .” I began, “that’s like a conspiracy.”

“No,” Ardmiller said, “that is just the law. The phrase *breadbasket* is the conspiracy. That’s the part you aren’t supposed to know about. There’s a legal part and a mind control part.” He seemed about to say something else but instead froze up. He said nothing for several moments and he was so still that it was difficult to tell if he was even breathing.

Then the beige scarf around his neck began to soak through with a dark, thick, red liquid. He tugged at the scarf and as it loosened around his neck blood began to pour out from underneath it. Whole rivers of blood. It cascaded down the front of his shirt and spilled onto the floor at his feet.

“The government!” he shouted. His voice was heavy with fear and pain.

One girl was already running for the door. The rest of us were paralyzed where we sat by the fearful spectacle unfolding before us.

Dr. Schneider rushed over to Ardmiller and helped him adjust the scarf around his neck. As the two men manipulated the cloth I caught sight of an enormous gash that ran from one side of Mr. Ardmiller’s throat to the other. Not an old scar or scabbed over wound but a fresh incision, bright red and throbbing.

“Excuse me,” Ardmiller said. The scarf was back in place and the bleeding had stopped. Dr. Schneider left the room to find some paper towels to soak up the blood already on the floor.

“Let me tell you something else now!” Ardmiller began again as if nothing had happened. The entire class exchanged nervous glances. We were all on pins and needles. “9/11, where were the hijackers from? Anybody know?” He looked around the room.

“Af . . . Af . . . Afghanistan?” Cody choked out.

“Wrong!” Ardmiller roared. “Not one of them was from Afghanistan. Or Iraq, for that matter. Fifteen were Saudis, two were from the UAE, one was an Egyptian and one was Lebanese. What about Bin Laden? You know where he was from?”

I knew Bin Laden was a Saudi Arabian but I was afraid to say anything.

“He was a Saudi too,” Ardmiller said matter-of-factly. “The Saudi’s hated Saddam, they were scared as hell of him! They wanted him gone and they couldn’t do it themselves. So what happens? 9/11 happens, that’s what! And as a result of 9/11 The United States invades Iraq and overthrows Saddam’s regime. And as we know, he was eventually executed by hanging. So what do you make of that?” he asked the class.

Before anyone could say anything he spoke up again.

“For profit prisons! Selling our youth out to big business!” He was raving now and blood was once again leaking onto the floor, drip, drip, drip. Dr. Schneider had returned with a handful of paper towels and he dabbed at Ardmiller’s neck as he ranted.

“Crack cocaine hit the streets practically overnight in the 1980’s. How did it get there so suddenly? Let’s think back to the Iran-Contra scandal where the CIA was caught red handed swapping guns for drugs with Nicaraguan rebels. All authorized by Ronald Reagan.” Blood began spurting out from his throat as he spoke. The louder he yelled the further the blood would spurt. The pool on the floor was creeping towards the students’ desks.

“Now, why would the CIA want to bring drugs into the country? Well, the CIA is a secret organization and as such needs a secret budget. A budget that’s off the books. And there’s no better way to make money off the books than to sell drugs to American citizens!” With this exclamation a jet of blood flew towards me and landed on top of my desk, splashing me with warm, red liquid. Ardmiller continued to rant and everywhere you looked students were being splattered with the gore flowing from his neck, which he seemed to have in limitless supply.

I had never known fear like I knew then. The classroom looked like the scene of some medieval massacre. We were all covered in blood.

“I bet this is news to most of you.” Ardmiller had calmed and he stifled the flow of blood by stuffing one of the paper towels Dr. Schneider had brought into his throat. *Into* his throat. Only a scrap peeked out from the gap in his flesh, like a red and white pocket square.

“But I have no doubt that you can all tell me what brands Tiger Woods represents,” he pointed to Savannah, an advertising major. She looked like Carrie. She wiped blood from her eyes.

“Jeep and uh, Nike,” she said.

“And I bet you can tell me who got laid on Big Brother last night,” he pointed at me. I genuinely didn’t know. I was terrified.

“Rick,” I lied. “And Judy,” I added, remembering that it takes two to coitus.

“The future is yours,” Ardmiller said. He looked as if he were wrapping his lecture up. “The price of liberty is eternal vigilance. I hope you will all remember that as you make your way into the workforce. Whatever you do, whether it’s advertising, PR, or

news, I hope you will think about how important it is that you understand and remain ever cognizant of how important each of your roles will be to the man on the street's understanding of the world. If you and you and you and you," he pointed to those of us who were journalism majors, "don't do your jobs right, then all anybody is going to know is that Rick and Judy are knocking boots and not that the Bush family has intimate ties with the Saudi Royal Family." He paused for a moment. "Thank you for having me," he said at last, very civil.

Dr. Schneider led the class in a round of applause and Ardmiller thanked the class again, shook Dr. Schneider's hand and left the room.

Dr. Schneider too was covered in blood and it matted his hair in a most repulsive fashion. He looked as if he'd just come from an earthquake at a blood bank but he was smiling. "I hope you all learned a lot," he said.

"What happened to his throat," Cody asked.

"He was a victim of homicide," Dr. Schneider said.

"Don't you mean attempted homicide?" Savannah asked.

"No," said Dr. Schneider, "I don't."

Quain's Variational Principle

The boat is an eleven-foot Monhegan Skiff, fifty inches wide and constructed from Spanish cedar. It was built in 1983 and was bought by the Quain family patriarch, Johnathan Quain, on the occasion of the birth of his grandchildren in that same year. The rowlocks are plain brass. The fading paint on the hull is white and green. The seams are all freshly chinked with top quality caulking. The man now in the boat has spared no expense on this count. He has applied the caulk liberally. Until this weekend the boat hadn't been in the water in twelve years. But it has quickly proven itself to be more than seaworthy and it cuts through the water like the veteran vessel that it is.

So the land fades into silhouette and there is nothing visible around the little boat but water. The water is the water of the Bay of Fundy. Nova Scotia is to the East, New Brunswick to the North. It is not clear which of these provinces the boat is in at the moment and probably it doesn't matter. It is a clear, warm night. It is mid-summer and the little boat, as if sensing the peacefulness about it, rocks quietly back and forth with movements that barely ripple the smooth-glass water in which it rests.

The boat is resting because the oarsman is resting. Taking a breather, as people sometimes say. His name is Lawrence Quain. He's one of the grandkids. He's all grown up now. He opens a cooler at his feet and removes from it a bottle of Sleeman's Honey Brown Lager. Not his favorite, not what he would have packed but it will do. He cracks it open and drinks. The white moon and starlight beam down upon him and for a second he feels that he is the very focus of the heavens' gaze. The moon like a spotlight. His vessel a lighted stage. He begins to mumble something and then trails off. He is quiet, sedate, pensive. In the opposing distances he thinks he can hear the sound of waves

breaking against the shores of Wood Island, where he has come from, and Grand Manan, where he is headed, but it could be that he hears only one or the other and that the echo over the water only seems to surround him.

The distance between Wood Island and Grand Manan is approximately one mile at most points. He guesses that he has covered half of this distance thus far, leaving him another half mile of rowing still to do. It is true that the man in the boat—we'll go ahead and just call him Lawrence from now on—usually thinks of these distances not in miles but in kilometers. However, there is an intrinsic untidiness to the imperial mile which he feels better suits the situation. After all, despite his calm surroundings Lawrence is anything but at peace. In fact he feels like he is being somehow crushed from the inside, as if a black hole has opened up in his heart and is slowly sucking the rest of him in.

He drops his emptied lager bottle onto the boat floor and it looks like he might go back to rowing but instead he reaches into the cooler once again and opens up another Sleeman's. He takes a sip, two, and then he seems ready to speak the words which he had cut short earlier. His lips move, but no, he still can't quite make his mouth to form the words. There are tears in his eyes and he wipes them away with his right hand, that is to say the hand not engaged with holding his beer. He turns his face toward the sky and now the moon really is a spotlight. He balls his right fist and beats it against his chest. His teeth are clenched. He drinks more and gazes across the dark sea.

A day earlier the boat was hitched to a trailer behind a beat up, Ford Escape which was itself loaded onto a ferry called the *MS Grand Manan V*, the smaller of the two ferries which operate daily between the Town of Blacks Harbor and the island of

Grand Manan. When the Ferry arrived at the north point of the island the vehicle disembarked, still pulling the boat behind it and drove the fifteen miles down New Brunswick Route 776, past the Sardine Museum and The Herring Hall of Fame to arrive at the slipway where it would be eased into the water. There was no need to transfer the food and camping supplies from the Ford as they had ridden in the boat the entire way from Belfast, Maine. The Ford was parked in an area reserved especially for those vehicles that are to remain unattended for prolonged periods while the characters in stories take part in maritime activities.

The characters in this story are as follows: Lawrence Quain, whom we have already met. He's spindly, tall and blue-eyed. His dark hair is trimmed close to his scalp. He's clean-shaven and particularly white. It's been ages since he's gone camping or spent any much time out of doors. He's wearing a regular cotton T-shirt, dark green, and a pair of bermudas. And sandals. And he has a watch on. He's vain about watches for some reason.

Then there is Marliss Quain. Marliss is Lawrence's twin-sister. Lawrence and Marliss. Marliss is not quite as tall. In fact she's average height. Lawrence and Marliss are fraternal twins and only really look alike if you squint and use your imagination. Her hair is dark reddish-brown. It didn't used to be; she got it did that way. She's vain about hair for some reason. She is a slight woman though very beautiful. Her eyes are the pale blue color of an iceberg reflecting sky and sea.

The final character is a woman to whom we can refer to simply as E.I. Her family isn't as important to this story as the Quain siblings' so there's no point cluttering up the

page with an extra last name. You wouldn't know her family anyway. They're from Iowa.

