

M.O.M.E.N.T.O.U.S.

Subtitle: The Original Eddie Motion Manuscript *Unless Noted Otherwise*¹

BY
LUC GRINGO

¹ In some versions (esp. those circulated by internet ca. 2020): *Subject: The Original Eddie Motion Manuscript (Unless Otherwise Noted)* along with this introduction:

[my_friend],

I'm writing on behalf of youknowwho regarding youknowwhat.

Take this as the full account of what transpired as far as it can be reassembled.

You've been initiated to the origin. You know why it's got to be kept underground. I reiterate: don't let this out to anyone unless you'd trust them to lie to the society on your behalf. You likewise should understand the granting of this MS as a sign of my confidence in a person like you to do the same. They will find you if they haven't already: your loyalty will be tested.

You have questions: What is the terror of Eddie? What is the nature of his spectacles? The nature of his real work?

The answers will fall in place as you prove your readiness. The point is: don't let the unknown scare you. None can be surer than I that Eddie in fact exists to save you.

I've done my best to show you that his scheme is for your benefit by every imaginable calculation of utility both individual and total. If you do the right thing by Eddie you will gain special powers in measurable quantities and you will know the truest nature of his being.

But don't cross him. Then he'll double back his offer twice before he takes ya ferallyerwerth. Consider this fair warning.

These are the documents relating the encounters along with the context as time would allow. In the probable case of an encounter with Eddie in the future take note: make record.

Let these and all other possible future moments be dubbed the panscene and the each one individually a futurescene in the lexicon of the canon. In these terms the solution resides in the procurement of the proper scenes in the intended order by the manipulation of free will. Since all scenes exist in the panscene it is only by the belief in the knowledge of everything that a direct line of fate can be discerned to one who has reached Eddie's plateau. If you attribute it to any other then you'll never be beheld as a most honorable believer beyond all simulacrum.

Among us it is taught certain things must be felt for themselves. This is Eddie's promise if you let him in. Apply yourself to the text: there are secrets that affect each person in a different manner. If you begin to lose the path remember and repeat the constant question in the sacred shorthand so that you may recenter your being on the inexorable truth of the conflict deep in each of us: the reprehensible question that holds us from immortal union with the godhead: terrific and daunting enigma: Y, Eddie Motion?

Contents

I. (I'm a) Soul Man (Repeat 4x).....	5
II. Ante Bellum Longissimum	11
III. Prepare.....	19
IV. To Meet Your Maker.....	27
V. Black Bomber.....	33
VI. Everyman is Underground.....	35
VII. He, Don Ism.....	41
VIII. I, Dee Ology.....	45
IX. Fuhgedaboutit.....	83
X. Do Your Homework.....	89
XI. The BFQ.....	95
XII. Complete Your Complex.....	101
XIII. Do You See What I See?.....	119
XIV. Musical Break.....	121
XV. A New Enigma.....	125
XVI. Spec Sheet.....	127
XVII. Pick A Mantra, Any Mantra.....	129
XVIII. A Poor Trait of the Artist.....	131
XIX. Subsynthesis.....	177
XX. Good Ol' Olfactory.....	207
XXI. Browse Free or Die Trying.....	208
XXII. Rob, Peter, "Toupee" Paul.....	219
XXIII. 'Nother Nursery Rhyme.....	225
XXIV. Need a Hand with That?.....	235
XXV. Live In the Moment.....	247
XXVI. A Coronavirus Carol.....	257
XXVII. Don't Mar My Log, O Captain! Or, Ante Bellum Maximum.....	273
Apocrypha	
XXVIII. Soul to Squeeze/Breaking the Girl(Medley).....	285
XXIX. Soul Sacrifice.....	287

I. (I'm a) Soul Man (Repeat 4x)²

So the long and short of it when Eddie comes clean is this:

I say to him Eddie, when you lied about your mother, I mean about everything before we met, whenever that was, it's just—I mean how do I know now it's not a lie, too?

Look he has his eyes lowered toward his mangled hand, which is stiff with congealed blood crusted over the tears in the flesh.

Look, I couldn't tell you before, you weren't on my side.

What are you talking about?

His face is cool, the whirring lenses study the wound carefully, and then justify to his brain this:

I know this is going to fester in the hospital, if you take me there. The doctors will cut it off, but the infection from the shards of micrometric carbonfiber which went deeper up my arm will already have my lungs and heart by then. Once I die, they'll autopsy me, and then they'll have the glasses. The goddamned establishment will have the glasses.

I can't fathom the origin of his urgency, even knowing how he's described their effect.

Understand—what the glasses let you see, it's only good for one man. One man ahead of them all, one man who cannot be contained. One man who sees light moving at him slower, one man readjusted to the circumstances so as always to have the upper hand. But all they will do when they come to understand them, the capitalists, they'll do what they did with personal computers, or Jesus. All those things the glasses make so real to me will be destroyed when they are commoditized into smithereens. It will be a phase changing phenomenon.

² Chorus to *Soul man* (Sam & Dave: 1967)

We'll all lose track of our senses, we'll all become enamored with the possibility of divine union, of communion of souls, of collective consciousness, but really it's all just lies, lies for profit...

It's only kind of convincing and mostly paranoid and I think Eddie's done talking on it as he's probing his hand with the silencer of the 1911. But then he adds:

Jonas Salk said he would give away penicillin for free because you couldn't put a patent on the Sun. See the reasoning? It's poetry. Pure idealism. Look at the present—now that you can profit off it doctors over prescribe and bacteria are evolving into worse more deadly creatures at a far more rapid rate.

He stops and points the gun at me.

If I go, the glasses go with me, got it?"

I nod.

I ran the medirithms to their asymptotes at full QRAM³ and it's not changing the diagnosis. I'm gonna die if I leave here tonight, and I told you it's not going to happen that way. So—

And then he cocks the pistol and flips it in his hand so the stock is facing me.

Do me in, brother. Be my assassin, send me to my maker, cover me in DEATH baby DEATH

He's frantic, and the blood starts to come out from his hand again, only now I can see it's got a hue like deep blue steel.

You're fucking crazy.

He's thrusting the gun at me now and I back off to stop him from hitting me.

My mind left me a long time ago, Slugger. I told you how these things work. My brain's just pictures, nothing but pictures. The parts are there but the order isn't. I can't put it all together, I CAN'T PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

³ Quantum Random Access Memory

He points the gun at me now and I duck away. He fires and nicks me in the leg. I have the sense he placed the bullet there, aiming to graze me.

Next ones at your temple.

Fuck you coward just stop FUCKING AROUND!

Listen. You need to do this. I'm not wired for suicide anymore. I told you I took those potentials out first thing when I remade the glasses. Too evil, too self-indulgent.

What about murder, then I surmise You can't fire that thing to kill.

I'm still crouched down though I know it'll do me no good if he can.

Fully capable of killing. Nothing wrong with killing someone in defense of the self in as far as I can tell. And that means I can kill you: but look I don't want to.

I turn my chin up because he's standing nearer to me now and he's handing me the gun again. I know better than to look into the glasses but want so bad to see his expression that I do anyway, and now I'm standing there with the gun aimed at his forehead right between the lenses.

Just do it he's cackling and I hear in the cackle all the laughter from all the kids I ever knew who beat me up: recall all the evil acts by people with power over me who made me feel like shit.

Take me down Charlie Brown just pull that mm-mm-good trigger easy now easy now

Then his brains are on me and I'm still staring into the glasses. Between us I hear it in my head:

That wasn't the whole of it what I told you only some—

—and there's a lurching from his stomach. He pulls a yellow book out from his shirt and hands it to me: I swear like he's still alive he hands it to me, and then the lights in his eyes go out, start to sputter and spark instead as if trying to destroy themselves. I go for them barehand: grab the right frame with a firm left claw and pull back but they're actually wired into his face so they rip off parts of his

skin when they come loose. I come to and realize what I'm doing, vomit violently into the gore and all over the corpse. But when I wake up in my apartment in the morning, it's just the book on my bed and the sense of having just dreamt, even though I can't explain how I got to where I am, as there's nothing there to prove any of it was real at all but the book itself anyway. It's a yellow book: *The Byzantium Diaries*.

Then I see that there's something set between the pages, so I pull it out and it's a drive for a PC. I plug it in and it's got the instructions for constructing the glasses. And it's like I made the file, because it's all been generated from the software I use: so when I see the halfworked pair of green lenses on the desk I know it was just a nightmare from that night when it happened, everything is well again and I'm back to work.

You see amidst the muddled romantic chaos of me and Eddie's backandforth there were moments of real, true and most vividly unmistakably for certain, clarity. As if oneness with God was coming through the pores: as if sunlight in fact carried all space and time as Einstein fathomed: as if trees and rocks and things like that were more than they were and only just for their being. And it was in these moments when the glasses came to me, well came to Eddie, who then showed me the concept of their function:

Time is moving forward when we talk about it in terms of age, music, money. But when we talk of time itself we are talking of that which moves expanding out in all directions, until at last you see the miniscule segment we possess in our conscious life and by virtue of one's nature you are thrown into crisis. So if it can really be broken down, the whole system undermined, then life becomes what we become when we are nearest death, by which I mean it's much easier if not something else entirely beyond all signs and signified.

So the glasses do just that which Eddie claims will free the spirit, slowing time by speeding up the brain.

Fickler forms of time travel like those partaken by The Psychedelic Prophets simply cannot be controlled the way the glasses can be. And could an acid addled brain be worth much in the end anyway? how would even the cloud in its enormity ever calculate for those infinitely complex and contradictory synapses flashing like Zeus's thunderbolts ad mortem, any better than beyond pretty neon pictures on an MRI? When a person is a visionary one day and suddenly snaps the next? With the glasses we're talking about inputoutput past the zeroandone and that's how I am here for you to see and only you, because you're the one I chose to see me by virtue of my vision.

It's a tricky thing to lay out to a layperson but here goes: the thousand/some odd lenses stacked in the zerofriction frames turn two hundred-million-millions times per second to refract the incoming light so it is moving faster than it should. When he perceives the information, it is a billisecond quicker than the rest of us. Of course that billionth of a second compounds upon itself, and now this far into the journey he is living in a future that won't be seen for centuries: he has diverged completely from the timeframe of the normal you-and-I.

But Eddie really is gone now: the one I knew. He could not land the leap. His blood is on my hands, was in my nostrils. Out driving sometimes when I see a green light glow in fog I taste the bits of brain that hit my mouth agape when I put one in him. He's gone, but I have his hardware, so no matter what else I try and do, no matter what tepid job I take and leave, I must above all things fix what I know will work so I can see again what he once showed me.

Because I saw it once, only once, when Eddie assumed I wasn't there, when he had removed the specs which I thought he never did to rub Burt's Bees® on the brownblack crusty craters around the in-

puts where his opal eyes had been. I saw them on the mantle still whirring and I stood there, statuesque in the dark doorway to the room where he kept his amp and computer until in one swift motion I had them pressed against my pupils: I saw Eddie growing old and dying, being born again, then dying, while the room lit up like moonlit snow or the sunshine through an autumn canopy. And all I heard was Eddie screaming *no nodamnyou no* and though he grasped for me I was always three steps ahead of him: hearing his thoughts before the words had formed for him to know to say, and when I took them off I saw that Eddie was still just there aloof and rubbing. And my eyes cried bloody tears as I laid me down to sleep that night but I do not need to worry now, I know what is ahead for me, for us, for everything that was and would ever be. It is there in the glasses. I will make them work again.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

II. Ante Bellum Longissimum

Eddie walks into the office with a leather jacket slung over his shoulder. He sees the shadow of the ten gallon hat on the wall beyond: Busto *the clown* is conducting business.

As expected. It's a room in the East Wing where the carpet is blood red and the walls desert yellow. Busto and his visitor are in the chamber designed to contain their conversation from bugs both hostile and friendly—China, Russia, Cuba, North Korea, South Korea, UK, Germany, the Saudis—and there's music playing over the speakers to further disrupt recordings so Eddie taps his toe to the tune of *Wake up Little Susie* (Everly Brothers, The: 1957) until he recalls the security monitor hung on the wall that he would be on, if he hadn't just sidestepped out of the cone of view as it pans on its axis. With some more fancy footwork he slips around the corner to a spot outside the reach of all surveillance, and from this vantage he sees the second shadow: the silhouette of a *keffiyeh*.

There's the sound of a door behind him and Eddie hovers. The pair of shadows jolt. With impossible thinness Eddie slides beside a mahogany pilaster. It's the Vice who's entered in a hurry and doesn't notice Eddie who kneels when he's past to get a better angle on the trio.

Everything is on schedule. Now he just needs to witness the handshake.

The conversation unfolds with the usual formalities. For a moment the Vice grimaces and Busto looks uneasy so Eddie positions himself for the maneuver: the Vice and the prince grasp at the wrist and Busto follows suit.

