

The Soybean Social Club

A novel by Evan Appel



Though we knew this day would come

“

Still it took us by surprise

”

In this town where I was born

I now see through a dead man's eyes.

Arcade Fire, Half-Light I

Huh

Zero

It's easy to forget where we're from and who we are when we spend a decade or so rewriting our past so that we can live with that reality. Some places offer particularly fertile environments for these survival fantasies and the king-all of these places is Los Angeles. The perennial destination of neurotics and misfits for nigh on eighty years. From your air conditioned car up in the hills you might be able to see the smog roll in on a typical weekday night and sweep away all of the horrors, the bad dreams and criminal hopes, the false narratives that weren't ever quite satisfying enough. It's like a public service that takes all that detritus of forgetting and sweeps it out to places like Las Vegas, neatly out of the way. All that's left by the morning is another pure Californian day in which we can workshop our lives until they're good enough to sell.

There's the American Dream for you. With enough cash, sunlight and salty sea breeze we can swap out our childhoods for whatever we imagined they should have been.

One

Nate Silas found himself to be very successful in achieving this American Dream and was mostly content—if profoundly hungover—on one Sunny So-Cal Tuesday morning. Slumped over in his chair at the writer's table, he considered briefly asking one of the P.A.s to get an umbrella, a tent, an awning, fucking something to keep the sun from beating down on him. His skin prickled with what he imagined were the individual rays of UVB on his very skin. Again he ran his hands against the front of his blue oxford shirt to get rid of any crumbs that might still be hiding there. He fixed the pin on his brown flannel tie, the knot of which never seemed to lay

flat. His slightly rolled up sleeves exposed his leather strapped watch. It had not worked in years, but he learned early on that some of the older execs do not trust young folks who do not wear a wristwatch. Black slacks led to dark patterned socks that were not stretched to their fullest that morning and clumped halfway up exposed parts of his pale leg. His leather shoes were pretty scuffed because he never learned how to polish them himself and he had not been to the airport in a while. Nate slid his sunglasses off of his forehead onto the bridge of his nose and proceeded to try to take a brief nap.

His business partner, Gerald Goldstein, strode up, the bottom of his wide paisley tie flapping under its pin, and kicked Nate's shoe with some force. "Hey, degenerate. Get the fuck up. Sara the P.A. says that you've got a call."

"Holy shit, Gerry." Nate said listlessly, "She can't let it go to voicemail or whatever. It's probably Laura and we already hashed things out yesterday." Nate paused thoughtfully before adding, "And by yesterday I mean at three this morning. I feel like death, Gerry."

Gerald was a good ten years older than Nate and was often exasperated by his young partner's refusal to grow up and act the part he was presumably playing. Gerald was a short middle aged man who liked to wear a suit and was particularly proud that he could hob-nob with celebrities all day as his job. He was a much more severe man than Nate and so their partnership struck many as being a sort of Odd Couple act.

Nate had not reacted to the first kick, so Gerald stomped on his already scuffed shoe sending Nate flailing for balance on his high canvas chair. “Hey! For fuck sake, I’ll go. Come on, Gerald! I would figure you’d want me on set. ‘Never on set enough,’ is what you’re always bitching about. Now you can’t wait to get rid of me.”

“Just go,” Gerald said and grabbed the previous night’s rewrites out of Nate’s hand.

Wandering through the set, Nate’s eyes darted around. He was wary of catching certain eyes and wanting to catch others. Laura was not on the set that day, so he could be a touch lecherous, especially in the morning when it was unlikely for anything of substance to develop.

God forbid he run into James. That prick will talk his ear off about the rewrites, how nobody respected his artistic vision. *Look, buddy, Nate had rehearsed to the shampoo bottles many a morning, Everyone around here’s got artistic vision. I’ve got my idea of how this is supposed to turn out, the director’s got his idea, the executive blood sucker has his idea and all the way down to the fucking teamsters, whose simple wish is to catch a wild starlet nipple out the side of his vision, have an idea of what this is supposed to be. So, I know you’ve been shooting a load of threes lately, but how about you play some D for a while? Huh?*

Though, if he were to see James in the crowd of extras and caterers, makeup artists and camera crew, he would have sooner ducked behind a set piece than have confronted the guy.

So far he hadn't seen Sara, nor had he seen James so he figured it was safe to take advantage of the craft services table. He poured himself some black coffee and dumped a few packets of sugar into it. He sipped on the coffee and felt the warm reassurance of caffeine. In small doses, Nate had found, coffee and tea could offer all the comfort of a warm hug, but too much of the stuff and it'll turn on you in a cruel way. Too many people he knew swilled the stuff. Nate believed that half the cases of narcissism and psychosis he had seen from here to Tijuana were the result of repetitive and intense caffeine overdoses. This theory came from the belief that some of his best work had been completed while under the panicky doom-trance of too many espresso shots.

Out of the corner of his eye Nate saw the precariously pinned pony-tail of one Sara, the P.A. He spun around on the ball of his foot only to find himself face to face with James, the actor.

"Aehhh!" he said with a start.

"Nate, I wanted to ask you what you thought of last night's rewrites," James said, clearly trying his best to be helpful.

"To tell you the truth, James, I haven't gotten to reading them yet. We've got a good hour before we even start shooting anything. Why don't you relax and get into character," Nate said with a strained smile that knocked his sunglasses higher on his face.

"That's just it, Nate. This whole speech he's giving to the cab driver. I'm just not buying it. It's completely out of character and seems like... like... moralizing exposition—"

“Ah, so,” Nat had caught Sara’s eye again from across the room and she’d started to hurdle her way through the crowd to him. “Why don’t you give a crack at your own speech?”

Nate slapped James on the back and leapt forward to Sara who held his cell phone in her outstretched hand. “Remember, you’ve got to leave the set before you make any calls.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Nate said as he made his way for the alley behind the set. Behind him he could hear James say something about how the scene should be silent and about lighting or something, but Nate’s mind was already far past that conversation.

Nate ducked into a well-lit alley by a dumpster that smelled of fried ketchup and weed. His phone had several missed calls from the same number, a number with a Midland area code. Instead of listening to the voicemails (he didn’t know the password anyway) he called the number back.

“Hello,” a voice said out of the staticky void.

“Hello, yes, this is Nate Silas. Someone was calling my number—”

“Nate, this is Deirdre Stephens,” Nate’s well manicured forgetfulness that he had cultivated in the Los Angeles sun began to wilt. “Charles died yesterday. I was hoping you could make the wake on Friday and the funeral on Saturday. You two were so close.”

“Of course, Mrs. Stephens,” Nate said in reflex. There’s nothing he would rather not do than go to the funeral of his childhood rival. Chuck Stephens, the bully, the torturer. That inconsequential prick always thought he was better than everyone else and Nate was just a side note, a side kick in Chuck’s hero story. But before he even knew what was happening, he was telling Sara to arrange for a flight to Midland on Thursday evening.

Two

“Yeah, Gerry? I’ve been trying to get ahold of you about page 71 —” Nate said while juggling his phone and bag in line at the Bob Hope Memorial Airport in Burbank.

“Just let it wait til Monday, Nate. Nothing is going to happen tomorrow much less over the weekend. Jesus, I wish you’d be more involved when you’re actually on set, but no you gotta fly out to the Midwest for a funeral and all of a sudden you’re Howard Roark,” Gerald said.

“Who?”

“Nevermind, just try to enjoy a weekend off. As much as you can, what with the funeral and all.”

“No problem, but will you email me the latest—hello? Hello, Gerry?” .

Nate fumbled with his phone trying to get the screen to light up as he stepped up to the stewardess greeting people onto the plane. “Sir? Sir? You’re going to need to put your phone on airplane mode in a few minutes, sir.”

This made Nate stop in his tracks and stare at the stewardess, “Jesus Christ. Thank god you told me. What a fucking hero.” And he walked on down the aisle while the waitress muttered something about how he didn’t need to be rude. Nate spent the rest of his halting walk to his seat thinking about why he had not been more rude.

After take off, Nate sipped on airplane scotch and switched between the script and original text of *Pedro Paramo*, which happened to be his production company’s next big project. The anxiety having to be away from the set, away from L.A. for a weekend motivated him to be prepared. No matter the reassurances from the company and Goldstein’s mentorship, Nate could never shake the feeling that he was replaceable. There were thousands of bumpkins with an eye for good writing looking to take his place. The industry was an enormous game of musical chairs. Shuffle your feet, lose your seat.

Pedro Paramo is a surrealist tale of a man who returns to his mother’s home town in Mexico only to find an honest-to-goodness ghost town. Then he dies. The script treatment then changed many of the details to make it a bit more palatable for the screen. Juan Preciado, the protagonist of the story, travels the wastelands of post-apocalyptic America to confront his father, Pedro Paramo, whose once successful town has fallen back to waste in the wake of Pedro’s crippling nihilism, which he acquired at the death of his favorite wife, Remedios. Along the way Juan meets a number of strange, Beckettesque wasteland characters. Nate was struck by how funny some of the scenes were and thought about how it might turn out to be a cult feature. Like a better version of *A Boy and His Dog*. Or a secular *Book of Eli*.

Nate makes several notes questioning why the story needs to take place in Comala, California instead of Comala, Mexico.

“Seems to me that this film could benefit from the relative cheapness of filming in Mexico, but also from the backdrops we can get there. For example, those little town square parks that are a part of every small Mexican town. Additionally, moving Comala to California seems that it might become an appropriation target. Might be more genuine or authentic to keep Comala, Mexico. I know there’s that one scene at an abandoned strip mall, but I can just as easily imagine that scene being rewritten in one of those shop stall alleys in Mexico.”

Then, a little more than half of the way through the treatment everything fell apart. Suddenly it went from a black comedy in the Samuel Beckett tradition and became a shock horror film akin to an Eli Roth production. The transition was so dramatic and startling that Nate had to go back and read some of the other scenes to remind himself he wasn’t experiencing false memories. The script is not lost, of course. They just need to get somebody to rewrite it for the sake of consistency. Make it feel like one film instead of a jumble of genres. Nate rubbed the bridge of his nose and imagined the author insisting that, yes, he did mean to make it seem like a jumble of genres. Switching from *Endgame* to *Bugs Bunny* to *Hostel* to Arcade Fire music video.

The stewardess announced final descent on the intercom and Nate put away his copy of *Pedro Paramo*, the crumpled manuscript, his notebook. He sat back in the seat and swigged the last drop of watery airplane scotch already anxious to be on the ground.

“Coming home, are ya?” the woman across the aisle from Nate said. He assumed that she was a local. Her rubenesque form squeezing against the arm rests of the airplane seat betrayed that she wasn’t on any sort of fashionable Californian juice cleanse.

“Home is Los Feliz nowadays, but I grew up in Midland,” Nate responded politely, hoping that the conversation would go away.

“Oh! A prodigal son returns!” She exclaimed giddily. She reminded Nate of his fifth grade teacher who always seemed to be so impressed by everything. Nate found that annoying because if everything was so damn exciting, then, well, nothing was. Not really. That teacher sapped the excitement out of him, just as this woman was in the process of stealing his remaining energy for the day. “Seems you’ve done well for yourself. What do you do?”

“I make movies,” Nate said and regretted it. He should have lied and said he was a computer programmer. Nobody ever wants to hear what programmers really do.

“Oh really! Anything I might have seen?” the woman said and then adjusted herself in the seat to face Nate more. She was about his mother’s age, but fatter and rosier. Her hair was cut into a dark brown pageboy haircut, which seemed uneven. It was clear that she normally wore glasses

from the indentations in her nose. JC Penny jeans. North Face sweater. A Midland native if there ever was one. He could even barely perceive that she smelled of the back offices of churches, PTO meetings.

“I’m not sure if you’ve heard of anything that we’ve done, but we put together an adaptation of *Light in August* last year.”

“Oh yeah, I watched that one with that Dave Franco fellow—”

“James.”

“Pardon?”

“James Franco is the actor’s name. Dave Franco is his brother.”

“Right, James Franco. So you produced that movie?”

“That’s right,” Looking over the skinny college kid through the scratched plastic window, Nate could see the green rushing towards him.

“You know what? I never really knew what a movie producer does. Is that, like, the director or something?”

“No, I’m more like a manager. I get the actors, directors, writers, et cetera to all play nice and get the job done on time. However, I do take a special interest in the script as my particular specialty,” the sickeningly light moments of weightlessness as the airplane was landing caught Nate here and his hand gripped his suitcase handle a bit tighter than normal. The plane applied the brakes and both he and the woman jolted forward.

“So you wouldn’t say that you’re part of the creative aspect of the thing?”

“No, to the contrary,” Nate said, feeling a certain indignant huffiness rising in his voice. “I pay particular attention to the script, like I said. I’d say I’m very much involved in the artistic vision of our projects.”

“Hmm, I do remember watching that movie. Really kind of unpleasant near the end with that old man walking through town and shouting about “whores and abomination! Whores and abomination!” Why’d he have to be so mean?” Over the woman’s shoulder, Nate could see the Midland National Airport come into view and remembered how small these country airports could be. He anxiously gripped his bag, hoping that he wouldn’t have to continue this conversation much longer.

“He was a mean old man, an ugly thing to encounter and he made life unpleasant for a lot of people in the story,” Nate said. “Also, he was pretty important in the source material.”

“How do you mean? Source material?”

“*A Light in August* was originally a novel by William Faulkner. That character, Doc Hines, was an important character in the story.”

“Well, he wasn’t really a main character from what I could tell. You could have probably left him out, you know?”

Nate did know, as they pulled to a stop and the flight attendants hopped into action, the seat belt buckles rang a chorus through the aisles of the airplane. Nate knew plenty well that *A Light in August* had been a massive bummer of a movie and his supposed attempt to communicate the visceral hate of racism in the film was seen as distasteful. Nate was also aware that the failure of that movie to turn a profit was another motivator for him to make sure that people could have fun in *Pedro Paramo*. Nobody wants to sit through a three hour downer.

“You have a nice stay in Midland now. Why was it that you were visiting again?”

“A funeral.”

It was then that a great compassion crossed the woman’s face. She stood in the aisle and hefted her bag onto her shoulder. Her mouth scrunched into a half-smiling grimace that could have been cast in stone and named Pieta. She grabbed his shoulder and said, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Then she walked down the aisle and out of Nate's life. A fact which Nate couldn't help but celebrate with a hefty sigh.

Three

Nate stepped off out of the airplane and onto the ladder onto the hot macadam under the cloudy midwestern sky and felt the disorienting sensation of going back in time. To Nate, the entire region of the Midwest was stuck, inexorably, in the past and any hopeless attempt at an update only advanced the region to somewhere in the mid-aughts. He breathed the heavy jet-fuel tinged air and strode up to the door to the airport, which unlike most doors in most airports was operated by a handle instead of a mechanical eye.

He couldn't remember when smoking had been banned in airports, but the MRA still had the look of being cigarette stained. Leather chairs and wooden arm rests with long yellow burns on them from where someone had let a cigarette rest. The low ceiling seemed permanently browned and the windows seemed smoky, but that could have been a function of distance and humidity of the region. It had been a good ten years since Nate had a cigarette, but everything about this airport reminded him of the ritual of smoking. The slowness of the act, how time would for a second stop being so frantic and how he might be able to convince himself that he might be able to get a good grip on time's tail and catch a ride for a while instead of having to chase it endlessly. He was reminded of the many joyful pairings of the activity with other forms of consumption: coffee, drugs, sex, booze, waiting, et cetera. He remembered how easy it was, when in need, to score a cigarette. Follow the haze to a forgotten corner of the airport, in this case a poorly kept courtyard strewn with active cobwebs and styrofoam cups, target somebody

with a cigarette in hand and offer them a quarter in exchange for a smoke. Jokingly offer another quarter for a light lest you want to be asked if they can smoke that cigarette for you too.

Compared to L.A., everybody in Midland smoked. And as Nate walked through the airport, he was unpleasantly surprised at all of the day-glow lycra windbreakers people wore, an artifact from his childhood that he preferred to keep in the past. It wasn't even the fact that it wasn't stylish or fashionable. He hated imagining the sound that the fabric made when it moved against itself. That swish-swish sound made him grit his teeth. And the smell of the stuff! After a season in the back of the closet that stuff accrued a smell that made his vision blur.

More people are smoking outside of the airport where the taxi cabs are lined up. There are only three cabs. One has its light out, another is helping a family stuff its luggage—Tetris-like—into the trunk. The cabbie inside the third had his face illuminated by the glow of his cell phone as he hid from the mid afternoon heat. Nate walked up to the door and knocked on the window. Startled, the driver rolled the window down manually. With the crank on the passenger side door. “Hey, sorry, I didn't see you there,” the cabbie said.

“You working right now?”

“Yeah, hop on in. You got luggage?”

“I'll just throw it on the seat,” Nate said and climbed into the air conditioned cab. While he put on his seatbelt, the driver adjusted the mirror and futzed with the taxi meter.

“Where you headed?”

“Midland Hotel,” Nate said with a certain amount of pride dripping from the words.

As a boy, the Midland Hotel, formerly the Midland Central Hotel, was the largest building he’d ever seen and from an early age it stood in the center of Downtown Midland as a symbol of the sort of cosmopolitanism that he aspired to. It was 30 stories tall and like an octagonal prism that reached up into the sky. Capped by a glass torus and an enormous spinning red M that you could see from miles away even in the dark of humid midwestern nights. Once as a child, sitting by a fountain across the street from the hotel, Nate watched a gaggle of lawyers dressed in suits leave the hotel and walk further downtown swinging their important-looking briefcases. The stores on the ground floor, the suit shops with varicolored ties and monochrome shirts, the coffee shops wallpapered with branded burlap coffee bags, jewelry stores filled with gems that signified a impracticality that verged on decadence. At the top of the building was a bar and restaurant. It was the dark, late night environs of that place that so enchanted Nate as a child. A place of quiet reflection of the machinations of the world from a distinct vantage point.

It was also another place from his memory soaked in cigarette smoke.

The late Chuck Stephens, perhaps because of his parents’ higher tax bracket, but also maybe because of some primordial understanding, was never as taken with the luxury of the Midland hotel. Chuck seemed to know that there were distant places like New York and London, Dubai

and Shanghai (still just flowering into the megacities that they would become). He knew and frequently reminded Nate how podunk their lives actually were and how inconsequential things were in downtown Midland. Nate remembered that Chuck's aspirations had a vaguely New England feel to them, a sort of return from exile to the home of his ancestors.

"Tallest skyscraper for 100 miles in any direction," The cabbie said. "You know, the skyscraper was invented in the Midwest. In Chicago, if I remember correctly."

"I did know that," Nate said amicably. "I happened to grow up here. Over on Elm and Main."

"Oh, so you know." The cab driver was a young black man who wore a hat over his shaved head and kept a glowing BlueTooth in his ear. His patterned, silk shirt was a little damp from sweat, but still well kept. His eyes darted up to the rear-view mirror to look at Nate frequently.

Nate considered telling the driver what Chuck had said about the skyscrapers like the Midland hotel. To quote: "The midwest coming up with the idea for skyscrapers is like a particularly plain woman one day deciding to hammer a nail into the center of her forehead in an attempt to stand out. Sure, it gets the job done, she certainly is more interesting, but at the same time you've got to ask yourself what the fuck it's doing there in the first place!"

Nate decided to not tell this story to the driver. He decided to not talk at all and instead look out the window like he would have as a child. See the scenery of his youth through aged eyes. He noted that things seemed to have stayed the same while modernizing somewhat. A mundane

observation that seemed to fit the mundanity of the environment. They drove by buildings that Nate recognized and then immediately wondered what it was that he recognized about the building, what was its importance other than as a landmark? There were trees he knew and stoops that were familiar, sidewalk cracks that he could predict from the taxi window, paint stores with the same faded signs. Occasionally he would see something new and its attempt at trying to look like it belonged to the same century as Orange County seemed pathetic and artificial. Why do away with the splintering wooden sidings? Why replace the glass fogged by time and endless polishings?

Mostly Nate just absorbed the color green. It had seemed like the last third of his life had been devoid of that color and so he just stared and stared at the grass and the trees and the vines growing on the sides of brick buildings.

It was not a long trip to the Midland hotel and before long Nate had arrived. He tipped the driver and stepped through to the lobby of the hotel with a certain thrill. The thrill came from the sensation that he had exceeded the importance of this environment. As a child, he felt that he didn't belong because it was above him. Now, he didn't belong because he was so much bigger than it. Hell, the Midland was a shithole compared to most of the hotels that he stayed at.

In many ways it was the kind of sensation one gets when one leaves a home town bully behind only to return years later and be able to compare one's triumphant return to the bully's abject failure. Nate began to draw parallels between this perverse joy to Chuck's funeral.

Nate could hear his mother chastising him for being so crude and mean. That for a time he and Chuck had been truly close. Nate couldn't wait to drown that voice out with a couple of martinis in the Midland Hotel sky lounge.

Four

Nate Silas was restless that night. Not having to be anywhere until the wake the next day, he decided that he would sample the nightlife that he had missed out on. When Nate moved to California to go to university, he stayed there.

Strolling out of the front door of the Midland hotel and down the street, his tie fighting its pin in the light breeze, Nate made for the center of town. Midland was mostly focused around the capitol building and its grounds. A large brutalist building on a hill surrounded by a park with arboretum, dozens of statues and endless benches to spend a lunch in the sun or an uneasy sleep in the cold, the Capital was surrounded by many businesses and storefronts which wrapped around and followed the primary streets of the town: Main Street and Grand Avenue. Rounding the corner of Capital Boulevard (the road that encircled the capital and its grounds) Nate spied the sign for S Main St. and immediately thought about how if he were to walk approximately 20 blocks in that direction he would find himself at his childhood home. If he walked 25 blocks instead of just 20 he would find himself in a Soybean field.

The first spot he decided to try was called Archies. He stepped into the dark bar from the dusky street and promptly fell down the three steps that led into the bar. Picking himself up at the bottom he first cursed the bastard who designed the entrance to a bar like that. The second

thought was that even though the bar was half-full, absolutely no one cared that he had fallen.

Perhaps this bar is haunted, Nate thought. Maybe these people are all ghosts and I've stumbled into their final resting place instead of walking up the alternate steps to the bar of the living.

Nate sat at the bar and the bartender ambled over to him. An old man with progressively whitening hair and a hunched walk, the man certainly fit the mold for a bartender of the dead. His sunken eyes looked lifeless and dry. His jaw seemed strained as if resisting the urge to snap open in display of advanced rigor mortis. "What can I get you?"

"Whatever IPA you've got on tap, man," Nate said.

Wordlessly, the man went over to the taps and drew a beer. When he came back, Nate handed him a card and told him to open the tab. "Wait," Nate said. "Hey man, can I ask you something personal?"

"Shoot, brother," the man said, heaving a breath that made his chest collapse and rebuild itself before Nate's eyes.

"Are you," Nate paused, the icy grip of fear wrapped somewhere around his vas deferens, "Are you alive?"

The old man closed his eyes meditatively and reached into his pocket. Nate pushed himself away from the bar, frightened that the man was going to pull a gun or knife on him and he nearly made

a mad dash for the door. Instead of a weapon, the man produced a coin which he held out by the edge for Nate to see. "Sure am, son. I've been alive for 11 years this August."

Nate smiled and nodded appreciatively, not daring to question the man's decision to work at a bar as a recovering addict. Nate looked around the bar some more to get an idea of the place. It was clearly not the sort of bar that young people went to, but neither was it the sort of place that old bar-flies went to die. There seemed to be a number of lawyers discussing a case at a table in the back, the table was strewn with yellow legal paper. There were a set of couples at the bar absently sipping on their drinks and staring into space. It looked like they should be absorbed in slot machines like the old folks get into in Vegas, but instead they just stared straight ahead. The place was dark and musty and unfriendly. It smelled of oysters and sawdust even though Nate saw no evidence that either were sold there. He quietly finished his beer and when the ancient bartender came by to ask if he'd like another one, he asked for his tab. Nate began to daydream about *Pedro Paramo* again and wondered if there was a scene where Juan stopped somewhere for a drink. He was startled out of his reverie by a sound that resembled the sliding chop of a guillotine. He looked over to see that it was the old man using a decrepit looking flatbed credit card imprinter on his debit card.

Next, Nate decided that he was going to get something to eat. The restaurant on top of the Midland Hotel wasn't a bad idea, but he had something better in mind. Casey's steakhouse was always too nice for dinners in the Silas family, but on occasion his father would take his mother there by way of apology or other. Now, Nate had the opportunity to be better than Casey's. He

rounded the corner and made his way over to the old Railroad station, across from which, in a storefront block that had been there since Lincoln's funeral train rolled through.

Nate stepped up out of the street and onto the wide sidewalk where people were already dining outside in cafe fashion. "Can I help you, sir?" The maitre-d' asked.

"Yes, can I have a table for one," Nate said, craning his neck a bit towards the outside tables.

"Somewhere outside? It's such a lovely evening."

"It certainly is, sir. If you'll follow me, I'll show you to your table immediately."

The Maitre d' showed Nate over to a table in the far back corner of the area designated for outdoor seating, but it didn't bother Nate at all. He was starting to enjoy himself. Contrary to how he'd been feeling for the past few days, he was starting to feel as if this could be a vacation, a little bit of time off from demanding actors and studios, overly busy coffee shops and two-hour reservations. Hell, seated immediately! Who has ever heard of such a thing as seated immediately? Even at Pink's hot dogs you have got to stand for a couple hours. If you had a heart attack on the Santa Monica pier they would tell you there was a four hour wait for an ambulance.

Nate was seated and started looking through the wine list which was bound in a large, heavy leather book. It seemed ancient. It was probably the same book that his father had looked through, frantically trying to calculate which wine would be the most reasonably priced while

not making him look like too much of a cheapskate. Nate wasn't here to impress anyone, but he had a similar strategy and chose the first \$40 Pinot Noir he found on the list. A waiter brought out his wine and Nate told the waiter that he wasn't yet ready to order, he'd like to do a little people watching and relaxing first. Which was just fine with the waiter, who secretly didn't care if Nate had run into traffic or assaulted him with one of the dulled butter knives.

There were still people walking the streets, but the numbers were dwindling. Some people seemed to be walking to their cars to drive home for the night, others were strolling to dinner or for drinks, some people were walking their dogs. Nate watched them all with the same self-satisfied aloofness. He sipped on his wine and tried to focus on their faces. He thought that maybe he would be able to recognize someone, but he couldn't spot anyone he knew. After a couple of glasses of wine he couldn't tell if the facade of the building he was sitting in front of was stretching towards the ceilingless sky or if he was slumping down in his chair. He decided that it didn't matter and poured a third.

Nate did remember how pleasant it could be in his old hometown. The wind that blows in cool on a hot day and the way that ice water tastes in the humidity. The smell of gasoline and cut grass floating down from the neighborhoods, the burning leaves in the early fall. Hot trash in the alleys wafts through the distant laughter of children in the parks. The deafening roar of the city buses trudging through brick-paved back streets.

Four and a half glasses in, the waiter came back and Nate orders a steak and asks where the bathroom is. "Take a right when you go inside, then go up the stairs right there, at the top of the

steps, hang a right and then a left. At the end of the hall take a left up the next set of stairs and another left down that hall. At the very end of the hall, take a right and it's right there."

"You're shitting me," Nate said, \$40 Pinot Noir on his breath.

"No, sir. This is an old building that used to house a number of businesses working concurrently. The downstairs toilets were replaced with a modern walk in freezer in the late seventies and so the only remaining facilities are on the third floor."

"There's no toilet on the second floor?"

"Well, there is, but that one belongs to Mr. Presbyter"

"Jeez-us," Nate said and followed it up with a more chipper, "Alright then, thank you so much."

Nate got a better look at the inside of the restaurant as he walked through to the staircase. It's clear that at one time it was two separate store fronts that were joined at the front and presumably at the back (for the kitchen). The walls of the restaurant proper were wallpapered with an ancient looking candy-striped pattern, chalky and dusty. Near the ceiling it browned with the tar of long since banned tobacco smoke. There are large mirrors pasted to the walls with crenelated, rococo frames painted in gold flake. There are pastoral scenes scattered between. Pictures of cows and sheep and haystacks and weary looking people hassling the aforementioned.

The staircase is tight and steep. It's lined in thick, loose mauve carpet that in Nate's state, reminds him of crawling up into a vagina-like structure. Into the darkness, back into the fetal state. Once at the top of the stairs, the hallway opens up quite a bit. Excessively so. The ceiling is 16 feet high and the big wooden doors that lead into various second-floor offices have those hinged windows above them for getting a draft going during the hot summer months. Nate cuts to the right and looks at some of the doors which read

Sea Crew — Midland's travel agents since 1955!

Increase Presbyter Esq. — Attorney at Law

"Increase!" Nate says aloud, "What is this? The late 17th century?" Across the hallway from Mr. Presbyter's office is a door which Nate takes for Mr. Presbyter's private shitter. He tries the door, which is locked. He searches his pockets for something that might help. A lot of these old buildings still use the old skeleton keys, which are just a walk in the park to pick. Nate pulls a paper clip out of his pocket and barks in triumph, but after he's unfolded it and leaned over to inspect the lock, he sees that it's a modern bolt lock mocking him from its nest in all that rotten varnished-over oak.

"Aw shit," Nate says and continues down the hall. The next staircase is much wider and its steps are worn away in the center where many thousands of people have stepped before. Nate silently hates it because it reminds him of slipping down steps like those during rainy days. The sensation of one's feet slipping out and having to grab the railings triggers feelings of familiar

vertigo. He trudges up the creaky steps and hangs a left to start walking back in parallel to those stairs. At the end of the hall, he dutifully takes a right and sees the bathroom, but more prominent than the bathroom sign is the window at the end of the hall, which looks over Alder Street and his table.

After using the bathroom, he walks down to the window and looks out, trying to see his table when the door next to him opens suddenly and an ancient man emerges from the dark. “Gah!” Nate blurts.

“Gah!” the old man sputters.

“Jeez, man, you nearly scared the shit out of me,” Nate.

“I nearly scared you? You almost put me in an early grave!”

“You would have been fine.”

“Whatever you say, boy.” The old man said as he closed the door and turned to walk away. On the door was painted the words “Midland Historical Society.” Nate was instantly reminded of the group. His father had always jokingly called them the Soybean Social Club because “They’ve got no interest in Midland as a city or history per se. All they care about is making sure that they’re safely encapsulated by these soybean fields, their faux agrarian post-bellum make-believe that society can be reigned in and made to work the town like an ox to the fields.”

It was typically at that point of the party when Nate's mother would encourage Nate and his brother to play "Hide Dad's Scotch."

Five

Nate relished his steak and finished the bottle of wine on his own and though it was only about eight o'clock at night, there was barely a soul to be found in the restaurant. This town goes to sleep early.

He paid his bill and began to wander off with a full stomach, a head full of wine and a mind for a cocktail or two before stumbling back to his hotel room and the sublime pleasures of hotel cable. Nate walked towards the Boulevard again and in the distance saw some 20-somethings crossing the street dressed in honest-to-god clubwear. This struck Nate as unusual for a few seconds before he realized that, no, of course people would still be going out clubbing. Midland is the cultural center of this area and these people do not consider themselves the bumkins that coastal dwellers make them out to be. Hell, what was he expecting? Overalls and straw hats? Barefoot women in threadbare sundresses? No wonder these folks felt so condescended to. How easy it is to drop into these stereotypes and judgements. It is ironic that Nate imagined these folks as hayseeds since he hated how he was seen as one when he first moved to California. He constantly had to explain that he did not know how to milk a cow and that he had never operated a thresher. However, it did not help that he happened to know that the machine was called a thresher.

When Nate rounds the corner and starts to walk around the border of the capital's grounds it was rare to see anyone walking the streets. Looking up at the brutalist slab of concrete in the center of the park it occurs to Nate that the town seems forbidden, like the town outside of Chernobyl, Pripyat. The city stands, but the denizens are gone, not dead, but evacuated to nearby communities where their children will be mocked for being exposed to radiation, always accused of being mutants only to have that confirmed later in life when it is revealed that they have all sorts of health problems they can probably trace back to their exposure.

Nate hears a pulsing beat at a distance and decides to follow it. There, on the other end of the capitol square is a small disco pumping Biggie Smalls from its speakers. Nate steps inside to find only a smattering of people gathered by the edges of the dance floor sipping at drinks and looking bored. Nate cannot tell if it is too early or if it is too late for the party, but he looks at the faces of the people in the club and sees the sort of latent fear that he remembered from when he was young, the fear of being seen. Once you have been seen you cannot fade into the endless rows of other folks, you are out there on your own. Nate awkwardly shuffled across the dance floor to the bar, he danced a dance of defiance to the little fear that keeps people from dancing in public, that keeps people from being seen. He ordered a gin and tonic and it came in a plastic cup, glowing bright blue from the excess of UV lights by the bar. He went back onto the dancefloor and continued to dance as the music switched from Biggie to Easy-E to De La Soul, it must have been nineties night. He wondered what compelled people to come to these places if they did not even want to dance. He was not exactly the sort of person who you might call a club rat, but he relished the sensation of being seen by these people, standing away from them and pointing out their fear. When you stand away from the crowd you've got to face your own

mortality, you can't hide behind routine and Nate loved mocking their fear of mortality in that moment. He imagined their frowns and judgemental looks. He danced awkwardly on an empty dance floor and he felt like he was saying all he needed to say to his hometown, to the people he left behind, to Chuck Stephens. *I stand apart, unafraid!*

When his drink was nothing but ice cubes he walked out of the club and threw the plastic cup into a public trash can from ten feet away. The perfect punctuation to his public act of defiance.

Walking back to the Midland Hotel, he was struck again by the quiet of the place. The path he took led under a railroad trellis. He looked at the dark rusty beams and rotting wood of the trellis, which, as far as he could tell, was still in use and wondered how old it was. It was rare to see something that old out in the West where everything was replaced every couple of decades for the newest thing. Here, in Midland, old things were held on to because they had some sort of innate value it had accrued simply by being around for years. Nate couldn't see it. In Europe, he could understand preserving some of those things. They were beautiful. Things like aqueducts and cathedrals and towers. The Midland Station Amtrak Railroad trellis was not a beautiful thing, had never been beautiful, never intended to be beautiful. Yet there it stood, and there it shall stand.

Nate was thinking that he might get a nightcap at the bar on the top floor of the Midland, but he got as far as the elevator before he decided that he wanted to go to bed. After undressing, he was able to appreciate the stiff coldness of the hotel sheets for only a moment before he was whisked off to sleep.

Six

Five years before, Nate Silas lay in bed next to his girlfriend at the time, Sarah. It was clear that he was finishing up a novel because his thumb and index finger were grinding away at the last few pages on the right and he was grunting uncomfortably as if finishing a short set of push ups. Sarah, who had gotten used to this behavior by now was staring at the back page of the New Yorker and trying to figure out a caption for the contest. The cartoon was of a man standing behind a greengrocer's stall talking to a young mother with a stroller.

“Who does he think he is?” Nate huffed and put down the book he'd just finished. The cover read *Country Roads Take You Down, All the Way Down* by Charles T. Stephens. “Does he think he's appealing to the Republicans with this Celine schtick? Or does he think he's more compassionate, does he think he's the Bulgakov of the Obama administration? Official satirist, my ass. No. You know what? I've gotten it all twisted up because he's a doctor. What he's really done is written a fucking John Irving novel for the alt-right.”

“Hmm,” Sarah said, still thinking about the vegetable stall.

I swear, Lady! Wax doesn't contain any gluten!

“That's the guy who wrote *Sleepy Hollow*?”

“No, that was Washington Irving.”

“So many Irvings in American literature,” Sarah said absently.

“The guy imagines that he’s T.S. Garp or something, like he’s the messiah for these fringe groups that have become so popular lately. The Anti-Garp. He’s even martyred himself in his book. And I bet if I asked him about it he’d give me that shit-head smile that says ‘I’ve got them on the run and you’re just far enough ahead to see it’ and then say that it’s just fiction. But he knows, he knows he smarter than that shit and he’s riding it all the way to hell. For what? Profit? Fame?”

“Didn’t you say that he was always like that?” Sarah asked.

“What? Famous? I suppose in a way—”

“No, like a martyr,” Sarah said.

Sorry, Ma’am, there aren’t any gourds shaped like the Holy Mother today.

“Oh yeah, like he was raised in a fucking Messiah factory. He’s the millennial model, the post-modern Jesus come to write off all that hippie bullshit and take us all away. I can’t tell if he’s serious or if this is all a sham, but he must be making loads from this dreck.”

“Are you maybe a little jealous?” Sarah asked.

Just had these flown in from Manhattan.

“No, no, I just. I know the guy. He was always a cynical prick and look at what he’s doing. Playing with the world like it doesn’t matter. Like it’s all a game. Like when we played Dungeons and Dragons and he would intentionally fuck up the game because he’d become bored with the rest of us and wanted to entertain himself.”

“You played Dungeons and Dragons?” Sarah asked and raised her head from the cartoon.

“Hon, you missed the important part of that,” Nate said with a laugh. He leaned over to kiss her and lean on her shoulder. She thought that he’d fallen asleep when he said suddenly, “*Don’t worry, I don’t let anybody vaccinate my potatoes.*”

Seven

The next day, Nate Silas awoke with one foot already on the ground and a dull pounding in his head. He turned on the television to the local news and began to get ready. This would be the first time in a long time that he would have seen some rather important people from his childhood. He didn’t want to be unprepared. He wanted to look aloof, but professional. Important looking, but unnameable. Unapproachable, but friendly.

The news rambled on in the background while Nate went about his usual routine. However, one story caught his attention, “Residents of Elm Street might have been surprised to look out their

windows yesterday afternoon when a 700 pound steer was found jogging down the road around 2pm.”

Cut to man-on-the-street: “I was workin’ on the truck when I see something out the side of my eye and at first I thought it was buttons, my wife’s cat, but then again it was runnin’ like it had all this weight. So I turn around an’ its a steer on his way downtown!”