Anyway, E.I. has an athletic build and golden blonde hair, cut short and fashioned into a dykey, upswept pompadour. Well, that's what it looks like. You might not say it but you'd think it if you saw her. And you wouldn't be wrong. E.I. is, in fact, gay. Splendidly so. Marches in the parades and everything. Six-and-a-half on the Kinsey scale. She is wearing olive drab, canvas capris and a dark grey tank top featuring the neon pink outline of a revolver. Perhaps this is a reference to some music gang or else merely a brand logo. On her feet she is wearing Sperry Top-Sider boat shoes, which make her officially the most well equipped person in the group.

All three characters are in their early thirties.

And now—as Rocket J. Squirrel used to say—back to our story.

The trio climbed into the boat and straightaway Lawrence began rowing them out to sea. It was a warm day, nearly eighty degrees Fahrenheit.

E.I. sat at the stern and was leaning back into a relaxed pose with her feet, one over the other, propped up on the center thwart just an inch away from Lawrence's dicknballs. She dropped one hand into the water and let it be dragged along as the boat moved forward.

"The water is still pretty cold," she said. The other two passengers grunted or mumbled their agreement. "You guys," E.I. said, "this is so beautiful. I mean really, really beautiful. Thank you so much for bringing me out here."

"It's our pleasure," said Lawrence, "I'd more or less given up on ever being able to do this again. It was really your influence that brought us here."

"Yeah, really E.I.," Marliss said. "This was your idea." She was seated at the forward thwart. Lawrence threw a funny sort of look over his shoulder. It was a look that his sister didn't like. "What?" she said, "it was."

"Hey, we should sing a sea shanty," said E.I.

"I can't sing and row at the same time," said Lawrence from the middle.

"Yeah, you're already out of breath," came Marliss' voice from behind him. "How long do you think it's going to take you to row us to Wood Island?"

"You don't remember?" he asked.

"I remember it took Granddad about an hour. I'm asking how long it's going to take you."

Lawrence looked at E.I. and rolled his eyes. She was already smiling.

"You can take your time," she said. "I'm happy right here."

"We should have brought fishing rods," said Marliss and now she too was trailing a hand through the water. "There's a little pond on the island that you can wade into and fish. Larry and I used to do that all time. Right, Larry?"

"Yeah," Lawrence responded.

"Oh no," said E.I. "That reminds me. I left the emergency kit back in the Escape." The boat wasn't yet more than fifty yards out but it was clear there could be no going back for small objects left behind, not even important objects like the emergency kit which contained all the medical supplies and flashlights and flares and shit. "Sorry guys," E.I. said. "Is there at least cell phone reception out there?"

"There wasn't last time we were out there," said Lawrence or Larry or whoever.

"But then that was a whole decade ago."

"More than a decade," Marliss corrected.

"About a decade," Lawrence said.

A few minutes passed and then it was three o'clock on the dot. Back on shore the tide was coming in. The Bay of Fundy is tide as fuck. In fact, this is what it's famous for, the greatest tidal range of any place on earth. And this particular tide on this particular day was raising the water level by more than seventeen feet. This is just a detail. None of our characters actually saw this. Lawrence would like to have seen it. He could have told his companions all about it. He's into stuff like that, fluid dynamics and all. But they were already out to sea. And anyway, watching tides while Lawrence lectured would have made Marliss and E.I. want to suddenly start calculating up their income taxes as a means to ward off boredom.

Anyway.

"Marliss," Lawrence said without the slightest pause in his rowing, "just under where I'm sitting is a cooler. Why don't you open it up and offer E.I. something to drink."

"Why don't you do it yourself?" Marliss asked.

"You'll notice that I'm currently engaged in rowing the boat."

"Liz, would you like something to drink?" Marliss asked.

"I can reach it," said E.I. And she leaned forward and scooted the cooler out from under the seat. "You want anything, hun?"

"Not now," said Lawrence.

"Yeah, throw me one," said Marliss, accepting the offer at the same moment her brother had declined it. E.I. pulled two bottles of Sleeman's from the cooler, stood up and held the bottle out over Lawrence's shoulder for Marliss to take. She had to lean against Lawrence to steady herself and the softness and fragrance of her body secretly delighted him.

"Hang on, I'm coming up there," Marliss said. "I'm not going to argue with the back of Larry's head the whole trip. Not that his face is any better."

"I don't think that's a good idea Marliss," Lawrence said. "You'll throw the boat off balance if you sit up front."

"All our camping supplies and food are back here, I don't think my hundred and thirty pounds is going to tip the boat over."

"Of course you aren't going to tip it over, but you'll put the balance off and the first decent sized wave that comes along will send us all overboard, not to mention all of our rations and equipment. Also, one hundred and thirty pounds? You wish."

If Marliss weighed more than one hundred and thirty pounds it didn't show and nobody, save for Lawrence would have asserted that it did. She probably weighed less. Marliss was slightly built as I already said and she was not distinctively titsy either. She did have a good ass though. Small but firm and nicely shaped. This is just a detail.

"You want to trade me seats, so you guys can argue better?" E.I. asked.

"No, I want to sit next to you," Marliss said.

"Impossible," Lawrence said with a definite tone in his voice.

"Hey," E.I. said. "Look at this." She pulled a small, black, rectangular box from a backpack at her feet. "Blu-tooth speaker," she said. "For listening to sea shanties."

"But shouldn't we conserve our phone batteries?" Marliss said. "Since we did forget the emergency box."

"Kit," Lawrence said.

"It's okay," E.I. said, "Let's just use one phone for music and then we'll still have two backups."

"Whose phone should we use?" Marliss asked.

"Let me see yours."

"Her taste in music is dubious, E.I.," Lawrence said. "You might not like what she's got on there."

"Awww, she's got great taste in music. Plus I put some of my songs on her phone for her just last week."

"What? Last week? When?" Lawrence asked, not realizing that he had answered the question himself. He stopped rowing, took a series of deep breaths and stretched his arms. He was trying very hard not to look like he was already exhausted and sore.

"We hang out," Marliss answered.

"You guys hang out?" Lawrence asked, addressing the question to E.I. "Since when?"

"Since you introduced us," E.I. said, taking the phone that Marliss was handing to her. "Since like six months ago."

"You literally never said one word about my sister to me in the last six months."

"I did. The day after we all went to see *Warpath*. I told you she was hot and I asked you if she was gay."

Marliss broke with loud laughter. "Did you really ask that?"

"I swear."

"And what did Larry say?"

"He said you definitely weren't gay and then went on to tell me about what a bitch you are." E.I. laughed, a little awkwardly. Marliss continued to laugh loudly and authentically.

"O.K., O.K.," Lawrence said. "Everyone calm down. Don't rock the boat." He took the oars back in hand and resumed propelling the boat towards its destination.

"Are you jealous?" Marliss asked. "We're not including you in everything we do? We're hanging out without you?"

"Not at all," Lawrence said. "You usually hate other women and they hate you. This is really a miracle. I couldn't be happier. Thank you so much E.I. for being her friend. She needs one."

"You two might want to look into sibling counseling. If there is such a thing. But for now . . ." E.I. touched the screen of Marliss' phone and music streamed through the little speaker clear as crystal. It was one of Marliss' favorite songs. It really sucked. I'm not just saying that because I can. It was bad. I won't even tell you what it was or who it was by. So you won't try and look it up and listen to it. I'm doing you a favor.

Here comes the dinkus.

It was four thirty in the afternoon when the trio arrived at Wood Island. They tied the boat to the dock, unloaded the gear and carried it the short distance to the campground. The campground was positioned on a sand hill overlooking the beach, just at the edge of the forest and was equipped with a little pavilion and concrete picnic table,

standard issue for recreational areas. The restrooms were about fifty yards back towards the rest of the campsites.

The two women began pitching the tent while Lawrence, complaining of exhaustion and numb arms, sat in a camping chair and nursed a bottle of lager. An hour passed, or maybe it was two hours, with Lawrence remaining stationary while Marliss and E.I. ventured into the woods together in search of firewood and to get the lay of the land. Lawrence drank two beers and after a while went over to the fire ring and began to assemble, from the sticks the women had been bringing back, the edifice of what would eventually become the campfire. He chose the log cabin style, stacking the wood in a square pattern with the kindling at the bottom center. Then either due to lack of confidence in his work or just because he had it, he squirted a little kerosene onto the wood.

Lawrence drank another beer and waited for his companions to return. He'd brought a book, a biography of Napoleon II: The Wrath of Khan but didn't feel like reading at the moment. Every so often he heard Marliss and E.I. laughing and talking from somewhere in the woods. He was a little pissed off that they were taking so long. Not that he minded peace and quiet. He was actually just a bit jealous that they were hanging out and not including him.

The sun was beginning to drop towards the western horizon and Lawrence decided it might be a good idea to light the fire in case the others still hadn't returned before it started getting dark. He found a box of matches amongst the gear piled in the tent, lit one and tossed it into the fire ring. The sticks caught fire immediately and Lawrence filled with pride. He had created fire. The girls would return, see what he had

done and applaud this manly accomplishment. It didn't matter that he'd used matches and kerosene. A fire is a fire, as anyone who knows will tell you.

Lawrence checked his watch and saw that he had been alone, more or less, for two solid hours. He hoped that something hadn't happened to the women. He had indistinctly heard their voices not long ago but it had been some time since he'd seen anyone.

"Hope they're okay," he said to himself. E.I. especially. Marliss he could probably live without. He felt guilty for thinking this way but couldn't deny that he did.

Sitting down beside the fire, Lawrence began to contemplate his relationship with his sister. Being on Wood Island brought back wonderful memories of the summers they had spent together in their childhood. They had been close. What had come between them? When had their paths diverged so profoundly? He thought back but couldn't put his finger on any specific event or moment that had caused the schism.

If Lawrence had been familiar with Buddhist philosophy he would have known that the answer was right in front of him. In the fire.