Sure I know ol'Sammy. Plays some raquetball don'ee?

That's his cue: he turns on the glasses.

ahem *Not ol'sammy, sir...*

The room is filled with an explosion of light. The walls have lost their material and the surfaces are delineated only by the vibrating strands of their corners, so that even the bullet-proof silence chamber has become nothing more than intersecting sets of the lines required to form each prism. When Eddie moves through space in this phase it is exponential so that every action is accelerated *and* time is aberrated to allow his easy navigation in a dimension that has the handy effect of also rendering him invisible insomuch as he is beyond the realm of vision. He sneaks snakelike through the distorted bluewhite miasma all around him up to the atoms of the chamber's glassplate walls and a cascade of electrons erupts where Eddie's knee first breaks the plane, so that he can slip through and get what he's come for.

With perfect stillness now he is in the chamber beside the three parties interlocked in their circular grasp. He removes the scalpel and the syringe: in a flurry of swift articulations of the wrists he has secured the substance and is backstepping through the gouge in the chamber wall that spurts frenetic electrons until he zips it shut with an outstretched index finger *zzzzzz-zuttt*.

Time is returning to its normal state of flux and Eddie has only seconds to exit the office and cross the hall to cruise through the kitchen and split out the wall along the west court so that he can escape by way of the rose garden. He sidesteps pressed against the West Wing out onto the parking lot and places the payload in the front chest pocket. He swings his leg over the black Honda with bright white-walls leaning on its kickstand at the curb beside the fence. The guards who had just noticed the bike's presence have begun to approach but with a tap on the temple Eddie enters a different mode and vanishes to leave the guards there scratching their heads.

It's an hour to IAD but with the glasses back on he can cut it down to 5 minutes. It's just long

enough to listen to *Power of Soul* (Hendrix, Jimi) which is queued up on the gyrostabilized tape deck so he drops the clutch and gases it from 17th to get onto Constitution 'til he's blazing down the dashed lane dividers on route 66 past the traffic that has slowed to a dim flickering crawl: the headlights projecting foggy beams whose photons whirl out in perfect spirals from the centerpoint of the lens and recede like vapor into darkness that is periodically permeated with the wave particles dancing as they emit from the highway lights towering above the asphalt. Eddie sails by with an eerie grin perceiving the liquidy forms reality takes when travelling this close to the speed of light. The distorted guitar solo screams on his speakers: Buddy hits the first chorus when he sees the exit for 267: *with the power of soul\anything is possible\with the power of soul\anything is possible* and it's a straight shot the rest of the way.

The bike dives and dips through the gaps around orange Toyotas and black limousines, commissioned SUVs, the fleet of middleclass vehicles that congest the four lanes approaching the terminal which Eddie navigates with magnetic buoyancy. He's got a spot reserved offsite so he drops the bike with the valet, tells him *tell your boss it's Eddie's* and turns his heel toward the terminal rising its suspended concrete roof on great leaned posts that beckon the travelers toward curtains of glazing hung in between.

Eddie's through the door and past the counters and kiosks when the glasses dull to a bleary gray which indicates they're low on juice. He slips in front of the security line with some delicate choreography and flashes his ID to the TSA who raises an eyebrow: it's a state license indicating he's blind. While he studies the document Eddie takes the opportunity to fling a telescopic white cane out in front of him for full effect.

Finally the officer signals to a man in a vest. *This way sir* he says and directs him to the front of the xray belt to take him through the metal detector and he doesn't even have to disclose the loot which he's sleighted up his shirtsleeve with the savvy of a card magician. When he gets to the other side he

slides it back into the jacket pocket sitting in the gray plastic bin, whips it over his shoulders and slips his wrists through the cuffs. Eddie thanks the attendant with a palmed hundo. *I can take it from here.*

He hops on the aerotrain that's sparsely populated with yuppies in jeans and sports coats, a few jittery families, the standard cast of foreigners. No one notices Eddie but he notices them each in the complexity of their minutiae. Sure he's fulfilled his directive, but still he can't help sizing them up. It's an instinct he likes to maintain and the setting makes for good practice. All it takes is some well placed glances—if you can determine the ratio of pupil to retina and the depth of the furrows in the forehead, then cross-multiply the max circumference of the cranium to the width of the mandible, it's just a couple more conversions to get your *classic rough estimate*.

Of course you can't know if you guessed it right until you perform the operation but Eddie with his aptitude can do the full assessment in a wink and he's never been wrong. He can't sense any whoppers in this tram car so he doesn't waste a syringe. Instead he turns on the glasses and takes the prop cane in both hands. As time slows to a near halt he lances the rubber gasket between the doors and pries them apart. Stepping through the gap and pulling himself to the roof of the car he splays out on his stomach then lifts his hands to grab hold of the maintenance ladder above him as the doors slide shut in slo-mo below. He gets up a couple rungs before the aerotrain bursts ahead through the tube with a sonic boom just missing the mahogany soles of his black leather boots. The glasses hum to a stop: dead.

No matter. From here he can get the rest of the way without the privilege of warpspeed: the steam tunnels that he's entered lead to the corporate jets. Now that the glasses have gone defunct Eddie really *is* blind but he's memorized the map and it's not long before he emerges from the manhole on the concrete pathway adjacent the tarmac. He projects the white cane but only to whack unconscious the curious ramper who's approaching him. He can see the plane ahead of him in his mind as he traces the

contours with his other senses. It's a Learjet 60. Cheap.

There's a thick cable on the ground that junctions with a transformer on a utility cart. It can reboot the spectacles so he puts one hand on his temple and grabs the cable with a crushing grip. Crackling bolts arc across his knuckles and shoot glittering over gritted teeth as the green glow grows on the lenses, til there's a *POP* when the fuse blows out and the singed cable snaps like a whip out of Eddie's hand. He adjusts his jacket by the lapels and takes a look toward the limo that's driving toward him on the tarmac. *Late as usual.*

The Cadillac pulls up and parks next to Eddie who's got his hands in the pockets of his jacket. With his left he's sending the canister back and forth around the tips of his fingers. The driver steps out and opens the door for Eddie to seat himself next to the man with gray hair cropped close to his scalp. He smiles through a stiff straight beard that comes to a blunt white point on his chin.

You made it here without any altercations I trust?

Eddie raises the corner of his mouth to half a smile. *Not a one.*

Given your record I'd expect no less his anticipation is starting to brim across his upper lip in spite of the decades of discipline, practiced composure *and the substance?*

Secured as promised.

Excellent m'boy.

Sure thing, Pops.

Eddie pulls out his hand in a fist, knuckles up. He flexes his thumb and the canister pops up between his pointer and middle fingers. The man with gray hair eyes it with visible hunger.

You're certain it will deliver?

It always does.

He takes a slender needle from the rose on his lapel and inserts it into the latex seal of the vial. With a delicate jab he nibs the surface of the fluid inside and retracts the needle then pulls down his eyelid and taps a vessel on the ball.

Ah—

Eddie knows he's made the sell so he examines the briefcase for its contents and offers the grayhaired man a handshake. He's smiling ear to ear, clutching the canister in one hand and the pricker in the other so he can hardly notice Eddie's outstretched hand, but when he does he sticks the pin back in its place and grips Eddie with gloved fingers. *Great work. Worth every penny.*

Eddie gets out and heads for his bike. The limo continues to the aircraft and the man with gray hair exits to climb up to the cabin door. Eddie straps the cash behind his saddle and swings his leg over. He kicks the asphalt and slings toward the runway. The plane has begun to taxi in the same direction as Eddie who is far enough down that he whips a 180 and revs. The turbines kick on and the plane starts its takeoff despite Eddie who drops the clutch and burns a thick black line behind him. He is about to collide with the fuselage as he rears back to pop a wheelie and manages to catch his front tire onto the surface of the plane's underside and it sticks to it like glue. With a drop of the wrist he gets the right gear and crawls along the body of the jet upside down until he dismounts with a tug right before the landing gear.

No one on board noticed the whitewall tire that burst through the floor of the fuselage as its rider decompressed the subatomic particles of the aircraft and swung in twisting his trunk above the bike that swung around, down, and around again in what's commonly referred to as a *backflip indian air* to avoid the passengers who had also become like trillions of tiny dots that hover in a fluidic postatomic plasma only Eddie can see. He was aiming for the bearded man's chest with his right hand when he jolted the bike above him, then below him, fully inverted, and pinched the canister from his lapel. He steers

through a gap in the membrane of the portholes that seemed to splice his being with theirs⁴ and the bike emerges, but does not return to its normal form until Eddie hits the button on his temple and the objects in space are restored. He's careening back towards the tarmac at a severe angle but his palm meets his temple and time slows just enough to give him the space to bring his acceleration up to speed with the ground below. He lets go of his glasses to grab the handlebar and hunches his shoulders as he hits the ground full-throttle, painting another black line on the pavement as he steers toward the access road.

Behind him there's a roar and a crash: *that's number one*. The jet's dived into the rough around Route 50.

He sticks one hand in his pocket to confirm he's got the loot; and so the tally has begun. In sixteen years he'll be looking back to this as *the night it all began*. He's got a lot of work to do before then: about one every two days. *To restore the balance and achieve the jump.*

⁴as if in the flatness of the skull in *The Ambassadors* (Holbein: 1533)

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

III. Prepare

The professor is dangling a plumb bob off the top of the tower. It oscillates to the foci of the earth as it descends, past windows into dormitories empty of their prior contents. No more the adolescent occupants who are off to the next accommodations and have left these rooms to the next set of incomings who will fill them with their cheap masonite desks and plastic furniture, 20 inch TVs attached to video game consoles, laptop computers, dirty clothes piling up like wet snow on the furniture with the clean clothes never leaving the basket from the laundromat, liquor bottles and pot paraphernalia hidden in the drawers where the clean clothes should be, minifridges stocked with beer, sweaty deli meat, moldy bread, aluminum cans of energy drinks and glass jars of instant coffee competing for attention on bookshelves crowded with textbooks, notebooks, required reading novels, three ring binders, yellow Ticonderoga® pencils and black Bic® pens protruding from red plastic cups, and leaning against the garbage cans, empty cereal boxes stacked like bricks beneath Styrofoam ramen bowls replaced by bottlecaps, tobacco spit, ashes from hastily smoked joints, discarded trident, wrappers from microwave burritos, for the garbage will have been full for a week before it is emptied. But now the quarters are spick'n'span and the plumb bob drops past until it plops on the grass beside the foundation and the prof feels the line go slack. *Just as I thought* he observes *too short a drop for that force of impact*: in fact with a quick calculation he determines the kid needed to have been dropped from up another fifty feet, and he tilts his head up to envision five stories higher in the air between him and clouds. He turns and leans his elbows on the parapet to wind the string back up in broad loops as he ponders another possibility: *he was thrown down*.

But who could throw a living struggling body from up here, with the acceleration equal to five stories of gravity? Did some monster emerge from a portal to hell and whip him down after wrapping him in its giant tentacle? Or some alien being with telepathic powers get him in a kinetic grip and hurl his suspended form by gestures of wormy fingers? Again he glances up fifty feet and attempts a meditation to ignore the fantastic explanations. His concentration hits an apex and there is the sensation of being lifted from his gut so he steadies himself. *Was this tower the same height that night? How could it not be* is the rhetorical reply. So who was the thrower?

The professor takes his pendulum and heads for the fire escape. Above him the clouds are dispersing into wisps of white and gray against the purpleblue sky. The moon is risen and beginning to glow. Rust and paint from the fire ladder stain his hands orange and black so that when he is back on the ground he has to wipe them on his tattered jeans leaving smears of grime on his thighs that read like burnt Rorschach blots. Surely the answer is in that stain in the fabric somewhere stuck against a fiber. There is an internal strain to see the meaning: fruitless. He twirls the weight to trace a circumference in the darkness before him. It will be five miles back to the lab so he begins a calculation on the scenario of the accelerated body: takes the mass, finds the velocity of impact of the body, takes the product, doubles it, considers a couple quantities for time of impact, finds their quotients, but all conclusions are the same, and it seems some superhuman force would be required to shoot him down off the roof at the initial velocity that would cause the force of impact required to crush the kid's body. Beneath his feet the road turns to grass when he veers off the shoulder into the field before the woods. He can remember a place like this in the town where he was born, setting for tree houses built high up in the maples from discarded 2x4s and fenceposts, shipping palettes, tar paper, rope, logs, and nails, where one could spend all day finding something to build or fix or another tree to climb and conquer. Instead these trees host thick

brown vines shrouded in kudzu. The pale yellow undersides of the leaves glance soft blinking moonlight. The sound of insects rises in chorus and sets the backdrop for a thousand different rustling creatures, a dozen cooing birds—

Let's take this thing to the whole world, Eddie would tell me. Let's give them all our clips and they'll fire away he'd say, so sure of what they'd fire *at*. But he knew better by then than to fall for his shiny bits of wisdom like fools gold still covered in mud. What he needed was the *truth*.