“The bovine health enthusiast had escaped from the fairgrounds sometime yesterday afternoon and it wasn’t until a couple hours later that police were able to locate it and keep it safe while animal control was called.”

Nate chuckled and combed his hair back. Looking at himself in the mirror, he was struck by his expression of temporary joy and how inappropriate it was.

“What?” he asked the mirror. “Just because *he’s* dead, I’ve got to be dead too?”

Eight

In the hotel lobby Nate filled up a paper cup with greasy black coffee and grabbed a small croissant to cut the bitterness. He stepped outside to eat his croissant and wait for a taxi. Standing there, chewing the last bit of pastry amiably and taking a sip of the coffee, it occurred to Nate that he was starting to look like a schmuck. He looked over to the valet at the booth and said, “Are there no cabs?”

“Oh no, we gotta call them in from the airport. Other than during a couple of times a year, like a convention or the State Fair, there won’t be any cabs here,” the man, who was probably not yet old enough to drink, had a fading case of acne and an overly large uniform on. There were some spots on the bottoms of the sleeves indicating that it had probably never been washed in his presence and was probably hung every night by a hook in a Honda Civic somewhere in Wattumwa County. He stood still and smiling at Nate with his hat slightly askew.

“Would you call me a cab or should I look the number up myself?” Nate said and this electrified the valet who immediately dialed a number while muttering polite apologies. “I mean, what am I standing out here for?” Nate commented to himself.

There was no reply except for the mundane parade of people passing in front of the hotel. In car or bus or on foot, there was a constant, but trickling stream of humanity. Again, Nate looked from face to face to see if maybe he recognized anyone, but he didn’t.

“Cab should be here in ten or fifteen minutes, mister!” The kid called.

“Thanks. I’ll be here if you need me,” Nate said sardonically, but assured that the kid wasn’t going to get it.

Nine

Nate and Chuck called Chuck’s house The Mansion and it certainly lived up to its name. When they were both young it stood alone at the top of a hill on Polo Road. There were no other trees

or houses or anything at all nearby to hide The Mansion from the world at that time, it was all alone on that bald hill. Over time, it began to fill in with thin sycamores and beeches and vine lattices. It was, for a long time, a central landmark to Nate's childhood. It was a sort of compass rose from which all places in town could be referenced. To the East, down Elm, was Nate's house. To the north was downtown. South led to the public pool and the newer developments in town, the strip malls and box stores. The west led to the river and the wild lands of the Midland Centennial Park.

The Mansion itself was a Elizabethan sort of affair made of red brick and plaster with big wooden cross beams. Later, when Nate visited England and saw the inspiration of the Mansion, he noted how they were supposed to be cottages, not the abomination that this thing was. The facade of the building featured a large wooden door in the center, which, Nate was not entirely sure if it was practical or if it was just for show. There were about twenty windows in eight different styles scattered across the front of it and wrapping around. The large front lawn had a narrow foot path that led to the big wooden door and a gravel driveway that led down to the side of the house which was a sunken basement area where the garages were.

It was one of the more recognizable buildings in their neighborhood and Nate imagined that any realtor worth his or her salt would definitely swing by it a few times to impress any potential buyers.

It was so recognizable that if one was dead lost, by climbing a relatively tall tree and by referencing the Stephens' home and the Midtown hotel tower one could triangulate a way home.

Ten

After picking up Nate, the cab wound through downtown and then down Grand Avenue through the houses and trees and store fronts and hedges that composed his earliest memories.

Momentarily, he wanted to mention the things he saw to the driver, but realized how silly and childish that would have been. The car turned on to Elm and drove past Nates childhood home, which looked like it had been taken over by an arborist since it had become overgrown.

Then they came upon the hill on which The Mansion stood and Nate was shocked at how overgrown it had become. It was veritably returned to the forest. Trees stretched their foliage up past the roof of the house and spread handsomely among the other large houses that now shared that aristocratic hill. The lawn in front of the house was still wide and spacious and uncluttered by foliage, but the two sycamores had grown up sharply and now towered over the road.

The driver pulled up and stopped, but Nate didn't move.

“This is the right place, isn't it?”

“Yeah,” Nate said, coming out of his daze. “I barely recognized it. It's been so long.”

“Don't worry son, it's the same old home underneath that it always was.”

Nate got out of the car and began to walk down the narrow pathway to the front door saying under his breath, “Oh Jesus Christ, I certainly hope not.”

Eleven

The big wooden door loomed under the eaves of the Mansion. The lawn, damp and cool seemed to breathe its earthy air that lay thick upon Nate's ankles. He walked up to the big wooden door, his head suddenly dizzy and light. He reached out his hand to knock on the door, but then saw a note almost hidden under the doormat, it had fallen from its crack in the door. The note said, "Please join us in the kitchen for the Memorial of Dr. Chuck Stephens, M.D."

Nate knew where to go, but what of other guests? Then he realized that the other guests would know better than he to go round to the side door instead of the front. No wonder the note was half hidden, no one really needed it.

He walked around the front of the house along the slimy flagstones grown thick with moss and acculturated lichen. He tried the door and found it to be open. Out of habit he left his shoes in the mud room and before he could catch his bearings in the old house, Mrs. Stephens rounded the corner and they embraced. Not yet an old woman, Deirdre Stephens hunched over with a look on her face that seemed to want to run away. Her eyes were sharp, but hidden by tired eyelids. She seemed to be overly frail for her age, as if Nate could hoist her with one hand and break her upon the tile floor like an urn. She wore a blouse that felt as if it was made of muslin and khaki slacks, which sighed as she walked. The whole image of her was at odds with Nate's childhood memory of Mrs. Stephens, a woman he once described as being sharp, almost cruel, but ultimately dexterous and refined. Here she was a lump of damp chalk.

She led Nate around the corner into the kitchen where his parents, Henry and Florence were standing, Deirdre walked past Nate's mother, putting her hands on his mother's shoulder for a moment before moving on, "I'll go and find Carl." she said.

Nate's mother looked at him with eyes full of the drama of the scene, while his father tightened his jaw and switched his wine glass from his right to his left hand before thrusting out his right hand and saying, "Really sorry to hear about your old pal, Nate."

Nate took his father's hand and shook it, but then Florence charged him. She wrapped her arms around him and said in halting breaths, "Oh Nate! It's such a tragedy!"

"Yeah, it's terrible," Nate said, not knowing what to say. It wasn't like he could tell them the truth that he couldn't give a damn, that Chuck had come to mean less to him than almost anything. That he'd sooner cry for the falsely imprisoned in the Sudan, for the wrongfully executed in Mississippi, for the pretty girls in Hollywood who aren't getting laid enough.

"We've been over here since it happened," Florence said. "To support Deirdre."

"Hmm, yeah, I see you've both gotten into the wine," Nate said pointing out the half finished glass by Florence' elbow.

"There's cheese and fruit too," Henry added.

“Hank!”

“What? Look at the kid, he’s been living on nothing but lattes and oranges out there in California.”

“No, no, he’s right. I’m dying for a little cheese and wine,” Nate said to diffuse the playful spat.

Florence poured Nate a glass of wine and Henry passed him a little plate of cheese and crackers and too many grapes so that they almost all went rolling off as soon as Nate grabbed hold of the plate, “Thanks.” Nate said dryly.

He stood there appreciating the kitchen, which had changed little in 25 years. Granite counter tops, tile flooring, wrought iron handles on everything. He chewed through a bit of gouda and warmed his stomach with a gulp of wine. It had started to rain just very lightly outside. The patter of the rain drops on the uneven glass windows conjured a maelstrom of memories within Nate. He couldn’t nail one down to identify it, but it they had certainly been knocked loose.

“So, I think I’ve got a few minutes before Deirdre can find Carl, so, uh, how’d it happen?” Nate asked taking a bite of cheddar.

“Huh?” His mother cocked her head.

“You know what I mean,” Nate said with a mouth full of crackers and wine. “How’d he, you know, die? Was he sick or something? I didn’t hear anything about it. Was it an accident?”

“Oh my god,” Florence said and reached for a tissue.

“Son,” Henry said, very solemnly. “Chuck killed himself just about a week ago.”

“Hmm,” Nate hummed, still chewing. “That...” he swallowed and blinked meaningfully. “That I wasn’t expecting.”

Twelve

The branches and leaves of the trees overhang the creek, a tributary to a big river, pulled by invisible tendrils towards the ground and then snapped up to the sky in a grotesque imitation of human dance. Long grass pushed apart and lay flat against the ground making a smooth shimmering in the storm. All manner of dirt and flower petals and leaves and grass clippings flew wildly in the air and whipped up into clouds of their own that would occasionally rain down upon Chuck and Nate who were huddled in a drainage ditch. They’d been walking the creek too long, nearly outside of town they realized that the trees that grew alongside the creek had hidden the severity of the coming storm from them. “Where do we go?” Chuck screamed into the wind.

“We should go further back in,” Nate yelled. He didn’t want to go farther into the drainage tunnel. He knew that even though the homeless were moved out for the season, He also knew that very soon the storm surge would come through and flood the creek bed all the way to the top

putting the two of them underwater in a corrugated aluminum pipe. Chuck shook his head at Nate to say that he was not going to go back further into the pipe. Nate's hair whipped up in his face and he looked up to see the great green sky falling down on them. The sound of the hail hitting the ground all at once sounded like machine gun fire and didn't let up. In the distance, the air raid sirens wailed.

"Hold on!" Nate screamed and got out of the pipe to scramble up the side of the creek bed and onto the pathway that ran the length of the creek. The howling wind was a ragged sucking sound. He turned around trying to keep his balance in the wind and hail and then he saw it, the funnel dropping out of the sky and onto the field a hundred yards away. Nate's heart died in his chest and he became very cold. He leapt into the creek below and threw himself into the drainage tunnel dragging Chuck as deep into the pipe as he possibly could despite Chuck's protests, which were violent and audible above the horrible sucking of the sky.

Later, when Nate woke up in the hospital he was told that it was a lucky thing for Chuck and he to have survived. He also got thoroughly chewed out by his parents for being so far out of town during such a storm.

But, as the years past, when Nate recalled this episode in his dreams he remembered something else from the hospital, something he didn't remember when he was awake. He remembered a group of old people who showed up to his hospital bed, gathered around him and whispered to each other, their voices blending into one fractured voice.

“...saved that boy’s life....wanted to run home...had the good sense to...Let him be...It wanted Chuck, but couldn’t...It is how it should be, Let the boy be...One day it may ask,” And a hush fell upon the group.

A single voice from somewhere beyond Nate’s vision responded: “Then let it ask on that day.”

Thirteen

Nate’s parents looked at Nate with great concern and he felt, in kind, a deep affection for them. This felt so out of character for them, so unlike them. Since he’d become an adult they’d become extremely straightforward. It’s also true that as they’ve aged he’s become more fond of them. As their hair grew gray and wild, they became funnier. As they became more frail and less willing to fly out to California, they seemed wiser. As they spoke of moving to Corpus Christi, they became more like friends. But parental pity? No. That had nearly disappeared and Nate was grateful to be done with the condescending platitudes.

“Do you know anything about what happened?”

“Not really,” Florence said. “Haven’t heard much in details as of yet.”

“But it took them a week for the coroner to get their shit together enough so that the family can have the funeral. You know what that means, don’t ya? Means that maybe it wasn’t so simple as to call ol’ Chuck’s death a suicide. Maybe it wasn’t so clear in some of the circumstances,” Henry deduced.

“Hank! Don’t you go and fill his head with your theories,” Florence said.

“Oh, hell, don’t worry about it. If I’ve fucked the kid up he’s already been fucked up. I know you’ve got a mind for those conspiracies yourself, huh kid?”

“Make a living off of it,” Nate said quietly reaching for the wine bottle.

“That’s right, that’s right,” Hank said. Suddenly, Dr. Carl Stephens was standing by his shoulder.

“Ah, Carl! I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Carl Stephens was a tall vampiric looking man who possessed one of the dopiest smiles Nate had ever seen in his life, but today his lips were drawn into a face-wrinkling frown and his eyes and nose looked irritated and pink. Jordan Ellicott once described the senior Doctor Stephens as Nosferatu on Nitrous, but today the man looked like he should have been an extra in a George Romero movie.

“Oh, thank you all so very much,” the man rumbled the syllables out slowly as if on anesthetic.

“It’s so kind of you to come all the way from California, Nate. I’m sure that Chuck would have been pleased for you to have been here.” Nate’s eyebrows instantly shot up his forehead in surprise and he had to wrangle them down, hoping that it didn’t look too obvious that he thought the old man so oblivious. “Now, we should have many more guests coming through over the next couple of hours and I welcome you to enjoy the snacks and beverages. Please also visit our

memorial in the main hall here on the ground floor. At five o'clock, we will have a short service and tomorrow, at three, we will put Chuck to rest at the Alderwood National Memorial Cemetery. You are all invited to that as well." The doorbell rang. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to welcome some of our guests."

And with that, he left the room. Nate noticed that the man was so tall that he was only an inch short of the doorjamb. "Well, alright, Lurch!" Florence chuckled under her breath. Nate and Henry couldn't help but laugh. The man was cartoonish in aspect here, but in Nate's youth he was imposing, terrifying.

Fourteen

Chuck was fond of torturing his sister, Silvia, but only when he knew he could get away with it. Nate and Chuck would spend hours in the finished basement playing board games on the scratchy carpet while Silvia would play with dolls or futz about with a different board game nearby. Chuck insisted that she never be included in their games, nor was Nate's younger brother Mitchell allowed to participate. Even in cases where games may have been improved with having more people playing, Chuck insisted that no siblings be allowed and any school friend had to be screened by him.

Silvia's concurrent playing infuriated Chuck and on occasion, without warning, he would walk over to her and grab her by the hair to brutally drag her from the room. This, of course, would end in tears and she would run upstairs to tell on Chuck.

It wasn't long before Mrs. Stephens would call down to Chuck, anger in her voice. He'd run upstairs nervously and after ten minutes or so return to the basement white as the fungus pulled from a trunk's roots. He wouldn't say what frightened him so or admit that he was even frightened. He just sat there, playing Knights of Catan, shaking so slightly, his eyes wet and his throat compulsively swallowing. On these days Nate was sent home with enough time to beat the dusk from reaching the house on the hill, as early as four o'clock if it was late in the season. Nate would walk or bicycle home with barely any thought about Chuck's fate.

Later, with the assistance of his father's drunken memories, Nate came to know the truth about Chuck's fear.

"Chuck's dad beat the livin' shit out of him, Nate," Henry said one night when Nate was visiting his folks for Fourth of July. They'd both been drinking beers for a few hours by that point and had settled into a comfortable rapport when Nate rhetorically asked why his memories of Chuck as a kid were of a skinny, nervous kid.

"No shit," Nate said, but then slowly the memories began to bubble up. He remembered he took too long to leave one day and as he was being pushed out of the house he saw Mr. Stephens looming like a well-dressed hat rack in the darkness of the main hall. He said nothing and his waxy face reflected candle light like a nightmare crawling out of Chuck's sub-conscious.

“Mean fucker, he was. I supposed he’s mellowed some with age, but I think he’s still got something of the streak,” Henry rambled on. “Your mother and I didn’t need to beat you and your brother.”

“No, the psychological abuse was enough, huh?”

“Give it a rest, I pay the shrink bills around here, don’t I?” Henry said and reached for another Coors. “Maybe when it’s your chance you’ll figure out how to raise a kid without fucking him up somehow.”

“You think so?” Nate smiled at his father’s riposte, he relished these drunken, sardonic conversations they started having as soon as he had dropped out of college.

“No,” Henry said, cracking his beer open and spraying a stream of beer foam across the yard.

“But you’ll think you’re doing a great job for the first twenty years.”

Fifteen

Over the next couple of hours, people filtered in and out of the kitchen and parlor and other parts of the house. A parade of half-conscious people munching on cheap cheese and expensive crackers. Drinking wine at a completely inappropriate time of day for this particular continent. Florence was busily updating Nate on everything that had happened in the neighborhood since he’d last been back.

“Ashley Parks, you remember her, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do,” Nate did not mention to his mother that he would always remember Ashley Parks because she was the first girl in his cohort to get tits. And what miraculous tits they were.

“She’s just landed the weather woman job for the NBC station. Just a lovely person, isn’t she,” Florence said and popped a grape in her mouth. She was wearing a patterned blouse matched with baggy pleated khakhi slacks and the classic black mules she had bought at least fifteen years prior. Her curly red hair exploded out of its bun on the top of her head. In other words, she looked exactly as she did when he was in Middle school. Maybe a little more tired and a touch chubbier.

“Oh! And Derek Johns, you remember him from church, don’t you?”

Nate had a hard time focusing on the conversation with his mother. He was instead thinking deeply about Chuck Stephens and how he died. Nate wanted to ask his mother how, exactly, Chuck had died, but he was afraid it would turn her into a maudlin mess. And as more of the wine disappeared, the greater the chances that she’d fall into a piteous state, apologizing for something that wasn’t her fault, and never actually getting to the details of the matter that Nate so desperately wanted to know.

“Derek’s done well for himself as a car salesman and has recently started selling Teslas. Your dad thinks he’s crazy, but word around St. Ursula’s is that he’s crazy like a fox and is about to catch a serious windfall.”

“You don’t say,” Nate said, suddenly noticing smoke outside on the patio. He craned his neck to see that it was someone he knew out there, “Excuse me, mom, I’m gonna go say hi to Brian.”

Mrs. Silas face folded into a melodramatic frown, “I thought you quit smoking, Nate.”

“Mom! I did! I’m just going to chat with Brian for a minute. I’ll be right back in,” Nate said and slipped out onto the slick patio stones.

Brian Cavafy was smoking a cigarette in the misty noonish air. Though all morning the weather had alternated between pissing down rain and misting.

“Nate Silas,” Brian said. “Who’d’a thought you’d show up here after all this time. Want a cigarette?”

“Quit five years ago, Brian. How’s it been? Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Last time I saw you was probably the wedding.”

“Ah, yeah, I remember now. I remember the wedding more than the bachelor party, that’s certain. How is Gwen nowadays.”

“She and I separated 18 months ago, but we’re thinking about getting back together now.”

“Ah, I’m sorry, Brian. Not about you getting back together, rather about the separation and stuff,” Nate stuttered.

“I know, I know what you meant.”

They stood silent in the heavy early afternoon air. Nate was surprised to find the collar of his shirt already becoming damp. He had forgotten how wet the midwest could be. He felt uncomfortable. Brian was nearing the end of his cigarette, its ash grown long and bent with neglect and its butt crushed under Brian’s grip.

“When did you hear about it?” Nate said.

“Week ago. I barely know why they told me. We just golfed together from time to time. I only knew him through you.”

“Still, golfing means something.”

“Right,” Brian said and lifted his foot to crush the butt out on the sole of his shoe. Then he went hunting for an appropriate place to throw it out. There were many planters up and down the terraced patio. Terracotta resting on limestone slabs. From the top of the Grant’s Garden neighborhood of Midland. At the bottom was a bowl of verdant green grass surrounded by the small forest of trees that separated the Stephens backyard from the others on the hill. Nate wondered if Brian remembered the time that the whole backyard was covered in a solid three feet of snow and he had packed a snowball with a river rock in it and hit Chuck squarely in the head with it. Blood flowing out of his lime green beanie, Chuck was so full of rage, he was frightening. Nate had run all the way home exhausting himself by trudging through the deep and soft snow. By the time he’d stomped through the door and into his mother’s mud room, Nate was laughing hysterically. Remembering the look on Chuck’s face, like a bird had shit in his mouth, made him laugh aloud.

“Here. This one’s full of refuse,” Nate said and held a pot out for Brian to throw out the remainder of his cigarette. “Do you know what happened?”

“He killed himself,” Brian said nonchalantly. “What else is there to say?”

“What do you mean what else is there to say?” Nate retorted, trying to not raise his voice. “Did it seem like he was bummed out? Did he owe somebody money? Was there a girl?”

“Nope, none of that as far as I know. I haven’t heard of a suicide note either,” Brian said and put a piece of chew under his lip.

“Do you—” Nate hesitated carefully, “Do you know how he did it?”

“Shit, Nate, you didn’t read the paper?”

“Brian, we don’t get the Midland Star in Los Feliz.”

“Supposedly Chuck laid himself down in bed one night, took a boning knife and shoved it straight through his chest into his heart. The coroner said it was surgical-like.”

“That would make sense, considering the man was a surgeon,” Nate said. The mist began to accumulate into actual rain. “How strange.”

“Man, if you think that’s weird, his fiance hasn’t even arrived yet,” Brian spat into a planter.

“The weirdness proliferates.”

Sixteen

“What was it like growing up there?” She asked and passed Nate a roach, “I’ve only ever lived in cities, in apartments.”

“Idyllic, you know, like the cliché of *Stand By Me* or any of the John Hughes movies, but different still. Those comparisons are really kind of lazy.

“Tell me about what it was like. Tell me about what it was like in summer. What did it *smell* like? What do you remember?” She asked and curled up into him under the covers as the fog from the bay rolled in and through their open windows. Her hair splashed over her and obscured her face from his memory.

“It had a smell and an energy all of its own. I’ve never experienced it again, it only exists in my memories. It smells like gasoline and fresh cut grass. But then there’s so much more to it. The tar melting off of the roads, which were impossibly hot and seemed to roll on forever. If you look at a map you can see the tiny state roads that cut the whole region up into neat little squares. You could walk out of your house and start walking in one direction and soon enough you’d be on one of those country roads, wandering endlessly through geometric perfection. Endless soybean fields, endless corn. Occasionally you’d come across a silo or a farmhouse or a little town with a high school fit for 200.

“On those hot days you’d try to get into the local pool with its pitch dark locker rooms, concrete floors slick with moldy slime and by the pools themselves impossibly hot pipes and lounge chairs. Because, it’s not like out in So-cal where everybody and their mother’s got a pool. The taste of chlorine and candy and the sound of the local radio station playing Wallflowers and Smash Mouth and Breeders.

“Then there was the sensation of being watched. Something subtle and almost imperceptible. Like a lifeguard on duty at every street corner. Some quiet reminder that these inconsequential summer days are all that you’ll ever deserve, all that you’ll ever want out of life. An awareness

that you should be appreciative of all of this simplicity and quaintness. I found summers to be suffocating and spent all of my time trying to cool off and not fall asleep in the sun. The midwestern sun is like heroin, it lulls you into a peaceful sleep and will then promptly fuck you up.”

“That all sounds like a dream. Like you’re dreaming of a summer there and not really telling me about what it’s like.”

“That’s what it’s like, it’s like a dream.”

Sixteen

As in Midland, as in Los Angeles or any town at all there is a small core of people who constitute the soul of the place. These people are well respected in their community, though sometimes anonymous. They’re typically elderly and spend most of their time getting in the way of other people’s lives.

There are many lucky people in this world who have only passing relationships to these people. They might have an aunt who they kiss at weddings and funerals and to whom they never speak a word. Or they might bump into a member of the historical society at a local restaurant. In bigger cities seeing one of these people might be occasion for celebrating as they are a celebrity in their own right, but they are celebrities anyway, even if the scale is smaller.

For those arguably less fortunate, this tight knit group of town elders takes a particular interest in their lives and becomes intrinsic in their success or destruction.

Oftentimes it's hard to tell whether this group means one harm or good as the assumption is that they're such good-hearted, home-grown people, well, how could they mean one harm?

Others are preternaturally prepared to avoid these people at any cost arguing that they can do no good.

In many ways they are gods. From a primitive perspective, anyone who lives past 60 must seem like Methuselah. From a social aspect these people can get you out of jail, get you a job, help you pay for your kid's education. The rules that normally stand in our way are invisible to them and they transgress them at will. They have existed since the beginning of time, before any God you may have met and made your personal savior. Hell, they'll convince you that God is real.

As stated, many people do not notice these people, but there are some who are particularly predisposed to sense their presence and desire to avoid them.

Seventeen

"Kee-rist!" Henry Silas cursed under his breath, causing Nate to turn around looking for what had so startled his father. "The Soybean Social Club. I just saw them coming up the path." Henry finished his wine and set the glass in the sink. He ran some water over his hands and then ran his fingers through his hair, which had long since gone gray and wiry. His thin face rimmed by large

circular glasses made him look like some East Coast blue blood, but he was anything but. Rather he was a lazy intellectual who had managed to put together a living for himself at the Midland university as a professor. He was a man who tended to wear earth tone colors and cardigans with bulges in the pockets where his collection of expo dry erase markers lived. “I’m gonna get out of here. You coming?”

“I think I’ll stick around for the memorial,” Nate said.

“Ha, good luck to you. We both know that you’re a better man than me. Tell your mother that I just remembered I left the garage door open and that I’ll be back after I close it.”

“Are you going to come back?”

“No, no, no.” Henry said, halfway out of the patio door, “I’m going to take a strategic nap if you know what I mean.”

A strategic nap. A distinct invention of his father’s, which meant something like ‘sleep to avoid responsibilities or life in general.’ It was a miracle that he’d never developed a serious drug habit. A miracle that he’d done anything with this life at all.

There was a ruckus at the door as about a dozen people tried to come into the house at once. Shuffling and scooting around each other, no one willing to get out of the way for the others to make it in, they were focused upon their nucleus.

At first Nate could not see and so he went and offered to take coats only to be rebuffed and ignored. He stood on the edge of the swirl of black wool and looked in trying to see who was at the center. The old ladies wept and the old men fussed.

As the group broke into the hallway and began to flow towards the parlor, Nate saw her head and if he didn't know her personally, he would have assumed that she was a victim of polio being carried about like a totem of god's hate. However, she was not ill, she was Mary Thurgood, Chuck Stephen's bride to be.

Eighteen

Nate Silas felt light-headed and felt like he might pass out right there in the middle of the kitchen with people rushing about bringing cakes and plates and taking out glasses and cups. They opened and closed cabinets and refrigerators and cupboards and other appliances until he could feel the wind from their moving doors whip up into a surly gust and his mind composed a little poem which he said to himself:

From the dark-damp of the winter and springtime

Basements where I spent my youth.

California's dried me out,

Dried out those memories,

Which come rushing back in the humidity,

Come pouring down

From the pregnant midwestern clouds,

Which blow in on green howling winds.

Nineteen

Feeling the inklings of a panic attack, Nate Silas made his way out of the kitchen, but not before stopping to grab another drink. The first thing in sight was a bottle of Spanish Sherry and he hesitated for a moment wondering if maybe it weren't better to search a little more for a wine that might be a bit more palatable, but then a chorus of voices sounded behind him:

"Terrible, terrible tragedy," One old woman's voice coughed and sputtered like a backfiring Datsun.

"He was so young, so much opportunity still out there for him. His practice was becoming so successful!" another woman shrieked like a muted trumpet.

"We truly never know when the Lord will call us home," A fat man burped.

Nate resigned to his choice and topped off his glass. Years of growing up in and around the Mansion had prepared him for what he was about to do. He slipped out of the back through the kitchen patio door and made his way around the patio underneath the very few awnings made available there so as to not get wet. While dodging raindrops he sampled the Spanish wine and found that he didn't find it repulsive, he rather liked it, though it had an unusual taste that he was unsure he could tolerate for a night of drinking the stuff. Nate found the door where he'd

anticipated it, the movie room. A large-ish room with a few rows of reclining chairs focused on an enormous television mounted on the wall.

He stepped into the room and checked his tracks to make sure that he wasn't leaving mud and leaves behind. He exited the movie room and into the main hall where the great big wooden front door was. Also, the staircase that led up to the upper floors let out there. To his left was the parlor, Behind him, to the left was the living room. Piano hymnals were being played, presumably by Christian, the virtuoso. Nate looked around the corner to confirm the truth. And Lo, there was Christian, surrounded by his mother and father and a few guests.

He was wrapped up in the music to say the least. He writhed and slapped at the keys and kicked the pedals with great emotion. Nate imagined that the sheet music called for "*Here, tear one's breast asunder in grief!*" His hands flew up from the keyboard dramatically and ladies dressed in black held handkerchiefs to their faces. Chuck would have been disgusted by this display. He would describe it as so disingenuous as to verge on comedy. Christian, the fraud. As much as Nate believed Chuck to be a sociopath, it was clear to both he and Chuck that Christian was a very accomplished sociopath. His skills at emotional manipulation were amazing and cruel. Nate had never seen Christian engage in any activity in which Christian might falter, he was always in control. He was a sick man, a vampire, a demon, but looking at the parlor an observer might think that he was some nationally praised concert pianist instead of an errant banker visiting his hometown for his kid brother's funeral. Now that Nate thought about it, it struck him as strange that Christian would show up at all. A thought crept into Nate's brain and planted itself firmly. Maybe Christian had decided that the time had come to be rid of Chuck, put an end to the kid so

that he could put on a nice little performance for the mucky-mucks of Midland, remind them who the golden child of the Stephens family really was. A person would have to be truly disturbed to do something like that, but Nate wouldn't put it past Christian. He would probably have to interview Christian later, but he regretted the mere thought of having to do so. Talking to Christian was like having a conversation with a very well-developed computer program. It passes the Turing Test, but there's something of the Uncanny Valley in his eyes, in the way he repeats key words that you've just spoken.

Being as he was unseen by the crowd in the parlor, Nate ducked into the library. The heavy wooden doors swung open silently and he moved immediately to the back of the library. Nate absolutely loved it and ever since he was a child he promised himself that he would have a library exactly like it if he ever became successful. The entire room was done in chiseled mahogany and smelled of leather and binding glue. The stacks reached up ten feet on the wall, so high that there was a small ladder on casters that you could use to reach up to the higher volumes. There were two cases in the center of the room that stretched six feet wide. In the corners of the room were cushy and worn leather chairs aimed into the corners which had windows in the wall where the bookshelves had been left out. On the side farthest the hall door was the desk, which was built into the wall itself and was strewn with books that needed to be reshelfed. The desk's cabinets were locked just as they had always been. There was something gothic and severe about the library that ironically put Nate at ease. He sipped his wine and read the spines of the books. It was clear that at some point there had been an alphabetical order, but it had been long since abandoned. His eyes skimmed over anything that was remotely medical, journals stuffed into tight cracks and stacked on top of books or wherever they could fit, among

John Irving novels and Oprah Book Club picks, *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Mao II*, *Frankenstein*, or *A Modern Prometheus*, paperback fantasies, mass market sci-fi, hard-backed Heinlein and creased Bradbury. There was Carson McCullers, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandberg, Anne Proulx. The complete, the collected, the illustrated, the celebrated works of Poe, Dickins, Ginsberg, Angelou, Burns. Nate was lost in it, just like when he was a kid. He could never imagine Dr. Stephens spending any time reading such things as *The Red Pony* or *The Collected Dorothy Parker*, but he knew that Chuck spent huge quantities of time absorbing as many volumes as possible. It's probably because of Chuck, Nate thought, that every one of these books has felt a human's touch. Otherwise they may have been neglected. He looked up to the top shelf to see if he might spy a book that's never been pried open, that's never stared into a face with as much absorption as the face itself. A small hand came down on Nate's shoulder and he gave a start. A credit to the careful librarian in him, he did not spill a drop of his sherry.

"Jesus!" Nate exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, Nathan, I didn't mean to startle you," Mary Thurgood said as she embraced Nate.

Nate put his hands on her back and felt her heave through some tears, "I'm so sorry, Mary. It's not right. I'm so sorry for your loss."

Mary pulled away and daubed her mascara'd eye. "Thank you, Nate. You always did have a big heart." Nate turned slightly to avoid making a face that betrayed how much he thought her compliment was a mischaracterization.

“This really is terrible, Mary. Was there any sign? Anything at all leading up? Did he have money trouble? I figured he was golden after the book.”

“I knew you’d be curious too,” She said and turned away to pull a volume off the shelf and stare at it to hide her face. Her black bobbed hair hung from the sides and obscured her face. She wore a black A-line dress with a square cut neck-line. She wore shiny black heels and Nate noted the glossy red sole. The only hint of color on her hidden under her foot.

“What do you mean by that?” Nate said, pulling *The Tin Drum* from the shelf.

“You know what I mean, Nate,” Mary sighed in exasperation. “San Diego, remember.”

How could he have forgotten? It must have been some attempt at self-preservation, a protective forgetting. Nate had forced it out of his mind and now, here it came rushing back, just like the rest of his history that seemed to be rejuvenated in the midwestern dampness. “Oh no. Do you think he knew? How could he have found out?” Nate whispered. But for whom did he whisper? Why? Did he think a guest might have heard and assumed something or was Nate starting to become aware of the ways of the dead? The dead, the eternally blind and deaf are unkind, cruel in the memories of the living.

“I don’t know, Nate.” Mary sobbed softly, “I just don’t know.”

Twenty

When Nate was in fifth grade he learned how to apply a condom by watching a video in health class where two disembodied hands demonstrated on a banana. They were woman's hands as Nate could remember. The classroom was hot and muggy in the dark. Better to get the students sleepy than have them realize they were locked up in a hopeless classroom.

Chuck probably watched that same video, but the same year he learned something else. Chuck Stephens learned that it would be a very nice thing for he and Mary Thurgood to get married. Not that year, but when the time was right.

Deirdre Stephens hadn't given it a thought before one day Reverend Porter's wife mentioned Mary in passing after Sunday Service on a bright summer day, "Oh, isn't she just adorable? She's growing up to be a fine young woman."

"Hmm, sure is," Deirdre Stephens replied absently.

Later in the week while driving Chuck and Nate to basketball practice she mentioned it. "I hear that Mary Thurgood is really good at three pointers, you and Nate ever think about inviting her to play basketball with you down at the park?"

"Why?" Chuck said defiantly. He knew what his mother was getting at, but wanted something out of her. This was how many conversations among the Stephens went. There was the

conversation that was being had and the sub conversation, which was more like a game to be won.

“She just seems nice, like you’ll all have fun together,” Deirdre said.

“I play on her team in gym sometimes,” Nate said. “She pushed me into a wall last week and the coach didn’t even foul her for it.”

The car remained silent. No one cared about Nate’s anecdote. If asked, it’s doubtful that even Nate cared.

It would be impossible to directly connect the idea of pairing Mary Thurgood up with Chuck Stephens to the Midland Historical Society, or the more loosely affiliated Soybean Social Club, but folks in the know, residents of Midland, were pretty certain. It was one of those pairings that was ordained by the stars. Passed down from on high for the poor human players to act out and vouchsafe. Deirdre thought nothing of her son’s initial rebuff to her idea and would never have thought of bringing it up again. But, as is the way in small towns, these sorts of ideas gain some persistence over the years.

Little things would happen from time to time. Mrs. Hayes would assign Mary and Chuck to be partners in a school assignment or they’d end up dominating a particular lane at the bowling alley for Joe Taylor’s birthday. Chuck would end up placing as second Trumpet right behind

Mary's Baritone Clarinet seat. Well, that placement required a little finagling from Mr Allen, the band director and musical archivist for the Midland historical society.

For a time it seemed like the very plants and bricks of the city conspired to bring Chuck and Mary together though they seemed to be completely resistant. Like most people their age, they weren't especially interested in boyfriend-slash-girlfriend nonsense and found the implications to be vaguely annoying. But the pressure was there nonetheless. Building like a far off storm.

Twenty-One

The Stephens family held a Christmas party every year on the 26th of December, otherwise known as the Feast of St. Stephen. The event, for those who were invited was a raucous good time for all involved. The adults would gradually get completely wasted in the parlor and get in over-involved arguments about local politics or the performance of sports teams from New England to the Bay Area. There were a few occasions on which the adults parties almost ended in fists.

The childrens' side of the party was almost certain to *begin* with fists. Gifts already given and brand new toys available to play with made the Stephens' party particularly popular. The year that Nate and Chuck were in sixth grade, the party was particularly outrageous. Nate and Chuck had both gotten walkie talkies for christmas and were inspired to organize a house wide hide-and go seek game. Jordan and Terry were on one team, Nate and his brother Mitchell on another, Brian and Ashley, Jordan's sister on the third team. The fourth team, somehow, serendipitously, was composed of Chuck and Mary Thurgood.

Now, one of the immutable rules of the Mansion was that kids were allowed in the carpeted areas of the basement (excluding the wine cellar and garages) and the kitchen. Typically, this was plenty of space for the kids to play video games or board games or to chase each other around until exhausted, but there was something special about this year, something about sixth grade. Next year they would matriculate to Junior High, they were on the top of the Elementary school totem pole and feeling grown up. The basement was no longer enough space for them and thus the game was organized.

The rules were that the teams would 1) have 15 minutes to find a spot to hide, 2) team members had to be arms length from each other in their hiding places 3) each team would have a slip of paper with a ranked number on it that they could only look at at the end of the 15 minute hiding period at which time they would look at it. The lowest number would then act the part of the seeker 4) each seeker had thirty minutes to find the other teams. Points were awarded based on how many teams a seeker could find.

Of course being found by an adult was right out because it would mean the collapse of the game.

The teams organized, planned and then they were off! Jordan and Terry ended up hiding in the library assuming that being so close to where most of the adults were no one would dare come and look for them there. Nate and Mitchell hid in the linen closet on the third floor between the guest rooms. Mitchell, being tired from all of the excitement kept falling asleep on the sheets.

Ashley and Brian took the exciting and dangerous choice of hiding in Chuck's very closet stuffing themselves into his jackets and polo shirts hoping to further camouflage themselves.

Jordan and Terry happened to have the slip of paper with the 'one' on it and so began to search from the top floor down. The adults did not hear their scrambling steps as they ran up to the fourth floor. Later, Terry would admit that they decided to search there simply because it was the most exotic place in the entire Mansion and they weren't going to waste this opportunity.