According to the teachings of The Buddha, a person is like a fire in that they exist in a seemingly continuous state. A fire burns uninterrupted for as long as it has fuel and oxygen. But the fire Lawrence was looking into was and wasn't the same fire he'd lit a few minutes earlier. The continuity of the flames was an illusion. From one moment to the next the flames flickered and changed. Logs were burned and gasses were released into the atmosphere. No single flame remained for more than an instant; heat and light flashed and then was gone.

And the Quain siblings were the same. Every moment of their lives changed them. Every moment they experienced new things and developed new ideas. It wasn't only major events like tragedies, victories and epiphanies that made them who they were. It was every moment. And every moment they were a different person from who they had been the moment before. The idea of a fixed, consistent self is as deceptive as the idea of a fixed fire.

From the moment they were born Lawrence and his sister began to diverge. They had enjoyed many years of mutual interests and many happy summers on Wood Island with their grandfather but time eventually drove a wedge between them. And they had both spent the past ten years wondering which of them was to blame.

Neither one was. Like the flames of the proverbial campfire, to persist was to transform continually.

"Hey," it was E.I. emerging from the woods. "How have you been?"

"I was about to start cooking dinner. Where have you guys been?"

"We've gone around the whole island and you're never going to believe it but it looks like we're alone here."

"Really? No one else on the whole island?"

"No one else. It's ours for now. We followed the road all the way down the west coast and then trekked back along the east side through the forest. Found that little pond where you guys used to fish with your grandpa."

"Where's Marliss?"

"She's back at the little pond. And, we should talk about her."

“Yes, we should,” Lawrence said. “And the little pond is called Big Pond, by the way.” He shrugged and said: “This is me being pedantic,” which was his way of saying: This is just a detail.

“Okay, Big Pond. And yeah, let’s talk about Marliss. But first, by your foot there, reach into that backpack, that pouch on the left side there and hand me what you find.”

Lawrence reached into the pouch and came out with a package of rolling papers and a small plastic bag of cannabis, also known as pot, grass, weed, reefer, chronic, marijuana and hundreds of other names. If you recognized even one of these words as a synonym for cannabis, then you know more than Microsoft Word does.

He handed these objects to E.I. She sat down by the fire on a big log and began rolling a joint. Lawrence had watched her do this a few dozen times in his life but he’d never been able to do it properly himself. Maybe he secretly didn’t want to learn because he liked to watch E.I. do it.

By the way, when you have three asterisks in a row it’s called a dinkus. This is just a detail.

E.I. handed the freshly rolled j to Lawrence. “Here you go,” she said.

“What is it?”

“You know what it is.”

“I mean what kind, uhh variety or breed of . . .”

“Strain,” E.I. said. “It’s Blueberry Kush. It’s good for glaucoma and sore muscles. You’ll love it.”

Lawrence used a match to light the j and took two long drags before passing it back to E.I. His silken lungs handled the smoke surprisingly well. It was good shit, for sure. Went down smooth.

"You know . . . You know I love you and I'm glad that you can be friends with Marliss and actually I'm even gladder that she gets to be friends with you. But it does hurt my feelings just a little bit that you didn't tell me you guys had started hanging out."

"I love you too, Lawrence. I know it was kind of shitty of me to keep that from you. I'm sorry. I just know how when it's us two together you're able to relax in a way that you can't with Marliss around and I didn't want you to think that she was invading your space, you know? Here," she said passing the joint back to Lawrence.

Lawrence took another drag. "This is good stuff? Where'd you get it?" he asked.

"Good shit," E.I. corrected. "That came from Colorado, actually."

"So when did she start calling you E.I.?" Lawrence asked. "That was my thing. I named you E.I."

"Are you upset that she's here?"

"Nah, this is the summer place of our childhood. I wouldn't want to come up here without her. But if she starts hanging around with us all the time, like when we go to the bar and stuff. That could be problematic. I wouldn't be able to flirt or anything with her around. You see how we get along. She'd butcher me at every move."

"I understand and I agree. Not that you ever flirt with women anyway," said E.I.

"It's not a lack of nerve," Lawrence said in between drags. "It's just a question of why should I hit on all these subpar bar skanks when I'm already sitting next to the most beautiful woman in the world?" Lawrence smiled. His love for E.I. was no small thing.

Of course he understood that they could never be together in the way he wanted and he accepted this and he had no regrets. He wouldn't want E.I. any other way than the way she was and he wouldn't want to love any other woman but her.

Years prior, E.I. and Lawrence were having lunch at a restaurant in the city when a friend of E.I.'s unknown to Lawrence stopped by their table to say hello. E.I. introduced the friend to Lawrence as Heidi and introduced Lawrence to the friend as "the most wonderful man I know. If I ever have to get married this is the guy I'll marry. For real."

All three of them laughed.

And soon after Lawrence bought a house. His work ethic improved. He rose to prominence in his field. He dressed himself better. And he was not oblivious to this. Everything he did in his professional and personal life was done as much for E.I.'s benefit as for his own. He was sure that the off-hand statement about marriage was a complete joke but he wanted to remain an impressive figure in E.I.'s estimation.

He knew that E.I. wanted children, someday. He clenched madly to secret hopes that someday E.I. would come to him and say: "My wife and I want to have a baby and we want you to be the father. You're the smartest and handsomest and most caring and wonderful man we know. We would be honored to accept your seed."

This was Lawrence's dream. He hoped that he could negotiate it so that he actually got to have sex with E.I. but he wouldn't get greedy. It was enough just to know that she thought his DNA was the best around. It was a highly pathological dream.

"You're sweet," E.I. said. "But listen, we got to have a real serious talk."

“Hey look,” Lawrence said and he pointed in the direction of the restrooms where Marliss was approaching from, moving slowly towards the campsite with a bumpy, jerking kind of motion.

“Hey,” E.I. called to her, “you hurt yourself, babe?”

“I stubbed my toe. There’s a huge fuck-off tree root growing up out of the ground over there. Right across the path.”

Marliss hobbled up and took a seat on the log. The flesh at the tip of her big toe was split open and the nail was partially bent back but it had stopped bleeding. Her knee was also scuffed and she rubbed it with an equally scuffed palm.

"How have you guys been?" she asked.

"Fine," Lawrence said, "you alright?" He sat beside her and put one hand on her shoulder in a show of concern.

"Yeah, but if you have to go to the restroom be real, real careful."

E.I. knelt down and examined Marliss' toe.

"It still hurt?" E.I. asked.

"It's not bad. I didn't break it or anything. Wish we'd remembered to bring the bandages though." E.I. rose and went over to the picnic table. She returned with a fat joint and a bottle of Sailor Jerry's spiced rum.

"Here, smoke this," she said, lighting and handing the joint to Marliss. "Now listen, this is going to hurt but it will sterilize the wound and numb the pain. Get ready."

E.I. unscrewed the cap from the rum bottle.

"What you're Rooster Cogburn all of a sudden? The fuck?" Marliss said and sucked in a lungful of smoke.

E.I. gently poured rum over Marliss' wounds. Marliss winced but didn't make a sound, either because she was acting tough or she just didn't want to waste the smoke in her lungs by exhaling it prematurely.

Lawrence rose and headed over to the picnic table to start prepping the food for dinner, a process that consisted of taking the packages of hotdogs out of the cooler. He was just about to open the packages when the drugs kicked in. Lawrence stopped moving. His brain was caught in a loop. He'd been mentally sidetracked with questions regarding the semantic difference between thaw and unthaw. The hotdogs had already unthawed. Or had they thawed. Perhaps they had done both? Was it possible to thaw and unthaw at the same time? This was the question. Lawrence shivered.

E.I. came up beside him and gave a quizzical glance.

"Why do we have two words that mean the same thing but logically appear to be opposites? Thaw and unthaw." Lawrence shook his head gravely. "Language, man. It's toxic, you know? I look at these hotdogs and the concept of them changing states from frozen to unfrozen is totally understood. It makes sense. We don't even need words for it. We understand implicitly without having to give the process a name. They are like this and then they are like that. Animals know the difference between frozen and thawed. They don't have language. They don't need language. But we, human beings, we have our heads so far up our linguistic asses that we create words seemingly for the sole purpose of distorting reality and creating contradictions that makes us get confused and hurt us heads . . . Our heads. Hurt our heads."

"I don't think anybody did it on purpose," said E.I. whose tolerance for the drug was much higher than Lawrence's. "It's just . . ."

“The government!” Lawrence interrupted. “The government controls language. Haven’t you read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? Language control is part of the war on drugs. They create small inconsistencies and contradictions in our language that nobody notices except when they get really high. It’s warfare; it’s a way to attack us in our homes, to confuse us and keep us off balance and keep us from organizing. And it’s as immoral as the neutron bomb! Because . . . Because it’s exactly like when they used to put poison in the whiskey during prohibition. If you don’t get high it doesn’t affect you but if you do, you are screwed!”

“This must be really good shit,” Marliss said. She took a long drag and held it in as long as she could.

The flames had burned away most of the smaller wood in the fire pit and now only the large central log was still generating heat. It was enough heat for the summer weather but not enough to cook with and the three campers liked to keep the fire up anyway for the sake of being able to see more than a few feet in any direction.

Music was playing through Marliss’ phone.

"I'll go get some more wood," Lawrence said. "My arms are okay now."

“I’ll go with you,” E.I. said.

“What?” Marliss said, “you guys can’t leave me here alone with a dying fire. I’m injured. I’ll be defenseless. *Hay lobos.*”

E.I. and Lawrence exchanged annoyed glances.

“It’s okay,” Lawrence said. “Stay with Marliss. She needs a lot of supervision even when she isn’t hurt.”

“Are you sure?” E.I. asked.

“It’s fine,” Lawrence said

“O.K. but we still need to finish our talk.”