I can't promise you that Eddie would say only that the truth exists.

The professor realizes he has begun to doze off in his seat and snaps out of a hazy recollection of the day before. Around him the waning light casting silhouettes of gently swaying leaves against the red rusted metal across from him to signal the start of the sunset. Sliding the chair back beneath the particleboard and melamine tabletop to the far end of the warehouse he lifts the blue tarp dividing his cot and lamp from the remainder of the overgrown volume, ties it back down from the inside, lays with his hands folded on his chest to rest until moonrise.

Then in dulling consciousness, bizarre and gruesome images arrest his reeling mind: first he is careening off a rollercoaster cliff in an old *Pinto* and landing it like a cat on an island in the sea of black below and spilling out when the thing comes apart *thwop* like a chocolate orange. Someone pulls him to safety—long black hair: a cool quick grasp. Now he is in a room in an old Victorian by a derelict fireplace calling for help *I can't get the gas valve to stop* and the fumes fill the room painting it in vibrating striations of intoxicating graygreen vapor stinging his lungs till he chokes but is stuck as if planted in cement so he can't leave the room. The fire crew comes but when they arrive they are too concerned with their break-

fast brought in pails, directed by an oversized oompaloompa: them all sitting on fire blankets spread out in the shade of giant oak trees on the mansion's manicured lawn. The professor is miming giant gaping screams through the glass but he cannot generate sound: only the echo of a yell as a whisper despite the straining sinews about the neck, the laboring diaphragm, the unbearable feeling from the back of his gut to the top of his temples, the room growing buoyant with the gas now: so that he is lifted up as a dirigible and still the firemen do nothing being preoccupied by the giant sandwiches which are also blimplike and must have been first deflated to fit in the small lunchpails scattered on the grass below them. He is gasping: the breath gone—

—and there in the darkness a slideshow of some cartoonish abstract terror: nine bodies one by one flash before him, posed to face him but the faces are gone: like a pantheon of demons each one distinct though generally the same: they are in the uniforms of businesspeople and move a bit as if to prove capable of animation but the skin is gray and loose and when he reaches the faces: now a slideshow so he sees their grotesque countenances all fleshy and red from ear to ear and crown to chin and where the orifices should be instead strange bonelike protrusions that are the suggestion of sea creatures—the eyes are clusters of fanned cartilage from a lobster claw's thumb joint and the mouths of teeth like spindly rib bones on a fish's spine: for ears nautilus shells and pairs of nostrils formed by anemones and now he sees the hands are not digital but tentacle—some of them singular, some of them multiple, each one wriggling and contorting, and he has the sense that he is witnessing the victims of a maritime massacre transfigured into undead demikraken.

He was transfixed on the terrible vision when his eyes opened: he jolted awake. It was midnight as the chime on his watch informed him and he had to get back to work. The next day was deadline for a batch of new uppers he was poised to get into circulation before finals week at The University. The pro-

fessor worked in the pitchblack of midnight to protect the precious photosensitive molecules, without the means for a darkroom in the wrecked and holeridden aluminum skin of the warehouse. He had managed to lift a decent pair of nightspecs from the hunting section of a laquedaisical Swellmart that was one of a dozen or so such shopping centers from which he managed to siphon supplies to keep his lab in tactful order. Swellmart was particularly useful if you knew how to access the Swellmart welfare program. It went like this: since Swell's was not requiring a receipt to return items that were less than \$50, if you lifted something under \$50 you could *return* it and get the value in cash straightup. You had to make a good sell and some items were rigged to require deactivating a security device before it could leave the store without sounding the alarm or what he called *landmines*. The cash was useful since to get the most eclectic or illegal ingredients—ergot for the acid or ephedrine for amphetamines—he was forced to resort to legitimate transactions in person or over the dark web. He learned Mandarin and found public computers he could route to the websites of Chinese chemical plants to have the various salts and compounds delivered discreetly to a gas station he had blackmailed to front for him with videos of its back alley prostitution scheme. There he could also acquire tanks of gasoline to fuel his generator *gratis*.

That night the professor was not concerned with the acquisition of any new provisions though he took a quick inventory of the tools in his arsenal: sixty-three pipettes from 10 mil to 50, twenty rubber bulbs, eleven beakers two of them cracked and healed with duct tape over epoxy, a dozen new flasks still in sterile bags and boxes, half as many Bunsen burners, a butterfly knife affixed with an old Zippo flint with which to start them, two handfuls of hoses, a pair of percolators, three steambath setups ranging from new to nearly broken, a copper still, a glass still, a stainless steel still, a sleeve of Petri dishes, a five gallon bucket full of valves and gaskets, a couple sets of Pyrex, plastic funnels, metal funnels, paper filters, carbon filters, three hot plates, a rice maker, glass tubes and spirals, vent ducts, area fans, fat orange ex-

tension cords lying in twists and bundles, some of them attached to red blackroom lights in cages, all plugged into surge protectors plugged into more surge protectors plugged into an inverter and then to the Life Force, the gasoline generator, built from a rotting cheater Volks smuggled out of the *tdi* graveyard behind the old Lions stadium in '15 and a set of six car batteries awaiting the professor to light the sparkplug and set autocruise for 120V to get the operation going. He pulled the keys jingling off a rusty nail on the wall and started her up: exhaust channeling out through a snake of PVC and up to the roof with the motor getting hot and the batteries beginning to hum in their cases, as the lights came on to paint the array of glass objects bloodred against the green vined interior turning leaves brown and black in the safelight, his fingers starting to tingle in anticipation.

It was time to open the cabinet where the vials of stage-one product sat equilibrating since the night before, and some of them had formed long thin crystals at the surface with a few gone to shit from contamination. The successful lot of batch A were sorted and brought to the counter where a burner was lit and with steady hands he moved to stage-two: extract the crystals with a dropper to distribute evenly on a calcium-ether base. React at constant temperature for sixteen to seventeen minutes until crystals turn yellow then immediately bathe in dry-ice. Collect new compound in Petri dish. Bring this gradually to 26 degrees and add 107 ml of one part manganese salt to two parts methanol. Place in glass still and bring rapidly to 35 degrees. Collect condensation in 1 L flask. React at 34 degrees with 0.7 L ephedrine and distill again through stainless steel still at 42 degrees. Spread liquid over 12 degree cold plate. Allow crystals to form (twenty three-to-twenty six minutes) and place in slow vacuum (for this he had an old Oreck rigged to a hole cut in a pyrex tube mounted with silicon) until brown liquid evaporates leaving only bluegray powder. Mix powder 1 part to 100 parts gelatin and press into tablets: *presto*.

The Prof had to test the material so he popped a pill and found the marble notebook he had

acquired that morning to flip to a spot yet unperused, feeling dreamlike and euphoric as he read the sentences that began to bounce on the page:

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

IV. To Meet Your Maker

I came up with the godhelmet concept when I was sixteen. Really I just stole it from TV—I saw it on PBS: there's a scientist who found the gland that makes you feel god. All he had to do was sit you down and zap you for a couple seconds in the right neuron center and you'd have an epiphany on cue. I drew up a prototype and applied for a patent. I thought I'd make a killing. But I got Zilch. Just lost the money I'd saved all summer working the pool on the fees. It was kid stuff.

The important part was finding Eddie on the internet. I was buzzing over New Christian and I caught an icon hidden toward the bottom. It took me to another site, all black except for AQU in white so I opened up the html and in green beneath the three letters I found the manifesto: every futurescene Eddie'd ever interpreted plus the ones he hadn't figured out yet scribbled out in logical order from that present to The End. But it wasn't the New Christian end that I had come to understand from the pseudosermons posted on the New Christian Blog: these essays were all one form or another of Apocalypse with modern history as evidence all culminating in the interpretation of the symbols of John 13 with Realman as the harbinger of miracles that rain fire from the sky and Rumf himself the manchild who controls all buying and selling with a mark in the hand or forehead and brings forth the beast numbered Six hundred Threescore and Six a number that foretells the invention of the USA 666 years after 1111 which are among the ritual numbers of the occultomasonic intraterrestrial bloodsucking behemoth that has control of all civilized humanity.

This incognito version of the truly futurevisioned end described the destiny of a society where citizenry is eroded by controlled doses of radiation, human logic is slave to a network of cybernetic implants, and a movement prepares to abandon their solar system and its exploding sun. There was no God in this truth: just

miles of mathematic proofs and a string of practical prophecies inside a philosophical doomsday narrative which called the New Christian Movement the first step toward truly redeeming humanity of its psychosuicidal infatuation with the aesthetics of technology, denial of the divine, nihilistic science worship.

Authorship was difficult to determine but I could tell the guy had guts and influence. I wanted a piece of the action, so I wrote him through a torrent he'd made accessible to hackers about the godhelmet and if he'd want to fund it. Days, weeks, months went by with no reply. It was a year later when I turned eighteen: he emailed me back with an address unencrypted and signed his name Eddie Motion. I thought it was pseudonym until I met him at the bar and he proved he had it on his license. I asked him if the card was counterfeit and he told me there's nothin' fake about Eddie Motion like he would always say: smiling through his bullshit. Rather than lose time inquiring further I just assumed he was telling the truth and knowing what I know now about the way to act in accordance with what I have received via Eddie's eyes—that perfect vision of the future—indeed it has all come to be as Eddie had described.

Back then I was concerned less with Armageddon than the feasibility of a profitable godhelmet. Any interaction I had with him pertained to its production: was it practical? sure, it had a use that was in demand: would it cost too much? no, the components were common parts easily procured from China: will the possibility of danger be too high? nothing a waiver and a lawyer couldn't handle. I was convinced of the necessity of the invention to the salvation of modern man and I thought I was grooming mistermotion to ultimately join in a partnership with the deal. In my ignorance of The Plan that Eddie had set into play decades earlier, I exposed the innocence of my soul to his marauding eyes and in my conceit I thought that his proposal that I come to his company was a signal that he wanted to help me with the project. In my enthusiasm I only saw the posi-

tive possible outcomes of the opportunity and I needed the money so when he asked me if I'd join him I told him I'm on board but will you cover some overhead on the godhelmet for 20% return?

I couldn't really read him through the glasses but something quivered in his lip when he brought his scotch to it and sipped. Yeah I'll cover it he told me but let me ask you this: who needs a godhelmet when you've got souls?

Then he flipped a couple bills on the bar and left walking. I knew better than to follow him out.

Two weeks later I get another message and rendezvous with Eddie at Bar B. He's wearing a black shirt with a collar that's white all around. In the middle he's got a black tie and above he's still hiding his eyes behind big 50's wayfarers. He never takes them off: just pulls them back up his nose when they start to slip. He showed up to the bar on an old Honda with whitewalls and chrome spoke covers and the headlight just barely glowing right after midnight. I ask about the origins of NCM and he throws back a shot of rye in such a way that the liquor floats between the glass and his mouth like we're drinking at zero-G before it hits his gullet and I see a faint green halo emitting from behind the thick black lenses.

I started New Christian in 1999. All that stuff in the news about the y2k myth—that computer clocks would reset to 1900 and trigger the collapse of the power grid, meltdown the international banks, abort the operation of the antimissile defense wall, shutdown breathing machines, the whole shebang: *I just brewed it up to herd more sheep.* Think of it: The Whole World Erased by a Couple of Kilobits! After computers had come to their full glory and permeated the edifices of society with the promise of making life easier they would be the thing to *destroy us all!*

⁵The soul walks not upon a line, neither does it grow like a reed. The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals. (KG)

People could not understand the enormity of the lie unless they were deep in the data stream or at least mostly understood how computers work: and for the white evangelichristian luddite conservative uneducated middle to lower class that make up the belly of the country, paired with the oldschool upper echelon who resented the way the tech revolution empowered the working class nerdosphere, it was too fantastic a notion to pass up on. Thus my fraud was widely spread: and from the number of blog hits I was getting from the pilot posts that originated in the rust and bible belts proved my suspicions of hysteria were confirmed. So I used Y2K as the fundamental apocalyptic belief of NCM which at the time stood for *No-Computer Manifesto*, and then I garnered more membership on that lie alone than anything I could come up with to supplant it.

As Y2K dawned and I knew naught would come to pass as I had foretold, I adjusted my audience's attention to their inevitably imminent doom and the redeeming power of Christ. The poor folks were caught in the paranoia I implanted with my false prophecies: it was just a matter of posting enough algorithmically scripted interpretations of the New Testament to encourage my following to forget about the whole y2k scare entirely. To redirect the attention of their superegos to the intoxicating bipolar phenomena of guilt and repentance of sin, with nothing more than a few changes to the pseudosermon code, I would parse and reparse the Good Book for supporting evidence, then order it in a manner determined by bell curve sampling of the recurrence of phrases, the pattern of the meter, the length of sentences, among the other variables. When entered through the app this put out a convincing stream of literature promoting the truth of the coming New Christian doomsday. By 2001 I was spiritually guiding a hundred an' eighty-thousand and now, well it's in the millions. Not that I even keep track of it any more.