They hadn't even gotten to the end of the third floor before Mary and Chuck had been found. However, it wasn't Jordan and Terry who found them. Instead, it had been Aunt Moira who after volunteering to grab another bottle of cabernet discovered the clandestine couple swapping saliva in the wine cellar. She gave them a wry smile and said, "I'm going to guess you two aren't supposed to be in here."

Now, it may have been Moira's playfully cruel nature to take those kids out of that cellar and parade them in front of the parlor of adults. A sort of look at this entertaining bit of embarrassment I've brought for you here! But to have looked at the couple in the moment of their shame, like a model of Adam and Eve in Miniature, Chuck clutching his walkie talkie like a fig leaf and Mary biting her lip, it was clear what Aunt Moira (Midland Historical Society Treasurer 1997 to 2003) was orchestrating. It was a debut.

Twenty-Two

Nate liked telling that story because for the longest time he could only see the innocent angles of it. He told it at a Christmas party he held himself at the ramshackle bungalow he owned in Long Beach one year. He had his guests rolling with his invented details of the shocked faces of the old ladies in the parlor confronted with youthful sexual desire.

Later that night, after the guests had gone and his girlfriend at the time, Amy, the one with the fro wig and dark skin that hid her from him everywhere in the night except for against the bright white of his sheets, had asked whatever happened to the unhappy couple.

“Well,” Nate began, shifting himself in the bed to face her, the wig long removed to show her nearly bald head, her eyes shining in the multi-colored christmas lights that still burned on the porch behind him. “I don’t know if Chuck’s infidelity has anything to do with it, but he was never what you would call a faithful boyfriend.”

“No!” Amy said, shocked.

“That’s not really right to say either. He and Mary were on-again-off-again for years. They were together, in as much as any junior high school kid can be with someone for several years, but by the time that we got into high school, he couldn’t be contained.”

“How did she handle that?”

“You know what? As I remember it, she didn’t seem to care that much. When they were together, they were a model couple. Very much the sort of relationship that they model horror movie lovers after. They went everywhere together. I remember several dances where the main event was Chuck and Mary showing up, hand in hand, lovingly looking at each other before stepping on the floor to gracefully dance to the slow songs and then split up with a laugh to hop about to the hip hop songs. Strange to think considering how much of a nerd Chuck was.”

“But they weren’t always together?” Amy reached over Nate to grab a joint out of the ashtray on the nightstand. “He was a dog, wasn’t he.”

Nate laughed, “Wasn’t he? Isn’t he. Yeah, when they weren’t together in school, Chuck tried to lay every pretty girl he saw. He wasn’t even opposed to the occasional blowjob behind the dumpster from Krystal McCall.”

“That’s the school slut’s name?” Amy asked and took a drag off of the joint.

“Yeah, she was actually a really nice girl. I wonder what happened to her.”

“Do you wish you’d fucked her?”

In the darkness of the Christmas night and thoroughly soaked in celebratory wine Nate felt comfortable enough to tell Amy the truth. He trusted her and he felt more relaxed than he had felt in a long time.

“Yeah,” Nate said. “But even more, I wish Jordan Traudt hadn’t fucked her.”

“Hmm,” Amy hummed with a mouth full of smoke. After she exhaled and coughed a little, she added, “And how do you know that old Chuckie is still up to his tricks?”

A small panic rose up in Nate, but he pushed it back down and told the truth again, “I saw Mary Thurgood in San Diego a month ago during a conference. Remember the one that I put together the improv troupe for? Anyway, she tells me at the bar—so matter of fact, you have to understand, it’s like how it was back in middle school when it was just she’s with him or he’s with her or he’s with her and she’s with him—Mary tells me that Chuck’s basically using his practice and his book to get laid whenever he wants.” Amy passed the roach to Nate who took a drag and coughed so much that he had to sit up and thump his chest with his fist.

“But what does she care?” Amy said, taking the joint back and examining it for any excess saliva. “How long ago had they been broken up? Why does she still keep tabs on him?”

Recovering from his coughing fit, Nate turned to her confused, “Oh, I left that out! They’re engaged to get married. Have been for a few years now. She’s very upset that he’s cheating on her.”

“Fuckin’ A!” Amy exclaimed. “You left all that out!”

“Oh yeah, they were together on and off throughout highschool and college and then he moved back to Midland to open his practice and he proposed. That has to have happened... uh... three years ago?”

“What’s keeping them from getting married?” Amy asked and burned out the rest of the roach. “He’s got cold feet because he’s still keeping them warm in other womens’ beds?”

“Interestingly enough,” Nate began, resisting the urge to shudder at the memory of the conversation. “Interestingly enough, it’s the family that’s had the problem. The Thurgoods claim that Chuck needs to be a little more established before they can marry his beloved. Mary blames them. She says that the reason that he cheats is because he doesn’t feel like he can fully commit because the family is preventing him from committing. Sounds like bullshit to me, but that’s what Mary told me.”

Now Amy was curling luxuriantly into her pillow and inviting Nate to curl up next to her, which he did. Her head smells of lilacs and cocoa butter. Nate’s got an erection, but he doesn’t press the point.

“You ever want to fuck that Mary girl?” Amy says sleepily.

“Girl,” Nate said, “Don’t you know I’m a virgin?”

They laugh and then fall asleep. Both were late for work in the morning.

Twenty-Three

Mary Thurgood grabbed Nate's hand and dragged him out into the hallway, "It's time," she said.

He watched as the bodies flowed out of the kitchen, down the hall. More came from the dining room and they gathered unevenly in the hallway. Women and men of all ages, but indistinguishable features conglomerated there and flowed about like a heavy surf. Something was happening, but Nate couldn't tell just what was happening yet. The parlor seemed to fill with faces that were familiar, but faces he couldn't name. He had the sudden paranoid feeling that he would have to speak publicly, that Mary had pulled him out into the the general area to make a toast or speech for which he was wholly unprepared. He began to rehearse lines in his head, desperately. He knew that this would be bad, whatever he said would be bad.

Then, Carl Stephens appeared at the top of the bannister. Typical of him to make such a dramatic entrance. He was a saving grace for Nate, who stopped sweating for just a moment. He took a sip from his sherry and felt cooled in the shadow of Dr. Stephens.

"Excuse me everyone," Dr. Carl Stephens began. "May I have all of your attention. This is a very difficult time for the Stephens family and we are so grateful to have you all here. Especially, you Nate. Thank you so much for coming all the way out from California."

People applauded Nate and he felt sick. He nodded dutifully and wondered if there weren't any other people from more distant locales.

“Our son has gone away from us,” Dr. Stephens choked up at saying this, but continued bravely. “But he is not forgotten. Never will he be forgotten.” pause, “I would like to ask everyone interested in buying flowers for Charles grave to instead give to the Midland Suicide Trust. We have decided to decorate Charles’ grave with flowers from our own garden, which you all know to be very delightful even in these awful times.”

A murmur of agreement followed this statement. It affirmed the appropriateness of the garden, of the gift to the local charity.

“My son.” Carl spoke gravely. “My son!” He exclaimed. “My son was a good man who was tortured by private demons that none of us could have seen nor acknowledged. Now he is at rest.” Carl Stephens spoke this with more sanguinity than Nate had ever seen before and he was thoroughly wrapped in the man’s words. “I’d like to say a few words from the Holy Book as, perhaps, my son’s last words, “I say, ‘O my God,” Where before Nate was captivated, he was now disappointed by the religiosity of the statement. Chuck, he knew, would not give a good goddamn about any verse. Nate fixed his mouth in a position of mourning and forced it there. It would be unkind to laugh. “Do not take me away in the midst of my days, Your years are throughout all generations. Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but you endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing You will change them and thy will be changed.”

Carl paused and then added “Psalms 102:24-26.” And he went back upstairs to the forbidden areas of the Mansion.

Twenty-Four

“And that,” Nate said to no one in particular, but assumed that Mary Thurgood was still standing near him, “Was supposed to be a memorial speech? What was that?”

“Memorial speech,” Brian Cavafy mumbled and discretely spat into a plastic cup he was carrying with a folded paper towel at the bottom. “Wasn’t up to your literary standards, Nate?”

“No, I mean, it just seemed to be surreal,” Nate said.

“How so?”

“What do you mean, how so? When the fuck did anybody in the Stephens’ family give a shit about religion. Where the hell did he find a bible to look up the scripture?”

“Ever hear of this thing called Google,” Brian said.

“You know what I mean, Brian,” Nate said. “Hey, I still haven’t found out. How Chuck, uh...”

“How he did it?”

“Yeah,” Nate said, leaning in towards Brian so that he didn’t have to say it too loud.

“Don’t know why you want to know. Doesn’t make any difference,” Brian said.

“Come on, Brian. I’ve got to know.”

Brian spat into his cup and said, “That’s Nate Silas all over.”

“What does that mean?”

“Always got to be in peoples’ business. Got to know what happened when it won’t help at all if you know or not. Folks are just puzzles for you like the crossword or some book from Lit class. You were always one of those guys who would read the last few pages in the middle of the book.”

“Are you,” Nate began and halted to calm his voice which was becoming irate, “Are you casting moral judgement on me because I used to read the ending of books before finishing them?”

“I wouldn’t judge you for it, Nate. That’s God’s job, but you tend to reserve that same judgement for whoever you’re looking at.”

“So, you aren’t going to tell me? Am I going to have to go down to the fucking morgue to find out? Is that what you want? Should I ask his grieving mother?”

“He hanged himself,” Brian began. “In his office.”

“Holy shit,” Nate whispered. “Like pulling teeth.”

Twenty-Five

Brian and Nate stood in the Parlor as Christian resumed playing the piano. Some dirge or another, sounded like Bach. People of every age milled about in their Sunday best, in dark colors and black ties. Mostly everyone was white with the odd exception of an elderly black man who could have been a shop owner or there was a Native American, who wore a bolo tie and denim jeans under a polyester black suit. Nate remembered a feeling that he had when he had been growing up in Midland, everyone here spent so much time conforming to their appropriate stereotype that they became parodies of themselves. But parody wasn't a good description because parodies were funny. There wasn't anything humorous about the rigidity with which people conformed to their stated public image. Christian took his place playing sad classical music at the piano as he was the musician in the family. The ladies whose children were about the age of Chuck crowded around Deirdre and dropped out only occasionally to refresh their glasses of white wine. Always white, can't be red. The men stand around talking about television and their golf handicap. They get to drink beer or red wine or heavily watered down whiskey. Almost all of them are using one hand to balance a paper plate, napkin and canape precariously. There are some younger people at the fringes of the rooms. They're absorbed in their tablets and cell phones. They never knew Chuck and they were simply dragged off to the service because their mothers or fathers thought that it would be right to bring them along. Either that or they were not trusted to be on their own. Even those who tried to stand out from the crowd ended up being caricatures of themselves. One girl, who introduced herself as Grace, wandered through

the crowds asking people how they were and if they wanted anything from the kitchen or a tissue? She had to be in high school and Nate suspected an aspiring local politician.

“Hello, Mr. Cavafy. Are you doing alright? Can I get you another... Uh... empty cup? No, alright. Hello, I’m not sure if we’ve met before, Mr...” Grace said to Brian and Nate. She wore black slacks and flats that exposed her ankles and a dark blue cardigan. Her lips were painted a purplish blue color that if it had been on a less bright or lively face would have made people think she’d been suffocated to death.

“This here is Nate Silas,” Brian introduced. Grace’ face contorted in appreciation. Nate couldn’t tell if she recognized him or not. “He’s a famous Hollywood producer now, but back in the day he was part of the original gang with Chuck and I.”

“Gang,” Nate repeated. “That’s a touch grandiose.”

“Oh, you know what? I have heard of you, but I thought.... I honestly thought you were made up,” Grace said.

Nate gave her a strange look, but Brian laughed and said, “That’s right. He is made up. A complete fiction of his own making. The man, the legend.”

“How do you mean that you thought I was made up?” Nate said, curious.

“Oh, you know, I just hear some stories about you and Mr. Stephens and Sidney and Terry and Brian...Angela... I just thought that they were always telling us tall tales and that you were one of those tall tales.”

“Do you think that Terry’s a tall tale too?”

“No!” Grace started, “Terry was real?”

“What,” Nate turned to Brian, “in the fuck have you been telling the kids around here for the past fifteen years?” In Nate’s periphery he could see Grace wince and shudder as if she’d just bitten into a lemon. He felt embarrassed for her. Nearly a grown woman and she can’t stand the word ‘fuck.’

“You’re a legend, Nate,” Brian said cruelly, “You should be happy about that. You always wanted to be a character in a book. You just didn’t get the chance to write your own legend.”

Grace, smart girl that she was, took the opportunity to notice Mrs. Hayes several feet away and shuffle off.

“Come on, Brian. How did it happen? Was there any sign?”

“What does it matter, Nate? It’s not like you’re going to solve the case. There’s no foul play here, there’s no criminal mastermind for Sam Spade to uncover. The man decided that enough

was enough one day. Maybe they didn't have a fresh cinnamon twist at the Kraz-e-Kream that morning. Maybe he was just depressed."

"Why are you so intractable? I just want to know. Call it fucking closure. I need closure."

"You know what? That's fine. But don't ask me any more questions about it. You were always upsetting people and getting me in trouble so you can go and do all of that on your own. I have no interest in ruining my reputation in this town asking stupid, useless questions."

"They're just questions, how could they ruin your reputation?"

"Look, Nate, when you're done with your closure, your little investigation, you can go home to Hollywood, but I've still got to live here." Cavafy paused for a few moments and then spat into his cup. "Gretchen fuckin' hates it when I ask questions like that."

Twenty-Six

Who was this gang that Grace spoke of? Nate had to reach deeply into his mind to remember his childhood friends. It wasn't so much of a gang. Maybe, in the midst of a particularly sardonic mood someone would have called it a gang, but really it had no name. A loose alliance of students who lived in the Grant's Garden neighborhood of Midland.

Brian Cavafy, the son of a local sewage bureaucrat, was the most athletic of the group. The pitcher for the neighborhood baseball team and an avid BMX biker, he was a mostly quiet guy

who tended to not hold very strong opinions about much. Nate was surprised at Brian's cynical judgement of him as it seemed to be so much out of character, but then again it had been many years since his wedding, which was also not the best time to have figured out what kind of man Brian turned into.

Angela Ferguson who was an early crush of Nate's. His memory preserves her strawberry blonde hair pulled into a ponytail, her pink sunset t-shirt and blue shorts as her uniform of summertime. He dated Angela for a period of time in high school, but not terribly long. Apparently she'd most recently been working as Chuck's office manager and was therefore an excellent place to start in unravelling the mystery of Chuck's death.

Terry was dead. Probably.

Sidney Parrish, who had been a meek and unassuming child prone to allergies and injuries graduated from school with honors and then promptly joined the Army. The last time that Nate had seen Sidney was at Brian's bachelor party between deployments. He chugged beers and laughed confidently, told stories about the strange towns he'd visited in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was very different from the boy Nate had watched accidentally launch his bike into a rose bush and then upon being removed, bleeding and bruised, shiver like a sick dog and whimper, "I Don't want to die."

There was a time when they rode the wind down. The idyllic, breezy summers would wind away as the six of them biked through all throughout town, terrorizing mall walkers and hanging out

on the stone steps downtown. Eating snow cones in the midwestern shade their lungs filled with the purifying air of opportunity. They all attended the same elementary school and junior high school and formed a sort of clique of their own.

Nearly every member had a good understanding of their place in the clique, but Nate always rejected what he saw as the implication that they existed simply to serve Charles Stephens. He wasn't so special, Nate reckoned, they were all equals deserving of their own respect.

It was around the time of the tragedy, when they lost Terry, that Chuck had decided to go to school at a prep school instead of Midland high school.

“Who do you think you are,” Nate said, half joking.

“My dad can pay for it and it means that I'll already be pretty acclimated to the area when I get into Harvard.”

“Harvard!” Angela blurted, “That's incredible!”

“Give me a break, Angela,” Nate barked. “He hasn't gotten into Harvard yet. Hell, he hasn't even gotten into his prep school. Or do you need to do anything for that? Will they just take daddy's money and that's all she wrote?”

Charles leapt over the park bench and threw Nate into the grass. They wrestled together for a little bit before Brian finally decided to walk over and break it up.

“You stuck up, fuck,” Nate accused Charles.

“Look, just because I’m not going to waste away here you think I’m stuck up?” Charles shouted, “I’m going to go do something with my life!”

“Hey, I’m not the fucking side kick in your life story, Chuck. I’ve got my own life I’m going to do something with.”

“Oh yeah? Let me know when you get around to doing that,” Chuck said and then caught a fist to the side of his head.

This sort of violence pervaded their relationship during their entire childhood, even though early on, in Nate’s mother’s words, they had been so close.

Fights started after chess, Settler’s of Catan, tag, races, Tae-kwon-do demonstrations. They started over unfairly mastered Dungeons and Dragons games where Nate and Brian would balk that there was no way out of that room without triggering the ten-thousand ninja attack. There was blood spilled when Chuck was particularly dominant in Halo one day.

There were endless cycles of play and violence, which Nate accepted as the way and didn't mind when it ended up with Angela dotting over him after a particularly bad scrape up.

After Chuck left, only to return every summer for the next 12 years or so, the rest of the group went off to high school and mostly began to grow apart. Angela and Nate were an item in high school between sophomore and junior year, but broke up when it was clear that Nate was not as committed as he said he was.

They all shared a number of classes in the giant Lafayette High School, a former textile factory that had been built atop an even older cemetery. The structure was hopelessly haunted though Nate refused to believe in it.

Chuck would return every summer and try his hardest to join his old friends after his days of studying and working at his father's practice. The old group was more than willing to let him join them, but he was something of a foreign quantity. He didn't understand their jokes, he didn't have the same interests, he didn't even give a shit when Brian bought a brand new WRX from the dealership in Belleville. Chuck was an alien and Nate cruelly made sure that he felt that way every summer, but he justified it by saying that he was keeping Chuck's ego in check. It was Chuck, after all, who believed that they were all just players in his feature.

The last summer, Chuck announced that he'd been accepted to Harvard and then promptly disappeared, leaving Nate fuming. The rest of the group had been accepted to colleges all over

the states, but when Nate looked at his list of schools, he ended up accepting the school that was the absolute farthest away, USC.

Nate decided that he was going to leave it all behind. The absurd expectations of perfection that never amounted to anything, the rigid conformity to stereotypes and familial dynamics, the church appearances, the public events, the absurdity of putting forth a public face and maintaining a private one as well.

Nate imagined everyone in the city of Midland, all of the people he saw walking around in their shirts and ties, in colorful sundresses, under neat haircuts and well-stacked up-dos to return to their homes to pull off their masks and reveal the true horrors on the inside. Or, if they were not truly evil on the inside, then they were ugly or simple or stupid and he hated them and their dishonesty.

Moving to L.A. was a revelation and he felt that he'd landed in the most authentic place on the planet.

Now, this statement, made to anyone who has resided in Los Angeles for any time, would seem insane. There's no more spiritually depraved, inauthentic, fake place on the earth than the area between Orange County and Santa Barbara. However, there was something about the place that Nate understood, that he could like. Sure, these people were phoney, but they weren't out there trying to convince you that they were ordinary, they were trying, so very desperately, to convince you that they were extraordinary. They were shooting the moon! And if they failed and ended up

ordinary and simple like anyone else in the fly-over states at least they had the scars that showed that they had the appetite, the ambition to be something greater than the world in which they were born.

Being a practical man, Nate was wary that he didn't want to burn out like some of the trainwrecks he saw on the Sunset Strip, but he certainly knew that he could reach and potentially grab some of the greatness that was available in California.

Three semesters into school Nate dropped out and became a set assistant for a number of indie productions. He spent his days doing grunt work or, when there was no work to be had, he wrote obsessively. He read compulsively. He read on set, on the shitter, in line at the coffeeshop, at the bar, at parties. The habit had really followed him from high school, where he had been known to always carry a paperback in his back pocket. However, in L.A., something resembling focus came to him.

Twenty-Seven

Around that time, Nate's father bought him a plane ticket to come home for a week or so around Fourth of July. Needing a little bit of a vacation, Nate accepted.

On Independence Day itself, Nate was reading in one of the chairs on the patio when his mother shuffled past him making the sort of noise that said that she was worried about something. When Nate really thought about it, he wasn't even sure if this noise was real. Sometimes he thought

that maybe it was the sound of her aura getting out of control and setting into motion sound vibrations instead of light frequencies.

“Nate, would you like beans or coleslaw with your bratwurst?” Florence said.

“Mom, what’s wrong? I can tell you’re upset about something,” Nate said.

“Oh,” Florence said and sighed with her hands up in the air, a chunk of coleslaw captured in the tines of her salad grabber. “I’m just worried, that’s all. I just worry, is all.”

“Beans or coleslaw, sport,” Hank asked. “Important shit first, pal.”

“Beans. Come on, mom! Things aren’t too bad. Like I told you, it’s not unusual for someone my age to have three or four roommates for a while. In a few years I’ll start getting steadier work and maybe I can get my own place and you and dad can come out and visit?”

“That’s not what I’m worried about, I know that you’ll be fine. You always are.”

“What? Then what’s the issue?”

“Chuckie Stephens got booted from Harvard, pal,” Hank said, one of those Nat Sherman cigarillos hanging out of his mouth. Florence said that he couldn’t light them anymore, but he could act like he was smoking one if he really wanted to look like a fool, which wasn’t anything

to Henry Silas. Long ago Henry had accepted that he was a fool, a moment of enlightenment that he was fortunately not self-aware enough to recognize else he might ruin it.

“Yeah?” Nate said, wanting to add “so?” but hesitating so as to perhaps get more of the story. Not only had he dropped out, but countless of his cohort had done the same. What made his childhood friend any different?

“He told Deirdre that he didn’t want to study medicine anymore, that he only wanted to read the classics,” Florence said.

“Academically read the classics?” Nate asked. Nate had asked because he found it curious that Chuck had done what he’d done a year after doing it. However, if Chuck wanted to become a ph.d. In French literature that would have negated his respect.

“I don’t know,” Florence said.

“So that’s it for him, end of school?”

“Yup,” Hank said and skewered a sausage and shoved it into a bun. A college dropout himself, Hank had done reasonably well for himself in life, but always struck Nate as being a bit empty headed and uncomplicated. “He’s had it!”

“Hank!” Florence barked, “Charles is sick, surely, he’s probably terribly depressed.”

“And this, Flo,” Henry gave Florence’ hip a squeeze as he walked passed her, “Is how the kid gets better.

“Oh, I sure hope so.” Florence said, “That poor family. They won’t handle this well at all. The town is already up all night about it.”

Twenty-Eight

Several years after, Nate found himself rolling off of Mary Thurgood with a sigh of relief. It was an ecstatic moment. He lay silently on the hotel room bed panting gently while Mary went to the bathroom. The Pacific ocean gleamed metallic in the distance and the San Diego Convention center struck him as the surf solidified. The masts sticking up from behind the building only furthered the image of frozen violence.

Mary and Nate had met coincidentally when two conventions clashed that week. Nate had been at the San Diego comic convention supporting a post-modern novel called *The Earth Abides*. Mary had slipped out of her own conference (about agricultural logistics) to sneak into the famous San Diego comic con. Spotting Nate on one of the panels, she decided that it might be fun to get an autograph from a fellow classmate and apparently famous person now.

She stood patiently in the crowd. Nate looked mostly bored, occasionally laughing at what another panelist said. Once or twice another panelist would defer a question to Nate who would

then answer articulately, but perhaps a bit sardonically. A popular form of aloofness that would get oneself branded as a hipster in those early days of IPA and quinoa.

When the panel left the stage to give autographs, Mary didn't have to fight off much of a line to get to Nate Silas.

"Nathan," Mary began, "Haven't seen you in a long time."

"Isn't that an understatement," Nate said and stood up from his table. "How have you been?"

"I've been great. Thurgood farms is booming ever since my cousin, Richard, took over. You remember Richard, don't you?"

"Of course," Nate said. "How about Chuck? Last time I heard about him he'd dropped out of medical school."

"That was a while ago," Mary said. "He's since gotten back into his program and he's working on his internship right now in Cleveland."

"Good for ol' Chuck." Nate said, a mean-spirited grimace crossed his face, "For a while there I thought that he might be human, but I'm glad to be proven wrong."

They stood on the convention floor awkwardly while Nate signed a flyer for the movie. In the center of the flyer, surrounded by scenes of an apocalypse made of neglect was

“Isherwood Williams lived in a time where most of San Francisco
was strangers.

He would survive to a time where San Francisco was populated by
his relatives.

Oh! What a time to be alive!”

“What say we get something to drink, Mary?”

“Don’t you need to sign autographs?”

“I think the cast has it covered.”

Several cycles of cause and effect later, Mary Thurgood came walking out of Nate’s hotel bathroom with a t-shirt and tugging a pair of pants on. “Nate,” she pronounced with that entitled lilt that he’d almost forgotten and had conveniently ignored for the past few hours or so. “We’ll be getting married in October. I’m thinking earlier than later.

“No,” Nate began, his eyes widening and his voice becoming stern. “No, we are not getting married, Mary. I don’t know what you think this is, but—”

“I’m talking about me and Chuck, Nate. He and I are getting married on October 5, if I remember the date right.”

“Can I RSVP now or should I wait until I get the notice in the mail,” Nate said absently.

“You won’t be invited,” Mary said.

Nate cocked his head curiously, “Let me guess, this little afternoon tryst has basically gotten me uninvited?”

“No, Chuck was very specific during our engagement who was to be allowed and who was to be not invited. You were at the top of the not-invited list.”

“Hmm,” Nate hummed and began searching for his own pants.

“I’m sorry Nate, I can’t imagine how insulting it must be to be refused from your oldest friend’s wedding,” Mary said, genuinely.

“Oldest friend? What does that even mean. People act like Charles Stephens is supposed to mean anything to me. Like he’s anything more than a set oppressive furniture in a tiny room. Like stalks of corn or soybean in a field maze. Once I escaped it was good that I’d gotten away from him. That’s why I couldn’t stand to stay in that town anyway, I’d always be his second. Out here I might be a minor figure, but at least I’m the star of my own show. People aren’t constantly

suggesting that Charles is my counterpart. You know what?” Nate shouted as he buckled his jeans and slipped his shoes on his bare feet. “You know what? I’m glad I got the chance to fuck his fiance. That means that for the rest of my life I’ve got the means to shut him down and it’s right here in my back pocket, Mary!”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Mary said, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Don’t worry, Mary. Statistics are on your side. What are the chances I’ll ever see Chuck Stephens again? Or you, for that matter, when you become full with child and he’s off screwing secretaries again. What are the chances that I’ll be presented with the chance to ruin your life any worse than what you’ve already done with it!”

Mary was crying now and Chuck was buttoning his shirt. With his shoes back on, he went to leave the room, “That was cruel, Nate” Mary said, crying, “You can be so cold.”

“Me? Cold? You seem to have forgotten what it was like our little hometown. If I wasn’t being excluded, I was being pigeonholed into an identity. If I wasn’t doing well enough or helping Chuck then I was letting him down. What about me? That’s why I get out of Midland the first chance I got. I needed to put myself first. And that’s where I remain.

Nate left the room and when he came back an hour later she was gone.

Twenty-Nine

Very few people, less than a handful, definitely, know how many times Nathan Silas seriously considered committing suicide between middle school and the end of high school. Nate approached the casket after seeing a small group walk away from it. A swelling feeling of vertigo started to take over him as he neared the casket. Nate Silas might have thought about doing himself in during high school, but he knew he owed something to Chuck Stephens for not doing it.

Chuck didn't have any compassion for the suicidal. Rather he considered it to be a bad move in general, like as in chess. Worthy of a denunciation and an eye-roll, "Oh, don't you know any better?"

It was a reminder that no matter how sad his life got or how devoid of compassion, there wasn't going to be any compassion in the afterlife either.

There was something about the entire Stephens family that oozed this idea. Sadness was something that you lived with and eventually died with. The ultimate goal of life being to achieve the highest socio-political rank possible.

Now, when Deirdre and Carl Stephens were just getting out of school back in the eighties and thinking about their lives and their prime directive they considered the facts. They weren't starting with a whole lot of money, Carl was an excellent surgeon, but far from being a genius and there were a lot of cardiothoracic surgeons living in and around Boston.

There was, in other words a lot of competition and they both concurrently began to look for a market that didn't have as much competition. Serendipitously, Deirdre and Carl came upon Midland in two separate publications. *American News Magazine* listed Midland as being one of the most idyllic places in the United States to grow up and it was surprisingly inexpensive for such a crime-free city. At the same time Dr. Stephens found a peer-reviewed latitudinal study on the population of Midland that correlated the 1966 invention of the Midlander burger (double patty, lots of mayonnaise, fried egg, hash browns) to a extremely raised incidence of cardiovascular disease.

There was a little bit of something for everyone in Midland.

But there was something that always caught Nate's attention about this story. It was ultimately a story of compromise. They weren't living where they wanted to, rather they had decided to live somewhere like some widget-buyer in an economics textbook might choose to live somewhere. The overly rational decision didn't seem to bring anyone joy, but instead wrote post-dated checks to be collected somewhere down the line.

Carl missed his friends in New York and Cambridge and Boston itself. Dierdre longed for the society of Boston, the trips out to Cape Cod, the ancient feeling of its institutions. Nothing in Midland was older than about 150 years, built right before the Civil War as to be sure they had their plan together before stuff started falling apart in the union.

Soon enough the couple would begin to beget children. First Christian, then several years later, Charles followed quickly by Silvia. Christian was fond of torturing Charles for years until Silvia finally showed up. Then, Charles took up the mantle and began to tease and torture Silvia. Not really understanding the dynamic here, I later assumed that Christian had been beaten by Carl as a boy and Christian had passed this down through the other siblings. Nate was reluctant to say it, but he was often compelled to tease Silvia endlessly also. Nate wondered where she displaced all of the anger that her brother and his friend had put on her.

Anyway, the Mansion could be a brutal place and as an adult Nate couldn't help but make the connection to that early disconnection of the family from its putative home in Massachusetts. Were the Stephens paying a sort of penance for living the easy life out in Midland?

This is, of course, an absurd idea.

But perhaps not, because as Nate came up to the open casket and saw Chuck all done up and put in an unreasonably fine suit, it was clear that the sadness that seemed to permeate the dark corners and recesses of the Mansion and the family that lived in it had proven to be terminal for Charles, Scion.

“Who’s number two now, Chuck,” Nate whispered to the body all pumped full of formaldehyde, ready for his dirt nap. “Don’t you know any better?”

Charles Stephens was wearing makeup and it was how Nate could tell he was dead. A living body would have easily knocked that stuff off in the course of a day.

Nate threw a punch at Chuck's face, but pulled it at the last moment.

Why did he do that? Was he checking to see if Chuck was faking?

Nate leaned in close and whispered into the dead man's ear, "I don't care if you care or not. I don't care about them in the other room. I'm going to get to the bottom of your death, I'm going to figure it out, You won't get away with this, shit head."

Thirty

"I just want you to tell me that everything is going to be okay!" Nate must have been really drunk to utter such a useless cliché. She doesn't take the bait though. She never did.

"It's not going to be okay," she threw Nate a rag to wipe his face. "It's a flaming, fucking, radioactive trash fire, but you know what? Somehow you're going to live and you're going to have to come to terms with that right now."

Nate looked up at her with deep betrayal, the smell of whiskey and cocaine still in his nose, "Can't I get a little fucking sympathy here?"

"You've got to give to receive, shit-for-brains!"

God, thought Nate, what wasn't there to love.

Thirty-One

The river is full of brown filth and the sky is leafy. The earth is cold and the sun is absent. Days are shorter and mornings find panes of glass resting upon puddles.

Waiting for the bus is a serene experience, one that has to be practiced. Other stops haven't got the opportunity this one has for solitude. Others are raucous and wild, this one is introspective and lonely. Perfect practice for the life of a mind hidden in a body.

The smell of the scene. Wet and leafy. Nothing was ever quite as beautiful as people said they were. There was always the muck and the slick dirt behind everything.

Thirty-Two

"I've never met anyone who's committed suicide before," Mary said. She and Nate were back in the library, hiding from the world. What else is a library good for? "I guess I've known a few, but never someone I've touched, someone I..."

This made Nate frown with what might have been interpreted as compassion, or empathy, but what was really a recognition and embarrassment of his own cynical thoughts. He thought about how the suicide scene wasn't all that new to him. Friends, acquaintances, lovers and family

members had all offed themselves in one way or another. For a time he wondered if he was cursed to watch as those around him shuffled off the mortal coil until he too was called unto the void. But after a while, Nate began to think that it was simply statistics. He churned through friends and lovers in L.A. and it was practically impossible to lose track of someone once they got hold of your social media information, which meant that when some girl who he dated for a couple of weeks six months ago decides to drive her car into a bridge abutment one day it's impossible for Nate to not notice the everloving flood of pitiful tweets from her loved ones memorializing her the only way they knew how, which was, of course, through 140 universally accepted characters. All of the romance of suicide went out of it. It wasn't hip to kill oneself. It was profoundly cooler to simply be acutely aware that death was coming. Vaguely, something in the future, be it depression or car exhaust, whiskey or rogue amino acids from the Maillard reaction, something was going to get you and as long as you knew that, there was no need for an artistic death.

The scene of a suicide was nothing new to Nate either. He'd attended his fair share and here he observed it again. Quiet weeping, empty faces, cubes of cheese and ham, dry dirt on recently polished shoes. Favorite songs of the dead played on sound systems with limited range that always made Nate wonder if they just chose the last record the deceased had been listening to when they finally took the leap, as it were. It always seemed to be some depressing record that unkindly manipulated the heart. Surely the dead would be pleased with what he has done.

Generic wine in stiff plastic cups with lipstick stains along one quarter, oddly misplaced acquaintances, memorial wreaths, inappropriate sunshine right as a mourner is about to step up to

the coffin, the sudden light a neutral omen warning them away lest they might discover that there's something to this whole spirituality thing.

There are the emotional breakdowns when someone can't find the fucking triscuits and it's not always someone in the family, nor is it a lover, nor is it always even an acquaintance.

Sometimes, and Nate thought, inaccurately, that it was frequently, that it was some waifish girlfriend of a friend of a friend of the family who happened to get dragged along for some stupid reason and who in an effort to avoid facing her own mortality tried to help out in the kitchen, but upon the third searched cupboard, still no triscuits to show for her efforts, breaks down in tears. And it is a pity when that happens, but could someone please get her out of here because she's upsetting the other guests. And her boyfriend is nowhere to be found, of course. He's probably smoking pot out behind the trash cans with his friends so the girlfriend has to be stuffed into a spare room to weep and wail like some sort of undergraduate banshee.

There are the ancient family members with thousand-yard stares they've cultivated over the years from staring out across the prairie at nothing in particular and muttering things like, "Hope we get some rain soon" and "Sure looks like rain" and they mutter and putter about the hallways and kitchens and parlors and staircases and pretty much wherever they can be in the way at the most inconvenient time. They are hunched and dark, like the clockwork inventions in a Terry Pratchett film blended with a few cubes of Cronenberg aspic and sprinkled with a DMT high.

Middle-aged men from the entire tri-county area can be found doing home repairs that no one asked them to do in an effort to alleviate the emotional burden of an untimely death. Getting the

squeak out of that garage door chain might not bring back your beloved, but at least it's one less thing to worry about while you wonder what the fuck you're going to do with all of these fucking years you've got to live ahead of you.

Their wives are astir slurping down heroic quantities of wine and insisting on setting places and then taking those places away, running loads of laundry and dishes and casseroles with such efficiency that it strikes one, lo! Here is the motor of the world, laid bare and simple in the cruel light of tragedy.

The teenagers are somewhere watching television, but they aren't really watching television, they're staring at their phones or each other as it has been ordained since the begetting of apathy and somnolence. They will explore their own mortality in their own way, a method made special by the fact that none of them are convinced that they even can die. Vampirically they conduct clandestine missions to steal sips of wine and brag that they are drunk at a funeral.

"I've known a few, I guess," Nate said back to Mary. "Strange that you never get used to it."

Thirty-Three

Then Nate saw a ghost. He started and backed up into a coat rack which rocked precariously back and forth before Mary could set it still. "Never!" Nate hissed.

"What? What's wrong?" Mary said, a look of panic shining out of her eyes.

“It can’t be,” Nate whispered, “It’s Billy!”

“Billy?” Mary repeated, almost disappointed.

“No, you don’t understand,” Nate whispered stapled to his spot on the floor. “He was a terror of Grant’s Gardens. He was like the bogeyman of the neighborhood when I was little. My mother always assumed that he was someone my brother and I made up so that we wouldn’t get in trouble for not cleaning something up or breaking something.”

“Probably because you did. I know your mother and she would believe you two if she thought you weren’t being bad,” Mary chastised.

“No, Billy Corden, Billy Corden was real. My mother always thought that I was saying Billy Corgen, the guitarist from *The Smashing Pumpkins* so she thought I was telling tales.”

Even though Mary tried to hide the sudden giggle with her hand, Nate could still hear it, and a few mourners around them too.

“One day, I went outside to play and there he was, Billy Corden trying to tear the bottom most limb off of my favorite climbing tree in the backyard. I called out, ‘Mom! It’s Billy Corden!’ and she finally saw that he was real. She still refers to him as Billy Corgen though, which can be confusing in conversations at times.”

“I don’t remember him at all,” Mary said a little perplexed.

“He’s my own personal tormentor. You know how in the old cartoons there was always a guardian angel and devil on the other shoulder? I figured that Billy was my little demon, but instead of suggesting that I do bad, he would do it for me and let me take the fall for it. Either that or he’d beat the living hell out of me. I have no idea what school he went to or if he even went to school. I might go months without seeing him, but then one day see him down by the creek while riding the bus home from school. He’d turn and look right at me and I’d know he’d be waiting not too far away from the bus for me.”