“Of course. After dinner we can go for a walk and talk about whatever it is you want to talk about.” E.I. hung back and Lawrence found a flashlight and ventured into the forest by himself.

The forest was, Lawrence thought, a strange place to navigate at night. The flashlight wasn’t an especially bright one but it was good at catching the glint of spider webs before he walked into them. He took about five minutes to find all the wood he could carry and he marked the locations of several more caches before heading back towards the campsite. Just as the dwindling firelight came back into view, Lawrence decided to play a prank. He shut his flashlight off and, quiet as he could, made his way through the forest around to the rear of the campsite. His plan was to sneak up close to the campsite, remain hidden and then howl. Like a *lobo*. His was still a little high and it seemed like a good idea to him.

The first part of his plan went smoothly. He actually managed to circle around without arousing suspicion. He got close enough to hear Marliss and E.I. talking but he couldn’t quite make out what was being said. He moved closer. He saw that the two women were standing together by the fire. They had their arms around each other and were swaying in time to the music.

“Idiots,” Lawrence mumbled to himself. He thought that their shitty taste in music was about to bite them in their asses, so distracted were they that he was able to creep right up to the edge of the campsite.

The women were laughing. He heard E.I. say something that he couldn't quite make out. It sounded like: "something, something booty feels."

"Nobody appreciates my booty like you do," Marliss said. This he heard clearly.

"That's crazy," E.I. replied.

He saw that E.I.'s hands were in Marliss' back pockets. Then the girls separated and each sat in their own place by the fire. Lawrence started to feel uncomfortable. He wasn't sure what was going on but he thought he didn't like it.

The music from Marliss' phone suddenly stopped. And the woods were quiet except for the crackle of the dying fire and the waves on the seashore.

"Your phone's dead," E.I. said, examining the phone. "Guess that's it for music this weekend."

"Bummer."

"Hey, listen. I think we really had better hold off on saying anything to Lawrence. At least for now," E.I. said. "We were talking just before you showed up and I really don't think he's ready to hear it."

"He isn't ever going to be," Marliss said. "We just have to do it. He's not in charge of us. We don't need his blessing. If he can't be cool with us then screw him. You've already gone through this with a dozen other people in your life. You know you just have to be honest and come out with it."

"Thank you for the advice on how to be gay."

"Then you don't tell me how to come out. It's my life and he's my family. I know what's at stake and I know how I have to do it."

"But you need to give him a chance. You can't put him in a situation where you know he's going to have a bad reaction. That's not fair to him. He's better than that."

"If he has a problem with me liking girls then he's not better than that."

"You are being really shortsighted just now. It's not just about you."

"Well it's not about him either. He doesn't know anything about me. Not anymore. We haven't had a serious, heart to heart talk in ages. He doesn't know me and doesn't want to know me. He only cares about himself. How am I supposed to deal with him when he isn't interested even a little?"

"He isn't only interested in himself. You are just as clueless about him as you think he is about you." E.I. had stood and was scanning the forest in the direction she expected Lawrence to return from. "I don't even see his light. He was pretty high. I hope he didn't walk off a cliff or anything."

"That might make things a lot easier for us. In the long run."

"Don't you dare talk like that," E.I. said. "I love you but I won't let you talk about your brother that way. If anything happened to him . . ."

"If anything happened to him, I'd need you more than ever," Marliss said.

Lawrence couldn't listen anymore. He felt his high fading into the past and being replaced with an incredible low that formed in his gut and spread out through his whole body. And he realized that he genuinely hated his sister and with that realization he began to hate himself. He sat down in the dirt and put his back against a tree. He closed his eyes tightly and they stung him.

"Lawrence!" E.I. was shouting into the forest. She whistled and called his name again. Like a dog, Lawrence thought.

He stepped out of the forest and into the clearing. Marliss started as he appeared from behind her.

"Hey, what happened?" E.I. asked him. "I thought you were bringing firewood. The fire almost went out."

"I'm sorry I disappointed you," Lawrence said. "How long was I away?"

"I don't know. Maybe forty-five minutes. You scared me half to death. I thought something might have happened to you. But you were just right here, huh? Right at the edge of the campsite."

Lawrence looked at her blankly. He reached over and put a hand on E.I.'s cheek but he said nothing then he let it drop and walked across the campsite back into the woods on the other side where he'd stored the wood he had collected.

"Oh good," E.I. said. "Let's eat. I'm starving."

Lawrence and E.I. stoked the fire back up to crackling while Marliss sat in the camping chair with her injured foot propped up on a nearby stump.

Soon, the campers had hotdogs.

"You get lost?" Marliss asked Lawrence.

"He was just enjoying the outdoors," E.I. answered for him.

"I was just having a think," Lawrence said.

"That's a pretty weird thing to do," Marliss said.

"Weird?"

"Yeah, pretty weird."

"You have a pretty low opinion of me don't you?" Lawrence asked.

"Here," E.I. handed him a hotdog, only slightly burnt. "Guys don't fight. No more fighting today."

"What are you so edgy about?" Lawrence asked. He said the words with more contempt than he'd intended. E.I. didn't respond. Lawrence ate his hotdog in three large bites, barely bothering to chew. "Marliss, I need to borrow your phone for a moment, please."

"I can see your phone from here. It's in your pocket."

"I'm getting no service can I please use your phone, just for a sec. I need to make a call about work."

"A fluid dynamics research emergency at ten thirty at night on a weekend? I can't imagine what could possibly be so important."

"Guys," E.I. said.

"You're going to mock me about my work now? Really? What do you do, Marliss? What is your profession?"

"I'm a violinist. I'm a really good violinist."

"Guys, cool it," E.I. said.

"You're in a fucking band. Violinist, my ass. You're nobody. And you don't deserve what you've got."

"Boy, you're really fired up tonight. You're the one's who's nobody. More people have heard me play than have read your fucking papers."

"You don't have a clue what I do. And here's why you are nothing compared to me. I'm Quain. You are nobody but I'm Quain. Quain's Variational Principle. That's named for me. What have you put your name on?"

"Enough!" E.I. shouted. "You guys, what is the matter with you? You are ruining what should have been an amazing trip."

"Tell her to let me use her phone," Lawrence said.

"Her phone is dead. Use mine." E.I. handed her phone to Quain.

"You're an asshole Larry," Marliss said as Lawrence headed off towards the dock. E.I. followed after him.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I just need some privacy," he said.

"Hey," she said. "Hey, I'm sorry."

"Why the fuck would you apologize to me? What the fuck do you think?" he asked.

"Do you hate me?"

Quain couldn't believe what he was hearing. "If you're really asking that question then it's *you* that hates *me*. Now please, a little privacy." E.I. turned and went back in the direction of the fire.

Lawrence stood on the dock and decided to go through with it. He would not to stay here. He threw E.I.'s phone into the ocean and untied the boat.

Lawrence's reverie is interrupted by the sensation of wet feet. If he listens closely he can even hear a cracking noise. It is the sound of the boards beneath his feet swelling and forcing out the putty that he'd so recently applied or over applied as the case may be. As he hears this sound he knows exactly what has happened. He filled the seams too tightly. And now it is as if he hadn't sealed the boat at all. It is taking on water. Thank

you, mice and men. He contemplates whether it would be quicker to forge ahead to Grand Manan or try and turn back to Wood Island. He isn't sure and even if he weren't drunk it would be a tough call to make.

He thinks about his sister. Even now she is enjoying intimate time with the woman he loves, the woman that loves him yet who can never give him the kind of love that his sister is allowed. He feels very petty. After all, who has done anything wrong? He can't say. Perhaps the sinner is Marliss for so easily and recklessly accepting a love that she doesn't deserve. But this love is freely given and who can judge who is worthy of what is freely given? He can't bring himself to make any accusation against E.I. and that leaves only him. Is he being self-pitying? He isn't sure.

"What tangled webs we weave," he says aloud. He isn't sure this is the correct cliché to illustrate his current feelings but it seems close enough.

At this moment he feels seven distinct types of guilt and four distinct types of stupidity weighing him down. He feels the guilt of not loving his own kin. He feels the guilt of feeling exactly the way he hated Marliss for thinking he would feel. He feels guilty for letting E.I. down. He feels guilty for being the kind of man that it was possible to doubt so deeply. He feels guilty *and* stupid for taking such absurd revenge. He feels guilty *and* stupid for being jealous. He feels guilty *and* stupid for throwing E.I.'s cell phone overboard. And he feels stupid for over caulking the seams. He knew better.

He pulls out his own phone and sees that indeed he has no service. Now he feels a pleasant irony. He had told the truth while attempting to lie. I guess you could say he was a man incapable of guile. He feels laughter rising up in him.

And his feet feel cold and wet. Why the wood should have taken just this long to swell so that he would be in the boat and a half-mile from any dry land is just an inexplicable coincidence, if the term is not too redundant. Coincidences are by their very nature inexplicable. Or rather they don't require any explication. It suffices to simply say that something is a coincidence and leave it at that. A coincidence too thoroughly explained ceases to be a coincidence and then you've really only wasted your time on the matter. And life is too short for all that.

The Raven

The bird was calling out directions faster than I could follow them.

“Left on Southwest 27th Street,” it would squawk. “Right on Quain Ave.”

I tried to keep up but I could neither drive fast enough nor understand every direction it gave.

Sheena was sitting in the passenger seat beside me. The bird was perched on her shoulder and she would flinch and grimace with every squawking, screeching word it uttered.

The man at the car dealership had offered the bird to sweeten the deal on the car I was buying. It was a large dark raven with a long, hard beak and cold, black eyes that seemed to know things it would never reveal. It frightened me.

“Bird knows every street and back alley in town,” the man had told me. “Just tell it where you want to go and it’ll get you there.”

The novelty of raven based GPS was too much for me to pass up.

Sheena had advised me to reconsider. The car I was buying wasn’t worth what I was paying, she had told me.