He's been drinking from a tall glass. Now it's just the ice. When he turns his head to order more it's the first time I can tell he's got guards like blinders going back on his rims so you can't see his eyes from the sides.

I still have servers doing the iterations. The oeuvre has grown such that all the computers need to do is select a couple old sermons, cut them apart, stitch the parts back together, *voila* new sermon: the movement perpetuates. Multiply that by a couple dozen processors for the different sects and corresponding heretics that have formed since its inception, and I can spew out internet subscription BS across whole continent. I feed their desire for answers to the questions of eternity and the tithings come in. All over the world it's working that way and of course it's growing and ebbing as people change faith but look

And he gets me dead in the eye with those damn glasses so I see myself in them.

Once they're hooked they're there for the reaping.

I nod. For our purposes you mean.

For anyone's purposes. Anyone who can *pay*. We're talking *wholesale*.

After he finished the second drink we stepped out to part ways. *Come back here same time tomorrow* he says with his leg over the bike: headlight like a candle in the fog of the dawn. *Don't tell anyone* and he shoots off into inkblack under a moonglow haze.

The next night at the bar Eddie's outside smoking and I'm watching television. There's a loud noise and he comes running to tell me there's an accident out front.

Let's get out of here or the cops will grill us. So we sneak through the back and hit the next bar over to talk about the purposes of his cult.

I'm not in the business of influencing the public merely to bolster my power over their reason. Y2K, New Christian, the pseudosermons—it's all a bunch of potboiler bullshit. And that's not why I tapped you for this particular project.

I hadn't thought of it like *I'd* been chosen til he'd said it like that: but then I saw it was really *his* plan all along even before my first communiqué. I recalled the details of the manner in which I had encountered the godhelmet concept: the PBS doc that inspired my prototype must have been placed in my Youtube® feed to bait me: the research material appearing as if by magic in the local library days after I'd requested it: the torrent to the cracked drafting software that included the developer options I needed to draw up the design and run the simulations was the first hit on the web search results. *Eddie* planted the godhelmet seed and let it bloom under my watch so I would feel ownership. Now I felt like a farce.

So did you ever intend to bring the godhelmet to production or was this all just a way to get me under your thumb?

Just keep working on your wrist he told me godhelmet or not we're gonna get a billion of those fuckers at once.

V. Black Bomber

In the sheen of the dawning sun on the maze of pipettes and cylindrical tubes extending from beaker to beaker, the professor blinks and finds himself half awake with the marble notebook fallen open on his lap. He is having a vision: there is Eddie's blackshadowed face, the handful of acid tabs held out in front, shimmering teeth that grin and become beams of light which finally bring him back into consciousness. It is the last day of the hot/cool cycle and the crystals will be ready to harvest. He rises from his cot with tattered leather shoes already on his feet and walks past the trumpet back in its case. There is the urge to play it again with the accompaniment of insects still humming in the background but it is time to harvest and the thought leaves him when he sees the refrigerator: its white enamel glowing in the clear cool light of dawn that leaks through the holefilled roof as an aura.

The next step will require an emulsion of 2-methylindole and oxalyl chloride to be heated and stirred forming the reaction medium that will be added to the crystals dropwise until they break down into a bright orange paste. This will then be washed with diluted HCl, followed by H₂O, and dried over anhydrous dimethylamine. The last steps require the removal of the solvent with a vacuum and the induction of final-phase crystallization by scratching the surface with isopropyl cyclohexane.

The professor is prompting his equipment when he spots a glass jar, painted black, sitting adjacent a stand full of beakers. Someone, presumably himself, had scratched on the tin lid three letters delineating its contents. Beneath these letters: a rudimentary skull with an X below it, no doubt an attempt at humor. He glances at his watch: the effect of the jar's contents will last no longer than five minutes and he is ahead of schedule, so he scurries for a pipe and finds the old lighter in his jacket. He takes the jar and his setup to the darkest corner of the room to unscrew the lid. The crystals are yellowbrown and

pasty. With a tiny spoon he scoops the proper amount for a quick trip and lays it delicately in the bowl of the pipe. A pause: *I will want to be sitting for this* and goes cross legged to the floor.

The jar has its lid back on with its jolly roger aimed at him for good company and he holds the pipe in front of his lips to form the downward embouchure. The lighter clicks to strike the flame that vaporizes the chemical and he fills the pipe with opaque white smoke. He inhales again, holds: goes black. In his distraction he could not see that Eddie is standing there across the room leaning on the fridge with his elbow and his head perched on his palm wearing a familiar grim grin. He steps toward the professor who has doubled over in a dismal lurid state unlike anything to be seen while awake. He picks up the jar, opens it, sniffs the contents with a knowing look, replaces it, crouches down, waves his hands in the professor's stoned gaze, whistles shortly. He recognizes that in the chemical ecstasy he's triggered his presence will be entirely forgotten in the effect of the afterglow like a dropped splice of film. Satisfied, he gets up and walks the perimeter until he finds a little metal cabinet screwed into the wall. It's pad-locked but Eddie's got the wits to pick it open and when he does: a shiny 1911 and a little pile of black capsules. He leaves the firearm but pockets the pill, and with the prof mumbling gibberish to the dream beings he's encountering Eddie steps to the threshold, stops, and with a flash of the eyes switches two beakers in the stand the professor was preparing. With his finger to his lips *shhhhh* he backs out the moldy door that swings shut after him.

Then lapsing back he is in the corner opposite the fridge and drops the needle on the Philips record player to start the B-side of *Boston* (Boston: 1976). The professor peaks at the third crescendo in *Rock N' Roll*. Eddie observing the physical indications: waiting for the critical moment: then in the empty space between *Smokin'* and *Hitchin a Ride*, Eddie steps out again.

VI. Everyman is Underground

Sometimes in the morning before they had met he would try and separate the moments with a couple of hits in bed. Dreams becoming perception, then reaching their end in an instant. And in that instant a million instants all at once delivered by some mystic firing squad. All of them perfect, then a minute later not a single one to be recollected. *You can't stay in your dreams forever* Eddie had to remind him from time to time. Even when it seemed as if the weeks themselves had really been dreamed, or that someone who knew better than he was really guiding the way, he had to think back to Eddie's saying *never forever* like a sinister kind of medicine that knocks you out by waking you up.

Once while Eddie was showing him the ropes he fell into an enormous hole out in the woods somewhere with walls that bent in to a dome with the hole at the top. In there, spinning delirious for a solution he could see them all: the Greek Gods like fiery statues hidden in dark flames and each of them portraying their mythical deeds in a simultaneity of animation that seemed to last for eternity until Eddie nudges him awake like a kid with a stick poking at a bug. *Do you feel different?* he asked with his eyebrows arched high above the glasses.

No, of course not and he is back at his desk typing with his left hand, eyes on the screen, right hand on the mouse. *When are you going to start liking this shit?* was it Eddie's question or one of his own? a parable or a silvery catchphrase? *can't everyone be what they want most to be. Can't everyone be rich and happy. Don't work like that.*

You thought it would be different after you graduated: you'd be the forerunner of righteousness. Never compromise. Never end up like your pops in the big corporation. Show people *the light* and be a leader in a culture that would make work *meaningful*. Now here you are: worse than your father: in fact *envying* him. What he lacked in being quoteunquote *cool* he at least made up for in success, provisions for his family, palpable affection. Here you are at the desk all hunched over because you left your backbone on the coat rack when you came in: you go home and have a limp dick because you've been taking shit all day from people who don't respect you any more than you can be exploited, and the one who pays you only cares if your ratio is good, but he's cooking the books anyway so it's only your own pride that keeps you clicking away: only the *ethic* is maintaining the all important ratio: the real *passion* has been sucked out leaving only the rind: your graying wrinkling skin over automatic muscles dancing to the tune of pecuniary gain *and nothing to show for it but objects and debt*. Let go of yourself to the warm embrace of *mother system*. Ignore the immature desires of the lower self *or is it this desire that is noble? What is there in the absence of desire?*

Last night they had a fight. The thing began five, six months ago, before they were in the new house. The eight month yorkie was already in the other room whining like he had to piss and he started yipping like a banshee when the fight reached its physical crescendo: the man threw his fist against the carpet so he could feel his knuckles take the blow against the floorboards, the joists, knowing damn well it might sound like hell to the neighbors but *fuck it*, otherwise his head might have exploded.

When he calms down and apologizes she won't buy it: too mad about the whole thing to be at all impressed. He resorts to angry talking and she to the same until it culminates in a yelling match which could *definitely* be heard by the neighbors and up there in the black ink serenity of midnight in the moun-

tains, probably the whole neighborhood. But so be it as it's necessary: let the quiet ones have *their* reality: *this is ours*. So they settle it in the morning, one leg intertwined with the other, no real *sorrys* but enough there in the holding, the kissing, the clutched knuckles and locked gazes, ignoring the odors of sweat and dog urine.

When he sees her at work that afternoon he's reading a book that's supposed to be like Kafka. She tells him *they said it might have been because of the pregnancy* and he reframes that scene in his mind: the confession of the miscarriage, she crying at the bloodball of dead cells in the toilet and he trying hard not to so they shall not both descend. Now here it is again in the public of the little park by the side of the river and her lip just starts to quiver. That bloody pulp, that bud of a soul: the water lapping against the rocks. *Don't cry. It's okay. I'm sad too. It will be okay.*

One month later to the day they fight again. This time the dog's downstairs barking and biting at their ankles and they raise their voices over the din that duly grows until the dog gives up, defecates, and rummages around growling. For days it feels like it will never end. His grandmother used to say *the best lobster you ever had is the one you're eating now*. The inverse proves true for fights with this one happening now being the worst one ever. But by God it ends and resolves itself by His divine force so they make love while the dog wets the carpet. *I'll clean it* he says even though it's her turn *at least it's not number two again*.

Now they are driving through the snow: he and Eddie with the fog lights on through snowflakes that float forward to make white lines in the glow but never land on the windshield. *Did you have the dream again* Eddie asks.

Each time it gets more precise he answers recalling the specific body parts dismembered in his rage. The first time it was just a painting like a red Pollock but now it's a three act play. First the head then the teeth then the throat. I can feel the blood on my face when I wake up. It glues my eyes shut and paints my lips with salt. I can see the man I am killing: see him dead and then his eyes open as mine do. Eddie nods and pushes his glasses back up his nose. Futurescene number eight forty-seven: The Decapitation and Reanimation.

So you're sure it's a futurescene?

Positive.

The snow has stopped so he flicks on the brights. A bird takes off from behind a highway sign. *Aft City: 20.* At first it seems it has no head but then he sees it's the squat neck and flat face of an owl and it lofts up lumbering with wings like an eagle over, now behind them:

A punch to the jaw with a knee to the crotch. Two hands on his head twisting and pulling and then down on the knee: ferocious. Blood on the man, blood on him, blood everywhere. The first time he'd had the dream when he had left the hospital: *the man who is Satan spraying blood on the walls and covered in it but still some flesh visible white like puss and ice until the whole room's soaking in it and he wakes up.* Was it some pagan god? he continues to ideate the futurescene to his companion: a kick to the teeth and stomping the neck at the trachea really digging in with the heel at the end of it over and over until it's just wet blackred rags.

This too is when Eddie would strike: take the soul at its nadir, when it could not be objectively perceived amidst the fury of the desire for vengeance, not to mention that particular hue of despair and rage that would go for ten times the standard product on the market. In this case Eddie had reached a

low of his own as his glasses had ceased to function just as opportunity arose. But there were other methods.