“He seems to work for the mortuary,” Mary commented and she was right. Billy was wearing a sharp suit with a shiny fake gold nametag which shone uncomfortably in the advancing afternoon sun. His pudgy face, framed by delicate blonde hair, was contorted into a grimace of empathy, which Nate interpreted as the mask of a psychopath at work.

Nate’s blood ran cold when Billy’s eyes lit up in recognition and he began to walk over.

Thirty-Four

In what Nate’s guts assumed were his last moments on earth, he remembered how his father had filled out the story, the legend of Billy Corden shortly after he’d dropped out of college.

Apparently, Billy lived with his mother in a Section 8 housing development not far from Elder street. Nate remembered the building. It was famous for being littered with the furniture of people who had been evicted, but did not have the means to drag it away, so it became

neighborhood furniture. His mother, much to her credit, was able to hold down her apartment there for almost twenty years only leaving when she was able to afford a better apartment. But in those years Billy saw his share of unsavory activity. Murders, drug deals, domestic violence, vandalism, carnage of all sorts passed by his window like a high definition Grand Theft Auto demo. He was also supposed to be—as Nate’s father indelicately put it—retarded. That’s why Nate never saw him in school, he was in special ed from the start to finish and spent a good amount of time in juvie as well.

“Point is, son,” Hank said, pointing the neck of his beer at Nate on the deck of his house one idyllic summer afternoon, “All that commotion that kid caused, well, he thought that was how people were supposed to interact with each other. It was his warped sense of ‘playing.’ In fact, I might even say that he might not have been able to distinguish your relationship with him from the ones you maintained with the old gang.”

“Hell,” Nate said. “Doesn’t take away the fact that I spent a cumulative four months grounded for things I never did.”

“This government don’t do reparations, son,” Hank said in his patented sarcastic drawl.

After that, Nate would occasionally wonder what sort of crime Billy would eventually commit that would land him on death row in Terre Haute. The question was finally settled as he watched Billy Corden descend on him in the Stephens’ library.

“Nate Silas,” Billy said warmly as he held his hand out to shake. Nate took his hand, but said nothing as his throat had suddenly dried up. “I’m so sorry to hear about your loss. I know you were close with Charles.”

Nate was now close enough to read Billy’s name tag, “Funeral director?” Nate coughed and Billy grabbed a glass of wine from a passing waiter to hand to him.

“Yes, well, you know how much of a hell raiser I was for so long. Well, a couple stints in and out of prison and it was looking like I was going to be a lifer at any moment. Then Ma got sick. A few benefactors here in town did their best to help me get on my feet and into a profession that might suit me. They also helped keep Ma alive for a little bit longer than we ever expected. Well, it turns out that I was always meant to comfort the bereaved, so here I am,” Billy spread his arms wide to give Nate a hug.

“You don’t seem like the Billy I knew when I was a kid,” Nate said, not a little bit rude and refusing to hug the man.

“I understand that it might seem like a real transformation,” Billy said in his calm funeral director voice.

“Seems like you’ve been lobotomized or something,” Nate said to which Billy laughed.

“Oh! You always had that caustic wit, didn’t you? I was always so jealous. I’ve had to spend years working on my own diction to get anywhere near how articulate you are. And you were always so articulate. It was your talent,” Billy said and Nate gulped down wine, eyeing him suspiciously. “What is it that you do nowadays, Nate?”

“I write scripts and produce them out in L.A.,” Nate said.

“Now that was a job you were born to do!” Billy announced and looked like he was about to jump in excitement. “I’m so happy and proud of you!”

Nate softened for a moment, his cynicism melting away for a moment in the solvent air, but this sort of openness of emotions was highly suspect, especially in a midwestern home. He reasoned that the death of Billy’s mother and the impending threat of imprisonment could very well change a person so dramatically to the hulking comfort blanket that presented himself that day. It also made sense that Billy looked up to him considering what Nate’s father had said. All of the pieces fell into place for a rather heart-warming success story, but Nate knew that tear jerking success stories were the bastard children of studio-artistic compromise that held all of the allure of a particularly heaping pile of dog shit. He was wary.

“You said you had benefactors? Now who might those be?” Nate asked, loosening up his grimace and trying to be more friendly.

“There are a few, like Dolores Baily and her husband Duke. There’s also Reverend Perch, the Pentecostalist minister,” Billy said.

Nate paused before sipping the rest of his wine, “You know,” Nate cleared his throat, “If I remember correctly, they’re all members of—”

“The Midland Historical Society. Of course. I’m a member too now.”

Thirty-Five

Nate bummed a cigarette off of Brian Cavafy and smoked it in the rain as he stood by the side of the road waiting for his cab. Plumes of smoke gathered around his mouth as he cursed his reluctance to rent a car. His eyes cast about in the direction of the house as he hoped that the memorial wouldn’t break for some time yet. He didn’t want to be caught out in the rain and subject to all manner of questions and scrutiny. For example, he did not want to be asked what he was doing out in the rain. He did not want to be asked if he needed a ride. He did not want anyone’s damn condolences and he certainly didn’t want to be asked if it was wet enough for him.

He had forgotten how the rain worked in this part of the country, however. Big fat drops that fell in lockstep that soaked you to the core if you were not wary enough to shield yourself with a rain slicker. Out in L.A. you could stand out in the rain for a full hour before you might notice you were damp, but here, in Midland, you practically had to swim for the street signs. He was starting to feel cold.

When Nate Silas was growing up, he developed a deep seated fear of damp and dark places. It seemed like the early years of his life were fraught with such places. The rains in the spring would come and the ice would melt and suddenly every basement in the tri-county area was a hellish catacomb.

The lights shorted out from the water, Nate's father would descend the stairs, his flashlight reflecting off of the murky dark water and spraying light against the far wall revealing sinister shadows that rose from the waters that rose to take back what Nate's family had claimed. Nate's father would wade into the water which came up to his chest and slosh over to the far wall where the sump pump was. He cheerfully hummed some song or another as he made his way through the darkness, but Nate saw through his ruse and knew that Henry was scared too. Occasionally, he would kick some hidden object in the water and jump up, startled. "You and your brother need to keep this path clear from now on, you hear?" What if something took him, Nate thought and began to cry, what if something dragged his father down? Then, what if it pulled itself out onto the stairs and reached for him?

Adult Nate shuddered at the memory. Though he hadn't broached that particular topic with a shrink just yet, he imagined it was probably the same reason that he felt like he was having a heart attack when swimming in water deeper than he was tall.

The car arrived and he got in as fast as he could. Some people started to filter out the front door of the Mansion. “Wet enough for you out there?” The cab driver said and began driving. “Where you headed?”

“You know what? It isn’t. How about you drive me to the bottom of the lake?”

“What’s that now?”

“Nevermind, can you just take me to the Stearls and Fisch Memorial Pavillion?”

“Sure can!” The cabbie said turning out to be one of the most pleasant drivers that Nate had ever come across. The man smiled pleasantly in the rear view mirror. He was extremely large and his stomach seemed dangerously close to interfering with the steering wheel. “How’s your day?”

“Just left the memorial of a childhood friend.” Nate said determined to ruin the man’s smile.

“Aw, that’s too bad, was it natural causes?”

Nate made a face as if to telegraph his suspicion that the cabbie was putting him on, “No, he committed suicide. Supposedly by hanging.” A brief silence, the one that only strange cabbies can commit to, the sort of silence that hangs there and that the driver will let hang because, well, they’ve got another ten minutes to the destination and might as well stretch everything out to its possible length. “Then again, I don’t remember there being any marks around his neck. His

collar wouldn't have been so far up as to hide where the rope would have caught him under the jaw and you've got to get at least a little rugburn when you hang yourself, don't you?"

Again, that exquisite pause.

"I reckon the mortician would have covered that up with makeup or something."

"Hmm, good point," Nate said, starting to enjoy the conversation. "Are morticians the same thing as a funeral director?"

"I don't know the difference, myself. Why?"

"I met the funeral director at the memorial. Is that unusual? Seeing a funeral director at a memorial slash wake?"

"You said there was a body," The cab driver's smile was completely gone at this point. "He was probably there making sure that it was being taken care of."

Nate laughed caustically, "Ho! Yeah! Don't want the family to get out of control during the wake and get the corpse involved in the traditional gang-bang."

The driver laughed a hollow little laugh and was quiet as the cab rolled up to a large brick building. Several signs out front advertised various medical offices. "This is your stop, mister."

“Ah, thanks, and keep a little of this for your trouble,” Nate said and got out of the car. The rain had stopped and he was smiling. Walking up to the building he uttered his parting words to the driver under his breath so that the man might not hear him say, “And get fucked, hayseed.”

Thirty-Six

Nate stepped into the lobby and strolled over to the directory to find the name—

“Can I help you?” A voice from the other side of the lobby called.

Nate turned to see a thin, distorted woman sitting at a desk across the room. He walked up to her and felt that he vaguely recognized her from somewhere. Like a classmate in elementary school or something.

“Do I know you from somewhere?” Nate asked.

“No, I don’t believe so, sir, but you can’t go into any of the elevators until you tell me who you are here to see.”

“Oh!” Nate shook his head as if to knock the sense of déjà vu, “I’m here to see Derek Nilson, he’s a psychotherapist, I think.”

“Psychiatrist,” the woman corrected with her crooked smile, which wasn’t so much of a smile as it was a scowl set askew by her unevenly set eyes. An unfortunate looking woman to be sure.

“He may be finishing up a client right now, but you can go up to floor three and I’ll let him know that you’re coming up.”

“Are you the receptionist for this whole building?”

“Yes sir,” the woman said, her expression not changing an iota.

“Seems like a lot of work, eh?”

“Not for us elite few, sir.”

Nate walked away wondering if the woman’s last comment was a dig on him somehow. He rode the elevator up to the third floor and took a left into the lobby that was labelled “Nilson”. There was no one in there, not even a receptionist and Nate didn’t even have the chance to peer into one of the magazines before Derek came in effusively.

“Nate Silas! It’s good to see you! Let’s go into my office,” Derek held a door open for Nate and he went in, silently. “What? Cat’s got your tongue? You didn’t travel all the way from Hollywood just to stare at me, did ya?” Derek Nilson was a fit man of about Nate’s age and wore a lemon yellow shirt and playfully patterned tie. His jaw line was strong and his neck bulged a bit from his habit of lifting weights. He wore ironically thick glasses that he had chosen to never

get corrected. His opinion was that they humanized him in the eyes of his patients. On the basketball court he wore contacts.

“No, it’s just struck me how creepy this building is.”

“What’s so creepy about it? It’s not like Lafayette High, now that place was definitely haunted. This place is practically brand new, constructed back in the forties and nary a soul buried among its mortar and brick.”

“Agreed, but there’s something spooky about this place too. I think that it’s because there’s no one here. It’s a Friday, isn’t it? Shouldn’t there be things... happening?”

“It’s a quiet day, Nate. There you go again,” Derek said taking a seat in front of his big wooden desk.

Derek’s office looked a lot like the Stephens’ library except for instead of the bookstacks, there were four big comfy chairs centered around a coffee table. The walls were lined with cloth and leather bound books with little gold lettering. The titles that Nate managed to read all had to do with psychology or anatomy or medicine of some sort. He’d never had any need for the sort of psychology that had to do with the meaty parts of the body. In one of the only college courses he heard that Nietzsche said that Dostoevsky was the only psychologist from which he could learn anything and Nathan decided that old Fred was right and that the only psychology that was worth learning was from literature.

“Now what does that mean,” Nate said his mouth slightly agape in mock insult.

“Oh, you know, you’re always over-thinking everything. The teacher would say, ‘Nate, what was *Hatchet* about’ and you’d go on and on about how it was man versus wild, it was about the conflict between industrialization and agronomic lifestyles, about indigenous peoples clashing with Western values and you could never quite get to the part that the man wanted to hear, which was that the fucking book was about a kid who had to survive in the forest on his own.”

“Now, you may laugh, Derek, but that kind of over-thinking has proven to make for a decent job. Much more interesting than this science crap you surround yourself with,” Nate chuckled and plopped himself down in a chair opposite to Derek.

“So,” Derek began again, “Why are you here?”

“I hear that you were close with Chuck in the days before he died,” Nate began.

“Ah,” Derek grunted and adjusted himself in his seat as if suddenly uncomfortable. “That’s right, but what is this about?”

“I’m trying to figure out why Chuck offed himself, Derek,” Nate had right out with it. “I don’t get why he did it and I just want to know.”

“Ah,” Derek grunted again. “And you could never let a mystery go either.” Derek massaged the bridge of his nose and then replaced his glasses. “Nate, where’s this going? What good is it going to do for you to know why he did it?”

“Hey, doc, I’m not asking you to give me your professional opinion about why Chuck decided to end it. I’m not asking for your analysis of the whole thing. I just want you to give me the clues so I can figure it out on my own. I just want to know how he was acting, did he seem depressed? Was he fucking some woman he shouldn’t have? Did he have gambling debts? I can put the rest together on my own and be satisfied.”

“Will you though?” Derek said, settling into his caring character, “After the suicide of close ones people often look for reasons and pore over suicide notes trying to figure out what they could have done differently, but there really isn’t anything to be done. The only way to stop a suicide is to catch the person before they do it and convince them to not do it. Unfortunately, we can’t do anything now. The thing is done.”

“Look, *Dr. Nilson*,” Nate grunted. “I’m not going to say that I could have done anything, nor am I going to say I would have stopped him. I know that sounds cold, but if the guy wanted to die, well, he should have the right to end his own life the way he sees fit. The thing that baffles me is why he would want to do it. Just a hint of why is what I’m after. Was he addicted to drugs?”

“Oftentimes there’s no apparent reason for suicides. They have their own logic that might not make sense to a mentally healthy person, hence suicide being a symptom of mental illness.”

“Okay, let’s just talk about you two then. I don’t remember you being particularly close. How is it that you knew each other so recently?”

“We played basketball,” Derek said.

“Basketball,” Nate sat back in obvious shock, “You played basketball! Chuck was awful at basketball. He kept playing?”

“Yes, he was awful at basketball, but he kept playing. There was something about the competitiveness of the sport that attracted him, I think, but he was truly terrible. He’d become so upset when a three would fall short or when he’d fling himself into the wall after a failed dunk.”

“So, there’s motivation. So terrible at basketball that he couldn’t live with himself anymore.”

“I don’t see how you can be so callous about your friend’s death,” Derek noted.

“Come on, man. This is just how I cope with loss, I’ve got to make jokes. I’ve also got to find some sort of reasonable explanation for why he would choose to kill himself. Was it the other things? Drugs? Women? Men?”

“None of that that I knew of,” Derek said and re-adjusted himself in his seat, “I also struggle to understand why Chuck decided that he didn’t want to live anymore. His practice was blossoming

and he was quickly becoming known as an expert in his field. I think that he might even have had a chance to move to Chicago to expand his practice. His novel... did you read his novel?"

"Yeah, yeah," Nate said dismissively, "I read it. Plagiarizing Bulgakov is real original."

"I guess you would know better than me, but I really liked it. It showed the underbelly of midwestern living in such a bare light. The good and the bad set to rights against each other—"

"Move on, critic" Nate interjected.

"Well, Mary is such a wonderful woman and they were trying to get pregnant—"

"And you know what? You probably have seen some of my films, but you've glossed over my name in the credits because who the fuck normally cares about producers, much less— hold on, they were trying to get pregnant?"

"Of course, they'd been married for a few years."

"Was it was that he was gay and he couldn't get it up for old Mary Thurgood like he used to?"

Nate laughed.

"Nate, are you drunk?" Derek asked with that same look of concern that he probably gave all of his patients.

Nate thought about this for a moment and realized that he had been drinking for most of the day at the memorial, “Yeah, I think I might be!”

Derek stood up and reached for his coat, “I think it’s time for you to leave, Nate. I’ve got other clients.”

“What other clients?” Nate said looking around and laughing, “What? Your lobby’s empty.”

“Nate,” Derek said wearily, “Please.”

Nate stood up too, “Okay, okay, you don’t want to talk anymore about this, but can you tell me who might be willing to have a chat about our old gay friend, Chuck?”

“No,” Derek said sternly. “I would advise you that you leave the matter alone. There is no good that will come from you exploring the reasons for your friend’s death. You’ll drive yourself crazy trying to explain why he took his own life. I’m sorry for your loss—”

“Loss!” Nate turned off his jovial attitude and became cruel, “You think this is a loss? I’m glad the fucker’s dead! He should have died in the womb, would have been better remembered in my mind. I think he should have shot himself back in school so I could have soaked up the sad points from the pretty girls who pitied me instead of the psychiatrists. I’d have gotten laid more often even if I’d gotten less speed prescriptions,” Derek said nothing, which represented an opening

for Nate to really tear into the man, “You still do that, Derek? You still do the same thing as your dad? Hook the kids on amphetamines to subsidize your summer home in Charlevoix? Or have you graduated to Cape Cod? American Dream and all?”

Derek Nilson was a strong man and he forcibly ejected Nate from the pavillion himself. Nate wasn't done talking trash:

“Hey, if you're ever in L.A. there's always a job for a bouncer with a script book! Just look me up, or at least tell them I sent you, fuck-stick!”

Thirty-Seven

Immediately Nate felt a hunger for a cigarette, so he began walking down the street in search for a gas station. The first one he found sold him a pack of Marlboros, which delighted him.

Smoking a cigarette outside of the gas station and waiting for a cab he had called, a woman chastised him.

“You'll blow us all up if you smoke around here!”

“My father smoked while pumping gas not twenty years ago and we never died, you would know, you're at least eighty!”

The woman huffed and went into the service station. Nate could not remember if his father smoked cigarettes around the gas station, Hank had quit the habit when Nate was about five

years old, but he enjoyed pointing out the woman's age to her. All of his life women and men of her age had reminded him of how young he was and he felt that entitled him to comment about their age as well. Tit for tat, this for that, quid pro quo, an eye for an eye.

The cab arrived and he put his cigarette out on the ground before getting in, but blew the last puff of smoke into the driver's face when he said, "Midland Hospital, St. Ursula's Annex. Do you know it?"

"Yeah," the driver said with an exhausted air that might have been a fight if he'd been ready for it.

Nate stared out of the window for a time. He watched the houses go by. He saw some he remembered as a child. He noted the porches that had been re-done, he saw the duplexes turned into full houses. He saw the apartment complexes once new, turned to decay, folks laying out on the railings holding beers and smoking cigarettes or joints. Finally, Nate thought, California has reached the Heartland.

He fell asleep.

Thirty-Eight

A speedbump woke Nate up and he recognized the sign for the Midland University Center. The rain was coming down in sheets on the car and made a deafening roar. Lights of red and yellow

and blue shone in spots wherever a water droplet managed to keep hold. Water sloshed under the car as the driver came to a stop in front of the emergency room.

“No, no, no,” Nate moaned. “Not the hospital, the offices for the hospital.” Nate was feeling much more sober. In fact he was getting something of a headache. “You know what? Don’t bother. I’ll just walk the rest of the way.”

Nate handed the man a twenty and stumbled out of the car. He jogged over to the awning outside of the emergency room where he was met by some concerned looking nurses.

“No, I’m sorry about the confusion. I told the cab driver to take me to the offices here, not the ER, I’m fine, I swear. Do you know where the office building entrance is?” The nurses pointed him the way and Nate walked that way. As he walked he wondered if he was alright. What if the little headache he was feeling was a stroke building? A seizure imminent? What if he was about to have an aneurysm and die in some nurse’s arms like Christ in the Pieta?

A funny image, to be sure, Nate chuckled and kept moving. The rain always gave him a little bit of a headache. Something about the density of the air that pressed on all the wrong parts of his sinuses and made him feel like someone was squeezing his head between their thighs. It made his head heavy and light at the same time and made him unsure of the steps he was taking.

The lobby to the Midland University Center was busy and the speed at which people darted from area to area was punctuated by the scream of the espresso machine foam wands that a team of

baristas were wielding behind the Starbucks counter. The sound was too much of a temptation for Nate who slid over to the counter soaking wet and trying to pull his wallet out of his pocket.

“Flat white, please and thank you.”

“A what, now?” The barrista said, her mouth parted widely to accommodate the large metal rigging that had been cemented into her mouth. The girl looked to be about twenty, but Nate would have accepted a six year error. He was never good at guessing ages. Her hair was pulled back into a tight greasy bun and her eyes were a dull hazel. Nate was entranced for a moment. He thought he saw the lazy waving of the soybean fields right there in her iris.

“Huh?”

“What did you say you want?”

“A flat white,” Nate said again.

“I’m sorry, sir, I don’t know what that is you’re saying,” the woman said.

“Wait, what do you mean?” Nate, confused, looked up at the menu on the wall only to see that, yes, flat whites were on the menu, “Can you not tell what I’m saying because it’s garbled? Am I having a stroke?” Nate bent down to examine his face for asymmetry, he held his arms above his head pulling his shirt out of his pants comically. He stared at the barista and said, “Can you tell if I’m ill or not?”

“Oh, you’re sick alright.” The woman judged and then moved on, “Now what is it you want?”

“A flat white!”

“I don’t know what that is!

“Well now we’re getting somewhere! Why didn’t you say that in the first place? Like in the beginning when you just stared at me like an asshole!”

“Sir, I don’t need this today. I do not need this today,” the girl said, reaching for under the cabinet.

“Hang on, hang on,” Nate placated, “Just, just, a latte. Can you do a latte?”

“Yeah, \$4.56,” Nate handed her a five and instructed her to keep the change, but didn’t hear any change jump from the register to the jar. She disappeared behind the counter dragging a paper cup with the name “Nate” scrawled on the side. “Flat white ass.”

I deserve that, Nate thought, I’ve forgotten where I am, walking around like the whole world should be up to my standards. This place is stuck in time, a place that exists outside of the standard. It is, the Twilight Zone.

Nate chuckled at his own joke and then heard his name, “Kate! Kate, your flat latte is ready.”

Nate walked up and grabbed his drink from the woman’s hand who then immediately gave him a wide look as if wondering if this man was stealing Kate’s drink, but then simultaneously remembering that she’d just taken the man’s order and written his name on the cup no less than five minutes ago.

Nate stepped away from the Starbucks kiosk and into the lobby again. It was large and open. A large portion of the building’s facade was glass, a seemingly popular thing to do in the Midwest, but something that completely baffled Nate after living in L.A. for too long and seeing how the power bills get out there. The sun was starting to peek out of the clouds. Teasing a bright day when sunset was not far off. Most people Nate saw were leaving for the day, except for those few still dressed in scrubs and carrying plastic clipboards.

He made his way over to the elevators and saw the label for level 5:

Allison P. Darling - Deputy Administrator

Johnathan DeWitt - Deputy Administrator

Offices of Stephens, Stephens and Garibaldi

Nate got into the elevator and hit the five button and sipped at his too-hot latte as the elevator lifted him up. When it opened the first thing he saw was the entire city of Midland out of the window and the Midland Hotel right in the center, staring at Nate like a cobra rearing up from

the city itself. Nate didn't mean to be startled by the sight, but it was certainly what he felt as he looked out on the city illuminated by the parting clouds. He turned around and found the wooden door marked Stephens, Stephens and Garibaldi and walked in.

There was no one in the office, not even at the secretary's desk and as he walked up to the window across the room he got the creepy feeling that he often gets when he's somewhere that he shouldn't be, when he's somewhere he's not welcome.

The window on the far wall displays a different view from the lobby. He can see, for instance, the nuclear power plant on the edge of town and the reservoir lake and the distant buildings of the agricultural university on the horizon. Here, above the tree line, the horizon is as clearly defined as it could ever be and flat. Flat as hell. Places without mountains started making Nate suspicious a few years before. It's when he'd known that he'd truly passed out of being a midwesterner. What that made him now, he wasn't too sure.

"Oh my god!" A woman's voice blurted from behind, "Nathan!"

Nate turned around and gave a little grunt of surprise. In the fading afternoon light, Angela's ruddy hair was illuminated and glowed like the filament in a lightbulb. Her orange dress clung neatly to a very fit form. Angela's face, pointed nose and furrowed brow that when paired with her small mouth made her face look pinched in a cute way, had hardly changed at all from the last time he'd seen her, which was a few weeks after graduation day, when he had bidden

goodbye to the whole city and though his decision tore mercilessly through his heart he still felt it had been the best idea for all involved.

The sun was setting on a wet and foul day, but still Angela Fergusen radiated warmth and light, a sort of miracle person. Nate felt no small amount of shame in thinking about what she looked like with the dress hiked up around her waist.

“Nathan Silas, as I live and breathe!” Angela said and clopped over to hug Nate, her heels making a distinct and distinguished sound on the marble floors, “What have you been up to?”

This comment made Nate somewhat self conscious of the fact that his shirt and jacket were somewhat crumpled and his tie was starting to undo its own knot. He tried to tuck his shirt back in to his pants. “Oh, you know, I’ve been getting some work out in L.A. Writing. And such.” Nate hated how stupid he sounded. He felt dull and useless around Angela, which wasn’t typical.

“Oh yes, Mr. Hollywood” Angela said turning to walk down the hall, “Come on, let’s go to the break room for a cup of coffee.”

Sure, Nate always had the impression that Angela was out of his league when they were younger, but she never made him feel that way, it was always something external. Now, in this office, something had changed and she seemed to be inaccessible. But that’s just how things happen when you’ve been gone for a decade and a half, people close up again, Nate thought.

Thirty-Nine

In middle school, Angela's boyfriend, Gabe Newman, liked to frequently point out Nate's inferiority, the fact that Angela was out of his league.

"Hey, faggot, what are you doing?"

Nate looked up from his book and just stared at Gabe for a moment, evaluating whether or not the idiot had suddenly lost the ability to see or perceive reality, hopefully from a violent brain injury, "I'm reading," Nate said and waggled his copy of *Grapes of Wrath* in front of Gabe.

"Uh huh," Gabe said, snapping his gum and jumping up to sit on the table across from Nate in the quiet quad. "Angela tells me that you two have a study session tonight? That right?"

"Yep, I believe it's at the same time as your baseball practice," Nate added.

"Well, I was talking to Angie and she was saying that she thinks that you like girls, but I told her that *I know* that you're a cocksucker. You get to know a guy in gym over a few years."

"Hmm, yeah, that's me. Suckin' all the dicks in the locker room," Nate said.

"So what is it?"

"What do you mean?"

“Are you a faggot or aren’t you?”

“Kind of inconsequential, isn’t it?”

“What does that mean?”

“Like, it doesn’t matter if I am or not?”

“But see, this is where you’re wrong. It matters if you’re a faggot or not.”

“How’s that?”

“If you do like dicks then that would explain why a girl who’s so far out of your league would even bother to spend any time with you, much less a pretty big chunk of her time. Also, it would really clearly explain why I wouldn’t be getting jealous of you and her hanging out late at night in her bedroom because I would know that you were just spending all that time talking about how much you two want my dick in your mouths.”

Nate gave Gabe a curious look, not sure where this conversation was going, he was convinced that it was heading in a violent direction, “So, I just want to be clear, are you saying that you want me to suck your dick?”

Gabe got up and walked over to Nate and delivered a swift kick into his left shin, which almost dropped Nate to the floor. “That was really gay, Silas. It also answers my question,” Now Gabe leaned over and dropped his voice, “If I ever hear that you start wanting to experiment with pussy or might want to kiss a girl I’m going to beat the shit out of you.” Gabe formed a fist with his middle finger extended a little outside of the fist and punched Nate in the ribs, which was really painful and caused Nate to whimper a little bit. This seemed to please Gabe, who walked away chuckling to himself, “Faggot!”

As much as this might have been interpreted as Gabe wanting Nate to open up about his sexuality, it turned out that it was misdirected. Nate was more or less straight and attracted to Angela, who he started to have an affair with that summer while Gabe was working on baseball camp.

Angela and Nate would spend hours deep in the woods of the park talking about how the light filtered through the tree leaves. They would make out in movie theaters and end up watching the same movie six times in the same week.

Sometimes they would bicycle out to the abandoned munitions factory on the edge of town and wander through the cold and dark halls collecting shells they found. The hope was that they might find some errant and antique shell, but all they ever found were contemporary shotgun shells and .22lr from the local hillbilly population’s target practice. Otherwise it was a place where they knew that they were the only people for a couple of miles, an isolation that seemed otherworldly and exotic.

Gabe's efforts to speak Nate into gayness had some effect among their many mutual friends and he was mostly undercover when he went to the mall with Angela. When they laughed until they choked at the food court everyone just assumed that it was one of those cute gay-man committed-hetero-woman friendships as seen on TV.

The summer came to a head at Angela's uncle's lake house wherein after a day of lazing about in the sun and swimming to and from the floating dock, after a few clandestine beers snagged from the fridge in the empty house, after the sun had set, Nate and Angela had sex on the couch. Almost surprised by it they sat naked on the couch afterwards panting a bit, in shock. It was at this moment that their minds cleared enough to remember that Angela had promised to be at Gabe's baseball game this evening.

"Oh shit," Angela said, her cheeks flushed and glowing in the dusk light, "He's going to be pissed. But he shouldn't be—"

On cue, the front door clicked open and Gabe came in reeking of grass and mud stains, sweat and gatorade. Nate—who had a few seconds to prepare because he was hit with a premonition of things to come almost as soon as Angela said, "Oh shit"—had already pulled on his boat shoes and had his shorts around his knees. Later, he would look upon this scene from Gabe's perspective with affection.

Angela, Gabe's girlfriend, who he had almost certainly had never even seen partly naked was naked as the day she was born on the couch by the TV, her clothing strewn across the room. She had a shocked look on her face, which was partially obscured by her tousled hair. Standing not five feet away from Angela was his rival, Nate Silas, who Gabe thought he had intimidated into being gay (the logic of this would confuse anyone, but presumably Gabe had a special ability to reason this away) also naked as a jaybird, but desperately trying to pull pants on.

There was a pause in the scene while a decision was made. Nate was sure that the night would end in his beating, but he was hoping that Gabe wasn't the sort of piece of shit that would beat his girlfriend before beating the faggot who'd just fucked his girlfriend.

Gabe stepped forward and Nate was off, the decision made, the chase was on.

Nate, never being a runner, discovered that when properly motivated, running wasn't so bad. He ran out the back door and up the driveway to the main lake road hearing Gabe's cleats throwing gravel as he scrambled up the incline, but then he heard silence. He stopped at the top of the hill and looked back down at the lake house, hoping Gabe had not changed his mind.

Gabe was still in for the chase as was apparent by his appearance on his bmx bike climbing the driveway much faster than Nate could run. Nate took off slipping on gray gravel and crossed the black macadam of the road and onto the enormous green lawn across the street. He flew above the grass, diving into the night like the very spirit of freedom. Though he had the devil at his veritable heels. Nate could hear Gabe breathing right behind him, so he decided to make a

shortcut and leapt over someone's fence. If Gabe were on foot he could easily follow Nate, but since he was weighed down with his bike he had to take a detour. Nate was hoping that he might be able to lose Gabe somewhere in the houses. He ran across the stranger's lawn and then vaulted over the next fence straight into somebody's pool. He came up gasping for air and saw standing at the edge of the pool a middle aged man with a gray beard and wide glasses and a worn bathrobe. The man held a collins glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. His expression was of pure curiosity, "What," The man drawled slowly, which gave Nate the time to swim over to the edge of the pool and pull himself out, "What are you running from, son?"

"Sorry!" Nate shouted behind him as he ran on, leaping over the next fence "Didn't mean to bother you!"

Four more yards and four more fences and Nate found himself on a main boulevard with a stand of trees running through the center. Nate figured home was to the right, so he calmed his breath and started to walk casually on the sidewalk in the early evening darkness. His reasoning was that by walking, not running, he would not be as apparent to Gabe if he was still looking for him. However, it occurred to him that every time he passed under one of the streetlights he looked anything but normal. Soaked and naked from the khaki shorts up with sopping sucking sailing shoes, his hair sticking in every direction.

Nate heard Gabe before he saw him. A subtle squeak in Gabe's gear cassette gave him away and Nate dodged left into the road. He sprinted through the bushes and trees dividing the road and once again forced Gabe to go around. Again he cut through a neighborhood's back yards, but this

one wasn't fenced and therefore only slowed Gabe down. However, Nate suddenly heard the sound of the local bus slowing down to stop at the sign on the corner. He sprinted, expending the rest of the energy he had to cut through the next yard and catch the bus.

He lept into the bus and presented his pass, which was damp, but laminated. He stood at the door staring out into the darkness wondering when Gabe would appear, bracing himself for the fight that was coming.

But nothing happened. The door closed and the bus pulled away. "Get behind the yellow line," said the bus driver, a finely dressed old black man who eyed Nate suspiciously. "And son, next time you get on the bus you make sure you wearing a shirt."

"Yes sir," Nate said and sat behind the bus driver. "Will do, sir."

The bus was empty and the fluorescent lights turned all the windows to mirrors in which Nate could admire himself. His cheeks were flushed from running, his hair mostly laid back but still dripping somewhat from pool water and sweat, his chest heaving, he looked into his eyes and he saw a hero. Hero to what? To every kid that ever gets beat down for no reason at all, for every boy who spends his adolescence pining for, but never laying their sweetheart, for every fucking person who ever dreamt the impossible, but could never achieve it, he was their hero.

He declined to get off at the stop a block away from his parent's house because he figured that Gabe would be waiting for him, he decided to get off six blocks later, farther into town and then

walk back. The bus driver, who had clearly had enough of people's antics for a lifetime looked in the mirror and said, "Son, now, where the hell are you going at this time of night?"

"Two more stops, mister," Nate said and the bus driver resumed his quiet grumbling and concerned peeks in the rear view mirror.

Nate promised himself that he would call Angela the moment that he got home and tried to think of what to say. He wanted to say that he loved her, that he always had and that he wanted her to break up with Gabe and go with him because not only did they like each other better than she liked Gabe, but they'd also proven their love. He didn't want to put too much emphasis on it, but in addition to all of those other good points, he had also risked his skin quite heroically. He fantasized about going to homecoming to Gabe's febrile grimace, to prom with Angela all done up in a dress they'll never forget but they'll only ever see for a few hours. Perhaps, he thought, they might even go off to college together, or try to do long-distance.

It was Nate's planned stop and he got off tossing back a parting, "Sorry for the trouble, mister!" to the driver. The bus drove off and he looked around, he was standing outside of the closed strip mall on the far end of the Midland Centennial Park. He turned south and confidently strode off into the lamp-lit night. He even allowed his imagination to wander as far afield as to imagine that he and Angela might be the sort of thing that lasts forever. Maybe they would grow old somewhere nice, like, Connecticut, though he had no idea what New England was like. It was the sort of day-dreaming that only the young or truly old can do without giving themselves an

anxiety attack. Anybody else might rebel at the thought of their whole life laid out for them like that, but to Nate it was still quite the adventure from where he was standing.

The last thing he remembered was the subtle sound of a poorly lubricated gear cassette.

Nate woke up in the grass of someone's front lawn just as the delivery boy was throwing papers from his dad's car. Nate's eyes made contact with the little shit just as they lit up with impish glee. Too hurt and tired to do anything but imagine shaking his head, Nate just sat there leaning back on his arms as the kid wound up and threw the paper directly into his face.

Laying back in the grass again, a fresh wave of pain spreading through his body, Nate tried to remember what happened, but could only think about how heroic he felt on the bus. Dragging himself to his feet, he couldn't help but realize how unheroic he actually was.

In the dark of the early midwestern summer morning, Nate made his way back to his house along the way he remembered much more of the night before, how Gabe had run him over full speed with his bicycle, Gabe using the bicycle as a sort of bludgeon before switching to fists, Nate futility trying to defend himself with his own fists, the sickening knocking thud that a fist makes when it hits a human's head. Then, there was nothing until he woke up. Nate felt like crying, but he was too tired. He was also too tired to explain to his parents why he was arriving home around dawn looking like he'd been in a brawl and without a shirt.

Coming up on his house, he was filled with a wave of disappointment. The front window was illuminated behind the canvas curtain, which almost certainly meant that one or both of his parents were awake and prepared to flay him alive. Nate walked up to the front door and walked in and as he was locking the door behind him, he heard his parents shuffle into the mud room from the kitchen. His mother gave a yawp somewhere between hurt shock and disgust and his father's only response was "Jesus H. Kee-rist, son."

The mudroom had a large mirror in it in which Nate could finally see what his parents could see. He looked like Iggy Pop, stringy and lean and dangerous and absolutely covered in blood. Most of it was on his face, but there were significant drips and pools of it on his chest and stomach. His khakhi waistband was stained with blood. His hair stuck up in severe dark spikes where the blood had coagulated.

Florence by this time had become almost hysterical. Her emotion was understandable, if not her words, "Oh my god! Oh my god! I swear if you don't pay attention to them, let them roam about on their own they'll go and join a gang and then they'll come home covered in tattoos and higher than Jim Belushi at a Senior Prom. Hank! Henry, you need to get your son to the hospital so that they can give him the shot that'll take the drugs out of him or else he's going to overdose and it'll be on you, Henry Silas!"

While Hank was busy trying to get his things together to take his son to the hospital, including shouting from the other room, "Has anyone seen my fucking wallet?" Nate was busy staring at himself in the mirror, flexing even.

“Cool,” Nate said to no one, but then his little brother Mitchell came around the corner.

“What are you?” Mitchell said, unafraid.

“I’m your brother, Mitchell. Nate.”

“I know. But what are you?”

Nate paused in front of the mirror and listened to his parents yelling at each other in the kitchen.

“I’m a monster,” Nate said significantly.

“Yeah, duh,” Mitchell said, “If we’re doing halloween early then of course you’re a monster.

What kind of monster are you?”

Forty

Nate did start dating Angela soon after that night. And the fact that he blamed the concussion for forgetting who beat the hell out of him probably saved him from Gabe’s further wrath.