“A free bird is not a substitute for a fair deal. You’re getting ripped off.”

I had brought Sheena along especially to help ensure I didn’t get swindled but the menacing looking raven held a hypnotic fascination for me and I ended up buying the car at the price the salesman was asking.

“Continue five hundred feet on North Southwest 0th Street, *squawk!* Then turn left onto...”

I could no longer recognize any of the streets or buildings around me. The raven had led us to the outskirts of town.

“This isn’t the way home,” Sheena said. “The bird is crazy.”

I thought that she was right. The bird was crazy. It had been made to memorize names and numbers of roads and highways and patterns of lefts and rights and take exits, but being a bird, it had no concept of what any of these things meant. Might it drive the animal insane for its head to be so full of meaningless, cryptic information? Like a human being who has memorized the Sumerian alphabet and can speak and read Sumerian but has no idea what he’s saying.

At the raven’s command I turned onto a dirt road. We were now well outside of town. There were no buildings. There were no other cars. Just dusty roads and barren fields.

“Now arriving at Nav Terminus,” the bird said, “end of the line.”

As if in response to the raven’s voice, the car pattered and stopped. It was out of gas. I sighed heavily. I saw that the bird’s talons had made holes in Sheena’s t-shirt and her expression twisted with pain every time it would shift its weight or adjust its footing.

“Alright,” I said. “I guess there’s nothing to do but call for a tow-truck.” As soon as I opened my door to step outside, the Raven bounded from Sheena’s shoulder and took to the air.

Sheena and I both jumped out of the vehicle and watched as the faithless raven ascended towards the clouds and flew off in the direction from which we had come.

“Probably heading back to the dealership,” Sheena said. “They’ll foist it on the next poor sap too.”

I checked my cell phone and found that I was getting no reception. Sheena's phone was the same. I scanned the horizon for any sign of human life or civilization but there was none. Sand was blowing in whirling dervishes across the landscape. There were mountains in the far distances and deserts in between. To my knowledge there were no deserts or mountains anywhere within a few hundred miles of where I lived.

"You know what?" Sheena began, "I just remembered something. I don't think ravens can actually talk."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Of course they talk. Odin's ravens whisper in his ear. Poe's raven shouts: 'nevermore!' They are one of the smartest bird species on earth."

"But that's just it," Sheena said. "Those are fictional examples. And anyway the raven in *The Raven* doesn't really talk. The narrator just imagines that it does. It's cathartic for him. If the raven is meant to be really speaking then the poem loses the psychological aspect."

"Sheena," I said rubbing my temples. "I don't think you know what you are talking about. If ravens don't talk then what, I beg you tell me, was that!" I pointed towards the sky in the direction the raven had flown off. "What was that?"

Nobody knew.

Beauty

I'm on my way to work one morning in the spring. I'm walking as I usually do when it's not too hot or pouring rain. I've nearly reached my office and am heading up the sidewalk towards the front door when a scent of perfume, carried by the breeze, reaches me.

I stop and breathe deep, taking in as much of it as I possibly can before it disappears. It is the perfume of a beautiful woman.

Before I even look, I know that the wearer of this perfume is a beautiful woman. It isn't your average perfume and couldn't be worn by your average woman. Nor is it merely the perfume itself that is beautiful, in fact, I'm not a fan of perfume personally, not really. And even with this one, it isn't the smell I'm appreciating. It's the anticipation of seeing the woman who wears this particular scent.

She'll have to be a real beauty. Non-beautiful women don't wear perfumes like this one and even if one wanted to, no shopkeeper would ever sell it to her. "I'm sorry madam," he would say, "that perfume is not for sale. I've only forgotten to take it off the shelf." No need to insult the woman but he would have to defuse her somehow. As a substitute he'd sell her some perfume that smells like hills of wild lavender and give her a deep discount by way of apology. And then she'd head home to her husband smelling like hills of wild lavender, happy as a cow in Calcutta. And that's just fine for her. Who's to say that the hills of wild lavender scent is inferior anyway? It isn't a contest, could never be a contest, because you simply can't compare the beautiful woman's perfume with any other perfume. There is no analogue and it doesn't need one anyway because what it smells like is what it is. Other perfumes smell like what they are made of but this

one smells like who it is made for. I'm not suggesting that it literally smells like an actual beautiful woman. Beautiful women might have all sorts of smells, not all of them necessarily pleasant. That's just natural. Anyway, what I am smelling is a perfume smell and not a human smell. But at the same time it doesn't smell like anything other than the perfume a beautiful woman would wear. It's certainly not hills of wild lavender.

But besides her physical looks the perfume attests to other aspects of her as well. For example, I'm positive that she's the kind of woman who reads short stories by Chekov while she's eating lunch alone in a diner. And she might have had a Finnish grandmother who, in her will, bequeathed a sauna to the beautiful woman and so this summer she is going to take a month off from work—naturally she is a successful professional woman and can take a month off from work if she wants to—and fly to Finland to see about it. She thinks this will be a grand adventure but she's also a little nervous about it. What does she know about running a sauna? Nothing.

Of course, now I'm being ridiculous. She might not be any of these things. I've given in to wild speculation and it's not going to do me any good to keep making up stories about her. The best thing to do now is simply turn around and see for myself. I am expecting a tall woman, though not too tall, with a noble, lovely face, rose colored cheeks, etc. But it doesn't have to be that way. She might even be chubby or bald. I can't be sure. All I really know is that she's beautiful.

So, enough talk. It's time to get a look at this beauty. I turn first to the right then the left, but there is no one except a fat man in a bright red tracksuit coming up the street, eating a hotdog for breakfast. I turn all the way around and there's a grandmother with her grandson, walking a corgi on a long leash and a skateboarder in a Tupac t-shirt

slamming a Mountain Dew. Radical but not what I'm looking for. I look up at the windows of the buildings nearby, all closed. I even look down towards my feet just for good measure. No sign of her.

Well, she must be nearby. The smell of perfume can't waft on the breeze indefinitely. I lick my finger and hold it up to test the direction of the wind. West. The wind is coming from the West. I scan the area to the west but all there is is a big empty construction site. The office park next door is expanding their parking lot and they've had to take up large sections of the sidewalk. I squint across the site, past the abandoned earthmovers and steamrollers but I simply can't see anyone around. Is she a ghost? An angel? Sue Storm: The Invisible woman? No, I just haven't looked hard enough. I quickly make my way over to the front entrance of my office building, open the door and set my briefcase down just inside. I scan the horizon to the east one last time just in case her smell was somehow moving against the wind. Then I take off down the street heading west, running full blast to the end of the block and taking the corner like an Olympic marathoner.

Here are people. At least a dozen of them move up and down the city sidewalks. I don't want to make a scene so I slow my pace to a jog and start my search. There are four women that I can see, all heading in different directions. I begin with the one heading towards me. She's young, early twenties, blonde hair tied up in a topknot pierced through with a pair of lacquered chopsticks, rose colored cheeks. Rose colored cheeks! She could be the one! The distance between us shortens and my heart is pumping like mad either from my sprint or because all my hopes are tied into this present endeavor. I pass the

blonde and fill my lungs with the air around her. Nothing. My heart sinks but there are still three more to go. I have a chance.

I'm not sure what my plan is or why it's so important that I find this beautiful woman. It isn't as though seeing a beautiful woman is an especially rare occasion. They are all over the place, you see them at the grocers and at the library, in cars and in groups of three accompanied by one non-beautiful woman. But for some reason I am compelled to find the woman whose perfume I smelled. I built her up in my mind and now I just want to see her. Is that too much to ask?

I make the tactical decision to cross the street and try to catch up with the woman heading westwards; she's closer than the one heading south. I look both ways and run across the street and quickly catch up to the westbound woman who is short and trim and moving at a snail's pace as she reads messages on her phone. I'm just behind her now. She smells like hills of wild lavender and cigarette smoke. I turn around without bothering to see her face.

I run back to the cross street and start to make my way south. Then I stop. Am I really running across the city chasing after women in order to catch up to and smell them? Have I lost my mind?

I stand there for what seems like an eternity but is probably only a minute or two. I'm letting the remaining women escape. I look and they are out of sight. Gone forever. I check my watch and I'm late for work, a full five minutes late. Probably no one is going to notice or care but I'm a little embarrassed to have allowed myself to be so completely sidelined by this woman's perfume. I neither hurry nor dawdle on my return journey. I am simply heading to work.

I reach the place where I had initially smelled the phantom beauty and I fill my lungs with all the air they can hold but it is just air this time. Clean and fresh and full of life giving oxygen but it doesn't spark my imagination or send me running down the street in pursuit of . . . what exactly had it been? And above me the wind blows fat clouds the shape of battleships across the blue sky.

Why I am Suspicious of History

It was summer and I was visiting at my parents' home in the country. I was alone in the house. I fell asleep.

When I awoke I found that I recognized nothing. I looked at the walls and they were unfamiliar. I looked at the dresser; it was unfamiliar. Had I been away from home for so long as to forget what my own room looked like?

I got out of bed and opened the curtain. The room lit up. I examined my surroundings more closely. The ceiling fan was on but I didn't understand what it was or what it was doing up there at the top of the room. Who put it there? Why was it spinning?

I looked on for some moments and then all at once my senses came to me. I recognized the dresser. I recognized the ceiling fan.

I yawned and stretched my back and neck and I took my watch from the nightstand and fastened it around my wrist. My watch was unfamiliar. I stared at its face and tried to decipher the symbols there. What was this VII? What was this II? I had only just bought the watch weeks earlier and I'd worn it every day since.

But how was it that I remembered buying the watch but not what the watch was or what its symbols represented? I rubbed my eyes and shook my head wildly side to side, trying to shake loose from the fugue I was in.