Take this Eddie tells me and stretches out a small black cylinder with a bright silver button. *Hit it.*

I put it to my lips and press the button. A hot vapor streams out as I breathe in. I feel the headrush of a cigarette but it's more than that. Eddie grabs the wheel and I feel us pull over and peter out. Apparitions are appearing in the fog of reality that separates from my brainplane. Someone is whispering in my ears until it is the roar of the ocean and—

—the driver collapses: Eddie acts fast and snatches a scalpel and syringe from inside his jacket, pinches the neck and jabs it with the needle. He pokes an imperceptible hole in the skin with the slightest touch of the scalpel to equalize the pressure and the chamber of the syringe fills with the silvery green blue liquid. Eddie replaces the tools inside his jacket and swabs away a drop of blood with the black knit cuff of his jacket, feels the weight in his palm: *it's a keeper.*

His bike is stashed up the road so he checks his victim's pulse and lets his seat back til it's fully reclined. When he comes to he won't remember a thing. If the cops find him and test him he'll be clean: the sedative is out of the system already. Eddie closes the door and zips up his jacket against the snowflakes so delicate they wisp around him like dust as he trudges toward the tree where he hid his Honda. The kid is in for a rough time when he will begin to feel the effects of the drug hangover along with the absence of his essence like the center of the universe collapsing in the pit of the stomach and the vacuum consuming the atoms of his being until the identity has disappeared to be replaced by a thirst for something that cannot be identified: a desperation for what cannot be articulated: a nauseau: a terror: *where is my soul?*

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

VII. He, Don Ism⁶

Farmer is not out in the field behind *Sinkers* to find Eddie there fumigating his eyewear, he's just relieving himself against the skeleton of a birch tree with a beer bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other. But he's drunk enough to ask the nocturnally bespectacled dude for a hit of the *good stuff* as he tucks his dick back behind his fly and zips up with the bottle hitting against his thigh and splashing as he avoids catching his foreskin. Eddie's smile hovers in the cosmos: half his mind's here and half of it's there. He flicks the grimy burnt butt from his lips and reaches in his shirtpocket for a fresh bomber, book of matches. With some sleightofhand he snaps the match alight in his fingers, tokes to catch it, offers it: *here, knock yourself out.*

John throws his cig underfoot to use thumb and pointer pincers to take the uncharred end of the J from the guys hands and notices black leather gloves. With an eyebrow raised he puts it to his lips and inhales until he tastes a familiar stink and holds it in. *Thanks my man I owe you wah—*

Because just as he exhales he has the overwhelming realization that this is not the substance he'd expected throughout: now he is falling backwards but the ground never rises to hit his body. Instead he is shot up through the atmosphere and into black space. The plane of his vision is bent into an enormous dome and he can tell he is underground surrounded by shimmering undulating orbs that speak in

⁶ There are some disciplines that operate beyond the strata of Professionalism in the sphere of the intangible. In the thinnest air above the clouds the material world can only invade in temporary flares that to the inhabitants of the metaphysical fields appear as if fish leaping shining from the surface of the sea gulping through secant gills before falling back in a diver's furtive splash. A glimpse of the greater picture like a yellowgreen sunstain on the pupil: some form of what was but faded to black as the world of origin returns and inks it out. This may be the realm of the enlightened: hospice to the bodhisattvas and prophets: belonging outright to the buddhas and saviors: fenced from concern and desire: the place where the spirit is unified with the Other: transfigured by sunbeams to an impalpable ether neighboring the ancestor spirits and relinquishing being as if sin is filtered out and replaced by the purity of paradise. Hence we find Eddie entranced though to John Farmer he appears merely puffing the coal of a roach down to stiff pursed lips looping clouds of smoke back out that paint ghoulish silhouettes in his Wayfarers.

tongues and fill him with warmth. There is too much to comprehend and by the time he acknowledges his desire for comprehension he is back behind *Sinkers*: ass on the grass, beer bottle empty, the joint gone with Eddie who has disappeared from the perch.

I get up, wipe the mud off my pants, clutch the back of my head which is stinging like hell. *Whatthefuckwasthat*. I go back inside the bar proper but Volvo and the rest of the gang have dissipated. I see on the clock that an hour has passed since I went out for the piss and found the guy with the glasses. Tomorrow's a workday so it's time to turn in anyway. I start the trek back to HQ.

When I get home I lay on the couch sideways so I don't vomit and asphyxiate. My phone falls out of my pocket to the floor and I leave it there. A headache is emerging. Somehow I pass out.

A terrible dream: the guy with shades takes them off and hands them over. His eyes are neon. The glasses are on my face and I'm seeing a scene of The City: it is like two footage reels of the towers overlapping so that in one reel a plane hits Tower 1, like back in 2001: but in the overlapping image a second plane hits Tower 2: and as smoke billows out from the holes a closeup of the fenestration adjacent the damage where men and women in suits and skirts and uniforms plunge from the windows some headfirst some thrashing in their final moments others already dead in the air so their bodies fall like ragdolls into the chaos below them consigned to fate before the scene returns to the panorama and Tower 2 collapses straight down as explosions shoot out from top to bottom at the rate of freefall like a controlled demolition. In the destruction a tempest of pulverized concrete and vaporized carbon exhudes from the foundation where the building disintegrates: and then Tower 1 falls in the same exact manner: straight down in its own footprint at freefall speed. Only when I see the clouds of dust and smoke grow mammoth and spread like tidal waves through the street grid do I realize the chorus of

moans and screams and cries of anguish woe and terror that have been blaring at me since the sick slideshow began. And then as I am saturated with the horror of these scenes and the overwhelming agony of the dying sounds of thousands of people in a flash the scene is gone: the towers look like they do today: with the glass and steel repair by the great architect LW where the plane hit Tower 1 back in 2001 like a glistening beacon of hope RG called it and a reminder that the likes of terrorism will never succeed in This City or This Country was the rest of it.

The guy is there again, his green eyes glowing and he takes the shades off my head to replace them on his.

What the hell was that.

The Towers. What could have happened.

The extent of the terrorists' plot? Fully executed?

Exactly. And I didn't even show you Tower 7. Or the Pentagon. Or PA.

Jesus—

In a sense. Certainly a sign of the apocalypse. Though not necessarily an indicator it has been initiated.

I just mean... well for starters who the hell are you?

Something like that. But call me Eddie. He sticks out his hand and I grasp it. It's cold and stiff like metal. *There's something I need you to do* he says with his voice that sounds like a vinyl record. *I can't tell you what just yet. But when it's time you'll know. Remember: the best way to reach me is by the radio. Stereo preferred.* Take this and he shoves a fortune cookie in the palm of my hand *don't crack it open until the time comes.* Then he disappears into black as I wake up drooling on a throw pillow.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

VIII. I, Dee Ology

Next day we have work out in the county. Volvetti and I are in the habit of driving to and from work along the same highway every morning, like most people. So how come when we're driving there I look left and I see this record shop all blown out with neon signs and whatever that I never noticed?

Volvetti's like *what are you talking about? that's always been there* but he's still asleep and his eyes aren't even open so I know it's bullshit like half the stuff he says. Volvetti's alright though; meaning he's not too much of a shithead most of the time. But I know what I saw and this place sprung up in less time than when I drove past it on the way back last night. After the dream with Eddie things seem surreal and I feel like I need to check the place out. I tell him we're stopping there on the way back today and he says whatever.

Work's okay that day. We're up on one millionaire's property grooming his landscape. They got a view out off the mountain that can really clear your head which is just what the doctor ordered given my condition. But there's some catches to this piece of paradise. One of them is there's all sorts of venomous spiders crawling around. The other day we're taking out curb stones with a sledge and in between each mortared joint there's a black widow spider. You can tell because they look like a wet black blueberry with a unmistakable blood red hourglass blazed on. They don't do more than crawl away but we use the stones to crush as many of them as we can for good measure.

Today our boss is mostly being cool but Volvetti tangles up the mason line after the guy specifically said you can't tangle up the line or else you might as well just throw it away. That kinda shit Volvetti.

Boss starts yelling at us but then he thinks maybe he did it himself: to be honest I didn't see Volvo do it or anything, I just know it wasn't me. So he starts to cool off but you can tell he's got a lot of steam built up under there anyway from having to untangle the thing for like five minutes.

We need the line so we can lay the fence poles out straight. The other day when we started we did a line that was slightly crooked and our boss blew up on us, so we're extra conscious and careful today. I mean except for whoever got the mason line fucked up.

After the line's back in order we put in the rest of the poles like this: one guy holds the thing plumb while the other slams it in from above with a big metal sludge. Then when that's done we're trying to figure out how to unroll the fence more efficiently with our boss seeking new methods. Of course all that happens is we screw around for an hour with a tractor and some attachments and end up doing it the way we originally thought too—lay it down, unhook the end, and roll it up the hill along the poles we slammed in. Then we flip it up and tie it to the poles with wire hooks. The whole process is simple but it's loud at first and then it makes your hands really tired because you have to twist the steel wire hooks with a pair of pliers. Especially when the sun's on your back like it was that day. Not that I'm complaining—middle of November and it's 80 up on this mountain? that's alright in my book.

We get the fence up by lunch time. Our boss starts telling us about when he did mescaline in a ski resort in Switzerland.

I'd be looking at the clouds in the sky, but they'd be melting, and like dripping on people, and the whole thing would be hilarious to me, I'd be cracking up and people would be staring I guess

Next Volvetti's talking about mushrooms and all I can do is nod along. I do a lot of some of that shit but I don't like talking about it like I'm all proud of it. It might keep you feeling younger or like

you're not dying but that's just your perception being manipulated by the chemicals. And if it really starts to change your personality that's pretty scary for a lot of people who know you.

After lunch it's the same thing we just did only we gotta do it faster so we can get it all done before we lose the sun. It takes even longer because our boss keeps trying to egg us on by taking the tools out of our hands and showing us how fast he can do it. By now I've gotten used to the interruptions and I'm paid by the hour anyway.

We get out of the site by five which is nice because usually we end up staying pretty late past sundown. Then we're driving home and Volvetti's tryin all his stunts on the phone to get these girls to meet us out at the bar later. I'm tellin him to go for it 'cause if they're the girls I think he was talking to then yeah that would be pretty good.

I have this one I'm thinking about but it never really works like that. Sometimes it's still easy as asking her out but the politics can make it a debacle when you really try and see it through. A lot of people thrive on the drama of it but I end up morose and I get out of the relationship anyway.

Volvetti's got a much more nihilistic take on it, like he just does whatever with whatever girl 'cause if there's no kind of mutual status change meaning if they're not officially agreed to be a couple then it's all fair game to him. I just don't know if I want to mess around with a girl who's cool with that kind of messing around. Not that I don't mess around when I have to but still I think you gotta have some kind of loyalty with women. I mean to say the least it's only sanitary.

That's when I'm like shit: I forgot about the record place.

Volvetti snickers 'cause he could care less.

Probably closed now anyway.

Everything's always probably closed to Volvetti.

After work tomorrow

Whatever...

I don't remember the record place again until it's Thanksgiving and we're at my grandparents' house and one of my cousins says that there's a guy down the street who's a tattoo artist with a wall of vintage vinyl at the shop. I make a mental note *I need to check out that record place* but that doesn't really work most of the time. Besides I tell my cousin *I don't want any tattoos*. Then my cousin says they're all planning to get tattoos and I think he's joking at first but he's not so then I try to talk him out of it but I don't know if any of it really sticks. His brother comes by with a bottle of bourbon and we go outside to finish it.

It's not until I'm on the way back from Thanksgiving that I finally stop at the shop. I wouldn't have even come home on that highway except that day there were people doing construction so I took the detour. It's seven at night but all the lights are on so I guess I can check it out.

It's been like a week and a half since I first noticed the place but now I see it's called *Cougar Records* and there's a big yellow airbrushed cat coming at you on the glass bays on the front of the shop. I can't see anybody in there so I try the door and it's unlocked. But then as soon as I open it I hear a woman say

Sorry, we're all closed up.

When I look up turns out there is someone there because this lady is sitting leaned over the glass counter next to the cash register reading a magazine. She looks like Methodone Clinic Barbie. How I missed that at first I don't know but I say sorry and split. When I pull out the lights go off so I decide I'll just go again the next day.

Back at home Volvetti and Shakey are pouring draino down the kitchen sink. The pool of rotten water has been sitting there for a week stinking.

Should open a window I say and step over to do so beside them.

From our apartment we can see the other apartments across the street. College town is like that with all these big boxy cheap fuck-you moneymaker joints near to the bars and then only a few hard to find houses with real character interspersed. There's some pretty messed up stuff too. I heard one from this girl from this school about a half hour from ours: they found this door which was bolted shut and painted over and hidden behind a refrigerator. Then they got the thing pried open and when they went down it was a basement and there were scattered desks like from a middle school and a backpack with papers in it and the girl whose name was on the papers was someone they knew.

Sure those kind of stories may get totally mutated by the time you hear them but even if it's just mostly true it's still pretty bizarre. I can say personally I had a professor tell me he found a human leg bone in a house they were surveying for preservation except the bone was buried into the wall. He had it documented it and everything just never told the cops. And a friend of mine got abducted by this guy in a superhero costume who turned out to be some forty year old acid freak building a fort out of empty cereal boxes in his living room. You never read about that in the papers because it's all just wordomouth rumoring that's too weird for the record.

I hear Shakey saying something to me.

What?

I said whens the next one comin in?

He's talking about hañera.

The guy said Wednesday prob'ly. I'll call him Wednesday if he doesn't hit me up first.

Good I'm all out man. Sucks. Work sucks without it.