Nate and Angela were inseperable from Junior year and even jumped through some hoops to have the same classes at Midland High School. They ate lunch together and read the same books. They studied together at each other’s houses and had clandestine sex. They watched the same TV

shows and got excited for the same social events at school. Surely, the two of them were locked in a sort of adolescent joie de vivre that they shared intimately.

Things fell apart in the fall of their senior year when they went on a church retreat to a camp out in the forest. There the sexes had been separated for most of the time and late night discussions with the other guys poisoned Nate's mind against the fantasies he entertained the night that he and Angela first had sex.

"I hear that Ashley Parks was eyeing you in theater class, Nate," Brian Cavafy said one of those nights. The fire was dying and only the small core of friends remained after the smores had gone and a small bottle of schnapps had been passed around.

"I love Angela, Brian," Nate said.

"Yeah, I get that," Brian said thoughtfully, "But how do you know? You've only ever been with her. You've got no experience. What you should do is break up with Angela and try to fuck some other girls. Maybe you'll find you love someone else."

"What the fuck, Brian? You trying to get me out of the way so that you can get to Angela?"

"No, man, I'm saying that it's a test, everything is a test, that's the only thing they're really teaching us in school. All of life is a test. I'm saying you need to test love or else it isn't anything at all."

“This sounds like bullshit.”

“Yeah, I’d think you’d say that,” Brian took a can of dip out of his pocket and began to pack it violently, “I’m just saying. If nothing else works, you would go back to Angela knowing that she was the only one for you.”

“Alright, Brian,” Nate said, unconvinced and sleepy. “Goodnight, I’m going to go to sleep.”

But laying in his bed that night, Nate thought about what Brian had to say, in fact he took it a little farther. He began to wonder if Angela really loved him. Maybe the test was if he left her and she took him back then it was true love, maybe then it was meant to be.

It took a couple of months of ruminating on this idea before Nate acted on it. In mid-January he broke up with Angela. At first she was so shocked that she didn’t understand, but he kept trying to explain why he was breaking up. How it was unreasonable that they stay together during the best times of their lives, that they should see all kinds of people and experiment, that they could always come back together, but he wanted to be sure that their relationship wasn’t just one of convenience, but one of true love.”

After a long time of Nate rambling, Angela only said, “What is convenient about this?”

But Nate didn’t hear her.

Forty-One

“You seeing anyone nowadays, Angela?” Nate said while opening the refrigerator door to see only cups of yogurt and lunch bags.

“Nate,” Angela said, knitting her eyebrows and scrunching up her face in mild offense, “I’ve been married for five years.”

“Oh yeah?” Nate said, still staring into the fridge. “Anybody I know?”

“I don’t think you know John, no. He moved here sometime after we’d both gone to college,” Angela said, crossing her arms and leaning against the counter in the break room.

Nate closed the fridge door and leaned against the wall opposite to Angela crossing his arms, “So no chance?”

“What do you mean by chance?” Angela said, her voice starting to build into offense.

“Nothing, dear,” Nate said, relaxing his arms, “You know what I’m here for, really?”

“No,” Angela said, fearing that Nate might try to reignite a love that had long gone cold.

“I want to know why Chuck killed himself,” Nate said, using his hand to flatten his hair, which he expected had become wild.

“Oh,” Angela puffed and then uncrossed her arms to walk over to Nate to give him a hug. She embraced him, his arms laying unused at his side, “You know you had nothing to do with that. You couldn’t have known. You couldn’t have done anything.”

“I know I can’t have done anything, I just want to know why,” Nate said and returned the hug. He then used that moment to push Angela away some. “Look, I don’t care, I just want to know why he did it. Call it morbid fascination.”

“It has to be more than morbid fascination,” Angela said.

“What does that mean?” Nate said.

“I mean that you loved him.” Angela grabbed the coffee carafe and poured two cups and handed one to Nate. “This is your way of dealing with his death.”

“You might be right, Angela,” Nate took a sip from the mug and felt the comforting rush of the caffeine, “Do you know why? Why he did it?”

“Nate, Nate,” Angela sighed affectionately, “There’s never anything that you can really know from a suicide. You’ll drive yourself crazy thinking about why they did what they did, but in the end... well...”

“Well what?” Nate blurted, angered.

“In the end, they’ve just died,” Angela said.

“You act like it’s some sort of natural progression of things, Angela. Chuck killed himself. He woke up one morning and decided that today was the day, he would do himself in that day! How can you act like there’s some sort of natural order to this thing?”

“Do you believe that we have personal freedom?”

“Of course I do! Every day I have to deal with assholes and I say, ‘well, I’m not going to kill myself because of this asshole!’ I’ve got the choice everyday and yet I live! I’m alive, Angela! Why is Chuck dead?”

Angela closed her eyes and tears ran from the edges of her eyes and made some of her makeup run as well. “I don’t know, Nate. It is a tragedy. These tragedies can’t ever be explained.”

“But why not, Angela? Why can’t we explain this shit?” Nate shouted. “Come on! You know something, you knew him for how long? Why is it that you can stand here and say to me that you don’t know why he did himself in? I’ve got to fucking guess?”

Angela stayed silent and covered her face.

“Oh, okay, is it because he had debts?”

Angela sobbed into her hand.

Nate walked over to Angela, “Is it because he got caught cheating on Mary? That someone was fucking Mary?”

Angela said nothing.

“Did he know Mary was fucking someone?”

Angela said nothing.

“Was he fucking you, Angela?”

“You need to leave,” Angela said.

“I fucking will,” Nate shouted and threw his coffee cup against the wall, the spatter hitting Angela in the face a little. She tried as hard as she could to not wince.

Nate started towards the door to leave, but Angela stepped out in the corridor to say, “No, Nate, you don’t understand.”

Nate turned around with his arms out, “What? What is it? Your husband?”

“No, Nate, you need to leave Midland,” Angela said.

“Or yeah?” Nate said.

“You know why you had to leave. You left because you never wanted to be put in the same graveyard as Chuck. You never wanted that,” Angela said.

“Is this a threat? I’ll fuck your husband up just like I did Gabe!”

Angela came up on Nate like she was on skates, unreal fast. She handed him a card, “Go and see Sidney Parrish and leave Midland. Go back to Hollywood. Go and live your fucking life.”

Nate took the card and tossed it in Angela’s face. “I never loved you.” He walked out to the elevator and didn’t look back at her.

“I never loved you, either,” Angela said to an empty waiting room smelling of coffee and disinfectant. The evening sun had gone away and the windows were dark except for the light from the Midland hotel’s giant M which cast everything in a false red hue.

Forty-Two

Having almost entirely sobered up, Nate decided that it was time to get sloshed again. The uber that took him away from Angela bumped along the roads dappled in overcast sunset, some of the roads were potholed and some were simply never paved and were made of bumpy brick, others were lumpy with the errant roots of oak trees that had grown too long and too close to the road. The driver went on and on about the state fair, held in the next county over, which had just ended a couple of weeks before. Nate felt a seething hate form in the pit of his stomach, something about how ignorant and simple this hayseed was enraged him. He wanted to lecture the man about how the state fair isn't anything at all and that the world was full of wonders that exceed it easily. Even as close as a few hundred miles away were fantastic national parks, metropolises, even a shore that you can't see across. Had this man, Nate thought, ever been to a lake larger than the Midland Reservoir? Had he ever accidentally gulped a mouthful of saltwater instead of the amoeba-rich Leptospirosis sludge to the south? The state fair! Nate asked the man what his favorite part was about the fair. "Oh, I'd have to say it was the butter carving contest." Nate asked the man to pull over and let him out.

"Yeah, yeah, this is fine, this is where I want to be dropped off," It wasn't, of course, Nate was still some six blocks away from the hotel, but he couldn't stand one more minute with the driver, who struck him as familiar. Did they know each other from a shared class? Did they attend the same elementary school? The same high school? Nate didn't want to think about it. Primarily because the more he thought about it the more he imagined himself as the driver, forever thudding down the dimly paved streets of Midland in search of a little more scratch than he had the day before, but discovering soon enough that the money, no matter where it comes from,

will soon disappear. For some repair or a school project for the kids, a weekend trip in Chicago or the wife's traffic ticket. No matter how much he makes there's a subtle sucking sound already taking it away. This man, Nate began to think, was his doppelganger, or maybe more precisely what he would have been had he remained in Midland. The shadowy anonymity of the driver in the setting light of dusk made Nate uneasy and further reinforced the idea that the man was some ghostly apparition, an omen of bad luck. He crossed a set of ancient railroad tracks and ducked into a wedge-shaped bar on the corner of a street terminating obliquely with the train track. Signs hung out front advertised Budweiser and Schlitz. Perhaps there were windows at one point, but they'd been replaced by boards and painted over in some shade that was then distorted by the darkness of the evening and the green-colored lights from the track, which cast the bar in an eerie hue. Inside, it was like any other bar Nate had stumbled into from Atlanta to Vancouver.

Wooden fixtures on hardwood floors, a bar that stretched and snaked against one wall around various additions and cabinetry. The other side was lined with booths and in the back was a smattering of tables and chairs before a riser upon which a band was clearly setting up, but not present at that time. Nate pulled a barstool out from the bar and sat next to a man stuffed into a suit, who turned and said hi. Nate grunted and stared at the bottle of Bushmills in front of the mirror. His eyes wandered in the mirror's reflection to the man in his slightly too small suit to the under-

workings of the bar such as sink and soda gun. Nate turned to look past the man to a tin bucket that had suddenly begun to levitate. It turned out it was for serving the second floor, whose balcony looked down over the front and the back of the bar. Great dusty cobwebbed wooden wheels are suspended from the ceiling from black cast iron chains. This place seems to be populated with a younger crowd, perhaps itinerant as they seem lonely and out of place. The

entire place shakes and rumbles and clinks when a train passes and conversations stop when the whistle blows. Nate can't figure out how old the place is, it's almost timeless. Take away the hipsters with their smartphones and maybe Abe Lincoln ordered a nameless glass of red whiskey off of one of these walls when he was wandering the midwest two centuries ago. Nate orders a whiskey and a beer and begins to forget about the unpleasantness of the day. It had been a long day of unpleasantness. The band came out to play, but silently. There were only two of them and Nate barely noticed when they started playing. Muted, but persistent, it was a lo-fi version of, say, New Order or Depeche Mode played with a distorted eight string bass and a drum machine accompanied by a woman's voice. At first glance, Nate assumed that the woman on the stage was a waitress. She wore a white t-shirt with a Hokusai print on it and a waitress' smock with the string tied off at her back. She also wore a metal choker that looked something like concertina wire, but couldn't have been. Nate didn't pay much attention to them and continued to put away round after round looking through his phone for anything that might seem interesting. Then after a pause in the music, the bass starts up again sliding up and down the neck of the instrument plucking out a rolling melody. The woman in the waitress getup fidgets with the drum machine for a little bit and sets it pounding as the screaming whistle of a passing train fades into the boozy night. Eyes closed, she sways back and forth with her forearms flexed into a pugilistic pose, microphone in leading fist, wire wrapped in her defending hand. Tendons in her neck are strained in imitation of *Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C. 1962*. Then her body snaps into a different pose to fall into a loose swinging pose when she begins to sing, "Never going to die, ooo-oo! Never going to die, ooo-oo!" Hips swaying, she struts around the stage, stomping, leaping, slipping, striding. She grabs at her clothing and threatens to tear it from her body, barking the lyrics into the microphone as her arms dart in every direction in some

crust-punk imitation of voguing. She flashes complicated facial expressions at the crowd, who are barely paying attention, absorbed in their phones or some girl that they're trying to get home or a warming beer. Her face is kabuki-like in its frightfulness and concentration of emotion. She seems violent as one moment she smiles maniacally and the next she beats her breast so hard that the audience can hear the percussion in her lungs as she sings. "Jesus Christ," Nate says to nothing in particular. If ever there was a powerful performance, it was this one, he thought. There was something absolutely appealing about it. It was as if she was mocking her own youth and power and celebrating it at the same time. She was burning up on stage, he was afraid she was going to hurt herself, like she was going to start bleeding at any time and he desperately wanted to see her bleed. She was like Patti Smith and Iggy Pop combined and set to the romantic nihilism of late-stage Joy Division. He wanted to scream along with her. He wanted to beat his chest too and try to wake the people up sitting at the bar, sitting at the booths. He wanted them to feel the vulnerability and the humanity that this woman expressed on the stage. He wanted to scream until his mouth filled with blood.

The song ended abruptly and she thanked the crowd. Nate promptly slipped off of his barstool and when his butt hit the floor, he threw the rest of his pint in his face.

Forty-Three

In the morning, somewhat hungover and definitely starting to regret sticking around in Midland, Nate Silas stood under the awning of the Midland hotel waiting for an uber with a cup of coffee in hand. He'd given up on espresso and resigned himself to the oily brew that the hotel offered. It tasted sharp like it'd been used to lubricate an engine and contained colloidal particles of

cylinder walls. His jacket was crumpled and his tie already loosened. Nate was not in the sort of state that makes for an amiable visitor. Rather he looked like a refugee.

The oppression he ran from seemed to be from his own doing, but if pressed, Nate would have said that it was this town, Midland, the entire sky lays down on you and presses you to the Earth like a blanket and impedes your every movement. Some folks find it terribly comforting, but Nate found it to be restricting. He always had. He always felt that if he could get out from underneath the midwestern sky he could *fly*.

The uber arrived and he got in the back because the front seat was occupied by a box that contained snacks, bottles of water, some sort of radio and a lake terrier. “Good morning, sir. Where are we heading today?”

Nate wasn’t sure why every single uber driver he’d ever had asked this question. The GPS definitely gave him the answer as soon as he answered the call to pick him up, yet the man still insisted on starting their small talk with a minor annoyance. “Carroll.”

“The town?” The driver asked in surprise.

“Yeah, the town, rather, just outside of the town,” Nate said sensing the driver’s increasing excitement at the prospect of such a fare. The driver bounced the car out of the hotel’s driveway and made for the state highway that would take them out into the real pith of this country, the fields of soybeans, corn, hay and sorghum, whatever that is. Nate stared out the window at the

houses that passed by, the trees in these old lawns, people setting up their folding chairs on their front porches. They passed into the outer part of town where all of the strip malls could be found and Nate did something of an inventory of the stores that had sprung up since leaving. There was a WalMart, a Target, a Meijer's, Buffalo Wild Wings, T.G.I. Friday's, Applebee's, Olive Garden, Chik-fil-A, many many things that now replace the quirky and dysfunctional restaurants and stores that used to serve the area. Then they passed into the fields.

Over the short shallow ditches that line the roads, home of the telephone poles that trace the world, dividing the entire planet into neat little squares that you can see from 35,000 feet, the plants stand dumb to the world absorbed in their innate servitude. Endless. They wave like the ocean. Nate is lost in the vastness of the land. *Que onda*, Nate thought.

On the radio played Lou Reed's *Street Hassle*, which is not a song that Nate is very accustomed to, but it's familiar enough that he can recognize the voice of Bruce Springsteen when he shows up near the end to do a little spoken word. Nate began to feel somewhat aloof and hummed along, "Baby, tramps like us..."

The sky was conspiring a downpour sometime that day. Nate could see the tell-tale clouds in the sky and how they turned a dark gray and slowly swallowed up all of the blue. Nate felt lucky that it didn't look too bad, it was the tail end of tornado season, but there's still always the chance and where he's going, tornados have no problem with ripping folks into low orbit around a weather vane.

Sidney Parrish, probably the next most likely to succeed in their young group of friends after Chuck. He was a svelte quarterback who had a penchant for older brunette women. There was a rumor that he had been involved with Mrs. Sayers, which was legendary. Standing at six foot five inches of dehydrated muscle, his blonde hair cut into a sharply shaped buzz, he was known for a stoner-ish smile that earned him the nickname “Dopey” in the locker room. However, he was anything but in academics. He was certainly a better student than Nate was and he knew it. Dopey never tried to show anyone up, but he was never late on assignments and rarely got a score lower than 99%. This led his calculus teacher, Mr. Hamilton, to believe that someone was doing his homework for him and conspiring to help him on his tests. In an effort to humiliate Dopey, Hamilton accused him of academic dishonesty and forced him to come in on a Saturday to prove that he had the aptitude that he claimed. Hamilton and a few other co-conspirators came up with a number of calculus problems, oral history questions and an essay about the book he claimed he had most recently read.

Of course Dopey passed all of the tests to the satisfaction of the teachers and administrators. He really was a stellar student deserving of praise. He also had an extremely generous sense of humor and told Nate later on about how Mrs. Murphy had to go to the library to borrow a copy of *Nova Express* because she had never read it and would have to in order to understand his analysis. Dopey laughed and laughed about how he sat there watching Murphy grade his essay meanwhile muttering “oh my” and “oh my goodness” and “this was in *our* library?” over and over.

Sidney went off to West Point on a scholarship and was tracked to become a relatively high-ranking member of the military, perhaps become a politician one day. However, something changed dramatically because here he was... The uber turned onto a dirt road and Nate could see over the fallow field to the right there stood an old farmhouse on the property. Behind it was a barn, the home of Sidney “Dopey” Parrish.

He had fallen far, but for what? There were many different theories about what happened to him. Some assumed that on his deployment in Iraq he had developed severe PTSD, which, untreated upon his return to the states lead to his fall. Others thought that he developed schizophrenia at some point in college and really lost it when he was deployed. Also, there was the fact that soon after he returned from deployment he was arrested on a variety of drug charges. A drug addiction can certainly lead to the premature end of a promising career. Anyway, the fact stood that since being released from prison, Sidney Parrish lived in his parent’s barn behind their farmhouse because they had grown afraid of him.

Forty-Four

The uber driver pulled into the farmhouse driveway and Nate told the driver to stop there, that he’d walk the rest of the way. If Sidney’s parents were afraid of him, then Nate was outright terrified. He remembered the man, statuesque and imposing. He was beyond Gabe’s sort of bullying. Sidney was beyond a lot of things and it was not surprising to hear him talking of Nietzsche’s idea of the Ubermensch and to think that he equated himself with that ideal.

Turned to darkness, Nate wasn’t sure what the ubermensch would look like.

It had started to drizzle and Nate's Chukka boots ground through the gray gravel towards the big barn doors. The barn itself was diligently painted and well taken care of, but it still had an ancient and sun-worn quality. It looked as if the moment someone stopped caring about it it would fall over and dissolve into dry rot and sawdust.

The wind picked up some and kicked Nate's tie out from his jacket's buttoning. He stuffed it in his shirt and kept walking towards the barn. Near the door Nate can hear a sort of child-like song:

“Fishy, fishy, fishy.

In the sky, in the ground.

In the sky, in the ground.

Let me tidy up for when you come around.

From the sky, from the ground.

From the sky, from the ground.

Fishy, fishy, fishy.

Walk on your hands and knees,

Hands and knees,

To my abode if you please.

Walk on your hands and knees,

Hands and knees if you please”

Nate's face contorted into a desperately quizzical look and his guts pained him. He couldn't tell if it was fear or a hangover, but he was sure that he wasn't really interested in seeing his old friend only to get chopped up and buried in some anonymous field.

Then, the door popped open. A dark face peered out from the darkness, wild dirty blonde hair surrounding it and a burning cigarette dangling out of his mouth. Nate jumped back, startled.

"Hey, you, what are you doing here?" Sidney said curiously.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, it appears that the church rolls have made a mistake and you probably aren't interested in hearing about Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior," Nate said, hoping that the bullshit would shield him.

"Nate, you've got no car. Did you take a taxi? You're gonna probably have to wait a while for another one to come all the way out here. Come on inside, have a tea," Sidney said.

"You remember me," Nate said hopelessly.

"I remember your particular brand of bullshit," The face said and distorted into a comical smile that forced the lit cigarette to almost stand up on end.

Nate walked into the barn. It was dark and it took his eyes a few moments to adjust, but when they did, he was surprised at what he saw. It was amazingly quaint. Like something that one

might see in a Portland suburb. The walls were mostly plastered with old posters and collected signs, to the right was a small living area composed of a couch, a loveseat and a lazy boy all centered around a coffee table and television. A chain holding a stained-glass lamp hung from the ceiling over the living area, which drew Nate's gaze upward to the loft, which looked to be dimly lit by a desk lamp besides a bed resting on a stack of pallets. To the left was what looked like a well-heeled kitchen with steel appliances and bar-island with stools carefully stored underneath. To the back of the barn was a 1200 watt halogen tripod illuminating an enormous canvas, recently outlined, and several others, which had been painted on. The theme of the paintings seemed to be an exploration of various colors and they remained abstract and unidentifiable. The tea kettle began to whistle and Sidney kind of waddled over to the kitchen. No longer the Adonis he once was, Sidney had become skinny and weak. His hair grown long and dirty. He wore a cotton robe that hung from his shoulders like on a wire hanger. His feet, wrapped in leather padded socks, shuffled along the floor and kicked up a little dust. He was as different as could be. Nate was jealous of the transformation. If only he could become unrecognizable to these people in this town, a monster like Sidney Parrish.

Sidney took the kettle off of the range and filled the teapot, "It just needs to steep for a little bit," Sidney said, putting his cigarette out in a saucer. "You know, in England they'd think of using the range to prepare tea as being barbaric. They use these nifty little kettles that take care of the whole matter rather silently and quickly! I think it has something to do with the fact that their power is of such a higher voltage than ours. Their electric kettles can boil water much faster than an electric kettle might over here. Do you take milk or sugar in your tea? It's just black tea,

nothing fancy, so feel free to soil it as you might,” the ghoul who had replaced Sidney Parrish smiled sheepishly and pulled a quart of milk out of the refrigerator.

“Nothing for me, Sid,” Nate said. “I’ll just have the tea straight. Black?”

Sidney set two cups of tea on saucers on a tray and carried the whole arrangement over to the living area, shuffling and telling Nate to “Sit, sit! Please make yourself comfortable. I’m sorry about the dust, but I’ve not had visitors in a long time.”

Nate sits on the sofa and Sidney sits on the Laz-e-Boy. Sidney is smiling widely, but there is something about his eyes that makes Nate think that he’s somehow forgotten why he’s smiling, but keeping it up because of momentum.

“What can I do for you, Nate,” Sidney blurted, his face resolving into a receiving look.

“I’m here to talk about Chuck, Sid,” Nate said softly, not wanting to disturb Sidney. “I hear you two had become close recently.”

“Yes. He takes me to the pharmacy to get my medication,” Sid said and paused, “I haven’t seen him in some time though. I’m also starting to run out, so I guess I’m going to have to get on the bike and get to the pharmacist myself sometime soon.” Sidney’s face twisted into a grimace,

“Goddamnit, I hate that fucking bike!” Sid shouted, twisting in his chair to shout at the beach

cruiser by the door. “I’m sorry for the outburst, but that thing is a pothole detector. If there’s a hole that’ll throw me over the handlebars then it’ll find it.”

Sidney paused and put his head in his hands and began to cry quietly.

“Sid, what’s wrong?” Nate said, knowing perfectly well what was wrong. Everything.

Sidney raised his head up, his eyes streaming with tears, but trying to smile, “I knew how he was, Nate, I knew that he was just doing it because it kept up appearances, he did it because helping out his old junkie veteran friend was something that would help his image. I didn’t care because, well, if you squint hard enough, a fake friend can appear like a real one. Or at least you can try to make it like that. I just always worried that he’d get bored of it or find some more public charity. I guess that day has come. What I’m wondering is why they had you come out here and tell me? Don’t you live in California? It seems to be quite the imposition.”

“No, Sid, I…” Nate paused, wondering if he did know what was happening here, “Do you not know?”

“Know what?”

“Sid, Chuck’s dead,” Nate said and set his tea cup and saucer on the coffee table.

“Oh!” Sidney said. He pulled out a fresh cigarette and shakily lit it as he lay back into his chair, “That happened sooner than expected.”

“Sooner than expect—” Nate began to repeat, but then decided to push on, “Sid, Chuck hanged himself.”

“Ah, see, now that makes sense,” Sidney said and nodded.

“What? It does?” Nate blurted and moved to the edge of his seat, “What do you mean? Do you know why he killed himself?”

“His sacrifice to Dagon, I guess he decided that he didn’t want to wait anymore with that weight over him,” Sidney said matter-of-factly and waved his cigarette in the air. The light appear to dim and Nate’s headache peaked a little. His vision darkened and even though it was Sidney who was smoking, Nate suddenly felt the fine grit of cigarette smoke on his teeth. He coughed and a small cloud of smoke came out of his mouth.

“What?” Nate said, ignoring the smoke, “I’m sorry, Sid, but I think you’re getting confused. Dagon? Dagon is a character from a Lovecraft story. Like from one of the Cthulhu games we played when we were kids.”

“Yeah, that’s right, Dagon. Good that you remember,” Sidney said, suddenly calm.

“Dagon isn’t real, Sid,” Nate said. His vision seemed to be darkening, which Nate was trying to write off as a symptom of his hangover. He felt a pinching sensation behind his left eye and his right arm became itchy. Occasionally, in the corners of his vision, there would be a slight flash, like a meteorite or alpha particle in a gas detector.

“It doesn’t matter if you believe if Dagon is real or not, the effect is the same. Chuck knew that he would have to be sacrificed and simply... skipped a few steps. I get it, but I wish he would have said something,” Sidney said, looking sad.

“Sid, I’m not feeling well,” Nate said, his legs felt weak and as if they were exposed to direct sunlight even though it was very dark in the room. He could hear the howling of the wind blowing through the cracks of the barn. His teeth ached and when they touched he thought that he could feel them bend in his mouth.

“Nobody feels good when they think about Dagon or his ilk,” Sidney said and got up to go and rummage around in a cabinet on the wall. He produced a bottle of bourbon and walked over to Nate. “That’s where I picked up the heroin habit. It was the only thing that stopped the aches. I’m not going to get you hooked on the good stuff, but I remember that hard liquor was pretty good at getting me functional for short periods of time.” Sidney picked up Nate’s tea cup and threw the tea on the dusty floor. He then filled it with bourbon and handed it to Nate who swigged it unsteadily. Instantly the room became a bit brighter, the burning in his extremities a little more bearable.

“What’s happening, Sid,” Nate said, still trembling from what he thought was an impending stroke.

“We thought we knew everything, Nate. We thought it could all be explained by reason and science and observation and all that shit, but whose rules are those? Who put that shit together? Was it the God that we learned about in Mass? Or, like Chuck used to say, was it some cosmic coincidence? Just how stuff happened to fall together organized into a pattern and assigned meaning by a bunch of monkeys who possess a biological survival trait that has to do with assigning meaning to patterns?”

“The truth is that there is something out there that dictates the rules, something that created the universe, it is all powerful and can bend its own rules at will.”

“What are you talking about. Did you drug me? Is that why I was about to puke there?” Nate asked, still feeling weak.

“No, no, Nate, I’m telling you what I know, the truth about the world. They think I’m crazy, that I’ve cracked, but I’ve seen it and you’ll see it soon too. You’ve already started down the path where you will encounter them. You went too far and fell down the rabbit hole.

Forty-Five

“I fell down the rabbit hole in Fallujah.

“I came across a number of enlisted marching Iraqis into a warehouse, Iraqi children, mind you. The parents were told to remain outside and the translator was chanting something into the loudspeaker to them, but I didn’t know the language. The bombed out streets and the heat of the place. Unforgettable. It’s where Dagon’s from, you know? Iraq thereabouts, but it’s not limited to space and time like how we think or remember. Anyway, I went into the warehouse to confront the enlisted. I grabbed a corporal by the lapel and threw him on the ground demanding to know what they were doing. I could do that back then, back before my bones turned into the stuff sand dollars are made out of. Heroin will do that to you. Sucks the calcium right outta you. Calcium is one of the prescriptions I typically pick up along with a good amount of diamorphine. Anyway, the corporal had dead eyes and spoke in a language that I couldn’t have known. A dead language with a forgotten name, he’d been possessed by a priest of Moloch and charged with the ritual sacrifice. Moloch demands the burned bodies of children, if you don’t know. Jesus, it was horrific, Nate. I don’t ever want to see anything like it again. That’s why I left the army, it’s why I came back here, it’s why I won’t be around people, really. I can’t bear to see them consumed by kerosene fires like the children on the concrete floor. The blue flames rolling over them, so many looked like they didn’t know what was happening and lay perfectly still as their bodies turned into tallow candles. The ones that resisted were pushed back by spears, back into the pit, back into the fires. Outside the parents were calm because they had been informed by the translator that Moloch had returned and this was the sacrifice he demanded, it was the sacrifice he received. Of course, when you tell a story like that to your superiors, they say things like “PTSD” and “Schizophrenia” and “Lack of Evidence” and other nonsense. The old gods never left us, Nate. They never left and they control the very ground that you walk on, the physics you rely on to fly to California and back, they control our lives and we’ve no recourse. No recourse at

all to these hellish things. For a while I tried to research them. I wanted to find out if there's an afterlife, if these things control that too. I've never found any evidence that there is an afterlife and I pray to a god that cannot exist that there is no afterlife and that when I take my final breath, when I blink for the last time, consciousness will dissolve into the earth and end. I want it to fucking end. Oh god, I want it to end. But I'm so fucking scared to be wrong that I don't do myself in. Do you know what it's like to slam a load of smack into your arm and to slip into those gauzy comforts simultaneously crying out with your soul to die and shitting your pants hoping you don't find the thing on the other side of existence' veil? I've got a stressful fucking life, Nate," By this point, Nate was working on a pretty good buzz while Sid thrashed about the living area tossing his hair here and there and grabbing chunks of it for effect. When he got to the end of his speech he laid down on the couch next to Nate and lay his head in Nate's lap. Still six foot five, his legs hung off the edge of the couch. "You should go home, Nate. You don't need to see the rest. You don't need to know anything more. The ignorant are blessed people. They can lead happy lives or at least ones without constant fear and pain. Just go back to California, to the sun and the beautiful girls and remember this place as a sketch of a nightmare, something that you woke up from grateful that you weren't ever truly there. Drink yourself to death on the Sunset strip and turn your face away when you see atrocities because there's nothing you can do, nothing that can stop the Old Ones. They demand their sacrifice and as long as you don't stand in the way, you might not find yourself sacrificed."

Nate pushed Sidney off of his lap and stood up. The blood rushed to his head and his head pounded. He thought he might black out, but steadied himself. His mouth watered as if anticipating a puking episode, but simultaneously there was the sensation of tightness in his

throat. “Sidney, this can’t be. This is just a bad dream. An illusion. You know how things were like! Sometimes there were creepy things that happened that weren’t real. Remember Terry? He got fucking snatched, he didn’t fucking disappear! Some pervert took him and fucked him to death. There’s no Dagon, no Moloch, no cult, no—” Nate began to vomit, but he hadn’t had any breakfast. Instead, Nate vomited pebbles. At first little ones that you might find in a fish tank, but slowly getting larger and larger. Round and flat river stones, perfect for skipping across a quiet river or stream. He turned and began to run out of the barn, tripping as he did over the rocks. His eyes streamed with tears and he gasped for breath as each rock passed his tongue.

“Go home, Nate! Go home before they decide that they’ve seen enough of you!” Sidney yelled from the couch.

Nate burst from the barn door and fell into the wet gravel and increasing rain. As soon as he was outside of the barn, he stopped vomiting rocks and felt at his throat, which was no longer constricted. The rain washed away the tears from his face. He was startled by the sound of a car horn at the end of the driveway. It looked like the uber car he had taken earlier. He ran, sliding and skidding on the gravel to the car. Sure enough it was the very same car, “You need a ride?”

Nate got into the car and said, “Thanks, how’d you know I’d need a ride?”

“I just got a feeling is all. Plus, there ain’t anybody else out here to take back into town,” the driver said. “Coney Island Baby” was playing on the radio.

“Nope, nobody but me, I guess.”

“Where to?”

“Just start driving,” Nate said, staring at the barn door and hoping that it would not open, that he would never see Sidney Parrish again.

“Alright,” the driver said. “You look like you’re having a hell of a day.”

“You’re right about that.” Nate considered asking the driver to take him to the airport, skip the hotel altogether and just wait for the next flight out of Midland. But something called to him. There was one last girlfriend he had to set to rights, one last set of loose ends. She, more than any of the people he’d spoken to over the past couple of days would be able to straighten this whole story out. “Take me to St. Bridget of Alsace Convent and Clinic.”

“The nunnery?” The driver said. “What for?”

“I’ve got some apologizing to do,” Nate said.

The rain came down hard on the corn fields and Nate watched it thrash the stalks as they drove down the state road. Passing trucks screamed and rocked him into a sleepy reverie. He remembered Terry’s face the day he disappeared.

Forty-Six

The Midland Centennial Park was opened to much adulation many years before Nate came around. In the visitor's center, a dusty and cobwebbed building perched above one of the many ponds, there's a picture of the opening ceremony. Old Packards and Chevy's parked in a semi-circle on the big field that runs parallel to Main street, patriotic bunting covering the gazebo that still stands there, smiling faces milling about in a congratulatory mood. Written in pen in a dark part of the lower left hand side of the photograph is the inscription, "Opening Day of the Midland Centennial Park, 1946"

Something striking about the difference between the park in the days following the war and the days of Nate's youth was the lack of trees in days gone by.

When Nate was growing up in Midland, the park offered a wilderness unlike anything else. The farther one travelled from city center, the more order seemed to rule the landscape. The predictability of the enormous squares of crops that stretched with all too human regularity for as far as one could imagine was the very definition of civilization to Nate, albeit the most boring aspect of civilization. No, the only place that was really wild was the Midland Park with its dense trees that reminded him of the Brandywine forest. The ancient homes that surrounded the grounds flying the Stars and Stripes or black POW/MIA flags seemed to be haunted by the very ghosts of the forest, which were deep and impenetrable. Mysterious and impossibly large for being right in the middle of town.

Nate and Chuck and the rest of their friends frequently spent a lot of time in the park. During the dappled daylight hours they rode their bicycles at unsafe speeds along paths that had been lain by more adventurous kids than they generations before. Guttered muddy hills and serpentine paths through the driest parts of drainage ditches across crumbling macadam and down private alleyways lined with broken down motorcycles and trash bins, kicking up gray gravel as they fly past the park police and into the forest proper and through its well packed dirt paths. No end to the constant cycles of summertime racing and exploring.

Throughout the day they would lose a few of the group. Laura would go home after she hit a root and flew over her handlebars. Crying nearly uncontrollably, the rest of the group followed her a while to make sure that she wasn't going to go home and make up a story about how they had somehow conspired to throw her to the ground and muddy her jeans. Max quit after he slid off the side of a hill and straight into the duck pond. Game as he was, he couldn't get the muck out of his gear cassette. Peter always opposed going too deep into the forest even though it was only reasonable that it couldn't go that far, it was after all just a municipal park.

Years later, when Nate looked up the satellite view of the park on Google Maps he was struck by the size of it, how much smaller it actually was, how absolutely tiny the pathways were. The disbelief gripped his heart and he sighed in shame because it made all the more obvious his failure, his complicity in a series of crimes that transpired one August afternoon.

Forty-Seven

Cresting a particularly steep hill, Chuck, Terry and Nate found themselves deeper than they had ever been in the forest of Midland Centennial Park, they came to the edge of a seemingly impossible meadow in the center. The three friends looked at each other curiously because none could imagine that such a place could have existed in a forest they had been exploring since they were old enough to ride bicycles. The grass had grown long and forgotten, golden yellow and swaying in heightened yellow summer sun. Not far from where they had emerged stood a ramshackle and splintered brown barn that screamed of ticks and spiders and tetanus. In the center of the meadow was a pond lined with lilly pads and beside it a white-washed gazebo overgrown with morning glories near a stand of trees that made it look absolutely ideal for an afternoon picnic.

Their tires cut long gouges in the grass as they rode down through the meadow towards the gazebo, the pond. They sat in the cool shade of the stand of trees and wondered aloud how it was that they had travelled back and forth through the park over and over for five years or more and had never come across this place. How was it that the ubiquitous joggers or mothers with strollers were completely absent from the asphalt path that wound around the pond here? Was this an unnerving thought or wasn't it? Was there any reason to be suspicious of the cloudless sky and the din of cicadas in the distance? Yet still they sat in the shade enjoying the late summer breeze and feeling carefree and simultaneous paranoid.

“Hey, you guys see that?” Terry said, calm. The lily pads of the pond shifted easily in the wind and set the water to rippling and Chuck and Nate found themselves staring at the concentric

circles reverberating away from the shore leading their eyes to the center of the pond where there was a gentle gurgling, the outpouring of an underground spring, filling the lake with the stone-cold liquid. "Look at that."

But Terry wasn't looking at what Chuck and Nate were looking at. Chuck and Nate were absorbed in watching the sky boiling in the lake. The reflection of the water was a perfect mirror unaffected by the wind slowly building in the meadow, setting the grass low to the ground. There was something deeply calming about staring at the water, neither boy could have put words to it, but it was almost narcotic in its hold.

Beneath the surface, deep in the pool, low past the smooth rocks and the jumping pebbles, down through the trail of the cold water to chthonic peace a voice bubbles and pops and it calls to Nate and Chuck and it says, "Stay, be happy and at peace. Here by the deep pond."

Nate was the first to notice that Terry had gone. He cast his eyes around the meadow and saw him on the other side following a couple of girls in white dresses into the forest. Nate grabbed Chuck's arm and said, "Come on, let's follow Terry." Chuck looked terribly disappointed, but grabbed his bike anyway.

There was a slowness to the world in that meadow. Their hair seemed to flow in the wind like the grass, slow and deliberate and inevitable. Their legs felt weaker than usual and it seemed impossible at first to gain any speed. Slowly, deliberately, they made their way around the lake. All the while they could see Terry follow the girls up a dirt path and into the forest again. The

girls looked like they were dressed for church, but Nate was fairly certain it wasn't... but then again, he couldn't be certain... He didn't remember what day it was. And the grass laid flat and his hair whipped in his face and Nate had to lean into the wind to keep from being knocked over and the pond was perfectly still except for the center where the stony water came up and the reflection of the sky boiled at that point. A darkening sky, heavy black rain clouds forming out of nowhere bubbling out of some inscrutable point.