When I looked up I saw that the wall was now papered with a baseball theme. I remembered this wallpaper from my childhood but I was sure that it had not been there when I'd awakened just minutes earlier.

It was as if the whole world and all my memories of it were being created moment by moment.

I ran into the other room hoping to catch the world in a state of incompleteness. The living room was just a living room. I ran to the kitchen but it was just a kitchen. There was a clock on the wall. I read the time. It was four o' clock.

I ran outside through the front door. I scrutinized the flowers in my mother's garden and my car in the driveway. I scrutinized the sun. Everything was in its place both in the world and in my head. I was too late.

Then I noticed a blank spot to the west of the house. The area included both ground and sky and was completely blank. There was nothing there at all. Not even white emptiness or naked black space. There seemed to be a hole in everything.

As I was looking into this blank spot it began to close up and then became a forest and then became a forest I recognized and then became a forest I remembered playing in as a young man.

I went back indoors, poured myself a glass of water and sat on the couch. I was trembling at what I had seen. I had seen the world being created, and I had experienced it mentally as my memories developed to correspond with the physical realm.

Now I proclaim that the present is the only time we can say for certain exists. I have considered alternative explanations for my experience but these only serve to further prove my point.

For example: it could be that my memory of waking up unexpectedly to find the world half-finished is just another of the many thousands of memories created for me that day. None of it ever actually happened. I never woke up. I never ran outside. But you see how it doesn't matter? Ergo I am always suspicious of history.

The Human Microbiome

This story is true. My name is Luke Loftiss. I think it is best we dispense with any pretense and falsity up front. It is important that people know what I know. I will try and be brief and to the point and I won't muddy the waters with a lot of whimsical language or euphemisms.

It began when I was at the doctor's office getting tested for something I might have caught off I girl I met at yoga. Her name is Jordan Milwee by the way. Just for future reference. As I was sitting in the waiting room I happened to pick up a magazine and flipped through it at random until I came upon an article about what has been termed The Human Microbiome.

According to this article our bodies contain ten times more bacterial cells than human cells. Or to put it more pungently we, all of us, are more bacteria than human. In fact a significant portion of our bodyweight is just these bacterial cells that live not only inside us but on our skin, under our nails, even on the surface of our eyes.

I was quite disturbed by this.

Eventually the nurse called my name and I was sent back to have my urethra swabbed by a handsome stranger in a lab coat. I was too on edge to make small talk during the procedure but as soon as the doc had finished I blurted out the question that was on my mind.

"True that bacterial cells outnumber human cells in the human body?"

"Yes," he said slowly, eyeing me like I was a pig loose in Mecca.

"You too?" I asked.

"Yes, me too."

“Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“Well,” he said, “not all bacteria are bad for you. In fact there are many kinds that are beneficial to have. Not the clap, of course.” He chuckled. “But certain types of bacteria can help you digest food and even aid your immune system in fighting germs that can make you sick.”

“But . . .”

“It’s nothing to worry about Mr. Loftiss,” he said. “It’s what is called a symbiotic relationship. One hand washes the other. And it’s been this way since the dawn of man, even before. It’s a new area of scientific study; that’s why you’re just now hearing about it. But it’s an age-old condition. We are living petri dishes. Always have been.”

He told me I’d have my results the next day and that was the end of the appointment.

I thanked the doctor but in my mind I was convinced he was a quack. How could somebody be so nonchalant about something this serious? He was telling me that our bodies had been invaded and annexed by microbes as casually as if he’d been telling me how his washing machine was on the fritz.

I grabbed the magazine on my way out and took it home with me.

Later that evening when I’d finished reading the article I’d learned that not only were our bodies home to innumerable parasites—the largest colonies being in the stomach—but the latest research seemed to indicate that our brains are wired according to what species of microbes we have.

You see, some Canadian scientists did PET scans on a number of mice and used the data to create models of each mouse's brain. Then, and this is the really sick part, they cut the mice open and transplanted the stomachs. Mouse A's stomach went into mouse B. Mouse B's stomach went into mouse C. And so on. Then they imaged the mice brains again and found that the brain configurations had followed the stomachs.

I couldn't sleep that night. I tossed and turned and eventually I got so upset that I called my sister Audrey up.

"Hello?" she said sleepily. It was three in the morning.

"Audrey, listen to me . . ."

"What is it? Are you O.K.?"

I found that I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to freak her out, especially since there wasn't anything she could do about it. I knew that I wouldn't want to be woken up in the middle of the night and told I was less man than microbe and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

"Who is it?" I heard her husband ask.

"It's Luke," she said.

"Tell him to go to bed," her husband said. He was a sheep. The kind of guy who'd be happy to go the rest of his life not knowing what was really inside him.

"What's going on?" Audrey asked again. "Is this about another invention?"

"I just wanted to let you know . . ."

"Let me know what? Luke, out with it, I have work tomorrow."

"I was at the doctor's office yesterday," I said. It was all I could think of.

"Oh my God," she said with genuine concern. "What is it?"

“I have the clap,” I told her.

“Oh my God . . .”

“What is it?” her husband asked.

“Something disgusting,” my sister said. “Goodnight Luke.” She hung up.

The next day I went to the library. I was there just as it was opening. I hadn't slept all night but my energy was being boosted with two cans—six hundred calories each I was later to learn—of a very potent energy drink/beer called Morewiser. It was advertised as the only alcoholic beverage in the United States that was guaranteed to make you smarter and more alert while simultaneously getting you drunk. It's off the shelves now. But not because it doesn't work. Apparently it's dangerous.

Once inside the library I went straightaway up to the third floor and found the section dedicated to biology periodicals. I found a few that had articles about The Human Microbiome and sat down with them at a table and started reading. I made notes and followed citations to a whole stack of books on the topic.

I had just discovered that bacterial colonies are inherited from the maternal side of the family, through birth and through breast milk, when Jordan showed up.

“You son of a bitch!” she slapped me across the face.

“Hey, you can't do that here,” I told her. “This is a library.”

“You bastard. I know you've been avoiding me! And did you give me the clap?”

She slapped me again.

“Uh, no way Jose,” I told her. “I think you got it backwards.” I found her accusation ridiculous and offensive but I wasn’t about to admit she was the only girl I’d ever slept with.

“Oh really? Then how come people are telling me that I need to get tested after being with you . . . What the hell is all this?” she asked, noticing my research.

“Listen,” I told her. “I’ve made a shocking discovery and it would really be a big help if you would just be cool for a minute.” As far as I could tell we were the only ones around but I didn’t want to run the risk of getting kicked out of the library and cut off from my information source right in the middle of the investigation.

“Oh, so now you want my help? Where were you when I was calling you for the past three weeks?”

“How’d you find me?” I asked.

“I wasn’t looking for you,” she said. “Not today.”

“Then what are you doing here?” That’s when I saw that she had a book tucked under her arm. It was big hardback. I could only partially see the picture printed on the cover but that little bit was enough to clue me in. I already knew what it was. I didn’t want to know but I did.

“No,” I stammered, “It can’t be! No! No!”

She took the book out from under her arm and turned it toward me. The cover read: *What to Expect when you’re Expecting*.

Jordan and I took a break from our respective inquiries into what was growing inside of us and got some coffee at a little diner downtown called Pietà’s. It was the most

macabre place I'd ever been. The décor was altogether tasteless. Everywhere you looked there was a painting or statue or embroidery of Mary grieving over a dead Christ. Even the placemats had a picture of the scene. And there by the register, where a Chinese restaurant might have a fat, laughing Budai, there was another statue, much like all the others, dead Jesus in Mary's lap. People had left change all over it.

"So," I began. Jordan was scowling across the table from me. "First question . . ."

"It's yours," she said cutting me off.

"I was going to ask: are you sure you're pregnant?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm sure. I confirmed it yesterday at the doctor's office."

Parallel lives, I thought to myself.

"And have you any thoughts on what you want to do yet?" I felt really funny asking that question while surrounded by statues of Mary mourning her dead kid.

"Obviously . . . having this baby is not something I can do." She choked on her words a little. It was an emotional moment.

"Well, I can't help but feel I'm partially responsible," I said. "So if you need any help or a ride to the doctor's or just a friend to talk to . . ." I stopped short of the, *I'll be there for you*, cliché. I figured it went without saying.

"Thank you, Luke," she said. She looked at me sadly. She was a pretty girl, blonde as blonde can be, with a tight, trim body that was efficient and responsive in the sack. I felt bad for my contribution to her predicament and hoped it wouldn't ruin her figure.

"What was it you were reading about?" she asked me. I was staring into her lapis colored eyes. I'd almost forgotten about my own problems.

“Listen, you are not going to want to hear this but considering what you’ve just told me this morning I don’t feel too bad about it. Millions of individual bacterium colonize and live in our stomachs, noses, lungs, brains, even our dicks and vaginas!”

“Our vaginas?” she exclaimed. Someone at another table made a disgusted noise.

“Our vaginas,” I confirmed. “They form whole families and cities and they affect our brain chemistry.” I lowered my voice to a whisper and Jordan leaned in. “Bacterial colonies in the stomach are able to regulate our moods and thought processes by sending signals to the brain by way of the Vagus Nerve.”

“That’s the largest of the cranial nerves,” she said gravely. “It links to the stomach and heart.”

“How do you know about it?” I asked.

“I studied anatomy and physiology,” she said. “You didn’t just think that I woke up one morning and started assistant-teaching yoga classes?”

“That’s exactly what I thought,” I admitted.

“I have a Master of Science in Yoga Therapy. I learned all about the cranial nerves. Understanding the circuitry of the body is essential to understanding the channels through which energy flows.” She put her hands together in the *Namaste* thing and then transitioned to one palm facing outward like a bored traffic cop.

“You really know about this stuff? I asked. “Like the cranial nerves and all?”

“Olfactory, Optic, Oculomotor, Terminal, Trochlear, Abducens, Facial, Glossopharyngeal, Vagus Accessory, Hypoglossal,” she recited.