Shakey works at a little grocery store like two blocks from all the bars. He works most days starting at four but it's only really busy after midnight when drunk people come in looking for food and cigs. He started with hañera over the summer 'cause after the students leave it's not even busy after midnight anymore.

Volvetti's already back on the couch engrossed in his laptop and chortling to himself. He's got a languid look on his face and his glasses are reflecting some movie he's got on the screen. We're all gonna get some new form of neck scoliosis from these machines holding our heads at one angle all day. I'm glad I got work on the mountain even if it's just that low paying manual labor. I don't really care about the money. I just need enough for food, rent, and han solo anyway.

Hey what's the deal with those chicks?

Volvetti looks pissed that I'm interrupting him watching whatever BS video.

I donno they said they'll call me when they're going out.

Dibs Shannon.

HA.

Shannon's super hot and kind of a slut. She puts out but she's picky. I've been working at it for a month and I don't even have her number. See she's still in school but we've been out for three years. Which means I don't even know what kind of pussyprivateschoolboy competition I have to deal with, I'm so removed from that whole scene.

Seriously man, I'm making my move tonight. I mean if the timing is right.

It's only gonna happen if you're both hammered: she's got that dude in Bega you know.

Yeah yeah. I didn't know that and it sticks me in the chest to hear. Bega is Anabega County.

Mostly hicks and meth heads. But all it really means to me is that I need to convince her I'm better than some schmuck so it's not that big of a setback considering what hot shit I am.

You still tryin' for Ker?

I wouldn't call it trying you know.

Fuckin' Volvetti. Makes you laugh the ego he's got.

Ha ha yeah I know what you mean.

I go back to my room and take the han out and the burner. The great thing about this shit is there's no odor if you use a good enough burner, which is what I do. Five minutes after the hit I feel myself phasing out. First thing to go is the tension in my face then all my limbs until finally I'm soaking in the blue light visions like bulbous misty halos around everything. I do another eightspot for good luck and then turn on my computer and wait for time to disappear.

At nine Volvetti knocks on my door.

Yo wanna get beer?

It sounds good to me and I'm pretty much not boneface high any more so we get out and head to Squacko where Shakey works. He gives us employee discounts most of the time so it's worth the drive on the chance that he will. In the car we're debating the best way to get these girls to stick with us later.

You know of any other parties?

I donno Black Street's prob'ly got something

That's where all the upperclassmen who really party live. It's pretty much a safe bet you can find some place to drink there unless you're totally inept. We're pretty far from that but still there's definitely

some places where it doesn't matter how cool you are: if you aren't inheriting a bunch of money you can't really party with them. I think it's mostly because the drugs they do are so expensive and the girls are so hot and ready to go I mean who can blame them? They want to maintain the status-quo. I'd probably be the same shitty way if it were me in line for the millions.

As opposed to normal, Squacko's is kind of bustling. We get inside and Volvetti goes behind the counter to mess with Shakey. He looks kind of anxious. He must have just run out of h yesterday or something.

Hey man, you beam me some han solo later I'll steal us a case and blame it on hobo Stan.

He's all talk about stealing the case but I'll bring him a tube later anyway.

Hey what do you call a hobo on christmas?

Volvetti's interjecting with the joke. I don't think he likes us talking about using in public.

Ho-ho-homeless!

... that's bad man

We bring up a case of Black Steel Malt Liquor and tell him about the chicks later.

Well I'm going out to Gourbach's after my shift. Like two thirty.

Cool man. We'll swing by later.

After we get back we're done with about half the case when Honk and Peterson come in with a bottle of cheap booze.

What's up faggots?

Hey fuck you. Wanna chug? I throw Honk a beer. He cracks it and I throw one to Peterson.

Dude I just drank all this and he holds up the bottle to show.

Pusssssyy....

Fuck you.

Readysetgo and Honk starts chugging on a false start. I still beat him pretty easy.

What's good tonight fellas? Peterson's asking as we race to crush the can on the ground.

I belch one at him then tell him *Sinkers prob'ly then late night maybe wherever Shakey's going.*

Working tonight?

Yeah til like two thirty he said.

Honk's opening the bottle to take a pull.

'Ey pass it here Volvetti tells him.

I take it next and Peterson rounds it off. We start to jaw about two weeks ago when Honk and Peterson were drunk at Sufan's and they saw their old professor. It's not that weird of an encounter because Sufan is like thirty and going for a Ph.D.; but these guys were both C students in the prof's class so there was a mutual kind of distance. Like Honk didn't even know if the guy recognized him because he says he only showed up for class a third of the time. So he ends up puking off the balcony and the Professor came over to check if he was okay and he tells *him so this is where you've been placing all your energy,* *Mr. Horne* so turns out the guy did know exactly who he was. Honk claims he told him to fuck off but I doubt it.

Volvetti's phone starts to buzz on the table.

Whos that? I ask him when he picks it up.

Kerry. You wanna head out soon?

He's always playing it like he's a free agent but I'm starting to think this girl's got him by the balls.

I look at the clock on the oven. It's an hour and seven minutes fast which means it's only eleven thirty six.

But this is starting to feel overly tame so I tell him yeah and we all decide to do one more shot and chug one more beer.

Hey Honk we don't have a balcony but the toilet's that way.

Yeah and shouldn't you be studying anyway?

He picks up the shot.

Fuck he downs it you.

We all follow suit and stand up to chug-a-lug. Peterson's especially invigorated by the exercise and holds his beer can up like the statue of liberty to crush it with great purpose: *SINKERS*

HOOOOOoooooo!

Bro you can't say Ho any more. It's offensive.

To who? Chinks?

No dumbass. Women.

Chicks?

You can't say chicks. You can't say Ho. They get piss—I mean PQ'ed.

Yeah bro only if the chick is a Ho. Fuckin faggots

You can't say fag—

Alright fuckhead I get the picture. Can I say that? Fuckhead and he pitches the beer can at Honk who stops harassing him to get a fresh one from the fridge. They won't drop any n-bombs around me but I can tell those crackers are thinking about it.

Sinkers is what everyone calls Sink or Swim and we're heading there first for the special on rails. Nine out of ten Saturdays we do the same thing and sometimes a couple times a week. It usually feels pretty necessary 'cause if you can't brag about your drinking in Aft City you aren't worth much to the bar

scene. Everyone's in it for the same thing which is to say: drunk brief and simple: so when you can put it down all night and then advertise your ability to cope with intoxicants people know you're in the loop. Then you're more likely to catch some tail.

We're all pretty sauced by the time we get through the door. Volvetti's staring down at his phone and Peterson and Honk are talking bull between themselves but I'm looking around for something feasible. There's a sharp dressed brunette who catches my eye with hers but she's already talking to some other guys.

They aren't here yet but wanna get a table?

We walk to where we can sit in the booths. I take the seat facing the door and good thing because we're suddenly struck with a proliferation of tightly-clothed and young looking honeys all involved in some sort of party. One of them is stumbling pretty bad with a tiara on. It must be her special day.

Check it out Honk says under the roar of the patrons.

I smile yeah man...yowza.

Fish in the barrel says Peterson before he gets up to accost them. He's got a lot of liquor boldness in him and we can all theorize what'll happen from past experience. Still we try for an engrossing commentary of his progress.

Oh man he's going for the Queen Bee wouldn't you say?

She's five seven, lean. Whatever he says gets her to look at him at least.

Now watch this...one shot...two shots...

He orders two shots and throws them back immediately. He does this thing where he makes it like he's gonna buy the girl a drink then drinks them both himself. It's subtle but it usually works because then the girl's like *hey I thought that was for me?* and then sometimes he'll even get her to buy him a drink

or at least start a decent conversation. Queen Bee doesn't seem to be going for it though I mean without actually knowing what they're saying because she's just kind of smiling at him and turning back to her friends.

Then Kerry walks in with Shannon and another girl I don't know but sure would like to.

Hey guys.

Kerry is looking pretty good. Shannon's making me kind of nervous not that I'm letting it show or anything. But her ass is right at my eye level.

Oh hey. Have a seat I announce loud and gruffly. You have to be terse in these situations because otherwise the crowd takes over and no one can hear you and you seem like a wimp.

This is Jynx. Kerry signals to the coffeeskinned girl with tight black curls to her left, across from me. We all introduce ourselves. She's from Egypt. Wait: is she really that gorgeous or am I just drunk? If it's option B then she's about to get a whole lot more beautiful because Peterson comes back with a bunch of colorful shots.

Hey guys thirsty?

Awww... Shannon acts all humbled by the generosity. *Thanks Jim!*

Sure thing. Oh hey I'm Jim. He puts his hand toward the Nile babe.

Jynx, nice to meet you. Mygod her eyes are like amber almonds glowing in the desert sun.

We throw down the shots and Kerry volunteers to get the next round. I turn to Peterson.

What no luck with the bachelorettes over there?

He inspects the empty shot glass, answers offhandedly:

No, I mean, I got her number. Probably gonna call her later if we get into anything cool.

Jynx's looking off toward the periphery. I'm trying to think of something witty to say to her but Peterson gets the first word in.

Where are you living Jean?

Jynx doesn't correct his pronunciation, tells him *Bristol Place. I have an apartment with my friend Pakmiri.*

I can't tell if that's a male or female name. *Oh my friend Bill Bailey lives there you know Bill I turn to Peterson.*

Yeeeah...that bro with the fro

Bill's got blonde curls that grow out like palm fronds. Everyone calls him Dizzy 'cause he's generally aloof. When he gets belligerently drunk then everyone calls him Diz the Wiz because he always used to piss in inappropriate places. Like on the neighbor's door he drew a big uriney TW when the Timberwolves beat Sacramento.

I don't know him Jynx tells me.

Oh. Well that place is cool. You guys have a pool and all that.

Yes but I don't really swim.

Well I don't think anyone really swims there it's just like a sit around in your bathing suit type thing right?

Oh I don't know I haven't been down there.

Shannon comes back with the beer and we divy it out. I feel myself start to fade after we finish it and I get up to order something stimulating. 'Course when I come back the girls are gone talking to some other guys at another table.

Except Kerry's still there with Volvetti so it's just me and Honk and them two 'cause Peterson's in the bathroom. Truth is I don't want to be there but I can't really think of a favorable alternative either.

The euphoria from all the booze is fighting with the creeping malaise I feel whenever I can't pick out a clear route to a girl, any girl. Usually it comes when I'm too hazed out to think let alone get my dick hard anyway. But I'm feeling okay enough so the contents of the clear plastic cup go down the gullet in one gulp. The sugar makes my stomach turn but I can hold it down.

By the time Peterson gets back I'm floating on the drink and dicking around with Honk trying to find some single looking chicas as the crowd peaks. Shannon's getting pretty serious at the other table so I try and forget about her. Guy she's talking to looks like a dick in hipster clothing but I'd hate him if he were Jesus anyway just for being there. What's good is I'm starting to feel the lapse between what I think and what happens or what I do. The usual millisecond of space between what is presented to me and what I project onto it is expanded tenfold and it's great but I know my head will spin soon so I figure I could use a cigarette.

Honk's passing out so I take to shoving him toward the end of the booth til he gets up. I stand and Shannon's got her phone out with the dick over there like she's getting his number.

Jynx's at the bar getting her drinks paid for. I'd buy them for her all night for every night for the rest of our lives. If only she knew.

I don't have any cigs but there's always somebody outside with one so I step out into the cold, wish I had my stupid jacket.

Hey man can I bum?

I bring the V of my middle and index fingers to my lips. He's some white as snow dude in a black leather jacket with shades on. Seriously?

You know I'm guessin it's not that you're out of smokes he inhales deeply, holding it in to build the drama til the gray fog comes back out his nostrils *so much as you never buy them.*

I stopped buyin them last year I grin big and stupid at him, see my reflection in his shades and tone it down. *I'm just jonesin', you know...*

Ah.

He's got his chin tilted up a little so I feel like he's staring over my head at the scene inside. *The ol' reluctant quitter...* and in one quick move from his hip the soft pack is in his hand with the single cig popped toward me like he's just drawn a pistol. *I'm trying to not be one of those myself.*

I place it between my front teeth and he gives me the coal of his to light.

That was my last match he says and the white stick wobbles off his lip.

I'm feeling like I should say something about the glasses but I won't bite the hand that gets me a buzz. I'm starting to realize that he's not with anyone out here and I'm not even sure he was ever in the bar. I hand him back his cigarette and turn to cough to clear my throat. Yet somehow between the time when I do that and when I look back to where he should be he's gone. And then I realize I'm not holding a cigarette and the bouncer yells at me *Hey! Close the door or get back inside!* because I didn't pull it shut behind me.

I step back in and walk right into Shannon who's leaving with the hip dick guy. She just looks at me without any acknowledgement so I say *Hey! Shannon* loud enough as far as I can tell but she just ignores it anyway. So really: forget her.