The girl on the left had long red hair tied in a pony-tail and the one on the right had brown hair tied in a bun and they skipped along the dirt pathway barely displacing a pebble while Terry marched along with them kicking up red dust for the wind to take away.

No matter how hard Nate and Chuck pedaled they couldn't seem to catch up with Terry who eventually disappeared into the forest with the girls. When Nate and Chuck reached the forest the pathway suddenly ended. Only disorganized leafy detritus, fallen branches and saplings scattered in their way. They called out to Terry, but heard nothing

By now the sky was a roiling mass of black clouds and the air raid sirens had begun signalling an impending tornado. The temperature dropped unnaturally. Sometimes during these big storms, the temperature will drop and the hail will come, but this was an unnatural cold. A winter cold and when they looked back to the pond it was frothy with white caps.

When Nate and Chuck emerged from Midland Centennial Park the brick paved streets were already filling with water. Branches from trees were flying across yards. Unsecured trash bins

and lawn furniture were tossed down the blocks. The sky and everything lit had turned green and Nate and Chuck were soaked to the bone. They struggled to ride their bikes down the streets against the wild wind and the biting cold rain.

When they finally skid into the Mansion's garage, they were exhausted. They lay on the garage floor panting and wet and freezing, but too tired to grab a towel to dry off. Nate was the first to speak, "I sure hope that Terry made it home okay."

They agreed, but neither believed it to be true.

Forty-Eight

The jarring of the car pulling into the horseshoe shaped driveway of the convent awoke Nate from an uneasy sleep. He had dreamt memories of old musty books he found in the library as a kid. Stories and novels that were fiction, mythology, he was sure, but then Sidney Parrish is muttering about the fish-head god of the Canaanites. The car pulled up to the front door of the convent, which loomed ominously in the rainy early afternoon. Large stones stained dark by the damp, ancient metal lamps collecting and dripping water. The light shining out of the stained glass front door looked inviting.

"Here you go," said the uber driver. "The St. Bridget Nunnery."

"Yes." Nate said, hesitant. It wasn't too late to ask the driver to take him to the airport, to be done with this strange weekend once and for all. Something compelled him to know more. Did

Chuck discover his affair with Mary? Was he somehow responsible for Chuck's death? Or, impossible to say, but was Chuck sacrificed to some ancient deity banished by the Old Testament God? If so... How did Dagon make it all the way out here to Midland?

Furthermore, what was he doing at the convent? Was he really here to see Meredith? Why? Why after all of these years does he feel compelled to come to this place to find her? She must know something, she must be able to clear up some of this.

"Hey, buddy, you gonna get out of the car?" the driver said.

"Oh yeah," Nate said and stumbled out of the car. He half-jogged to the front door of the convent trying to stay out of the rain, but he got wet anyway, the huge drops falling from the trees out front are impossible to avoid. The door to the convent was open and Nate stepped inside and was immediately struck by the Catholic smell of churches, monasteries and convents. A mixture between age, dust and frankincense. It's terribly quiet in these places. Especially on Friday mornings when no one is particularly interested in their everlasting soul. Outside of Good Friday, of course. It was eerily quiet, peaceful as the clergy might say. Creepy is how Nate would put it. Silent like a knife in a field of tall grass.

Nate stepped up to the front counter. There was a nun there in blue and white habit, gray hair cut short and uncovered by shawl. Her eyes were a piercing blue and her hands were raw from the cold, "Can I help you, my child?"

“Uh, I’m looking for Meredith Poisson. Or at least that was her name.” Nate said. “Do you change your name—”

“Meredith is here. She’s likely dusting lanterns in the sanctuary. Would you like me to show you where she is?”

“No,” Nate said. “No thank you. I seem to remember the place pretty well.”

“Okay then,” the old nun said. Nate started walking down the corridor to her left, “Other way, son!”

Nate backtracked and then started walking down the corridor to the nun’s right. “Hey, thanks,” Nate said.

Nate’s shoes echoed against the walls as he walked through the clinic part of the building. Past the convalescent rooms and the offices that composed the more public aspect of the St. Bridget clinic. The St. Bridget of Alsace convent had been established during the civil war by French catholics to tend to the wounded on a variety of battle grounds and this particular clinic had been established on a former battle hospital. These new rooms with their beige walls and comfortable afghans were never home to soldiers, but there was still something of the memory of the suffering of that conflict that wafted about the halls along with the smell of medication, rubbing alcohol and piss.

Nate walked passed a large window above a bench in the surrounding park. Behind the bench was a statue of St. Francis surrounded by birds and squirrels and other small animals of the forest. There was something about the darkened bronze, the greening plaque, the muddy folds of St. Francis' robe and dirty black sandals, there was something about the stains on his face that made the statue look like a thin and frightened figure. Instead of ministering to the small animals of the forest, St. Francis was afraid of them, afraid of whatever stared at him from the window.

Nate shuddered and moved on.

At the end of the hallway was a large door, which Nate assumed was the sanctuary, but when he opened the door, it opened into an enormous dark space. The light didn't reach far, but the distance it did manage to travel illuminated a single rack of metal folding chairs giving some idea of the size of the place. It was cavernous and humid. Looking into it made Nate's legs weak and gave him vertigo. He had the sensation that he was being sucked into the darkness, like the feeling one gets when one turns off the lights to the basement and has to run up the stairs in near darkness. Any slip means being lost to the absence of light, the void will swallow you up.

He closed the door and took a couple of deep breaths to calm the vertigo. Then he turned and walked deeper into the convent. Past the metal doors with reinforced windows. Some of the hallway was dark and the only illumination was the late afternoon sun streaming in from outside and down the hallway and the illuminated red "Exit" signs. A sensation of impending doom came over him as Nate walked past some saint shrines showing in diorama style the way in

which they had died. Tied to a stake and burned, hanged, stabbed by a Roman soldier, drowned, et cetera.

He passed another window, like the one he had seen earlier. It was another bronze St. Francis statue, but this one was kneeling on the ground hand extended feeding the bronze birds, his plinth empty and his face turned up to stare directly into the window.

It startled him. And the smell of rotting wood, damp ceiling and dying flowers lining the saintly dioramas all seemed to give off a miasmatic odor that made Nate want to retch, made him want to run out of there and into the damp woods.

Nate started to panic. He was sure that he was going to throw up because he began drooling uncontrollably. He lost his sense of balance entirely and stumbled through the hallway pitching back and forth, falling onto water fountains and yearly pictures of the sisters neatly lined up outside of the convent. He fell when he tripped on some carpet and lay there drooling onto the carpet and feeling the world spin around him for a moment before he realized that he felt a draft. He looked up to see a large wooden door with a number of friezes carved into it. It was a sanctuary door if he'd ever seen one. Slowly, steadily, he pushed himself to his feet. He was feeling much better and suddenly felt ashamed and embarrassed that he'd felt so out of sorts. He cleared his throat and opened the door, careful to not touch any of the saints depicted in the wood.

Stepping into the Narthex, Nate dipped his fingers into the holy water and crossed himself commenting quietly that it had to be the coldest water possible without freezing.

Between the pews, there was Meredith Poisson, scrubbing the granite tiles of the church with a rag and a bucket of water. “Meredith,” Nate whispered.

Meredith stood up and looked directly at Nate, “Nate!” she practically floated over to Nate, her feet and legs hidden by her wide habit. They embraced and Nate could feel that underneath her habit, she’d not changed much in the ten or so years since he’d seen her. She was still thin and she still wore her long red hair in a ponytail, here partially covered under a shawl. “How have you been.”

“Good,” Nate said dumbly, “They always used to say that you’d end up living as a witch down by the creek, but you’re a nun now.”

“Yes, Nate, your constant wit hasn’t left you,” Meredith said and grabbed his hand to lead him to a pew, “Come sit down. I hear that you’ve not had much exposure to nuns as of late.”

Nate sat in the pew next to Meredith Poisson and looked into the dimly lit sanctuary, the stained glass rose that colored the motes of dust that flew through the air. “I’m so sorry what happened.”

“That’s okay, Nate,” Meredith said, “Really it happened to you, not me.”

“You know what I mean,” Nate said. She did.

Forty-Nine

Of course, the big question was what happened to Terry. The three boys went into the woods one day and only two came out. A big storm came through and flooded a few different ponds of the park, dumping their waters into the creek which swelled to an unnatural size.

When, exactly, did the boys last see Terry?

With the church girls beside the meadow was not a satisfactory answer.

When the weather had let up some, but it was still pissing down rain, the police took the boys with them into the park to try to find the meadow. They systematically walked back and forth throughout the entire park until they could practically draw a topographical map. They saw felled trees, hills washed away, new creeks ground into the clay deposits, but nowhere did they find the barn or the gazebo or the field nor a peaceful bubbling pond. The park resembled a site of a recent disaster. The storm had not only taken out a number of trees by lightning, flooding and fire, but it had also mostly stripped the trees of their leaves.

Thus denuded, the boys could see very far into the forest and it was apparent that there wasn't a hidden meadow in there. The police yelled at them and demanded to know what really happened. The police left them standing in the rain, their raincoats thwapping with the large raindrops.

“We’ll never find it again,” Chuck whispered.

“Yeah. You know why, right?” Nate whispered.

“Because it was a sunny day.”

“It’ll never be sunny again?”

“I think that’s what we’re supposed to take away from this.”

In an effort to extract more information out of the boys, they were asked to identify the girls who might have known what had happened to Terry. The boys both gave the same names based on the two girls who had the absolute most reliable hairstyles in the entire town. Meredith Poisson and Louisa Martin.

Much to the boys surprise, the police arrested the girls and their parents. Both Meredith and Louisa were sent off to be wards of the state and there was no talk ever again of what happened to Terry.

Very shortly after that, Chuck was shipped off to boarding school and he would only occasionally see him during the brief summers when he would return and cloister himself in his room in the mansion studying to become a doctor.

In college, Nate saw a shrink a few times where he expressed the feelings of guilt for ruining Meredith and Louisa's childhoods. By randomly choosing them, they were sent away. Then, his friend, his only ally in this horrible event left him. He felt abandoned by Chuck.

After a while he decided to stop seeing the shrink, reasoning that he wasn't seeing any improvement.

Fifty

Nate was crying and it was hard for him to speak. The sobs wracked his chest and his face was wet with pain. "They sent you away, I ruined your childhood, I took you away from your family. How can you forgive me for any of that?"

Meredith was silent, but kept her hand on Nate's back as his chest heaved and he gasped for breath. "How could I have stopped them? I told them that I didn't think it was you or Louisa, but it was already done. Where did they take you? They told me that they took you to a juvenile detention center."

"That doesn't make any sense," Meredith said calmly.

"I know! What crime could they convict you of? Why couldn't anyone tell me the truth?"

"The truth was dangerous, Nate. The truth was awful. I'm sure they didn't want to hurt you."

“What happened to you, Meredith?”

“The thing is, Nate, you were right. Louisa and I did take Terry that day,” Meredith said.

“No, that’s impossible. We were in an impossible place.”

“You have to understand, Nate, the cult demanded sacrifice.”

“No,” by this point Nate had stopped weeping.

“You saved me, Nate, you got me away from those people. It was hard to be raised in foster homes, but it was better than being raised in the cult. Raised by a bunch of people who thought that their god demanded regular blood sacrifices. Can you imagine such a thing? It was true. That’s what was happening. You named Louisa and I and the police discovered the cult. Some really prominent people in town were a part of it, Nate, they’d been participating in their pagan rites for years and years, but they took me and put me with a good Catholic family and saved me. Louisa... Louisa didn’t make it. Her heart had been turned by the evil and she killed herself a few years after the events of that afternoon. She rests with the lord now, so do not cry for her. By that age she’d seen enough horrors that she’d been corrupted as I had almost been. I’m so glad that you decided to make the trip out here to Midland to visit me and so that I could tell you in person. I must say that I debated for years whether or not to contact you to thank you, but I wasn’t sure if you would remember me or if you would even know what I was talking about.”

Meredith embraced Nate warmly, but Nate had become stiff and cold, “Meredith, did Chuck know about this?”

“Yes, he came to me a little more than a week ago, why,” she said, pulling away to look at Nate.

“Meredith, I didn’t come to Midland to visit you,” Nate said.

“No? Then why did you come?”

“I came for Chuck’s funeral, which is today. He killed himself a little less than a week ago,”

Nate said, the sensation of something hovering just behind his shoulders gave him a chill.

“He killed himself?”

“Meredith,” Nate’s voice was starting to get uneven as the adrenaline built up in his system. “I talked to Sidney Parrish before I came here. He says that there’s a cult that worships Dagon in Midland—”

Nate Silas was cut off by Meredith’s scream. She leapt to her feet and held her head with both hands pulling at her red hair and screaming. “Nooo! Noo! They’re back, how can they be? They all went to Terre Haute! They were supposed to get the fucking chair in Terre Haute, Milhaus told me! Officer Milhaus promised me that they wouldn’t be back.” Meredith’s eyes were wild, her face was snarled in anger, hate, “It can’t be!”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Meredith,” Nate said, now starting to feel genuinely scared.

“That’s what Sidney said, but I think he might have a screw loose or something.”

Meredith suddenly stopped tearing at her hair and turned to Nate, “I don’t know what you’re doing here. You need to get the fuck out. They’ve lured you back and you’re going to be their next sacrifice. They’re going to finish up the job Louisa and I botched all those years ago.”

Nate barely needed anymore excuse to leave. He was slipping on the tiles of the sanctuary trying to get to the door before she even stopped speaking. He could hear her saying behind him, “And what about me? When will they come for me? When will they be done with me?”

Nate burst out of the sanctuary into the hallway. He heard voices to his left, the direction of the front of the building and decided to get out through the garden. He jumped out of the door by the statue of St. Francis now erect on his plinth and pointing into the distance. Nate pulled himself through the overgrowth and slipped across the newly wet grass. His eyes scanned the area and saw several cars outside of the front of the convent. They had finally come for Meredith. Maybe it wasn’t too late for him. He ran away from the front of the convent, which happened to be the direction of the parking lot. He was running between the cars of the parking lot when he was almost struck by a car. It turned out to be the same uber driver who had picked him up that morning. “Hey, do you need a ride again?”

“Yes, yes, I do,” Nate got into the car. “Take me to the Midland airport. Quick as you can, man.”

“Hey, no problem. Jeez, seems like you’ve had a helluva day.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“Yup, pretty serendipitous that I was there to pick you up,” the driver said. Nate’s vision started to blur. Explosions of color and sharp slices of bright white light lit up his vision.

“What’s happening?” I think I need to go to a hospital, “I think I’m having a stroke.”

“Nope, you aren’t having a stroke. Nor do you need to go to a hospital. And you certainly aren’t going to the airport,” the driver said.

Nate’s world was getting very fuzzy and it was hard to focus on anything other than the fiery ink blots appearing in his eyes. “I remember you,” Nate said woozily, quickly losing consciousness, “You’re Meredith’s daddy. You’re Meredith’s...”

“Yup, I’ll make sure you get to where you need to go, son. You’ve got a funeral to get to and by my reckoning, you’re right on time.”

Fifty-One

Nate awoke to the sensation of very large and cold raindrops slapping his face very rudely.

Blinking through the water and swearing, he was unaware of his surroundings, but he was aware that he was tied down to something.

“Oh for fuck sakes, what is going on here,” Nate said to no one in particular. The response turned out to be a chorus of low hums. When he was able to open his eyes again, the first thing he saw was a man in a great black cloak with a headdress of horns standing a few feet above his head with his arms stretched out standing at Nate’s feet. “Ho! Fuck! Who in the fuck are you?”

Looking around more, in a panic, Nate saw that he was completely surrounded by people variously dressed in cloaks, some in animal skins and others were just plainly naked. However, all of their faces were obscured by veils or masks or hoods or something else. The naked ones were young and old, male and female and every shade imaginable. Indeed, some of them were painted such strange colors as blue or green or even had entire murals painted on their bodies. One woman, who appeared to be very old, seemed to be tattooed over her entire body except for her neck, her forearms to her hands and her ankles and feet. All of these people were engaged in some sort of ceremonial gesture that they were clearly trying very hard to hold and to not lose concentration. “Can I fucking help you people?” Nate remained clothed and it didn’t feel like he’d been searched, but what use is a wallet in this sort of situation anyway? His keys were in the hotel, which is something that he always does when he travels. Nate tried to wriggle around, but he was very tightly affixed to whatever it was he was tied to. “Look, folks, I was just leaving town! There’s no need for us to have any kind of conflict, I can just go and you all can keep on

with whatever freaky stuff you like to do in...” Nate looked around and saw the statues atop the surrounding mausoleums rise above the masked and hooded crowd, “Fucking cemeteries. We’re in a cemetery? Will someone talk to me, please? You’re making me feel like a ghost or something.”

“You wouldn’t know what that feels like,” the man with the horned headdress said. “You are at a funeral. Yours and of one Charles Stephens. Do you understand?”

“What?” Nate let out in panic, the memories of Sidney and Meredith rushing back to him.

“Do you understand that you are at a funeral?” The man repeated.

“Yeah, mine, I’m confused about that. Are you going to kill me?”

“No.”

“Then I remain confused.”

“You do not need to be dead to be interred.”

“That’s much clearer, thanks.” Nate said with as much sarcasm as he could muster, “Jesus Christ, you talk like you’re high or something. You always get fucked up before doing your job or what?”

“You and Charles Stephens are being sacrificed to Dagon, the God of fields and fertility, in penance for the fifteen years of negligence he suffered due to your selfish actions.”

“Okay, so here’s where I get confused again. There is no Dagon—” As soon as he said this the crowd screamed in unison and fell to the ground screaming and weeping and begging forgiveness to the sky. “Real dramatic, everybody! All I did was get you fucks in trouble for all this weird shit you’re up to. Don’t any of you go to church? This is clearly heresy and Bishop Callamazzo is going to be pissed when he finds his congregation out in the cemetery worshipping the cousin to the Golden Calf!”

The man now took off his hood and revealed himself to be a weeping Carl Stephens, “Nathan Silas, do you understand the crimes for which you have been convicted and the punishment that you will suffer?”

“Carl!” Nate said in recognition, “Carl, what is all of this? Come on, man, let me go! Let me go home! My parents will be worried, Carl!”

“It matters not whether or not you understand in the eyes of Dagon. We provide reasons only as a human courtesy. Take him to his final resting place!”

“What’s that now?” Four naked pallbearers came out of the crowd and picked up the stretcher that Nate had been tied to. They carried him through the hooting crowd “No! Carl! Stop this right

the fuck now! You don't believe in this shit, you're a scientist! A man of medicine! This isn't going to bring your boy home, Carl!"

The procession stopped and Carl said, "It's not supposed to bring Chuck back. He was the first sacrifice, you were both implicit in forcing us to neglect Dagon. His price has been paid. Now for you."

And then the bottom dropped out on Nate's world.

He felt like he was falling forever. He saw the people surrounding the grave and quickly passed them falling deeper into the hole. Knowing the typical depth of a grave, he kept anticipating hitting the bottom, but still he kept falling. The walls of the grave rushed past him and he strained against his bonds to try to reach out and grab a handful of dirt, anything to stop him from— And with a slam and a crack he hit the bottom. He gave out a yowl of pain and thought that maybe his wrist had broken in the fall. It was either that or one of the poles used to make the stretcher that he was still tied to.

The wind was knocked out of him when he hit the ground and so he coughed and hacked and his body shuddered in pain. When it subsided, he could no longer see any light from the top of the grave. The sun must have set and now he was laying at the bottom of some pit in perfect darkness waiting to die. "Hey!" He shouted and was surprised to hear the echo bark back several ey! Ey! Eys! So it was clear that he was also in some sort of cavern, which didn't make him feel

more comfortable at all. Instead it had a very weighty sort of feeling. All that nothingness between him and the dirt of his grave weighed more than all of the topsoil in Midland.

Then, out of the darkness came a sound, “Tisk, tisk, tisk.”

A coldness gripped Nate’s insides as he remembered the mocking tone by which his childhood friend used to chide him. Not knowing whether or not the sound had been real he called out to the darkness, “What the fuck was that?”

“Brer Rabbit finally got caught. Seems that even California isn’t far enough away to resist the call,” a voice said, Chuck’s voice.

“No fucking way,” Nate said, suddenly relieved. “Holy shit. I can’t believe I fell for this whole thing. Chuck, I swear to Christ, I thought that there was some sort of conspiracy going on in Midland, a fucking Death cult!” Nate struggled against the poles of the stretcher, trying to undo the knots, “I should have known you would put together some practical joke based on Lovecraft stories! What? You got bored so you wanted to torture your old friend one more time? I swear to god, this is the most amazing prank that—” suddenly most of the cavern lit up and he could see that the ground was covered in white bones, “Fuck! Oh, god, you got me again. What the hell is that light?”

“The midnight sun illuminates what I wish it to now,” Chuck said from the shadows.

“Man, that’s good. This whole thing has been a really excellent game and I appreciate it, really, even though you’re starting to piss me off a little. Hell, I think when I get back to L.A. I’m going to write an article about it. You’ll be california famous, not just Midland famous. Now, come on and untie me. I think I fucked up my wrist in the fall.”

“Do you know what happened to me after Terry disappeared?” Chuck asked.

“I dunno, Chuck, but I’m kind of a captive audience, so go on and tell me, but just keep that thing about my wrist in mind because it really smarts,” Nate said, trying his best at conviviality when he was still icy afraid and unsure of what was going to happen to him.

“Mom and dad sent me to prep school, you remember. They fucked me there. A group of some of the boys, they butt-fucked me in the showers as initiation. Then they did it as punishment. Then they did it to keep me in line. Then they did it because they wanted to. Years of this went on, Nate, years of it. No matter how much I complained, no one believed me. Especially not my parents, who insisted that I was just trying to come back to town to hang out with my low class friends like you and Sidney and Terry, if he was still around.

“You get fucking used to it after a while. And they get tired of doing it to you after a while too. But that first summer when I came back from school and you looked at me that way. You hated me, but I couldn’t tell you that I didn’t want to be there, I wanted to be back with you and Ashley and Angela and Terry and Sidney and Mary, but we never got a chance to talk. How would I have spoken of any of it?”

“This fundamental rift, this part of our lives where you hated me for leaving and I not being able to say anything to you, well, naturally, we grew apart. You eventually let your hatred color your whole view of this city, our hometown, and you fled. You ran away to the West Coast where you can wash those sorts of things away. Like it’s a public service.

“Me, well, this place was always where I was at peace. Midland was a perfect and beautiful home full of idyllic wonder and all through my schooling while I was abused, I studied as hard as I could so that I could do something that would end me up back in Midland. Maybe I could set my adult life there if I couldn’t set my adolescence there.

“I can imagine you saying that I could come back at any time, do anything, work at the gas station, work at the walgreens, but you know my family. There was no way that I could come back unless I found a way to be part of the gentry here. You know I tried? After I had my breakdown at the end of my undergraduate, I came home and worked at the Shell station. You might have an idea of how miserable that might have been. My parents wouldn’t talk to me. No one would. It was like I was dead. I lived like a ghost for three months. People I knew who came into the station would act like they had no idea who I was. My parents let me live in my old room, but no one spoke to me, there was never a table setting put out for me, I ate out of the refrigerator, out of the pantry. It was only when I went back to Harvard when they would pick up my phone calls and allow me back at Christmastime and oh how proud of me they were then.

“I was trapped into a path. A path predetermined by the momentum of my family. At first I hated it and it caused me to nearly come undone, but after a while, I accepted it. I decided that while I had not chosen this life, it was a fine life to lead anyway. A worthy life. In fact, if I did not lead the life for which I had been born, it would have been an insult to everyone in the world who aspired to a higher station, but would never be able to. I accepted my privilege and continued to pursue my medical career. Eventually, of course, you remember, I started my practice here, in Midland. Soon after, I decided to write my book. I sent a copy of it to you through my publisher, who then reported that a Mr. Silas responded, ‘If I wanted to read *The World According to Garp* written by Dorian Gray, I would have written it myself and it would have been funny.’ End quote. I admit, Nate, you made me laugh with your characterization of my novel. It really was my genuine explanation of why I had chosen the life that I did, but I could see that you didn’t understand. In your own way, you understood your own privilege and became a West Coast liberal, but I didn’t have that sort of opportunity. I had to speak in code.

“You think that I left you, but I never did. I always considered you my friend and was so pained to think that you didn’t think the same of me. I never wanted you to congratulate me on my achievements, on my M.D. on my novel, I just wanted you to see your old friend who you saved that fateful afternoon of the storm. I wanted you to see that scared boy who was so grateful to have a friend who had enough of a head to get us both through such a deadly fracas. Do you remember that afternoon in the steel pipe? Waiting for the water to rise? It never did, as you predicted, the storm was flooding the other creek six blocks away, but not the one we were ranging about that day. We would have died if we had left and tried to run for home, but instead we stayed and that funnel just tossed us less than ten feet and left us be.

“Nate, I never cared about any of the accolades, none of the degrees, none of the money, all I ever knew was that we were friends and I always wanted that back. But you know how it is. The accoutrement of adulthood obviates any real connection, even if it is one from the purity of childhood.

“They killed me last week, Nate, for what we did. We got a little bit too close in our lie about what happened to Terry and you know what the bitch of it is, Nate? My father always knew. He set me on the path, he was that momentum that drove me away from you and Angela and Sidney and all of you guys, he drove me to become something that could be bartered for so that the town could be saved. Here I am. In this pit. The treasure that saves the town, I suppose. You and I. I just wanted you to know that you were always my friend and that I’m sorry that whatever animosity grew between us ever did. I blame it on them. The fucking Soybean Social Club!”

Nate remained silent, but tears streamed down his face, “This whole time. I was so mad at you.”

“I know,” Chuck said.

“Chuck, I have a terrible thing to tell you.” Nate said.

“Tell me. We have time,” Chuck said.

“I fucked your wife. In San Diego right before you two were to be married,” Nate said haltingly.

“I know, Nate,” Chuck said and then stepped into the light. He was like an evaporated human, the skin clinged to his bones still he stood. His dick was but a dried and stiff appendage that stuck out from beneath the t-shirt that he wore, a “Git r dun” crop top which hid his horribly shrunken middle section, but still he had a full and bulging belly. His hair had grown in death and on his head it was stringy and cast everywhere. His cheeks were caved in and a little bit of his tongue stuck out when he was not talking. His eyes bulged from his skull and bled thick black tears onto his face. Nate screamed until his breath was done and then the look of terror only remained as he gasped for breath. Nate lost consciousness.

Fifty-Two

When Nate came to, he seemed more able to confront the horror before him, “Oh Christ! Please, Chuck! Let me go!”

“Nate, Nate, please be quiet. You’ll hasten his arrival. He’s waiting for both of us to be here.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Dagon. He’s going to come here to eat our souls. It’s part of the path. I’m sorry that you got involved in it, but that’s what’s going to happen. We’re just waiting. Let’s make our peace.”

“I am sorry that I fucked Mary, Chuck,” Nate said.

“Don’t worry about it, Nate,” Chuck said. “She was unfortunately caught in the momentum of my fate as well. I’m just happy she doesn’t have to get sacrificed as well.”

“No,” Nate clarified, “I’m sorry because I fucked her just because I thought it would make you mad if you ever found out. It’s a little violence I perpetrated against you. Hell, it’s a violence I committed against Mary too.”

“I’m sure she would forgive you, Nate.”

“I’m not sure if she should.”

The two old friends were silent in the dimly lit cavern beneath their gravestone waiting for the supernatural evil to come by and take them away. Neither could think of anything to say because their presence there spoke volumes. Ultimate forgiveness has no sound, no key phrase. The awareness of their own end was enough.

“Hey, Chuck, I’ve got an idea.”

“An idea?”

“Yeah, I think that we should get out of here before Dagon or whatever comes here.”

“There’s no escape.”

“See, now I think that you think that because you’re dead and because you’ve committed yourself to what you’ve termed “the momentum of your life”. I think, if we can, we can get out of here.”

“How?”

“How deep is the grave?”

“Infinite.”

“See, again, I see you committing to the path set out for you. How about you break away from that and maybe, just maybe, we can escape.”

“But how? We’re at the bottom of an oubliette.”

“An oubliette’s got an out, right? It’s the top!”

“Come on, Chuck, untie me and we can maybe use this stretcher to get us the both out of here.”

Chuck came over and untied the binds of the stretcher and Nate was able to stand.

“What are we going to do with this?” Chuck said.

“Okay, so I fell with the stretcher the whole way down one way, but if we turn the poles ninety degrees and use them to climb, maybe we can get out of the grave.”

“Okay, so you’ll have to stand on my shoulders and set the first pole into the dirt at an angle. You then lean on the top of that one and I’ll hand the new one to you—”

“I’ll set that one and you will climb over me to lean at the top of that one and I’ll take the bottom one and use your pole to set the next one. On and on until we reach the top!”

By this method, and with a great deal of difficulty, the two friends proceeded up the grave. Near the top the poles didn’t hold as they had lower down and slipped out of their positions. So close to the top, it became clear that one could escape, but only with the boost of the other.

“Chuck, push me up. When I’m up there, I’ll pull you up,” Nate shouted desperately.

“No, Nate,” Chuck said calmly. “When you get out, you run. You run back to whatever you have and don’t look back. Don’t look back on this cursed place. Don’t look back for me, I’m already dead.”

The already compromised pole started to snap and Nate jumped and grabbed for the lip of the grave, pulling and kicking himself up onto the land while he heard the clattering of the poles and his friend fall into the pit.

There was no one at the top and as Nate pulled himself to safety, muddy and exhausted, he turned back and yelled back into the hole, “Thanks Chuck! You were a good friend!”

Nate started running before he heard the echo of “rend, rend, end.”

Fifty-Three

Nate slid down the slick of mud that had been excavated for his grave and tried to gain traction on the gravel, but it only made him fall over and over. When he got to the wet grass he was still flailing so desperately that he nearly pulled a muscle trying to keep his feet from going akimbo.

It was fortunate that no one of the burial party remained near the grave site. Nate finally made it to the macadam road that wound through the graveyard and was able to properly move. Instead of running, he decided to make his way out of the cemetery with a half-galloping walking run.

This way, he reasoned, he would not look too conspicuous. However, anyone who was not being pursued by a death cult might be able to recognize this thought as being unreasonable. There was no way that a cop could put his or her spotlight on Nate and not arrest him. He was wild eyed and his hair disheveled and muddy. His jacket was long gone and his tie was pulled nearly off his neck. His slacks had decided to give out and split down the crease so his leg kicked right out of it every time he took a step, which exposed his socks rolled up to the tops of his shoes. He did not look like he was out for a little bit of twilight exercise.

Aware of this, he started to look for somewhere to hide and regroup. Surely, no one would know that he had escaped his grave unless he somehow gave himself away. So, he half-ran-half-jogged

out of the cemetery, down to the stoplight and cautiously, inconspicuously crossed the street. Once across the street he cut across an enormous front lawn and into the alleyway behind. The entire time he was looking at the windows for a silhouette or anything that might indicate someone watching, but he saw nothing. Once in the alley, it was relatively easy to stay hidden as most people had wooden fences that separated their yards from the alleys as well as from each others' yards. Nate dodged from trash can to dumpster to derelict car to shed looking around paranoid, sweating profusely in the early fall evening. It reminded him of the late evening hide and go seek games that he and the gang used to play when they were children. The ones that covered entire blocks and required the use of walkie talkies and chalk clues written on strangers' driveways.

He crossed three blocks following the alleyway before he started to recognize where he was, he was near the old Midland High School.

Midland High School was constructed as a preparatory academy sometime in the 1850s, just before the civil war broke out to prepare the city's young men to go to the best of the best colleges out east. When the war came and took all the young men into the meat grinder, the school became all ages and even accepted women, competing with the local convent much to their dismay. When the war ended, there happened to be quite a lot of dead men who could be recovered from the fields of Chickamauga, Manassas, Gettysburg and returned to their ancestral home of Midland. These men were buried on a plot immediately adjacent to the Midland High School.

Some forty years later, the school still known as Midland Academy, hired a somewhat mentally unstable man by the name of Jules Hollingsworth. He taught arithmetic, but always expressed an interest in teaching chemistry, which was a hobby of his. He was somewhat famous in town for setting his barn on fire a number of times while conducting “experiments”. One year, he found out that his wife had been having an affair with the chemistry teacher at Midland Academy and decided that the best course of action was to burn the place down. He spent several quiet days preparing for his massacre and on April 6, 1905, while school was in session, he brought his wife and children to the school to have lunch with the rest of the students in the cafeteria there. This wasn’t particularly unusual and didn’t raise any alarms. Survivors of the event commented how calm and seemingly happy Mr. Hollingsworth was as he walked to the cellar door, lit a kerosene bomb produced from inside his coat and then threw it in. No one can really know what he intended the effect to be, whether he simply wanted a slow and agonizing burn as he indicated in his journals in the days leading up to the incident or the unbelievable cacophonous explosion that was the result of his stacking of many different types of explosive near the building’s boiler. Anyway, the resulting explosion rent the building into a million pieces and scattered them near and far over the southwestern quarter of the downtown area. Wooden splinters and chunks of brick broke windows for a hundred yards around. The resulting shockwave was attributed two deaths in the following weeks when a couple of old women in the nearby hospital complained about a sharp pain in their ears just before passing. The entire building was completely flattened and a vast majority of the school’s faculty and students were killed. Thus, the Midland school year of 1904 to 1905 is historically a somewhat incomplete year. The following year a new school was built on the other side of the center of town. Also known as Midland High School at the time, it is currently known as Central High School. This is because the original Midland high

school was rebuilt in the 1920s. Now, a modern observer might think it a little strange and even a bit blasphemous that a school might be built on top of such a horrific massacre, but the real mystery is the fact that the town decided to not only bury the 206 children between the ages of six and 16 as well as the 50 adults who died in the blast right next to the fallen Union soldiers in the Midland High School plot and then build a modern Art Deco style high school on top of the whole mess. Now, if asked, the city planner of Midland city will tell you that the bodies were removed from their original resting places and relocated to graves in the nearby Alderwood National Memorial Cemetery, but that seems to make little difference. Indeed it sounds a bit absurd that that should be a satisfying excuse.

The fact is that Nate found the door to the Midland City High School to be very open when he tried it. The reason why the doors were often unlocked was because it was a local belief that the building and the property was haunted. Nate was just trying to find somewhere to hide and considering he was in the familiar space of his former high school, he decided to climb the five stories of stairs to the art room on the top of the building. Here he had been most comfortable. Here he'd had his first kiss. Here, he also knew, he could hide and make a phone call undisturbed.

He decided to call his parents, at their home phone. His mother answered, "Nate, honey, I'm surprised you're still in town. Did you make it to Chuck's funeral? Do you want to come over for dinner?"

“Mom! There’s something really fucked up going on around here,” Nate panted. “I was at Chuck’s funeral, they tried to throw me into the grave with him! I mean, they succeeded, like, I was in the grave with Chuck, mom!”

“Hey,” Nate’s father said as he picked up the other phone line in his office, “You coming to dinner? We’ve got a place set for you.”

“Dad, there are people in this town, people like Carl Stephens, who are trying to kill me. They tried to bury me with their son, who, by the way is some sort of undead wraith.”

“What do you mean?” Henry said, calmly curious.

“I mean I saw Chuck, I talked to him even though he’s dead. He’s definitely dead and he helped me escape and now I’m trying to get the fuck out of town because I’m pretty sure that once these people figure out I’m not dead, they’re going to want to take me back to Chuck’s grave and put me in there permanently.”

“Who are these people, Nate?” Henry said, again calm.

“I dunno, Carl Stephens, I don’t know who else was there, they were all dressed up for some satanic cult.”

“Oh yeah, that’d be the Soybean Social Club again. That’s why I don’t like to get involved in their business,” Henry said.

“Honey, should I put a place out for you? Dinner’s going to be ready in twenty minutes or so—” Florence Silas said.

“Mom!” Nate barked, “I’m on the fucking run! I’m trying to get away from these people who are trying to kill me. This is a very important fact, mom! Why don’t you care? Dad, why are you acting like this is some sort of after church event?”

“That’s just how it is around here, son. Flo, what are we having? I smell sausages,” Henry said.

‘Bratwurst and sauerkraut, your favorite. I wish you would get out of your study on Sundays. You act like you’ve been buried in a crypt,’ Florence said over the phone.

“You both sound like you’ve been in a crypt! I’m trying to tell you that our neighbors, the people we know in Midland are trying to bury me alive,” Nate shouted over the phone.

“Nate, don’t shout at your mother,” Henry said.

“You know how it is around here, Nate. Those people rule the social scene here. They decide to be done with you, well, they’re done with you.”

“Mom, how could you say that? That means I’m dead. They’ll kill me. Are... Are you one of them?”

“You know me, honey, I never did too well with the cliques around here. Now are you going to come over for dinner or what? Carl Stephens has been waiting in our den to talk to you.”

“Mom! Get out! Get out while you can, he’s dangerous! He’s part of the cult, he’s trying to kill me! Why don’t you listen?” Nate was weeping now.

Quietly, calmly, Henry Silas said, “Son, your mother and I have nothing to fear from Mr. Stephens. You don’t have to be afraid of him either. He’s only here to make things right. You want to set things right, don’t you?”

Nate was shocked into silence. The electronic gap between father and mother and son hummed in his head with the adrenaline in his ears. The world became terribly silent like when he fell in the grave.

Then a new voice on the phone, unidentifiable and wicked, “You want to set right the things that you did, don’t you?”