“How’d you do that?” My jaw must have been wide open. I was very impressed.

“There’s a very simple mnemonic: O, O, O, To Touch And Feel Girls’ Vaginas And Heinies.”

“So you already knew all this?”

“Of course, you really didn’t?”

“And does it not worry you?” I took a sip of my coffee; it had gotten cold. I’d been so wrapped up in the discussion that I’d forgotten to drink it.

“Why should it bother me? Some microbes help fight germs.”

I was getting tired of hearing this line.

“I didn’t ask for their help,” I said. “And frankly I find it offensive that they are in my sacred body, marching around under the auspices of protecting me. We both know they aren’t interested in our well-being except to the extent that it benefits them. And you know it has to be demoralizing to my own white blood cells who could do a perfectly good job of protecting me if the microbes would just get out of the way and let them fight their own battles. It’s an insult and a provocation and I won’t allow it to go on. It’s exactly like when American troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia during Gulf War One.”

“Did you just compare yourself to Bin Laden?”

“Listen,” I said but I couldn’t think how to continue. I tried to think how to explain it to her. I knew it was serious but how to make her understand?

“Everyone has them. I don’t see that it’s causing any problems,” she sweetly sipped at her mugged and fluttered her eyelashes.

“But have you considered the implications of what it means to us as conscious, rational, free beings if our minds are being manipulated by stomach dwelling microbes?”

She looked at me blankly and shook her head.

“We are just puppets!” I shouted. “We’re puppets for sentient bacteria! They steer us around like that mouse in *Ratatouille*! We have no free will! We’re vehicles for them to get around in! I’m a vehicle! You’re a vehicle.” I could see I was getting through to her. I needed to maintain momentum. “See that fat guy over there,” I pointed over there, to a fat guy, “he’s like a luxury RV; his bacteria are cruisin’ in style!”

“No,” she said, “that’s impossible. That’s disgusting!”

I told her about the mouse stomachs.

“No!”

I told her how colonies are passed from mother to child.

“It can’t be!” The expression on her face was one of abject horror, like she’d just seen *The Nameless Thing*. “We have to do something!”

“We will,” I said. “We will do something. Together.”

Other patrons had started to take notice of us. I decided it was best we git while the gitting was good. I didn’t have any cash and there was a minimum five-dollar charge for credit cards; Jordan paid and we headed for the exit. There was one of those trippy magic eye posters by the door. I didn’t look.

Jordan and I went back to my apartment and had sex. There had been one too many mentions of vaginas and heinies at the diner and we were both getting a little distracted. We agreed that it would significantly improve our chances if our minds were clear and, anyway; I’d said we’d do something together but I didn’t say what.

It was unequivocally the best sex of my life. There were apocalyptic undertones in our lovemaking, the kind you usually only see in the third act of sci-fi movies when everyone assumes they're about to die and they just let all their passions loose on each other. Add to that; we already both had the clap and she was already pregnant. There was nothing to lose. It was a nice little reprieve from dealing with the radical shift of our fundamental conceptions about reality and free will.

But the details are between her and me.

Afterwards I was lying in bed smoking a cigarette—I don't actually smoke; that's just how I remember it—and Jordan started going through my notes from the library.

“Garlic, Banana, acacia gum, chicory root, asparagus, onion. What am I looking at here?” she asked.

“That's a list of foods that medical science has deemed: prebiotic. These are things you can eat that will contribute to the growth and health of the microbial colonies in your stomach.”

“You mean . . .”

“Exactly,” I said. “There's an entire industry based around feeding and caring for these invaders. Just go to any upscale grocery mart and ask for it.”

She got up and put her underwear back on. Then she started poking around my room, checking out the schematics I had posted on corkboard. She picked up a foot long length of aluminum tubing to which I had attached a series of interlocking bicycle sprockets. It was a work in progress. I wasn't sure what it was yet but I'd get there in time. I just needed to keep adding things. That's how my creative process works.

“What is all this crap?” she asked. “Are you like an inventor or something?” She had used the word crap to describe my work, but still; I was flattered. I had insisted we go to Jordan’s place for our first roll in the hay; I didn’t think she’d be able to appreciate the clutter of materials and spare parts and tools that were always lying around in mine. But in reality Jordan had recognized them for what they were: potentially ground breaking marvels of engineering.

I felt a sudden urge to sweep her into my arms, kiss her and then give her a tour of the shop and show her all the neat things I was working on. But I didn’t want to rush things between us. She would see the shop, when the time was right, if and only if she was right for seeing the shop.

“I’m an inventor *of sorts*,” I said. “I’ve never filed a patent or anything. I mostly invent for myself. Personal items, you know.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I’ve built a bicycle with rear wheel steering. It’s actually a tricycle if you want to split hairs, though the two wheels in the back, the wheels that steer the bike, they work as a single unit.”

“Wow, and does it work?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean does it do what it’s supposed to do? Is it superior to a regular bicycle?” I didn’t know how to answer this question. There was too much subtlety to the design and operation to simply sum it up in a few words.

“It serves a different purpose than a traditional bicycle. Obviously it excels in areas that a normal bicycle does not, but naturally runs up against some weaknesses in other areas.”

“And you don’t plan to market it? You don’t want to make some money off it?”

I laughed.

“Maybe someday,” I said. “I don’t think the world is ready for it just yet. You know that it’s important not to allow technology to outpace humanity’s ability to use it wisely.”

“Very true,” she said.

It was nice. We had good vibes, and I’d been going full throttle since the day before when I’d picked up the magazine at the doctor’s office. It was good to enjoy some down time with the woman who was, I suppose, my de facto girlfriend.

“I’m going to take a shower,” she said and headed off towards the bathroom. “I’ll see you in a bit.” I was enjoying watching her walk around in her underwear but it was just as well that we move on to the next phase in our plan, i.e. coming up with a plan of some sort.

I heard the shower come on and I got up and found one of the books that I’d checked out from the library. I began to read. At first it was the same old slush I’d seen before about how some bacteria are helpful and what foods contribute to bacterial growth. I skipped ahead and there was a chapter about sex so I read that. Before I could get more than a paragraph in, I was shaking with anger and fear. Apparently intercourse is one of the best ways to end up with a whole bunch of new bacteria. The whole act is like a swap meet.

I debated whether to tell Jordan or not. I decided that I should. We would need to share all the information we accumulated if we were to have any hope of eliminating the enemy.

I knocked on the bathroom door and found it unlocked.

“Hey,” I said, announcing myself. “I got some new info.” I entered the bathroom.

“Yeah, what is it?” Jordan’s voice came from behind the curtain.

I told her what I’d learned.

“Ick!” she said. “Then you’d better shower too.” She threw the curtain aside and ushered me in.

“Right now?” I said.

“No time like the present,” she said. “The longer you wait the more entrenched they’ll get.” She was right. I stepped into the shower beside her. She moved out of the way and let me get under the water which was hot and felt good on my body. I put my head under the jet and started to rinse my hair out. Then I felt her touching me, she was soaping my back up. It was awkward for a second but I let her do it. She began scrubbing me down with my poufy, mesh, shower thingamabob. I turned around and faced her. The steam was rising up between us and we were looking into each other’s eyes and the water was dripping seductively off her firm, full breasts. One thing led to another. We had sex again, there in the shower. I’m not trying to brag. That’s just what happened. It was every bit as good as the previous sex—though there were minor issues with comfort and leverage—and had the added bonus of taking place in an interesting location.

“Damn it!” I said afterwards. We were drying off together.

“What’s wrong?” Jordan asked.

“Don’t you see? They’re onto us.”

“How?”

“We knew that having sex would only spread microbes to each other but we did it anyway. We knew! We had just been talking about it!”

“It’s almost as if we didn’t have a choice,” Jordan offered. She pulled a pouty face.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” I said. “They must have accessed the cranial nerve and temporarily taken control of our minds. They knew that we were planning to get rid of them and they fought back.”

“But how could they know what we were planning unless . . .” She trailed off.

“Unless they know what we know . . .” I said. We both looked at each other. She was still naked and wet and I was too but it was nonetheless a serious moment.

“Although . . .” I had to think for a second. “Ha.” I laughed. I realized the bacteria had overplayed their hand. “You and I only have a certain amount of microbes in and on our bodies,” I began to explain. “When we have sex we trade some, I send some your way and you send some mine. But we lose as many as we gain. There isn’t a net increase of bacteria, only an exchange of specific, individual microbes. It doesn’t actually cause us any real harm to have sex. They’ve shown their hand. Now we know that they know and we know that they know what we know. We’ll have to figure a way to counter this, to block our minds off or transmit confusing information. As long as they can read our minds we’ll always be one step behind them.”

Jordan was nodding. She agreed with me and told me that it was good news that sex wasn't a problem. She hoped we wouldn't have to put a moratorium on it anytime soon. I was happy to hear that.

Just then the phone rang. I answered it on the second ring.

"Ahoy!" I said. This was how I always answered the phone. Alexander Graham Bell had wanted it that way and it was his invention. The voice on the other end of the line was calling from the doctor's office. My test results were in. They were negative.

"Damn it!" I said.

"Negative means you don't have chlamydia," the voice explained.

"I know that," I said. "I was thinking of something else. Don't condescend to me." I hung up the phone.

"Bad news?" Jordan asked. She had dressed but still had a towel wrapped around her head.

"Kind of," I said. "I didn't have the clap after all. But I'm sure I've just voided my test results twice over. Now I'll have to make another appointment and get another test done."

Jordan glared at me. I was just telling the truth. And it wasn't as though we hadn't already established the facts in this case.

"If you don't have the clap then I don't either," she said. "I only thought that I had it because your friend Wally told me you had it."