I figure if I'm hallucinating already I might as well push it and I get a black beauty⁷. That's Coke® with a caffeine pill crushed into it and whatever cheap bourbon. It can give you pretty bad palpitations if you drink it too quick but it's not as bad as the prescription shit people take to study for finals. I drink some of it at the bar but the ice makes it run down the sides of my mouth enough that I stain my shirt. That's when I realize Jynx's staring right at me. She gets up from the stool and starts to move my way. I'm trying to keep a straight face, and her eyes have mine locked so I'm smirking to hide the twitches from the caffeine.

Then she's right next to me, and I say, *hey, you need a drink or something?*

She smiles and nods, puts her hand on my side like she's coaxing me.

What's or something?

Oh I just meant heh—

She laughs a little to balance things. I feel my quads starting to dance against my jeans. My heart's in my throat but I'm staying on the ball.

How bout a smoke?

She has a blue pack in her purse and hands me one placed nimbly between her thumb and pointer with her other fingers curling out inviting me.

Can't smoke in here the bartender says 'cause Jynx's got hers between her lips already and she's rooting around for a lighter *new law this year*.

Have any matches? I ask him.

He pulls a book out from under the rail and we go for the door.

⁷ Not to be confused with a *Black Bomber*

Outside again I can hardly think about that odd vivid spectre of a moment ago and then I remember the guy with the wet joint: the dream of Eddie: they were all three one in the same. But I'm completely entranced by her now and I can't let it show so I blow some O's into the still cold air.

Are these from Egypt?

She nods, says some word I can't interpret which must be the brand. *I have only two cartons* she gestures with her fingers to emphasize the count *and I'm so worried for when they're all gone.*

Well cigs are cheap down here.

She nods. *But they aren't as goood.*

I will say I hold up the cigarette *these have a good taste to 'em.*

She nods. *Everything from Egypt tastes better you know?*

Well I don't know... you're the only thing I know from Egypt you know that?

She's smiling at me and looking into my eyes. If there is a way to always have those cool beautiful eyes in front of me forever ...

Well I know a lot of persons from here.

Oh yeah? she's blowing the smoke from one corner of her mouth to the other and I try not to stare at her pretty pink lips. *Well how do you like being in this country beside the bad smokes? but we invented cigarettes you know.*

She laughs *It's good. I learn so much in school and we have so much fun at the parties.*

Yeah but we never had any Pharaohs or anything cool like that which isn't bullshit so much as stating the obvious so she can't be impressed when they have a revolution going on. But she must find some of it endearing because she laughs cutely and taps her filter so the ash falls off.

I feel my phone vibrating and I look at it to see Honk's calling me.

Hold on a sec.

He tells me they're going to go find something to eat at Squacko. It's already quarter til close.

alright well what's Volvo doing

staying with Kerry most likely.

I tell him I'm outside and he says they'll be there. Lucky for me him and Peterson come out and Peterson's like *Jean! Hey Jean!* and tries to poke her arm but he's so drunk he trips backward before he touches her which makes me look much better by comparison.

I'm just acting like I'm in charge and I say *Hey guys where you going after Squack?*

Peterson's like *I donno but you should come* and he puts a hand on my shoulder, starts gyrating his hips like he's doing the act and says *come come* before he puts his other hand on Jynx's shoulder and says. *You should come get food.*

I look at Jynx who's looking at Peterson's hand on her shoulder.

I'm not super hungry right now but I'll call you when we're leaving. I hope it's the right thing to say in front of her.

Okay well fuck you. Not you he backs up and looks at Jynx.

You with his two fingers jabbed in my chest.

Ha yeah well you fuck off already I'll call you later and they stumble away.

Man those guys are wasted I say to her looking after them.

Aww they're cute.

Kerry and Volvetti are sitting talking at the booth like we left them. It's pretty much what they do whenever they meet up. It's cool but Volvetti's always acting like he'll be doing the stag thing with us and

then he just sets up next to her for eternity. Which is okay: I get it. But then why all the talk about going out and finding someone else beforehand? That's just plain lying man.

Are you guys tryin' a leave soon?

They have empty glasses in front of them. I take what swill is left in the pitcher and gulp it down.

Black Street or somethin?

Neither of them looks super enthused and I'm sure they both just wanna go home and screw but Jynx's pretty into it. She puts her hand on the small of my back.

I'll go. Is there a party?

I can't say for sure but I say:

Yeah. Always.

The lights turn on and we all get up to go out. On the sidewalk it's a five minute debate before Kerry and Volvetti decide they're going to leave. Jynx's saying she'll be okay with me so we head the other way for Black Street. I'm sending text messages to everyone I know who's awake at this hour. Where's the party? SOMEBODY HELP me...

We're about to turn the corner that gets us to Black when my phone buzzes again. It's Honk.

Gourbach's is stupid but wanna go to El Tower-o?

It's the only high rise on Black: ten stories in an infill lot so it's super narrow. And really it's just the tower but Honk's been doing the Spanglish thing a lot recently when he's trashed.

Alright yeah I could go for that.

I ask Jynx and she agrees. So we turn onto Black and it's six blocks to the tower.

I'm getting Jynx to tell me what she studies which is biology and English. But when we get like two blocks down the road some guy comes up behind us and just starts gabbin':

Hey guys shit it's cold he's wearing shorts and sleeveless jersey where you goin you know about Brutus Ball? Shit it's cold. Sorry I just did a bunch of coke now I gotta get this keg and it's fucking COLD! he yells out to the universe.

Jynx starts to toy with him making me jealous.

What is Brutus Ball?

He's looking at her with wide eyes, hands rammed into his pockets, kinda spitting when he talks because it's so fast.

Brutus Ball? Like Julius Caesar like Ides of March like big toga party at the Yupsilon house you know fucking shots joints lines two DJs whatever fucking rager shit.

It's not even March but that's no surprise.

Ooooh I know George Finkey from yoopsilon. He's in my writing class with me.

I'm starting to think she might rather go to this thing. I don't know anybody in Yupsi personally but I know the type: rich fucking D-bags. But a party's a party you know?

Yeah should fucking come man we're still on the first DJ he's bringin the house down people are getting so shitty man it's fucking great and it's warm in there not COLD godDAMN it. Alright I'm gonna run before my fucking arms fall off SHIT.

He picks up the clip and gets away from us. I wouldn't mind something crazy like that right now so I say to her *hey wanna check it out?*

But what about your friends at tower? as If I could care less.

They're not even there yet I don't think. We can always check that out later, they usually party up top for a while if that's what they're doing.

Her eyes smile.

Weell okay. Let's go to yoopsilon then.

I put a hand between her shoulders to direct her.

Shortcut this way.

We cross the street and cut through the lawn between two houses. There's a post and lintel fence so I vault over it and Jynx goes under through the middle. On this side there's an open lot and you can see the stars pretty well except for the light coming off the houses behind us.

Orion's belt I say pointing up.

She stops, puts her hands in her coat pockets, looks skyward.

Ooo that's very pretty. I'm only a few feet away from her but I want to be closer. *Did you know at Al Jizah the pyramids are the same as the stars?*

Wait what?

At Al Jizah: you know Keops and the pyramids.

Sure sure I know what that is lying but what's that mean same as the stars?

Like the way they are built. Like she moves her foot to point to the ground with her toe one two three.

It sounds like astrological bull but what do I know.

That's cool. Why's that?

She shakes her head gently.

I don't know really but that's how it is. They told us there on a...ehm...you know

Like on a tour?

Yes right a tooour ... she says with pursed lips. I'd love to kiss her but we keep walking.

I read once that if you put food in a scale model of a pyramid—like if it's in the right spot and the model's facing the right angle—that it won't go bad.

Oh really? she's clearly skeptical.

Yeah I mean it might be bullshit but I read it in this book. Also they said you could put dull razor blades in there and they'd sharpen up. I'm not lying this time. I really read it somewhere.

Well that sounds weird.

Yeah I mean I donno if it actually works... we trudge across the lot and cut between two other houses. We can hear the echoes of banter coming from the Yupsi house.

Nice: sounds pretty wild in there. Who's the guy you know there did you say?

Oh I know George from class. He's so funny the teaching assistant is always trying to get him to be quiet but usually he laughs too! she can't help chuckling about it just to think of him.

Oh okay yeah I know how that goes.

*We get up to the steps and I can see it could be a hassle to get in. There's a crowd of twenty or so people standing at the steps out front of the house waiting for the guy at the door to open it up. Most of them have bed sheets on. I'm feeling pretty confident so I say to Jynx *hey stay close* and we push through the crowd to the guy even though everybody's giving us shit for it.*

Hey man it's just me and this girl can we get in?

He checks Jynx out and then looks at me.

Who do you know?"

Well...

George Finkey. I know George she fills in.

Oh yeah? You have his number?

She nods.

Well call him and he'll get you in.

She's perturbed by the whole scenario but she pulls out her phone and dials.

Hello George it's Jynx from poetry. Yes we're outside of your house. Will you let me and my friend come in? Thanks George.

The guy at the door is ignoring us for the most part to yell at the rest of the crowd to *calm the fuck down people.*

Finally George comes out. He's got a sheet wrapped around him and I can see he's pretty cut and like six two. He hugs Jynx and they do the thing where you rock left to right a few times. Whatever.

She introduces us and we shake. We go inside where it's uncomfortably hot and there's condensation on all the windows from sweat. George walks toward the bar talking to Jynx. He gets her a beer and I end up having to wait for one. Those two wander off to the dance floor in the next room over. I'm like *shit* but I decide to get a drink because it's not too long of a line to wait in. I'm taking in the vibes trying to look cool when I feel a sharp pain on my ass. I spin around and there's a girl behind me in a pink sheet with cartoon characters all over it. She's skinny and tan.

Hey did you just pinch me? she asks me with a look in her eyes like she's one drink away from paradise.

Very Funny I reply *you pinched my ass.* She starts laughing so I add *nice toga. Is that Cinderella?*

She smiles *Yep. Where's yours?* and pokes me in the chest.

Oh it fell off. dancing too hard I tell her. I bet George and Jynx are bumping over there. And this girl is starting to look pretty good anyway. In fact there's a feeling through my whole body like my veins are tingling. What is this sensation? Lust? Infatuation?

Well that's too bad because this place is togas only.

I can't find a witty enough retort but we've made it to the front of the line anyway so I put a hand down to lean on the plywood counter that's covered in beer. I feel it give and there's a grunt from under the tablecloth that's draped over whatever is holding the countertop up. *Quit moving pledge!* says the bartender who kicks at the living table legs causing more moans. We get beers and I tell her *we should go dance.*

Yeah!

Over there the air's wetter than the rest of the house and I can already feel sweat on my forehead and armpits which normally sucks but who cares at this point? I'm looking for Jynx and her buddy but I can't see them in the cacophony of gesticulating body parts. Over along the wall there are people doing some serious fondling. The warmth in my veins hasn't declined a bit: in fact I feel it growing like a glow through my whole body.

The girl is moving her shoulders to the pumping bass and I start to move with her. I have a hand on her hip and it feels bony. She's leaning away from me every once and a while so I have to pull her back toward me or she'll fall. After the song changes I give her my credentials and she tells me her name is Sandy. Then the next song starts and she spins around to back into me hard.

Give me the signal to gooooo she's singing way off key but it's cute enough. I'm working pretty hard to keep up with her tight little glutes swinging all over the place but she's not really dancing to the rhythm right. I work a little harder and she starts to get it. Then we're pretty much squeezed up against each other and I say into her *ear hey Sandy you're really cute you know that?*

She looks sideways at me and smiles and I think she's into it. Her neck is glistening with sweat and I start to kiss her there to taste the salt. She puts her hand up around my head and pulls it toward her

til I'm nibbling on her. Then the song ends and we make out. The next one starts and we're still locked at the mouth plus I've clamped both hands on her ass. She can feel me stiffening up and presses with her pelvis.

Hey want to step outside? it's so hot in here.

I have to say it twice because the music's so loud. She smiles and nods and I take her by the hand to lead her to the back. Right before the door I pull her to me and we're kissing again. This time she puts a hand on me where it counts and I lurch to feel it there. Then the door opens and it's Jynx: alone: looking right at me.

I go cold and I can see on her face she's hurt to see me like this. What the fuck am I doing. Jynx walks away quick and I just kind of push Sandy away even though she's working on my belt.

Hey I gotta um I gotta she's still got a hand above my crotch with her fingers wrapped around the buckle. She mouths to *me you wanna fuck me* and I shiver to think of her skinny little legs spread open.

I smile and ask her *where?* so she leads me by the hand up around to the stairs. There's some people eating face: guys and girls with hands up the toga. Sandy guides us both stumbling around them and we get up to a dark quiet room.

But then when I lift her up and drop her on the bed she goes OUCH and I hear bone hitting bone because some guy is passed out there fully hidden under the covers.