Nate mashed the hang up button on his cell phone and sat there in the dark silence of the Midland City High School’s art room. Various hanging sculptures of papier mache hung from the high ceiling and twisted gently in the mild draft. Nate tried to calm his breath, to breathe

normally again, but he was still huffing and puffing like he had been running. He held his breath and consciously tried to slow his breathing. The years of yoga and meditation with various girlfriends helped here. He was able to calm himself and notice his breathing for a couple of minutes in the large wooden cocoon of the old room. The geometric stained glass of the windows was momentarily reassuring as he remembered his high school days staring, lazily, out of the window at the low skyline of Midland.

The sound of hard soles on varnished wood awoke him from his reverie. Sweat beaded on his forehead and dripped down his nose, but he dare not wipe it away. He held himself as still as he could and tried not to breathe. His ears strained at the sound of the approaching steps and wondered if he would have to assault whoever was coming around the corner. Nate leaned over to see who might enter the main classroom, but when the shoes turned and stopped, Nate saw nothing. Perhaps, he thought, he was mistaken. Maybe this person had just stopped in the hall. But then a voice intoned, “Mr. Silas!” And Nate took off. Pushing tables and desks and chairs out of the way, he made it to the back entrance to the classroom and exploded from the door. However, he hadn’t taken three strides before he felt like he’d hit a wall. But there was nothing there.

At least he thought there was nothing there, when he looked up again, he saw a large man with greasy black hair and a three-piece suit replete with spats secured around his dark black shoes. The man reached down and pulled Nate to his feet. “Mr. Silas! Do you have any reason to be at this school after hours?”

“Look, man, I just need a place to stay for the night. I’ll be out in the morning and you won’t ever see me again,” Nate said.

“Mr. Silas!” the man boomed again, “You have not answered my question!”

“No,” Nate said shaking his head uselessly, “No I haven’t got any reason to be in the school after hours.”

“No extra work, no extra curriculars, no detention or volunteer work to be done?”

Nate looked at the man strangely. The man spoke with perfect diction, and stared with great big dark eyes, but no matter what Nate did he couldn’t quite meet the man’s gaze. “No, man, I’m not even a student.”

“Then we’ve no choice but to evict you from the premises, Mr. Silas!” the man bellowed and dragged Nate over towards the staircase, the report of his hard soled shoes echoing in the empty spaces of the school.

“Please, man, don’t throw me down the stairs! I’ll just walk out of here, you don’t have to throw me down the stairs!” Nate pleaded, but when the man chucked him down the stairs, he was surprised to find that he didn’t tumble down the steps. Strangely, several dozen hands grabbed hold of him and started to pass him down like he was crowd surfing.

Nate made the mistake of looking down and seeing the sea of mutilated ghosts waiting in the stairwells and hallways hands lifted to the sky in anticipation of carrying Nathan Silas out of the building. He screamed. He screamed unselfconsciously, not caring if it gave him away. The decaying faces and hands that he saw were too terrifying to bear and he thought that his heart would give way, but then he began to choke as he was so busy screaming that he'd forgotten to breathe.

Hyperventilating now, he could hear that some of the apparitions were saying things to him as they passed him along down the hall. Some of them were ghostly and glowed in the moonlight streaming in through the windows, green and blue and yellow. Others looked like regular people aside from missing limbs, torn and muddy clothing, gruesome wounds. They packed the staircases from bannister to bannister and huddled together in the hallways, each of which seemed to have something to say to Nate.

“Tell Veronica that I didn’t leave, I didn’t leave!” A man gurgled, his jaw missing and his tongue hanging down by his Adam’s apple.

“Do you really think you can get away? Do you really think you’re better than us?” An ancient glowing woman said, she gripped his wrist with her icy hand as Nate passed over her.

“When’s he coming down, d’ya think?” A boy cried out to the adults surrounding him, tugging at their clothing and trying to catch their attention. The half of the boy’s face was burned, that side of his head hairless. “When do you think they’ll get him?”

“No, don’t hand me over to them!” Nate pleaded, but the crowd of the undead just laughed, “Seriously, you may have been taken in by them, killed by them, but you can fight against them by freeing me!”

“Nice try, kid, but you just wait. You’ll see. When you die, most of your problems will disappear, but there’s still something to be afraid of. Hiding in the dark corners of impossible geometries, there are things to be afraid of in death and none of us want to fight against that.” An anonymous voice said from somewhere above Nate.

“This can’t even be possible! I don’t believe in any of this! I don’t believe in ghosts or the afterworld or any of this shit!” Nate defied the crowd who laughed again.

“Oh, you cute little pseudo-intellectual you,” Mrs. Hague, Nate’s middle school math teacher, eyes dead and gone milky from the decay of death, appeared on his right trying to keep up with the crowd that pulled him farther and farther into the school. “You think you can make your reality with your beliefs. You tried to do that with me too, Nate! But like I told you then, you can’t simply believe there’s no such thing as algebra and get away with it!”

The crowd had become a roiling sea of faces and hands and Nate was slapped and banged up against the walls of the hallways, tossed from bannisters into the ocean of death below. It seemed that every single bit of floor space in the school was occupied by some ghostly thing.

“What in the hell are you talking about, you old hag!” Nate shouted over the din to Mrs. Hague.
“Ghosts are nothing like algebra.”

The sea of dead soon had him in the lobby and it looked like he was going to get ejected, quite literally and forcefully, from the front door. However, as he got closer, he saw that there was a single glowing yellow figure hovering by the front door. As he got closer, he realized who the figure was. It was his childhood friend, Terry, dressed exactly like the day that he had disappeared. “Terry!”

“Go back to the grave, Nate.” Terry said and opened the front door of the school. “There is no use in running or avoiding the inevitable. They will someday hold all of our souls. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Terry! I’ve got to try! I’ve got to try, Terry! Don’t you remember? Remember being human!”

And with that, Nate was unceremoniously cast through the front door of the Midland Central High School. He rolled down the ten or so steps there and came to a stop at the bottom hyperventilating and scrambling to get up. He frantically tried to get his hair out of his face so that he could see if anyone was coming through the door for him, but instead all he saw was the open wooden door and perfect silent darkness within it. Terry stepped out of the darkness to take hold of the doorknob, “Remembering is all I do here, Nate. One day it’ll be all you do too.”

Fifty-Four

Nate hobbled through peoples' front lawns so that in case he had to hide from a passing car, he could leap into their bushes or hide in the crawl spaces beneath their houses. He came to an intersection and had to quickly hide in a small hedge because a group of robed people carrying actual torches and pistols were crossing his path. Nate thought that they were chanting something, but couldn't make out a discernible pattern. He watched them pass and monitored them as they moved down the street. Meanwhile, he looked in all the other directions hoping that there wasn't a similar party coming to surprise him. Fortunately, there wasn't, so he headed on. His plan was to reach his parent's house where he could borrow their car and go somewhere. Anywhere. Where would he go? How far would he have to travel to get away from the cult, to find people sufficiently powerful enough and willing to believe Nate's story to protect him? How far would he have to run to hide? Well, the answer came to him just as he saw another group of cultists coming down the other side of the street.

He hid behind a big sign on the corner of the intersection, one of those brick structures that names the neighborhood Oak Garden or Maple Grove or some other generic thing. He watched the cultists pass and listened to their odd ranting, trying to discern what they were saying, but getting nowhere. One guy in this group was carrying a hunting rifle. Nate hoped that the guy was a bad shot. It was here that Nate formulated the rest of his plan. He would get his parent's car and drive to the only place that he knows is big enough for him to hide: Los Angeles. He'd simply go home! Nobody ever bothered him in Los Feliz. Nobody even knew who he was in Los Feliz! He'd go back to his old life and things would go back to normal and he would never, ever,

ever come back to Midland as long as he ever lived and maybe his exile would be enough to satisfy these freaks.

“Well if it isn’t Nathan Silas,” A woman’s voice said behind him. He turned around and saw Lisa Parker walking a Maltese that he’d never seen before. She was smoking a long thin cigarette and holding the dog leash with one hand. She swung a tumbler full of ice and liquor in her free hand and her sharp, cruel eyes shone out, alive and severe from her heavily mascaraed eyes.

“How the fuck is it that I find you on my fucking property after, how long has it been? Fourteen years?”

“Lisa, Lisa,” Nate was in pleading mode again. “Lisa, I’m in trouble.”

“You had better bet you are, you shithead,” Lisa spat.

“No, Lisa, listen to me. There are people in this town that want to hurt me,” Nate said. “These are really bad folks. Satanists, I’m not kidding.”

“You think I give a fuck about Satanists, Nate Silas?” Lisa shouted and threw her cigarette at Nate, who winced and tried to stay hidden although anyone with any sense would have been able to tell this woman was yelling at someone and not a corner sign. “You think God gives a fuck about me after the abortion? The abortion that you made me get? You think that I give a fuck about God after he takes away my ability to have children after the fucking abortion, Nathan fucking Silas!”

“Lisa, please keep your voice down,” Nate pleaded. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know any of that!”

“You knew damn well that I was pregnant,” Lisa snapped. “That’s why you ran off to L.A. Then what was I supposed to do? Raise the kid on my own? Then I remembered something you had said, something about how it would be better to abort the kid than ensure he or she’s got a shitty life to look forward to.”

“Lisa, I had no idea that it was like that, I thought you would give the kid up for adoption like you said you would have. I thought you were against terminating pregnancies.”

“Abortion!” Lisa screamed, “Abortion! Say it, you coward, say the word Abortion!”

“Abortion! Damn, Lisa, I didn’t know! I thought you were against abortions,” Nate rasped.

“I thought I was still in love with you. I thought you had something to offer, that you were something important. I thought you would come back, that you would write for me when you got settled, but it became apparent early on that you cut and run. You were done.”

“It isn’t like that, Lisa,” Nate tried to reason, but stopped speaking because it was *exactly* like that.

“I was weak then, Nate. But now I’ve got the upper hand.”

“No!” Nate exclaimed and began to run.

The dog started barking and Lisa shouted at the group of cultists, “Hey! Over here! Over here, he’s trying to get away! He’s running down Alder Street!”

Nate ran as fast as he could down the brick paved street. Occasionally he would look over his shoulder to watch the progress of the cultists. One paused in the middle of the street and raised his hunting rifle. Nate zig-zagged instinctively and held his hands above his head. The bullet obliterated one of the bricks in the street.

Nate looked back again to see the man with the rifle re-loading. Lisa was standing on the corner with her arms crossed and a smug look on her face. The dog yapping at her feet. One of the cultists walking past her lifted up his arm and the sleeve of his cloak became a canvas for the moon and the branches of the weeping willows of that neighborhood to conspire a painting from which extended a gun. A clap resounded throughout the neighborhood and Lisa collapsed. The man followed up by shooting the dog. Nate fell in between a van and an old Geo Metro. The cultists were quickly moving up the street, spread out and checking the dark corners by the bushes and houses, guns extended. Nate tried to suppress his nausea, the sudden and violent end of his one time girlfriend made his mind reel. Nate wondered if they were going to shoot him here in the street or if they were going to try to throw him back in the grave with Chuck alive.

Nate decided that they would have to kill him before they threw him back in the grave, but he wasn't done running yet.

Fifty-Five

Nate's mind raced for the next place to escape, but his mental map of the area was scrambled. He couldn't quite figure out where he was. Then, he remembered, anywhere west of this stretch of Alder would eventually lead to the park. He could lose the cultists through the park and make his way closer to his parents place. Fear gripping his legs and arms, he flung himself from behind the parked vehicles and across someone's yard, leaping over the fence leading to their back yard he heard another crack and the sound of the fence collapsing underneath him from where the bullet had destroyed the aged wood. He picked himself up and began to run again, the game being to hop fences as quickly as possible. Never being much of an athlete or a hurdles jumper, he more just threw himself over the short wooden fences of this neighborhood. He tried to zig zag between houses to lose his hunters and by the time he was running across Park Boulevard and into the woods, there was no sign of his pursuers.

Here, in the forest, he was able to slow down some. He found a trail that looked familiar enough and followed it south. He knew he had about a mile to walk before he should cut out of the woods and make his way back to Alder Road.

It was dark and peaceful on the park pathway. Nate was reminded of moving covertly through these woods as a teenager, the deafening song of cicadas just after the sunset, the dim lightning bugs that illuminated nothing, but if you looked at the darkness the right way you could see a

moving figure blot out the bugs. The moon must have gone behind some serious cloud cover because it was deadly dark in the woods. Nate trudged through the trail carelessly snapping twigs and splashing through puddles, either too exhausted or disinterested to make sure that he didn't leave a trail.

He'd been walking maybe five minutes when he decided that he would cut out of the woods and see which cross street he was nearest to. He walked out of the woods and into a cool dark field that curved up to the street. During the April rains, this area would flood. During the January snowstorms they would bomb the hills on rickety toboggans, flimsy garbage bin lids. He climbed up the hill just far enough to nearly lose his footing, but enough to see that he was only at Birch, he had maybe another mile to walk. It made sense for him to go back to the trail and try to stay concealed that way instead of following the roads, which were almost certainly being monitored by at least that one group with the hunting rifle.

Nate marched back into the woods noticing that the moon was starting to come out of its cloud cover and illuminate the densely packed trees. Nate made his way onto the trail and started walking down it, but then paused. There was a silhouette in the distance, against the trees. Just barely visible, fireflies disappeared and then re-appeared on the other side, oblivious to their treachery. Nate crouched down and stayed still. He hoped that it was a dog or a cat or a stump or something. He waited for the moon to reveal what the thing was. He stared at it intensely, trying futilely to slow his breathing, to stop sweating in the the humid late summer. He stared the thing down. He stared it right into the dim light of the moon and when it became apparent what the thing was it spoke to him.

“Hello Nate,” Angela said and stood up. She was holding a semi-automatic pistol with two hands, like the Police are taught to hold a pistol.

“You stay the hell away from me,” Nate said and got ready to run for the street. “I’m going to guess that you’re a part of this whole fucking charade and I’m not having it. Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you tell me that this was happening?”

“I told you that you should go home, Nate. You didn’t want to listen to me,” Angela said calmly.

“Well, Angela! You seem to have left out a few details that I think might have aided in my decision to leave,” Nate’s voice was wavering now, he could feel the hot sting of tears in his eyes. The sensation of betrayal flowed through him and shook his hands with a hateful electricity. “You know, you told me to go and visit Lisa, well I didn’t really want to, let me tell you. I knew that conversation wouldn’t go well, but I ran into her anyway. You know what your friends did? They shot her in the fucking head. They shot her fucking dog too, Angela! Did you know that? Is that the kind of crew you’re hanging with these days?”

“You know I’m an empathetic person, Nate. These tragedies don’t pass me by, I’m haunted by them. Terry, Meredith, Chuck, Lisa—”

“The fuck happened to Meredith?” Nate turned around and in the distant darkness saw the movement of flashlights. This was all a trap.

“You know what happened to Meredith. You know that they can’t leave any loose ends,” Angela said soothingly. “This is the way of the world. People die. It is the plan of powers that are greater than ourselves.”

“This is a perversion of Christianity and you know it,” Nate said, trying to guilt Angela into admitting her own heresy.

Angela laughed, “Nate, this is the right religion. Do you think that Jesus Christ is going to come down from the sky and save you right now?”

“No, but not because of... I’m... uh, no, I guess not.”

“No.” Angela holstered her gun and walked over to Nate, “But after tonight, do you have any doubt that Dagon will rise up from the dark places in the universe and eat your soul?”

“What is this, Angela? This can’t be real.”

“It is. The horrible truth is that it all goes back to the beginning, that our lives are only as They deem they should be. That none of us can escape their prying eyes, nor can we escape the fates that they have written for us. We can only hope to appease them and thereby live happy uneventful lives.”

“It isn’t like this in California, Angela.”

“Oh, it is. The thing is that nobody cares about you out there.” Angela took a deep breath and hugged Nate, “They care a little too much for you out here.”

Nate didn’t hug Angela back, “I don’t want to go in the hole, Angela.”

“Nobody does,” Angela pulled away and wiped a tear from her eye. “Okay, Nate, you run that way. I’ll distract them down this way. It should give you some time to get away. I won’t stop you from running away.”

Angela started to jog away, but then stopped and turned around at about ten feet, “Well? Are you going to run or not?”

Fifty-Six

Nate took the hint and started to sprint down the trail towards his parents house. After he felt he had run long enough, he started to look for an exit to the forest. He climbed among the trees to the field that abutted the road, but he stopped short and hid behind a stand of trees. Something was travelling down Park Boulevard very slowly, lights flashing in all directions. Just then, he heard the sound of a gunshot from further inside the park, which made him feel like running out in front of the creeping vehicle. It took all his strength to stay where he was. He watched the thing pass by. It was something like a parade float, but surrounded by cloaked cultists waving flashlights everywhere. The float, which was really a truck with an extraordinarily large bed

lurched down the road unevenly. In the bed of the truck was something that looked like a pile of tires and greasy rags, but it *moved*. It seemed to move in and out of itself something like a slug. It telescoped to its greatest length over the cab of the truck and dragging some of itself behind. Appendages flew out wildly sometimes knocking cultists down, who paid it no mind and simply got back to the work of finding Nate. The thing frightened Nate greatly and he imagined being trapped in the hole with it. He realized that even death would not separate him from that thing. It would find him. Right now, on the back of that truck it was slipping in and out of reality at will. It existed in all realities simultaneously and its horrific form was that of a creature that could exercise its will over eternity. Christian tradition had always implied that to look upon the face of God would be too much, it would spell death for the perceiver, but here he was presented with an honest to goodness god who did not kill him instantly, but did make him piss himself.

Fifty-Seven

He waited for the thing to pass and then ran as fast as he could across the street and into the alleyway that would lead to his parent's place at Alder Road.

Suspecting that his parents had been brainwashed, he carefully made his way across his old backyard and up to the back porch. He silently let himself in to the house to find three table settings out. The kitchen counter had a tray of sausages on it and a bowl of sauerkraut next to it. A variety of chips and potato salad was set out as well and welcomed any visitor to dig in if they so cared, but Nate wasn't here to eat his parents' comfort food, he was here to get the three of them out of town. No longer was he okay with leaving his folks behind, whether they were hypnotized or not, he wasn't going to leave them in Midland.

He wandered about the house carefully. He didn't want to disturb any hiding cultists and catch a blunt object to the head. But everywhere he went, he only found the typical scene. His and Mitchell's rooms were as they were when they left at 18, save an elliptical machine in Mitchell's room and an easel in Nate's. His father's study had the usual scattering of books across every available surface, bookstore receipts tacked to the hanging calendar. The living room was cosily lit by art-deco style lamps and the television hummed gently by the window.

"Ma, Dad?" Nate said quietly down the hallways and up the staircase. "Ma?" He said to the couches. "Dad?" he said to the refrigerator.

There was only one place left to look, which was the cellar. He hated it down there. He stood at the top of the stairs and meekly, "Ma? Dad?" And then started to walk down. At the bottom of the stairs, he tried the light switch, but it didn't work. Possibly because a fuse had blown or his father hadn't replaced the bulb in a while. Instead, he grabbed a flashlight from the basket below the light switch and turned it on. Fear crept into his throat and cracked it dry as he swept the light across the unfinished basement. Every dark shadow threatening some horror or another. A hiding cultist, an otherworldly demon, a motionless leg, a pool of blood. He swept the light from shadow to shadow illuminating nothing but stacks of books, boxes full of toys or ornaments, construction equipment, relics and skeletons of hobbies long past.

Satisfied that the basement held no secrets that Nate couldn't handle, he decided that it was time to go. He made his way for the staircase and ascended it feeling a little silly for thinking that there were ghosts in such an obvious place. It was also apparent that his parents were gone.

Wherever they had gone, he'd get ahold of them from the road. It wasn't safe to stay in one place for too long. At the top of the steps, he grabbed the keys to his father's Jimmy and turned to open the garage door, which was right next to the basement door.

He opened the door and turned on the light and immediately threw himself to the concrete floor.

There, hanging from the rafters of the garage where his mother's Cadillac was normally parked, were his parents. Henry and Florence, who days ago had seemed so alive and who earlier in the day had been presumably alive were now definitely dead and swinging in the light draft from the crack in the bottom left corner of the garage door.

Nate wailed and cried. He pounded the ground and slammed his head. "No! Nooo!" he shouted, forgetting that he was on the run from *the entire town*. After a few minutes, the wailing on top of the seeming hours of running had finally gotten to him and he lay on his side exhausted, weakly muttering, "No, noo."

Tears streaming down his face, he looked up at his parents and said, "Why'd you do it? Why did you do it now? Were you brainwashed or something?" Nate felt sick looking at the bloated blue faces of his parents as they swung in the dim garage light. Their tongues stuck out grossly, their toes pointed down with nothing to hold them, their arms hung uselessly at their sides. Nate vomited.

"Why did you do this?" Nate shouted gasping from the effort of vomiting.

“Hey, big tip, kid. We didn’t get ourselves up here,” Hank said. Suddenly Nate’s father’s face was looking right at him and the man’s jaws were working in a grotesque imitation of normal human speech.

Nate screamed until his voice gave out and all that came out was a thin “Hhhhhhhhh!”

“Okay,” His mother intoned as she spun around lazily by her neck, “If you’re finished making all that racket, maybe you’ll listen to your parents for once?”

Nate was in no mood for his mother’s mock chiding. He stared at her in disbelief and the vision at the edges of his eyes grew dark. He huffed and he puffed, but he could not speak a word.

“What I’m saying, son, is that you should look below us,” Henry said and gestured down with his eyes, “No stool, no table, no nothing. What does that tell you?”

Nate started to get his bearings at his parent’s stern language, “Uh, well, that would mean that whatever held you up for your neck to be fitted in the noose is missing. Also, since it’s unlikely that either of you removed the items used to get you up there and there doesn’t seem to be any available pulley system to yank you up there... You were murdered!”

“Bingo!” Florence shouted and clapped her hands.

“That’s my boy,” Henry said. “Look kid, you should get out of dodge. This town has gone to shit over the years. You really should have stayed in California and I really blame myself for not telling you to stay put.”

“Don’t you lay all that blame on yourself, Henry!” Florence said, swinging away from Henry, “I should have called him and told him the whole story after the stupid memorial and we’d all have come out of this a little happier.”

As Florence swung around again, Henry held his hand out and caught hers. There in the garage, Nate’s dead parents held hands and had a perfectly normal conversation.

“I suppose we both fucked up a bit, Hon,” Henry said. “But we can do right by Nate here.”

“Things happen, but we’ve got to make sure that Nate gets out of town.”

“Okay, son,” Henry said, “You’re going to have to drive pretty aggressively to get out of Midland right now. They probably have a bunch of blockades up throughout town and most of the residents all doped up. The Jimmy’s gassed up and your best chance is to drive all the way down south to Our Lady of the Grasses church.”

“Dad, they don’t give a damn about churches. I’m not going to be able to hide in one. Meredith was a nun and they fucking killed her!” Nate interjected.

“I didn’t say stop at the church, son! Damn, the boy never listens to me,” Henry said.

“Sounds like someone I know,” Florence said cattily.

“What you need to do is take a right at the church and a hundred yards after take a left into the soybean field. Drive until you get to the state highway.”

“Do you think the Jimmy’ll make it through the field? That’s a pretty rough ride,” Nate said.

“It’s going to have to do, son.”

“Nate! Get going, they’re almost here! I can feel them,” Florence shouted.

Nate picked up the keys and flashlight and leapt into the Jimmy. He started the engine at the same time as opening the garage door. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry. I love you,” Nate shouted out the passenger window.

“We love you too, son,” Henry said.

“Now get out of here, Nate. You get a pass on speeding this one time, kiddo,” Florence said.

Fifty-Eight

The engine was warmed up by the time that the door was up. He gunned the engine and ran over the post box in his parents yard. He could hear his parents, still hanging from the rafters of the garage, complaining that he didn't know how to drive properly. He could only smile.

Being many years since he left his home and had to drive the streets of Midland, Nate had a hard time getting his bearings. He reflected on how this was strange considering that for a long time after moving away, he could drive the streets of Midland in his mind as he was falling asleep in Los Feliz, an exercise that he did to ease the homesickness and loneliness that he felt in the depths of the Los Angeles dream. He might have wanted to erase all of those memories, but that's all he could remember. Now, when it was most important, he took the wrong turns and drove down streets that he thought were the way to Our Lady of the Grasses, but he then realized were leading to the park, to the roller rink, to his old elementary school. He pulled over and turned off the Jimmy. Turning on the dome light, he found an old map of Midland that was stashed between the seats and hastily unfolded it. He quickly found the path: a few streets up was Union road, which would lead right to the church. He killed the dome light and went to turn the ignition, but in the darkness, even though his vision was ruined by the light, he paused. In the rear view he could see beams of flashlights. His blood went cold and he leapt into the backseat. He grabbed the heavy woolen blanket his father kept there and threw it over himself. He waited, trying to keep his breathing still, and listened to the chanting of the cultists passing by his car, the sound of the truck passing by on the road looking for him. Through the blanket he could see the lights play against the fabric. The voices chanted indiscriminately. He could tell now, now that he was close enough, it was a language that he didn't recognize. Typically he could identify the

sounds of languages. He could place them in Europe or the slavic countries. He could tell the difference between an african language and European. He could tell the difference between Chinese and Vietnamese from years in their restaurants, but he couldn't tell what language this was. He waited, as still as he could, until he was sure they were gone. Then, he tentatively looked around to check that they'd gone. The moonlight showed them taking a turn at the end of the block. When they were completely out of view, he jumped into the driver's seat and took a back way to Union Street.

Union Street was a commercial sort of street, lined with restaurants, stores, lawyer offices, schools and a few grocery stores that served the southern part of Midland, but on this night, it was completely empty except for Henry's Jimmy. Panic crept into Nate's bones as he anticipated every intersection. He started to run red lights and no other cars were waiting. The entire city was grounded. He was obvious and he knew it. He drove faster in response. He drove so fast that his knuckles went white as they gripped the ancient steering wheel. He was approaching tenth street when he realized that there was a blockade. He nearly drifted down eighth street to avoid being found. He rolled cautiously, slowly, so as to know of any threats that might come up, but he was able to cut across on Durant St. and then join up again on Union. It was clear that there wasn't a lot of organization to the cult's efforts in preventing him to leave town. He thanked God, but then remembered what he was going against.

For the first time in his life, he was faced with the thought that perhaps the question wasn't whether he believed in god, but rather the god that he purportedly believed in was the wrong one. It's so easy when in distress to call out to god, but no one ever thinks which one is listening.

Eventually, he makes it to Our Lady of the Grasses and comes to a stop. He turns off the lights and evaluates his position. All is dark on this side of town. It's past midnight and the church is a rocky outcropping in the middle of the midwest. Ominous and significant. The roads are doubly so. Nate wonders if he should listen to his father. His Dead Father. Hours earlier his father had seemed satisfied with... What? The status quo? The horrible dead thing roaming the streets? His own death? His son's death? The whole matter made him sick to his stomach because he knew that even though he had some last words with his parents, he knew that they were dead. No one lives through what they've been through. What Chuck's been through.

He steeled himself against Midland and put the Jimmy in gear. He turned right and then after approximately a football field, he turned into the soybean field. The Jimmy bucked and creaked as it went off the road he kept the accelerator depressed. His arms jerked the wheel here and there to keep the car on track. The thudding of the Jimmy riding the furrows alarmed him, but he kept on, the plant material flew past the windshield as he drove through the field. He closed his eyes anticipating his death. All he could hear was the thudding of the plants on the hood, his parents' dead voices, Lisa's condemnation, Angela's forgiveness, which probably meant her life, Chuck's reconciliation, which ultimately had no bearing on anything. The senselessness of their idea of fate! The madness of following that *thing* and oh god, the horrors that he'd seen.

Nate thought that he'd hit something and it threw him about the Jimmy, but he had the mind to push down on the brake, to pull the emergency brake. When the Jimmy stopped moving he opened his eyes.

The Jimmy had come to a stop in the middle of the state highway and the sun had started to come up just above where the road met the sun. Nate was shocked. He realized that he'd escaped. The engine had died, but he turned it over and it roared to life. He turned the car around and drove off, to the west, to freedom.

It was hours that Nate kept the Jimmy at a good 70 MPH going west, staying to the state roads and hoping that no one was chasing him. After awhile, he realized that he'd been released from their grasp. He wept as he pulled onto the 70, which would take him to Kansas City and then from there to Utah where he could find a way to California. Once again he would be free.

He drove through the endless fields, through the small cities that reminded him of the small towns that surrounded Midland. He drove like a madman convinced that if he stopped, he'd be stopped forever in the soybean fields, in the wheat fields, in the corn fields that so trap so many humans in their local cults. The storms accumulated over the plains and Nate out ran them. He accelerated through rainstorms and thunder hail. He passed tornados on the plains while watching the needle of his gas tank sink farther and farther towards E.

Nate made it to Kansas City where he decided that his father's Jimmy was too hot. He could refuel and keep going, but he feared that someone might report it stolen. Instead, he decided that he would take some other form of transport.

He pulled into a bar's parking lot and went inside. He ordered a beer and looked around.

Everyone at the bar was some local hick who was here to get a buzz on before going home to beat their wife or child. Not the sort of group to willingly give up information to police, even less to passers by who are looking for a queer looking Californian.

"How much is a cab to the airport?" Nate asked the bartender.

"You looking to get out of town in a hurry?" the bartender said.

Nate started at the suggestion, "What do you mean?"

"You come in here asking how much it is to get to the airport and you're trying to tell me that you don't want to get out of here in a hurry?"

"No, I'm sorry." Nate said, "Yeah, I guess I am trying to get out of here in a hurry."

"I've got some news for you," the bartender said.

"What? What is that?" Nate blurted.

"The airport is going to be all fucked up right now because of the storms. If you want to get out of town, you should take the bus," the bartender said while working on a spot in a glass.

“Okay, so can you get me a cab for the bus station?”

“You have cash?”

“What? Do I need cash? I’ve got a card. I can use my card here, can’t I?” Nate said desperately.

“Yeah, yeah, you can,” the bartender said, lazily reaching for the phone, “Some folks, you know, some folks, they try to come in here and get a ride somewhere and act like they’re leaving but then they put the tab on the bar. You aren’t going to do that are you?” The bartender acted like he was going to put the phone back.

“No, no, I have a good card! I’ve got an American Express,” Nate showed the card to the bartender.

“Alright, but if you try to put the tab back on us we’re going to reject it and you’re going to be in big trouble with the cabbies,” the bartender said and Nate wondered if Kansas City had the same sort of cult from Midland. The sort that would put you in a grave if you did them wrong.

The bartender picked up the phone. Nate drank his beer. The bartender said that a car was coming. Nate asked for a shot of Bushmills. The bartender asked if he would like to leave the bottle, Nate said yes. Nate took shot after shot until the bartender told him that the car was there for him. Nate handed the bartender his credit card and the bartender gave him a look that betrayed a sort of distrust until the card beeped in the credit machine.

“Now, catch your cab, son,” the bartender said.

“You bet,” Nate said. He jumped off of his barstool, but was surprised at how drunk he was. He stumbled to the door and out into the street where the cab was. Sheets of rain came down and Nate was cascaded in wet before he got in the back seat of the cab. Much to his appreciation, the cabbie said nothing to him as he was taken to the bus station. Nate flickered between wakefulness and sleep. When they arrived at the bus station, he was startled and hurriedly got out of the car.

In the sleeting rain, he ran across the street and up to the ticket station. He bought a ticket for Los Angeles. He was surprised that the ticket cost \$200, but he bought it anyway because he was already absorbed by the momentum of getting the hell out of the midwest.

He sat down in the waiting area anticipating the bus and seeing the others gathered at the station. Everyone looks homeless. Everyone looks like they’ve been chewed up by society and thrown up by the most awfully wealthy who couldn’t have been bothered to take care of them. Suddenly Nate feels an affinity for the people who he’d always thought were not part of his own story. He wanted to talk to them and ask what happened to them. But, he knew that he couldn’t ever join in with whatever they were involved in. He was somewhere between the insane and the sane. *How am I supposed to tell people that I’ve been through an insane world? Only these people would believe me. No one will believe them. I could tell them everything and they would know, they would understand, but what about the people I love? What about the people I care about? They*

will only see me as crazy. How can I keep from killing myself? I can tell them and they will put me in a home or I can kill myself from not finding anyone to tell. Oh god! Oh... god... I need to find my bus.

Nate found his bus and sat at a seat without anyone sitting next to him. He fell asleep soon after the bus left the station.

Fifty-Nine

Nate woke up in a strange place. Soft and warm and completely unlike a bus seat screaming across the plains west, to California. He opened his eyes to the dark room and looked around at the dimly lit bedroom. The flatscreen on the bureau at the foot of the bed, the wide dressed window to his left, matching nightstands on either side of the bed, books and alarm clocks stacked upon them. There was a cool and pressing patter of rain on the window. Nate reached out and grabbed handfuls of the bedsheets in his hands, the divot in the bed on his left has a lingering warmth. A light streams out of the walk-in closet and a silhouette appeared who said, “You should get up a little early today, maybe. Get some breakfast before you leave.”

“Yeah,” Nate said and the disorientation of dreams disappeared. It was funny how a dream that could have seemed so real just after waking could evaporate just like that leaving him slightly confused and wishing that he didn’t forget so quickly. “Do you need the bathroom?”

“No, it’s free,” Lisa said. “Remember that there’s that PTA meeting at six. Can you make it?”

“Yeah, I can do that, no problem,” Nate said, sitting on the edge of his bed, still somewhat dazed from sleep.

Lisa came out of the walk in closet wearing only a slip and kissed him on the forehead, “Thanks honey, I’ll see you when you get home tonight.”

She smelled of soap and grocery store shampoo. She was still as beautiful to him as she had been when they were in high school, but she’d started to develop a paunch. He had too. His was certainly bigger, but he hated his. There was something endearing about hers. He’d never say that out loud though, he wouldn’t want to embarrass her.

He stood up and made his way to the bathroom down the hall. He turned the shower dial, still damp from Lisa’s shower, and listened to the thudding pipes behind the tiled walls eventually throw up hot water into the bathtub. He checked his phone for any messages that might have come in the night, but found nothing. He got into the shower and let the hot water work its magic. He smiled and dunked his head into the stream of water, his head becoming clear. He started thinking about the day ahead as he washed. He spent a little more time in the shower this morning warming up his bones, which he hadn’t even noticed were chilled from the cold morning until he got under the hot stream.

He shaved in front of the fogged mirror with a towel wrapped around his waist. He was in a cautiously good mood today. Cautious, he couldn’t say why. There was a sense of trepidation that seemed to hang over the everyday items of his home. His razor seemed strange and new. His

shaving cream can seemed to be an artifact of someone else' life. The brand of toothpaste next to the sink was a surprise, "Colgate! Why did I think I was using Sensodyne this whole time?"

Shaved and brushed and combed and dried and starting to feel a bit cold again, he left the steamy bathroom behind and half jogged half skipped across the hardwood floor to the bedroom. Lisa was choosing a pair of pants at the dresser and Nate dove into the walk in closet to select a suit. There wasn't a great deal of variety, but he chose the black one with the light blue shirt and the paisley tie that he'd seen at the Midland Hotel the month before and just had to buy. Lisa, he knew, hated that tie and he was thinking he might be able to sneak it past her this morning in the quiet darkness of their routine done without turning any lights on.

"What do you want for breakfast?" Lisa asked.

"Just drag a couple slices of toast through the butter. That'll be fine for me," Nate said. Lisa ignored his cliched response.

"I'm going to make some eggos for Rob," Lisa said.

"I'll have an eggo too then. That sounds great," Nate said.

Nate was setting the knot on his tie when Lisa appeared in the closet mirror behind him. She wrapped her arms around his middle and rested her chin on his shoulder. She scrunched up her

nose in disgust and said, “Oh I hate that tie. I’m going to hide it from you when you aren’t looking.”

“I don’t have any idea why you hate this tie so much! It matches practically everything I own,” Nate countered.

“And so it matches nothing at all,” Lisa said, breezing out of the bedroom.

Nate took his time tying his shoes and then meticulously made the bed, taking the trouble to take off all of the sheets and replace them one by one. Before leaving the room, he sat by his night lamp and picked up what he’d been reading the night before. *Pedro Paramo* by Juan Rulfo. Looking at the cover filled him with a sense of deja vu and as he looked around the room it looked foreign to him again. The sensation was so strange, so great that it inspired the tiniest inkling of vertigo which was gone in a moment.

Moment passed, he got up and went downstairs to where his wife and child were hurriedly munching on eggo waffles. The television is on and Rob is watching music videos. Currently it’s “Time to Pretend” by MGMT. “Hey,” Nate says, “I remember when this one came out!”

“You remember when everything came out, dad,” Rob said.

“It’s because I’ve got a memory like a bank vault!” Nate said.

“No,” Rob said, “It’s because you’re old.”

“Sorry,” Lisa said, “I ate the last eggo.” She said as she handed Nate a plate with buttered toast on it.

“No biggie,” Nate said and sat down to munch on his toast. “You have band practice today, Rob?”

“I have band practice every day,” Rob said without turning away from the flat screen.

“Just reminding you so you don’t forget your clarinet,” Nate said temporarily transfixed by the swirling psychedelic visuals of the music video. He hummed along:

This is our decision to live fast and die young.

We've got the vision, now let's have some fun.

Yeah it's overwhelming, but what else can we do?

Get jobs in offices and wake up for the morning commute?

“It’s in my backpack,” Rob said. “I never forget.”

“Mrs. Hanneman said that you forgot it twice last week and she’s going to have to knock off a few points from your participation grade this quarter,” Lisa said.

Rob frowned and set down his half-chewed waffle. Nate felt a great empathy for Rob in that instant. He looked weary for his age. The kid looked ground down. God knows how that's possible, he hasn't a clue what it's really like to suffer the real pains of life. Nate looked at his son and thought about the last time he had to get inoculated. He didn't remember for what. They all blend together. Hepatitis? There's a million Hepatitis injections you've got to get. The kid moped around the house all afternoon feeling miserable. Perhaps that's what this was, his misery at the hounding of his parents was simply an inoculation for the pains he'll have to suffer as an adult.