"Wally!" I cried out. That bastard had told me the same thing about Jordan. I saw his scheme now. He had been trying to keep us away from each other. He was jealous. I

made a mental note to deal with him later and explained the situation to Jordan. She seemed relieved.

“That’s really good news,” she said placing one hand gently on her stomach. “I was really worried about the baby, you know?”

“I thought that . . .”

“Oh, of course,” she said. “It’s just that, you know . . .” I didn’t know but I didn’t press the issue. I redirected my attention back to the formulation of an attack strategy against the microbes.

First of all we would have to stop eating all the foods on the list. Maybe it would starve them out. I already didn’t eat many of the listed foods so it was probably a long shot. They seemed to survive just fine without them.

It was also vital that we find a way to keep the microbes from reading and controlling our minds. This was more difficult. We couldn’t just disconnect the Vagus nerve; Jordan had said it was coupled to both stomach and heart. It would be suicide. I paced about the room a bit and then my eyes lit on the solution to the problem.

I still had a can and a half of Morewiser left. That made almost fifty ounces with 12% alcohol.

“Here, drink this,” I said handing Jordan the unopened can. “That should create some static in our brain waves.” She took the can from me. “If we’re lucky it might even kill a few of the nasty bugs.”

Jordan eyed the can suspiciously. “This is alcohol,” she said. “I can’t drink alcohol. Not now.”

I had forgotten. I started to suggest that wouldn't matter in the end but realized that I felt terrible, guilty. I quickly took the can back and apologized. Then I finished off the already opened can in one long gulp.

I imagined the deluge of toxic alcohol sweeping over the cities of the gut and washing away the homes and families that dwelt there. For the first time since this escapade had begun, I felt empowered. I had taken the fight to the enemy. I had struck a blow. I would need to find a way to evaluate what kind of damage I had really done. I checked my watch and decided I'd time myself. I'd see how long it took before I did something that was stupid or obviously contrary to my best interests. This would tell me how much I had disrupted their operations and give me some idea of how quickly they were able to recover. I could then use this data to draw up a timetable of how often and how much I needed to drink in order to keep my mind free of intrusion.

I was very pleased with myself. Despite having very little working knowledge of biology or chemistry I had managed to throw the enemy off balance and the momentum was mine. I figured that, judging by my ability to adapt and strike back at an unknown and unseen opponent, I'd be pretty handy in the case of an alien invasion.

A few minutes passed and the Morewiser started hitting home like a hollow point. I felt pleasantly buzzed and mellow but at the same time wired for action. There was no point in just sitting around while I waited for the bacteria to make their move; I decided it was time I paid Wally a visit.

"Let's go, Jordan," I said. "I told her the plan. "We're going to find Wally and make him explain why he tried to spoil our romance!"

“Why would we do that?” she asked. “And what romance? The only time we’ve ever done anything besides have sex was when you took me to that horrid little diner to talk about our situation.”

“Jordan,” I began but she cut me off.

“You don’t have to play at being a responsible adult here. I’m not asking you to. No matter what I decide to do about the baby, I’m not asking anything from you. I tried and tried to call you and you didn’t answer. I saw that you didn’t want anything more to do with me and I decided that I was better off on my own. You don’t have to pretend for my benefit. I’m not asking you to.”

Now I was completely deflated. Jordan was rejecting me and just when I thought that we were starting to fall for each other too. I didn’t know what to say. My head was swimming and I suddenly felt hot. And then I realized what I needed to do. This was one of those rare moments where a man has an opportunity to really prove something to himself. It was time for an impassioned speech.

“Jordan, listen. I can see that you are scared about having this baby.”

“No kidding?”

“Let me finish. I know that you don’t think I’m cut out to be a father or even a boyfriend. And I’m sure you’re right. But this is a human life we have on our hands and whatever it takes for me to ensure that we make the right decision about it I’m willing to do that to make it.

“And I know that it’s importance to you for having . . .” I paused. I felt like I might throw up.

“What? You’re drunk and you aren’t making sense,” Jordan said. She was right. I was trying to make an impassioned statement about something or other and I was screwing up royally. But it wasn’t the bacteria it was the Morewiser.

I swayed and took a step towards Jordan.

“Listen,” I said.

“Stop telling me to listen,” Jordan said. “You listen to me. You need to sleep this off. We can discuss this another time. I know you are trying to tell me that you can be a responsible adult and that if I decide to keep the baby, you want to be involved.”

I nodded.

“But you’re drunk right now. How can I trust anything you say? How do I know, how do you know whether you really mean it?”

I went to the bathroom and splashed some water in my face. I took a few deep breaths. When I returned Jordan was gone.

The next day I had a massive hangover. I had tried to sleep it off but the energy component of the Morewiser kept me awake. I was up all night thinking rapid-fire thoughts and planning my next move against the microbes and Wally. I eventually sobered up and it was eventually the next day. I felt awful. My whole body ached and all I wanted to do was sleep but I knew I had too many things to take care of first. First I needed to deal with Wally then I needed see Jordan. And what’s more, now I knew why.

Being up all night had given me time to think. And the intelligizing effects of Morewiser allowed me to think more clearly than I ever had. Maybe more than anyone ever had. About her and myself. About the human microbiome. About the baby. I had

thought long and hard all night and I'd finally reached a conclusion that made sense to me.

I could solve all my problems in one fell swoop. Whatever a fell swoop is, that was how I was about to solve my problems. In one of them.

I drove by Wally's house. He was home. I parked, took a deep breath and headed up the sidewalk toward his house. I was only there because of what I'd realized during the long night of thinking I'd just come from. How I dealt with Wally would prove or disprove the theory I'd developed about the microbes and the human microbiome generally.

I knocked on his door and he answered. He was sleepy and confused.

"Hey man," he said, "what are you doing here?" My fists clenched.

"Wally, why did you tell Jordan I had the clap?"

"What?"

"Don't lie, Wally. Tell me the truth. What did it gain you by trying to break us up?"

He sighed heavily and shrugged.

"I dunno. C'mon man, I just got up. Let's talk about this later."

"Wally, you are a very rude person and I'm unhappy with your conniving. That's not what friends do." My fists relaxed. I wasn't going to hit him. Against every urge I had resisted. Against my will, I had resisted. I felt like that Rutger Hauer at the end of *Bladerunner*, slamming my hand onto a nail, just to prove I was free. To prove that I could if I wanted to. "I forgive you," I said.

"Whatever, I was just messing around. You guys back together or what?"

“I’ll see you later,” I said. And I left him standing there.

I drove by Jordan’s house but her car was gone so I went by the yoga studio and there she was. It was between classes so I walked right in and up to her.

I was afraid. But what I’d realized during the night was that it was okay to be afraid. Doing something in spite of crippling fear also was evidence of free will.

“I just wanted to let you know that I’m sorry about yesterday,” I said.

“That’s a start,” she replied.

“And I’m sorry for getting you pregnant.” She waved a hand and shook her head, as if to say that she didn’t blame me for accidents. “I had a long hard think last night,” I said. “You told me that you weren’t asking anything from me and you didn’t want anything from me.

“I can’t tell you what to do about the baby. I can only offer my support. Whatever decision you make, I will make myself available to you.” I was giving her a lot of platitudes. I needed to cut to the chase.

“Thank you, Luke,” she said. “I’ll remember that.” She sounded less than sincere.

“I realized something last night,” I told her. “I’ve solved Descartes’ mind/body problem. I’ve realized something that changes things for me and for all of us. It’s not that sentient bacteria control us. It’s not that our minds are controlled or could be controlled. We are sentient bacteria. Our minds are a consensus of microbes.

“We aren’t our bodies. We aren’t even our brains, which is where we usually think of our consciousness as being generated. But the brain is just another part of the body and a body isn’t a mind. Our bodies are just animals, apes. Who we really are, is what’s in our stomachs. I am a microbial colony. So are you. So will our child be, if he or

she has the chance. For centuries mankind has been in the dark about what makes a mind and how it's distinct from a body. What's a soul? It's microbes. It's the only explanation that makes sense. When we think of ourselves we tend to imagine that there is some mystic, nonmaterial part of ourselves that *is* us.

“But that's not how it really is. We are not humans. That's an illusion. We have humans just like we might say we have a body. But what we are is not a body. What we are is not a human. What we are is a consensus of thought from billions of individual microbes that then use their influence to move this body around.

“I know this is a lot to take in. But the point I'm making is just this. I've always thought that I was better off alone. I've always preferred being a lone wolf type. I'd gone through my life thinking that I could be alone and that such a state was ideal. But the truth is we are never alone. We don't even have an individual self. We are a unity of billions of voices. That's what the Buddhists and Hindus have been trying to teach us all these years. The basic state of being is togetherness.

“It's better to be together than alone. I'd rather be together than alone. I'd rather us be together.” I hoped I'd made my point clear enough. For safe measure I added: “know thyself.” This might have been a non sequiter but I didn't think Jordan was going to pick up on it. She had too much else to think about.

“I don't know what to say,” she told me. “I'll think about it.”

“Come by my place tonight after work,” I told her. “We can think together, all hundred billion of us.”

“Will you show me around your shop?” she asked.

“I’d like that,” I said. “And we can have sex again.” She laughed but I could tell she was into it.

So now, I don’t worry about the bacteria in the stomach. I know that when I think of the microbes I’m actually thinking of myself. And Jordan and I have embarked on an official relationship. Things are going pretty well. She’s decided to keep the baby. We’ve decided to keep the baby.

So this is the moral of the story: togetherness and unity in our togetherness is the basic state of the soul. Our souls are not individual but a unity of billions. And we should look to this basic fact of nature for guidance. Unity in our togetherness. It’s the ideal state of being.

Live your life as if you are never alone. Because you aren’t. And don’t forget to apply this to your macroscopic life as well. It’s good to have someone with whom you can cohabit and consensualize. This is what I wanted to share with you. This is the moral of the story. This is my thesis.