Nate gripped his son's shoulder and said as gently as he could, "Just a reminder, I know you've got it."

Nate got up from the kitchen table and walked down the hall to his office where he packed up his computer and grabbed his key-card from the nail on the wall. Outside of his window, he could see that it was raining hard. He wondered if the cat had found its way inside the night before. It wasn't in his office, he knew, because its usual place there was atop his charging laptop. Nate walked down the hall and peered into Lisa's office, but there was no sign of cat in there either, just a scattering of files on Lisa's big wooden desk and the tiny little desktop computer on the opposite wall.

Nate had suggested a few months before that she might want an upgrade, but she insisted that was all she needed. She really did prefer handwriting all of her articles, which baffled Nate, but he had no choice but to accept it.

The kitchen was empty except for a couple of plates still lying on the table. One with Nate's yet uneaten slice of toast. He grabbed it and went into the mudroom where Lisa was switching out a load of laundry and Rob was putting on his raincoat. Nate grabbed his coat and put it on. "You ready, buddy?" Nate said to Rob who just shook his head. They opened the side door and jogged back to the detached garage trying and failing to not get wet.

The ride to school was a quiet one. Nate didn't feel like talking, so he didn't. Rob just stared out of the window at the rain streaming past. Rob went to the same middle school that Nate had gone to. Some of the same teachers remained, but Nate tried to not make mention of this very frequently. He'd rather not bring that up, nor did he want to become the center of attention. That's what Rob was there for. To have his own experience. Not to follow in the footsteps of his father.

Nate pulled to a stop outside of the school. Other fathers and mothers were dropping their children off, the kids variably running to the awning in front of the school or trudging reluctantly through the damp, resigned to the fact that whether they run or not, they will be wet. "Have a good day at school, bud!"

"Yup," Rob said and stepped into the rain. Rob happened to be one of the kids resigned to the inevitability of the rain.

Nate didn't wait to watch Rob walk all the way into the school, he pulled out into traffic and started to make his way to work. At stop lights he daydreamed and tried to remember what he had been dreaming about before he'd woken up. The steamy exhaust rose through the heavy rain and between the cars and Nate imagined that the sewer grates in Los Angeles belched steam in the quiet hours of the night. He'd never been to Los Angeles and his image of what it looked like mostly came from the movie *Chinatown*. He couldn't recall another specific movie set in Los Angeles. He knows the city's big, but how big is it? How many Midlands could you fit into Los Angeles? How many Midlands fit in a Hollywood? Do people even live in Hollywood or is it just movie lots and bars and mansions?

What had him thinking about Los Angeles this morning? He chuckled at his wild imagination.

He pulled into the Downtown Midland Garage, a large underground structure underneath the Midland Central Park a couple blocks away from the capitol building. The parking attendant waved at him. "Hello, Travis. Having a good morning?"

"Oh you know me, Mr. Silas," Travis was a rotund middle aged man who had been working at the garage for as long as Nate could remember. He'd never seen him outside of the parking booth and he imagined that if he had the shock would be just too much to bear. "I can't complain."

"Hey, at least it's Thursday," Nate said and drove through.

"That's right, you're right about that," Travis laughed.

Nate parked the car on the first floor. The garage hardly ever got too busy until about ten o'clock, but he was never that late. He walked up the stairs to the park and pulled the collar of his raincoat up to keep the rain out as he walked down the street to his office. Standing on the corner, waiting for the light, he was struck by the comforting smell of downtown in the rain. The smell of baking bread and coffee mingled with the wet-dog smell of wool and the dampness of the earth.

He didn't pass anyone he recognized on the street today, and good thing too. Any delay would just make them even more wet.

Nate's office was a narrow set of rooms on the second floor of a shopfront on Main street. It was accessed by a set of stairs located in the coffeeshop on the first floor. Nate had mixed feelings about the coffeeshop, Sunsup Coffee, on one hand he was very grateful that there was a place so close to his office where he could get a coffee and a bagel and a copy of the Chicago Tribune. On the other hand, he knew he didn't need to be eating pastries anytime he wanted and it wouldn't hurt for him to go on a little walk every once in a while to try the other coffeeshops in the area. Yet, Sunsup was the only coffeeshop he ever went to and they knew him well. Natalie was working today. Pale and pierced, Natalie had tattoos that seemed to curl up past her shoulders and up around her neck as if threatening to strangle her. "Mr. Silas, what'll it be today?"

“A muffin top and a cafe-au-lait, please,” Nate said grabbing a paper from the rack. “And one of these, of course.”

“You got it, pal,” Natalie said, “Blueberry fine?”

“Blueberry huh?” Nate said, suddenly distracted by the cover of the paper. The familiar face of Chuck Stephens looking at him with those sad eyes that he developed sometime after he left Midland. The headline told Nate that Chuck Stephens had won the Pulitzer prize for literature for his novel about the Inuit on Baffin Island. Nate frowned at the paper and said, “Not in the coffee.”

“The coffee?” Natalie asked, confused. “Nate, where’s your head at, man? The muffin, it’s blueberry. That okay?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, of course,” Nate said. “Have you seen this?”

“What’s that?” Natalie said returning with a cup and a paper bag with a muffin top in it. “Six even, Nate.”

Nate set the paper down for Natalie to look at and pulled out his wallet. “Local boy wins the Pulitzer Prize.”

“Oh yeah, I heard about this book. I’ve been meaning to read it, but I just haven’t gotten around to it. You know how much I love those trashy sci-fi books.” Nate *was* familiar with Natalie’s propensity towards sci-fi novels. The walls of Sunsup coffee were lined with bookshelves that held the copies of pulp novels that she had read and then discarded for her customers to find. While Sunsup didn’t ever get truly busy, no busier than what Natalie could handle such as the smattering of businessmen and legislators that streamed in and out in the morning, it did occasionally get overrun by small groups of science fiction enthusiasts introducing each other to this magical library of nerddom.

“You aren’t missing much,” Nate said with a wink. “I frankly found it entirely too boring to comment on, which is why I’m somewhat surprised that it won such a prestigious award.”

“Well, whaddya want, Nate? He’s a white man. Of course he wins the award,” Natalie joshed and handed Nate his change.

“I’m a white man, where’s my Pulitzer?” Nate said and stuffed a couple dollars into the tip jar.

“You got to write a book first, dear,” Natalie said and went to wash a milk carafe.

Nate just smiled and pointed at his temple as if to say, *Oh, I hadn’t thought of that*. He walked up the white tiled stairs to his office juggling his muffin and coffee against his laptop case and newspaper. While Nate was thoroughly dedicated to the technological advances of the computer, he did still enjoy reading a physical paper. He liked to flip through it lazily and absorb it through a kind of osmosis. He was also a forerunner in thinking that getting all of one’s news from the

Internet might hold some problematic filtering effects. This year's election would bring that to everyone's attention, but he didn't know that at the time.

Nate's personal office was at the back of the building, which meant that he had to pass by his partner's office before getting to his own. "Nate, did you hear?"

"Hold on, Terry," Nate said. "Lemme put my stuff down."

Nate ducked into his office and set his things down. Terry came in and sat in the chair on the other side of Nate's desk, typically where clients sat. Terry Winslow and Nate Silas had been friends since childhood and now ran a small-time law practice in Midland. Terry was a great big gregarious man who had been a fully committed football player from high school to college. He was an interesting complement to Nate's thin build and measured temperament.

"That shit head Chuck won the fucking Pulitzer prize," Terry said.

"Yeah, I saw," Nate could feel the cloud of misery orbiting his head. This revelation did not make him particularly happy. His rivalry with Charles Stephens started sometime before his birth and seemed to be endless. Nate could practically feel the judging eyes of the Midland Historical Society at one of their garden parties. *Didja hear about Chuck's book? I hear that Obama put it on his summer reading list.*

"How much do you think he won?" Terry asked.

“Ugh, don’t even mention that. He’s probably giving it all away to charity,” Nate said.

“He really did turn into an intolerable bleeding heart, didn’t he?” Terry asked.

“Where’s he living nowadays? Manhattan?”

“Detroit,” Terry said and eyed Nate knowingly.

“Oh no. Don’t tell me he’s decided he’s the man to solve the Flint crisis,” Nate sighed and removed his wire framed glasses to massage the bridge of his nose.

“He hasn’t said anything yet,” Terry defended, throwing up his hands. “But come on! What the fuck else is he doing there? He’s not there to single-handedly fix General Motors.”

“I honestly don’t know why I let it bother me, Terry. Why do I care what he does with his life?”

“I’ll tell you why you care. Why I care. It’s because when he comes back home at Christmas and he goes to the Midland Country Club Christmas party, he walks around and hobnobs and he’s so *damn smug*. He just walks around like he’s Albert fucking Schweitzer. That’s why he’s an intolerable prick. That’s why you or I can’t stand him. We know he’s just like us. He’s got the rest of the world fooled, but we knew him when he was just a kid. We watched his father wail on his ass and him cry and cry like a bitch. Now he tries to be magnanimous. You’d think he’s

convinced himself that he's Jesus Christ reborn," Terry said, pulling a piece of muffin off of Nate's muffin top.

"No, he didn't need to convince himself of that. It's this town. The society folks. They groomed him and prepped him to be the messiah of the midwest and here he is. Turns out they were more successful than they could have ever hoped. These people, have an unhealthy obsession with Chuck! You know at the Soybean Social Club's office they've got a picture of Chuck with the inscription 'Midland's Favorite Son'?"

"Yeah! I'm the one who told you about it!" Terry laughed. "Anyway, stop calling it that. It's the Midland Historical Society. You're going to slip up one day and call it that and somebody's going to take offense."

"Oh yeah, I'm sorry," Nate said. "I had some fitful sleep. Lots of dreams that I can't remember."

"Well don't bother telling me about them. I hate it when people talk about dreams. They're all so boring. The only time I could ever stand it was when a girl was telling me about some dream she had when she was in college and I could use the time to undo her bra," Terry said.

"Oh come on, Terry, that's not necessary."

"What?" Terry looked around, "Nobody's here!"

Nate took a sip of coffee and opened the paper. Terry didn't take the hint to leave. Instead, he ate some more of Nate's muffin. "Didja hear about Mary?"

Nate folded up the paper and set it in his lap. "No, what?"

"Apparently Chuck found her in bed with one of his *Medécins Sans Frontières* buddies."

"Really?" Nate asked, genuinely curious now. The schadenfreude of Chuck's misfortunes was a guilty pleasure of Nate's. "How did he react to that?"

"Like Chuck. And by that I mean like some sort of fucking saint. He forgave her and he committed himself to the marriage. They're going to couples therapy and he's taking more time to be with her. Who does the guy think he is? If I found my wife in bed with you I'd fucking kill you, not apologize for not spending enough time with my wife! That's how you're supposed to react!"

"Just more evidence that Chuck's part of a more sophisticated species than the two of us," Nate drawled sarcastically.

"I've got an appointment at nine. You want to come along? I might need your help on this one later on," Terry said getting up to leave.

"I'll catch up later, I've got some work to do on the Pedersen account," Nate said.

“Jesus that’s a big family. Good luck with that one,” Terry said and walked into the waiting area by the bay window at the front of the flat. “Doctor Chaudhury? Good to finally meet you. Just follow me into my office and we’ll get started. Hey, thanks.”

Nate paused to listen to Terry for a moment and marvel at the man’s amazing ability to pronounce anybody’s name correctly the first time. He often joked that if Terry started to mispronounce peoples’ names that was a sign that dementia was setting in and it was time to put the old quarterback in a home.

He finished his coffee and pulled his laptop from its case. He worked soundlessly for a few hours, losing himself in concentration he was able to straighten out the Pedersen will that morning, which was good because he had a court appointment that afternoon. He wasn’t often called to court, but an old friend had requested some assistance.

He didn’t have to be there until two pm and at around noon he was reminded of a vacation he had taken with Lisa and Rob a few years before. They’d gone to Mackinac Island in June and stayed at the Lake View Hotel. The street full of knick knacks and the smell of fudge filled him as he sat in his office. The sound of the harbor and the summer rain the reggae on the soundsystem while Lisa knives out ketchup on Rob’s burger. Nate had never felt so relaxed in his life and he remembers commenting to Lisa that he wouldn’t mind retiring there. She thought he was crazy, had he forgotten they were in Michigan? The entire place freezes over from

September to May. Nate leaned over to Lisa and kissed her on the forehead. And told her that he'd rather retire in this very moment then and change nothing about it.

Lunch was one of those cheese and cracker blister packs that resemble Lunchables for adults. He used a little plastic stick to spread tapenade on a cracker and then placed a slice of swiss on top of that. He ate his little open-faced sandwich with relish while sitting in one of the waiting room chairs. The rain had cleared and it was looking like he could just walk down to the courthouse, which was preferable to driving because if he drove he would have to find a spot in the garage, which was infinitely more difficult after noon.

Oh No! Nate startled, *I almost forgot about Rob's PTO meeting tonight.* That would mean that it would make more sense to take the car to the courthouse and then drive straight to Rob's school.

With the plan now set, Nate threw the empty blister pack away and packed up his computer. He walked down the office steps and said bye to Natalie, who was operating the steam wand and so probably didn't hear him. He stepped out onto the street and was nearly bowled over by a group of local legislators hurriedly walking down the street. He got his shoes wet when he stepped in a puddle to avoid running into them. Nate jumped back onto the sidewalk indignantly and then walked back to his car at the garage. A school group was gathered in the park probably getting ready to go down to the capitol for the tour. Nate got in his car and drove off to the courthouse, conveniently located several blocks north on Main street. There weren't too many people on the streets today, must have been the rain that scared them away. However, now, there was barely

any sign that it had rained at all. The sky was a fine and clear autumn blue with a smattering of clouds above the horizon.

The sky in its blueness caused Nate to be conflicted. At the same time he was comforted on some base level, a clear sky meant no foul weather, no poor conditions, but then, simultaneously, there was something about the perfect flat blue of the sky that seemed like a void, like a pit in which to fall.

A horn honks at him because he's lost in a daydream. He stomps a little too hard on the gas and the car jumps forward awkwardly. He drives for perhaps fifty yards before he hears the whoop of a police car and the lights in his rear-view. He pulls over and collects his identification and insurance card, shaking a little bit. There was always something about getting pulled over that made Nate nervous. Other people, like Terry, seemed to be emboldened by the police. He'd just as soon argue with them as hand over his ID.

Nate recognized the police officer before he even got to his window. "Hello Sidney," Nate said as he rolled down his window.

"Nate Silas," Officer Parrish said. "How're you doing today?"

"Just fine, Sid. Just fine. How're the folks?"

"Doing great. You know they were asking me about you the other day?"

“Is that right?”

“Yeah, Maw said, ‘Now where’s that young friend of yours, Mr. Silas?’ I think they want you to come out and rent the lake house again.”

“Well, I might be inclined to do so, but the season’s kinda over right now. Next summer?”

“Oh sure, I understand. They just like you. And you know what? The lake house isn’t bad for ice fishing in January if you want to give it a whack.”

“That sounds like something fun Rob and I can do,” Nate said. “Now what can I help you with today?”

“Oh yeah, well, I saw you get to a weird start back there and I got suspicious that whoever might be in this car might have been drinking.”

“Haha, I can see how you might have thought that. I’m sorry, Sid. I kinda zoned out for a moment there and then got startled when the car behind me honked.”

“Been drinking at all?”

“Nope. Just the daily dose of coffee,” Nate chuckled.

“Alright, that’s good,” Sidney said. “I’m going to let you off with a warning, bud. Keep the daydreaming at the office where it belongs, okay?”

“You bet Sid. You have a good day now.”

Nate watched Sidney Parrish walk back to his car and drive off in his mirrors. Once Sid had gone, Nate drove the rest of the way to the courthouse uneventfully.

The courthouse was a huge and ancient brick building. It had been, at one time, the capitol. However, it’s been a century since laws had been written here. Instead, the two former chambers of the state’s legislature had been converted into courtrooms in which laws were argued. The various other offices, conference rooms and libraries had been converted into rooms for mediations and offices for the presiding judges. The building always creeped Nate out a little bit. It seemed like it was built for someone else. Not for humans, but some other human-like thing. The stairs felt short and shallow. The railings were placed at uncomfortable heights. Door jambs loomed at strange angles. To Nate, it seemed that he and everyone else in the building had taken it over from its previous inhabitants and possibly unfairly.

Nate’s friend was bound to be in the Calhoun Courtroom, so named after a Senator Calhoun, who presided over the senate when it was housed here for the longest. Nate pulled on the great wooden door leading into the chamber and was immediately greeted with the rambling sound of

presiding Judge Dolores Hepworth reading off another docket. Nate found Brian Cavafy and went to sit next to him.

“Hey, thanks for showing up, Nate,” Brian said.

“No problem at all, Brian,” Nate said. “Where’s Gwen?”

“I dunno if she’s gonna show,” Brian said.

“Then that will make short work of this.”

And short work it was. Judge Hepworth decided that Brian was responsible for an alimony of \$3,000 a year for five years. Practically nothing. It was a success if Nate ever considered it. However, his friend wasn’t celebrating as he might have expected. Outside, Brian put a pinch of dip in his lip and paced around in the grass some.

“Brian, what’s wrong?” Nate asked. “Look, this is a great outcome. It’s a little rough that Gwen didn’t even bother to show up, but really it turned out great for you. \$15k is a pittance in the long run for you.”

“Not really,” Brian said. “I didn’t want to get divorced, Nate.”

“I know.”

“She didn’t even show up to her own alimony hearing, Nate. She made all that stink about it and then didn’t even show up.”

“Yeah, it’s rough. I know.”

“Do you know what it’s like to have someone hate you like that?”

“I don’t think I do, Brian.”

“I don’t know,” Brian spat a long stream of brown liquid and extended his hand. “Hey, thanks again for helping me out. I’m gonna get outta here. Get on with my life like you always say.”

“Gotta do something, Brian,” Nate said grinning a sardonic grin at his old friend. “That’s the real shame in life. Tragedy befalls us and we survive. We’ve no idea how to live, but yet we do. It’d be much easier if God were to kill us when he decided to ruin our lives.”

“That what they taught you in college?”

“That and how to balance a checkbook.”

The sun was just starting to set when Nate found himself on the road driving to Robert’s school. The parking lot was mostly empty, which was strange for a PTO night. Maybe he was early, his

mind was caught up in thinking about his friend, Brian. He decided that he would invite Brian over to dinner more often. Maybe he could get Brian and Robert to go ice fishing with him this winter at Sidney Parrish' place. He didn't want Brian to be alone.

Nate was walking into the school when he was overcome with the memory of one hot spring day in the library of that very school when he and Brian were about 14. They'd been assigned to find a poem to recite in class from memory. Nate and Brian, who had recently become enamored with thrash metal were looking for the most "metal" poems possible. The more gruesome and tragic, the better.

Nate was struggling through a thick volume of Edgar Allen Poe poems knowing that he was fertile territory for the most "metal" stories and poems. However, he was having a hard time finding something that was short enough to memorize. Brian on the other hand had taken a different approach and simply was looking at random through poetry anthologies. This meant that he happened to read a lot of dreck, but ultimately, he scored.

Suddenly, Brian broke the silence of the library, "Hey! This guy's got the same name as me. C.P. Cavafy." Then he was silent for a while. Nate eventually grew tired of trying to untangle Poe's wordplay and looked over to Brian who was absolutely absorbed in the anthology.

"I don't think I've ever seen you enjoy a book more, Brian. I guess you're a poetry fan."

“Dude,” Brian said, looking up with a dead serious look on his face. “This is the most metal poem I’ve ever read.”

And so, the next week, Brian recited *The City* by C.P. Cavafy for freshman English. He said,

*You said: “I’ll go to another country, go to another shore,
find another city better than this one.*

*Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong
and my heart lies buried like something dead.*

How long can I let my mind moulder in this place?

Wherever I turn, wherever I look,

I see the black ruins of my life, here,

where I’ve spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally.”

You won’t find a new country, won’t find another shore.

This city will always pursue you.

You’ll walk the same streets, grow old

in the same neighborhoods, turn gray in these same houses.

You’ll always end up in this city. Don’t hope for things elsewhere:

there’s no ship for you, there’s no road.

Now that you’ve wasted your life here, in this small corner,

you’ve destroyed it everywhere in the world.

Nate and Brian and Angela laughed for hours after school at the fact that Brian's recitation was so impassioned that Mrs. Ashe made him go and see the school counselor that afternoon.

When Nate got to Robert's classroom, his stomach flipped. There was no one in the room except for the teacher, Jane MacCaskill. "Oh, this isn't a PTA meeting, is it? It's a Parent-Teacher sort of meeting."

MacCaskill smiled politely, "Yes, Mr. Silas. I'm sorry if that wasn't clear from the note."

"No, no, that's fine," Nate said. "Do you mind if I stand? I've been sitting all day."

"That's fine, this should be short anyway," MacCaskill said. "What I wanted to bring to your attention was some behaviors that I found worrisome. Robert has been doing a lot of daydreaming in class. Normally I wouldn't find this to be particularly concerning, kids daydream, especially boys, but Robert seems to be very distracted by this. I think that it's starting to affect his work. His grades have been dropping pretty steadily this semester. Sometimes this sort of thing comes up when there are big changes in family life. Is there anything going on at home?"

"Hmm," Nate hummed thoughtfully. "You know, I can't think of anything, but that doesn't mean there isn't something there. I could easily misinterpret something as being inconsequential when he's ruined by it. I guess what Lisa and I have been interpreting as the onset of teenaged sullenness might be more serious than we thought."

“Okay, well I’m sure that you have things under control. My advice to you and to all the other parents is to just talk to your child. It really does wonders.”

“Yes, of course, Mrs. MacCaskill. Is that all?”

“Yep, that’s all. Sorry about the inconvenience,” MacCaskill said.

“No trouble at all. Thank you,” Nate said and walked out of the room. The janitors were turning off the lights and he walked down the hall in a sort of artificial twilight cast in half light, half darkness. It made the place feel eerie and Nate had the distinct sensation that he was being followed even though there was nothing, nobody behind him. Still his hackles raised, his skin prickled, his heebies were jeebied.

He drove home silently, still thinking about the poem that Brian had picked out all those years ago. He thought of one line in particular, “You’ll always end up in this city. Don’t hope for things elsewhere: / there’s no ship for you, there’s no road.” He drove on and daydreamed about Bonnie and Clyde for some reason. Head in the clouds, is what Lisa accused him of. Just another Walter Mitty.

When he got home, he got a feeling in the garage that something was amiss. He could feel an electricity in the air. The sort of electricity that forms when there’s friction between two people. He opened the door into the mudroom and Lisa was in there folding laundry angrily.

“Good evening, wife!” Nate tried to be chipper. “What say I take off my jacket and I’ll come back to help you with the laundry?”

“How was the meeting?”

“Okay, so it turned out that it was just a parent-teacher meeting. MacCaskill is worried about Rob’s attitude.”

“So am I,” Lisa said and burst into tears. “Why does he hate me? One day we’re having snacks in the park and now he won’t even talk to me.” Lisa’s face distorted in pain, her nose and eyes leaking and her teeth exposed in a rictus of agony that shook Nate’s composure. For a moment he hesitated, afraid to even taste the same pain that his wife was experiencing, but then embraced her.

“Lisa, he doesn’t hate you. He’s just a kid going through puberty. It’s messy and it’s rough and it’s painful and we’re all going to get through it.”

“You don’t know that,” Lisa sobbed and cried harder.

“You’re right, I don’t *know*. But I do believe it, Lisa. I believe that things will be better. That we’ll get through this just as we’ve gotten through everything else together. I told you 13 years ago that I’m not going to let you go and I’ve stuck to that, haven’t I?”

“Yeah. I hate it when you do this. Sometimes I just want to cry. Now I’ve got no reason.”

“Cry, it’s okay. I’m going to be there for you regardless.”

“Shut up,” Lisa laughed and pushed him away. “You’re annoying me.”

“I’mma be on you like white on rice, girl,” Nate played and kissed Lisa.

“Oh my god, you’re such a cheeseball,” Lisa said.

“Cheesy for you, my dear. Cheesy for you.”

“Okay, okay, enough. Will you go and check on Rob? He’s been in his room since he got home.”

Nate walked through the kitchen and up the stairs. Halfway up the stairs, he felt the friction again and heard his son crying quietly. He went to his door and knocked gently. “Rob? Can I come in?”

“No,” said a weepy voice from the other side.

“Your mother and I are worried about you, son. Can we talk?”

“You’re mad at me.”

“Why do you think that?”

“That bitch MacCaskill called you in and told you about how I’m going to flunk.”

“Flunk?” Nate asked, confused. He tried to remember the meeting and any talk of flunking. “She didn’t say you were flunking.”

“I’m not, but it’s just a matter of time, isn’t it?”

“Rob, come on, let’s just talk about this. I’m not mad, I swear. And your mom is just worried about you.”

The door opened from the inside and Rob got back into his bed. His room was neat and clean, which was unusual, but welcome. Nate stepped in and took Rob’s clarinet off the stand and sat on his desk chair. Rob laid on his bed and faced the wall sullenly. Nate played with the keys of the clarinet. He admired the shininess of the hardware, the matte black paint of the clarinet itself. The weight of the instrument felt good and he was tempted to put it to his mouth and toot out some notes, but knowing his son’s germaphobic reaction to sharing utensils at the dinner table, he hesitated.

“Mrs. MacCaskill says that you daydream too much and that it’s getting in the way of your studies. What do you think about that?”

“She’s not wrong.”

“What do you daydream about?”

Rob turned around and sat on the edge of his bed, his head bent. “You aren’t going to tell me to stop daydreaming? To start focusing on my homework?”

“You want me to say all that?” Nate chuckled.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“No,” Nate said. “No, son. I’m a daydreamer too. I laughed because people are always telling me to stop daydreaming and I thought it was ironic that you wanted me to tell you to stop daydreaming.”

“What you do isn’t daydreaming. It’s concentrating.”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I just let my mind wander,” Nate said. “You know what I was daydreaming about today?”

“What’s that?”

“I was driving around and thinking about Bonnie and Clyde. I was imagining how fun it would be to take you and your mother and go and rob banks like Bonnie and Clyde and Robert. We’d stick up a bank in some podunk little town and then drive as fast as we could to the next town to spend all the money we stole on milkshakes and burgers and bowling frames and then go to the next town to start again. The cops are all incompetent so we always lose them and you shout from the back of the car, ‘You’ll never catch us alive, coppers!’”

“That’s ridiculous,” Rob chuckled.

“Yeah, of course it is. It’s just a fun thought that came into my mind and was out the next,” Nate said. “What were you daydreaming about today?”

“It wasn’t ridiculous like that,” Rob paused. “Do you ever wonder what we’re doing here? Do you ever wonder about, like, why we’re here? In Sunday school they go on and on about how we’re, like, part god. I don’t feel like it. I feel random. Have you ever heard of this thing in science fiction where a different universe is created every time you make a decision?”

“What’s that called? Multiverse theory? Sure, I know it,” Nate said and smiled.

“So, there are only a set number of worlds in which I exist. Only a set number of worlds in which you exist. But technically, there’s infinite worlds beyond that where we don’t exist.”

“Okay, yeah, that’s the gist of the thing,” Nate said.

“So, if there are infinite worlds that exist and we only exist in a finite number, then we might as well *not* exist.”

Nate started to laugh, but then stopped himself, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh. Do you feel like you don’t exist?”

“That’s what I’m saying, dad! I can’t, I can’t get these ideas to... to agree. I look at myself in the mirror and think ‘Oh yeah, I’m real’ but then I think about the universe and I don’t.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, kiddo, but a negligible quantity is still a quantity. It only takes a tiny imperfection to ruin a diamond and us humans? We’ve been the monkey wrench in the works of the universe for a long time.”

“Mrs. MacCaskill says that all of nature fits together perfectly.”

“By mistake or accident, I guess. It doesn’t matter. Look, Rob, you exist. And I understand if you worry about these kinds of things, but there are lots of thinkers out there who have thought like you do. Maybe you can find some comfort in their thoughts. Science fiction might be a bit overly bleak when it broaches these topics.”

“Yeah. I just start thinking about it and I get sad,” Rob said.

“It’s okay to be sad sometimes, Rob. I just want you to talk about it when you do, okay? Will you do that for me? Will you talk to me when something makes you sad?”

“You won’t get mad?”

“No, no! Of course not. Now, is there anything else you want to talk about?”

“Not really. I should do my reading for tomorrow. MacCaskill will be mad if she calls on me and I don’t have anything to say.”

“That’s good. You practice your oboe-flute yet?”

“Clarinet, dad,” Rob rolled his eyes and took the instrument from Nate’s hands. “I’ve already practiced today.”

“Okay, son. Hug?” Nate stood up and stretched his arms out. Rob stood up and wrapped his arms around his father. “Oh god, you can reach all the way around! I need to get fatter!”

Nate walked down the stairs again and walked passed Lisa’s office door, which was closed. She was talking to someone on the phone. He went into his office and closed the door. He opened the window to the crisp autumn evening and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his top desk drawer.

He lit one and then walked over to the door and flipped the ceiling fan switch there. Then he went back to his desk and retrieved a glass and bottle of scotch from the cabinet. He poured a few fingers and then went over to sit on his desk so that he could blow the smoke from his cigarette directly out into the evening air.

Nate looked at his bookshelf and imagined the books that he could introduce to his son. He would want to start small and then move up in complexity. *The Stranger* would be a great start to existentialism. Then maybe *Nausea*? No, too boring. Maybe Vonnegut? But that would be too depressing maybe. Then again, wasn't he about Rob's age when he started reading Vonnegut? No, he was a couple of years older. But the kid's precocious. He's already thinking and agonizing about multiverses! How extraordinary that his boy is so much smarter than him. What can he accomplish? The world is vast. The universe vaster. Nate felt a great swell of pride for his son and thought that this must be the worry that others feel about him. To Nate, his son's anxieties could be harnessed to great things. Maybe he'll be a physicist or an engineer or maybe an artist. Maybe the boy could change the world. Nate marveled at the prospects and took drags from his clandestine cigarette, sips from his smoky whiskey.

"God help us. I've cast my son as the messiah," he said to the empty room with a smile on his face. Suddenly it disappeared when he realized the unfairness of his imaginings. "Will I be okay with whatever he does with his life?"

There's a knock on the door, "Ah shit," Nate said and threw his cigarette out the window. "Come in!"

Lisa opened the door and stood by the bookcase with arms folded. “When are you going to be done with this charade?”

“What charade is that, dear?”

“You’re still smoking. I can smell it,” Lisa said, making a point to scrunch up her nose at the smell.

“I’m not smoking that much, Lisa. I’m sorry.”

“After a meeting like that, I get it. Go ahead, light me one too.”

Nate lit two cigarettes and handed one to his wife who closed the door behind her and then sat in the chair by the bookcase. She twirled the cigarette between her fingers and occasionally tapped it in the wastepaper basket next to her chair, unlined and typically empty it might as well have been a large ashtray. Nate smoked his cigarette and through habit blew the smoke out of the window. Lisa, with no guilt complex built into the habit simply blew the smoke into the room. Nate didn’t mind, it made little difference. By the morning the room smelled of book leather and varnished oak anyway.

“What did she say?”

“She said that Rob’s daydreaming too much.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s all, really.”

“Fuck. She had me scared.”

“Is that why you pushed the meeting on to me?” Nate said with a mischievous grin.

“You know it is.”

“You’re too predictable,” Nate laughed.

“What did you two talk about?”

“You know Rob’s gotten into philosophy beneath our noses?”

“Has he? That would explain all of the existential crap that he says when I drive him over to his friends’ houses. I blame you for all of that.”

“Rightly so,” Nate said, still smiling. “Honey, I think we’re raising a bright boy. I’m not worried.”

Lisa smiled back and took a drag from her cigarette. Nate knew it was to be her last drag. She would hold the cigarette until it was gone without taking a puff again. She was never much of a smoker. She only did it to impress him when they first met. It was something that Nate first thought was strange, but now thought was endearing.

They sat smoking in silence for a couple of minutes looking at each other obliquely.

“I had a dream this morning,” Nate said suddenly.

“I could tell, you were thrashing about like a dolphin in a sleeping bag,” they both laughed.

“I just remembered this dream when I was standing here just now. I dreamt that I never married you,” Nate said.

“Oh? Is this going to be a conversation about how you regret marrying me?” Lisa said with eyebrows arched.

“Not at all,” Nate began. “I dreamt that I moved to California to become a script writer.”

“You always thought you would be good at writing dialogue,” Lisa quipped.

“Will you let me tell you about my dream?” Nate snapped playfully.

“Okay, okay, tell me about your dream where you’re single and have no family or any ties or anything at all.”

“That’s the thing, Lisa. I lived in an apartment on my own. Occasionally some girl would stay for a while and then leave. I produced movies and worked on scripts all the time. I drank a lot. A lot more than I do already,” Nate brandished the glass in his hand in humor. “I watched the tides of the Pacific ocean come in and go out and the sun and moon danced around in a sort of montage of time passing. The low buildings of Los Angeles looked brown and disused. The bright parts of life were when I was working on a movie, seeing it be made. I felt like those things were my children, but then they died the moment they were screened at the Chinese Theater. Endless miscarriages that I had to watch play out before me.”

“This sounds like a nightmare, Nate. This is so sad,” Lisa said.

“But when I was in the dream, I didn’t think of it like that. I thought I was living the life I always wanted to lead. Everything was perfect. Cocaine parties and late nights that turned into early mornings at diners that looked like Tarantino had dressed up. It was surreal. It was like living in the movies.”

“So what happened?” Lisa asked.

“I came home. I came back to Midland and they put me in a grave. They buried me and then I woke up.”

“Definitely a nightmare,” Lisa said and then her cigarette dropped from her hand.

Nate got up from the desk where he was sitting to go and pick it up. In the same motion, he tried to flick his cigarette out the window, but the cigarette floated in mid-air. He looked back at his wife as if to say, *can you believe that?* But her face had gone blank and expressionless. Indeed, she didn't have a face anymore. It was a blank, like a mannequin. He tried to walk towards her, but his legs wouldn't move. “Lisa, what's wrong?”

Nate's voice echoed against impossibly distant walls as he was fixed to his place. He tried to let go of the glass in his hand, but it wouldn't drop. He put it in front of his face and watched the glass melt like hot hard candy. “What is this?” he cried out, but his voice was muffled because his mouth had disappeared. The cigarette Lisa had dropped set fire to the carpet and quickly consumed the chair in which she was sitting. Though the fire lapped at her skin, she did not move, she still laid languidly, faceless in the chair, her flesh consumed by the supernatural fire that glowed blue.

Nate tried to scream, but no sound came out. He looked at the window and found that he had no face either, but only eyes set on a blank face. The desperation in his eyes frightened him and tears streamed down the flat skin and accumulated on the floor, which was quickly catching fire.

Sixty

Nate woke with a start and found himself in a completely empty Greyhound bus panting furiously. “What the fuck?” was all he could say, but there was no one to hear him. He looked out the window and saw endless desert terminating in distant dusty mountains. He got up and pulled himself down the aisle by grabbing and yanking the headrests of the bus seats. Once at the front, he looked to make sure that there was no driver. The seat was empty, looked like no one had ever sat there. He yanked on the door release and it clapped open. He tripped out of the bus and fell into the dust of the desert.

“What’s happened?” He shouted, “Where is everyone?”

He moved around the bus looking for people, but he found no one. He didn’t even see the road that the bus came in on. It was as if the bus had been emptied and deposited on some barren desert flat. “Helloooo!” He called to the sky, the deep blue sky that looked like a pit. “Helloooo! I’m here! Help me!”

There was no one.

Nate, not having any luggage to speak of, or anything at all, set off in the desert to try to find a road. Maybe, he thought, he could hitchhike back to LA. He looked at the sky and figured that the sun was starting to set though it was around noon. He used the sun as his guide for the west.

It was hours in the sweltering heat that he walked using the setting sun as his compass, but he could not find a road. He couldn't even find the evidence of an ATV trail. He didn't see anything except for vast and plain desert. He was disoriented, dehydrated, delirious and he searched his mind for where such a place could exist. No place as flat and sandy and dry existed in the American West. There were hills, arroyos, canyons, trails. But there were none of those things here.

The bus disappeared behind him and still he kept walking. He started to think that he was going to die. If he couldn't find water or food soon, he most certainly would. There was nothing, not even cacti, no brush. Just sand and uneven rock on the plain. There was no place for shade or relief from the punishing sun.

Nate laid down on the sand in his suit and tie. He remembered the dream he had of the rainy place of his youth and still held out hope for rescue, for finding his way out of the desert. He had hope.

Then, he saw the gathering clouds to the East. Like an enormous wall in the sky, the gray and brown clouds gathered in the distance, but there was something distinctly different about these. They *moved*. They churned and they leapt forward indiscriminately. It was as if they were walking with an uneven gait. The human analogy was supremely disturbing to Nate and he scrambled to his feet.

The wind whispered then howled. Nate ran as fast as he could, but his legs failed him. He tripped and stumbled for several yards before he collapsed in exhaustion. He could barely lift his limbs. The sky turned dark as the sun began to set behind the distant mountains, but still, Nate could see the oncoming wall of dust and storm coming from the East.

With the last of his strength, he knelt to the East and shouted, “What was that? Some final torture?”

The landscape gave no response. The sandstorm still bore down upon him.

“I can’t escape, can I?” Nate screamed into the wind, tears streaming from his eyes.

Still the sandstorm said nothing as it started to pelt Nate with particles of sand and dirt and pushing him against the ground.

Nate resisted the push of the wind and the sand, “Fuck it!” He shouted.

The sand descended on him and obliterated him. It tore his muscles and skin from his bones and ground the bones into more sand for the storm.

“Come home,” Said the storm.