Laughing I haul her over my shoulder to head back to the hallway with her yelping. We end up in a bathroom in the showers and I'm pressing her against the wall hiking up her Disney® themed sheet while she pulls down my jeans. I don't have anything to put on but she knows there's one in the drawer and we get to business until I finish when she goes down on me. Then I realize how hot it is and how many people are yelling at us through the door and trying to break it open. The warmth has dissipated

from all over: my skin goes flaccid with my dick and I'm clammy and starting to feel a throb in the front of my forehead.

Sandy looks dazed and I have to signal to the mob outside with my thumb *saying they're gonna break* in to get her back on planet earth because she's still got her tits out and I'm already holding the knob to keep them from busting it in. I'm hopping like a penguin and she keeps grabbing me by the neck and kissing me and grabbing my package but finally we get our clothes back on and prepare to brave the tide. She tries to fix my hair but misses since she's lost her coordination further in the bliss of the after-glow. I kiss her a little more til we open the door and walk out.

Ah gross dude what the fuck

Ha! hahahaheeeey Sandra...

Oh man look at this pimp. Look at this fucking pimp.

In some way I think we both like to be seen having just scored. But then I can't fake it any more that I'm not longing for Jynx in spite of it.

Hey where are you going? she asks me and grabs my wrist.

Getting a beer. Need a beer?

She pulls up against my arm and hugs it with both of hers.

Yesssspleeease.

My head is pulsing and I feel my eye twitch. I'm thinking of how to ditch her and find Jynx. She keeps stopping me every five steps to make out but I can't get into it again. We get to the bar and she's clinging so hard I can't not forcibly escape. Finally she lets go to take a cup.

Hey I'll be right back I lie. I get out of the room and go for the door to the back. And there I see George taking Jynx by the hand toward the stairs. Shit.

I go back to the bar room but Sandy-or was it Cindy's not there. I can't see her pink toga in the tumult and my head is reeling. I look at my phone to see all the missed calls from the guys I said I'd meet with. Time to make the trip back to Black I guess.

Lucky for me there's couple people smoking on the front porch so I manage to get a cancer stick for the long hike. The text showed it had been sent forty minutes ago so I'm guessing they're all still there.

I go back the way Jynx and I came in with thoughts gone to bedlam in the wake of all the shit that just happened. Usually there's a pretty logical thread upstairs but after that much stimulation the index is completely awry. *Pyramidscheme⁸ for pussyyyy find the Georgie boy and Sandra D motherfucker up on the tower til later til later alligator.*

My head is pulsing but if I close my eyes I start to feel violently nauseous so I just try and walk faster to ignore how weary I've become. But still when I get to the empty lot I have to sit down. Then I stand up to throw up over in a patch of tall weeds. There's a decaying cardboard box and empty beer cans under my vomit and I feel a hundred percent better after I upchuck all the lite beer and Sandra's semen laced spittle.

Fuck I announce as I think *I hope it was just mine* and then *I hope she didn't have STDs*. My thinking's clearer again but I'm wishing it weren't because I am scrutinizing my judgment: why did she know where the condoms were in that bathroom unless she does that all the time? I'm shaking my head in furious bursts and spitting to sober up best I can blocking thoughts but now my throat's starting to hurt. I can deal with with a cold just not herpes please not herpes. Then I see my smoldering cigarette in the vomit and realize that's probably the reason for the throat ache.

⁸ See also: *Multilevel Marketing*, Ch. XXI.

Need another one jimbo?

I whip around and almost fall into the pukey brush.

Hey what the—and its jonbo, you lookin for Pe—

It's the dude in the shades. I can't tell if it's for real or just the liquor but he's got a weird aura hovering off his shoulders like neon in fog.

I start walking away briskly because I can't go crazy in an empty lot at three a.m. on a Sunday but he calls after me. Auditory hallucinations surely nothing more than that: too much caffeine and not enough sleep and—

I said why'd you dump the pink rabbit?

He's right in front of me jutting his wayfarers in my face. Then he puts his wrists limp at his chest like a kangaroo and starts singing:

Put your right foot forward

Put your left foot out

Do the Bunny Hop

Hop, hop, hop!

I'm walking left and right to avoid him but he keeps skipping like an imp to block me.

Dance this new creation

It's the new sensation

Do the Bunny Hop

Hop, hop, hop!

I go to shove him but he evades it with a spin.

going to the tower

seven past the hour

someone's gonna drop

drop drop drop

It's starting to freak me out so I break into a sprint. I can still hear him laughing behind me:

hop hop DROP.

I go to jump over the fence but I catch a toe on the top bar and fall down. I get up and my shin's bleeding soaking through the denim. I can't hear Phantom Rock Star anymore but I still run til I get to the street. And there's Peterson and Honk sitting on the sidewalk where the coke head intervened with me and Jynx: oh Jynx. Then he's in my face so close that all I can see is the two green eyes but *I hear* in my mind: *every choice represets a possibility. Certain choices can be reconfigured. In the meantime sober up and get back to work kid. Either King George falls off the tower or the towers fall.*

YoHonk.

He looks more sober than Peterson who's got his head in his hands.

Hey man where you go? Shit what happened to you?

It's stinging pretty bad now that I've stopped long enough to feel it.

Oh I went to Yupsi with Jynx and then...had to split the cops were coming

Oh. So where'd she go?

Home. With a friend.

I'm breathing heavy and my hair's stuck to my forehead.

How was the tower?

Dude. Somebody fell off.

I feel my stomach in my ribcage. *WHAT?*

Yeah man some freshie firster fucking fell off the top.

Peterson groans in stomach pain or mourning I can't tell.

Holy shit man. That's too heavy dude I mean what the fuck.

Yeah we weren't up there or anything, but we booked it out of there when we heard cops outside. They got the body out before we saw it but there was a pile of sawdust over the blood, like fifty square feet of it.

I'm starting to lose my consciousness so I sit down on the other side of Honk and say

When did that happen man? How long you been out here?

I mean just happened like just at three⁹ I guess. At least we were out of there by like three thirty.

I can't think of how to explain the phantom dude to them so I just shake my head and try to stand up a couple times. When I do finally I reach into my pocket but my phone's gone.

Ah shit I think I lost my phone at Yupsi.

Honk's smirking.

Sucks man. Hey, looked like all of Yupsi had moved to Tower til it cleared out, maybe the party at the house is over you can go look for it.

Later. Tomorrow.

Call a cab?

Yeah alright. Hold up Peterson I'll steal fare from his wallet.

fffuckyou he says from between his palms then spits a fat loogie but it gets stuck hanging from his mouth.

Fucking gross dude. Fucking lush.

⁹ 3:33 to be exact

I tell the guys I'm taking a leak and diverge to an alley between two frats. I'm blind drunk but eventually I find my zipper when I get goosebumps. It's Eddie which is to say it's just a flash: like two green circles suspended in mid air three feet in front of me hovering like hummingbirds.

The smell of ash from all the way over the bay two hours away. The bodies falling like ragdolls from the windows. Fire melting steel and concrete: unholy combustion: the incineration of flesh bone muscle tooth wedding rings simultaneous. Some part of hell emerged here like a flare on the sun just two hours from Aft City wherein lies the center of the universe now torn a new one...

It was like an attack on The City. Was it a dream?

...It's the same way every time right before the ballistics take down the behemoth. See the power and the money in the hands of the few? Their empires are based on objects of the greatest vice greed, and most of most that all unsalving selfdeluding state before pleasure, peak, and misery: desire. And now we have to wait and watch while the final falling star: the comet from heaven and hell that rapidly approaches like the priests were always promising. But be it bombs or God or swiftly falling satellites it's all going to burn one day. All of it will burn. Just remember my mantra:

Eddie Motion doesn't mind

'cause the sun's still burnin'

And the world's still turnin'

And remember what I told you. Sometimes: somehow you can hit rewind.

It's in my head like a prayer when Honk slaps my back and grabs me by the collar to pull me before I can fall flat on my face with my hand still on my cock. The start of the urine has already seeped through my fly and when I get it open I spin around to unleash a stream and spray that motherfucker.

SHIT he says trying to swing at me over the piss that's coming out full force. *Not the SHOES man...* then he has to stop to find his balance and lets go of me so I zip up and split. *Fuck these shennanigans. I'm gonna walk it off. Don't wait up.*

Fuck you too asshole. Nice dick by the way. Small as SHIT.

YOUR MOTHER LIKES IT

FUCK YOUR MOTHER

By then I'm far enough away we've both stopped caring. I can get back to the 24-7 library over the train tracks under alpha bridge. If there's no one paying attention I can get into the bathroom and dry the piss off my jeans.

In the psychosis of the drunkenness and shock I stumble down the sides of the ditch that go down to the tracks and knock my shins on the fallen limbs and saplings strewn across. I get to the rails and look left and right—is it a train in the distance or two green eyes? I make it across and up the other side a lot easier in the light of the street lamp. From here I can cross no-name field to the lib and the hand dryers. No one is on this street like it's cordoned off so I dart across and down the grassy hill. The lights from inside the library glowing through the windows like eyes in a jack-o-lantern. I'm jogging to the back steps when I feel a hand on my wrist that pulls hard so I lurch around. There's no one there but I've gone off kilter and I hit the mud: a big stinking puddle. On cue the sprinklers emerge in full force and I see the puddle is due to the sprinkler that's clogged and is guzzling in low flow. Now my pants are covered with mud anyway so I get off my knees and abandon the effort to clean myself in public. I'll have to trek back towards the house and see if I can catch a bus. I don't think the antirape shuttle will let me on looking like this but then again they might legally have to so I figure it's worth a shot. If you call them at the right time they could be on your route already. I reach for my phone but it's gone. *Goddamn.*

I get up out of the muck and try and rinse the shit off my shins at least. The water is strong at this sprinkler head and it gets most of the sludge off. Now I'm fully waterlogged¹⁰. I figure at this point I'm fully beyond the auspices of the safeshuttle so I turn back to start the long walk of shame to apartment. But there's a feeling like someone's behind me and I feel my wrist still aching from the invisible grip that pulled me down a moment ago so I turn around again to see nothing.

Come on Eddie I know you're out there I say and then he's standing next to me and we are in the stacks of the library. I feel water running down my torso and legs and pooling in my shoes before soaking into the familiar dirtbrown carpet stippled with the foggy yellow light of the dim fluorescents suspended above.

Yer makin a mess there kid he says and I almost lose my balance when I feel the same grip from outside grasping to stabilize me. An impossible warmth spreads throughout my body and in an instant I'm dry.

As if the circumstances are totally normal Eddie starts to pace up and down the aisle in full soliloquy: *we can take this goodversusevil breakdown of the human condition back to Adam or we can take it back to Zoroaster. We can trace the image of the trinity through the ancients be they Semitic, Egyptian, Persian: you name it. Before Nero made it criminal and Constantine made it the law Christianity was not the big deal we know it to be now. Rather it was one of several mystery religions. Envision: Rome as it once was filled with strip malls of temples who had a savior for every taste. Several fell in the same category as that of the church of Jesus of Nazareth. But it was only when the ecstasies of the predominant Bacchae cult became popular and weekly frenzied orgies spread throughout the empire even the mighty pagan emperor had to find a way to crush it ideologically lest it all go the way of Sodom and Gomorrah. Thus we have Jesus turning water into wine at Cana*

¹⁰ A baptism of mud

trouncing the old winegod by preaching a new salvation and making morality not ecstasy the endall of humanity. Some have observed that if Mithraism had been a sexier religion with more realistic parables maybe it would have been used to defeat Dionysus instead. People adore Jesus because his story sounds real to them, not for its factuality.

Then he stops and looks in my direction but don't take that characterization of the religion to mean it's not the Truth.

Then what's the critique?

No critique, son: the Truth. For those who are not yet capable of believing the changing of the weather or the Pentecostal epiphanies I ask you: does it matter the means of the myth or the end result? id est if a man is kind because he believes in the consequences of eternal damnation or eternal salvation is he better than a man being kind with none of these aspirations? What if he is even kinder? Look at the good Samaritan—he is praised in spite of his paganism: he was worshipping the wrong God. So I ask the unbelievers: do you need to know the other or the deity to realize or recognize human divinity?

Then'e takes a flask from his jacket and raises his eyebrows above the thick rims of his wayfarers. It's more of a rhetorical question. Or like half a limerick. Eitherway the problem with Christianity as I see it is this: there is only one Jesus.

One Lord, Jesus Christ, onlysonoftheFather

Precisely! This is patently untrue. The Christ is the anointed one blessed with the chrism of the crocodile fat of the Nile: the man sacrament the eternally begotten son of God: proclaims the salvation of the world: announces the apocalypse: reigns with the Father for a hundred thousand years. This narrative has played out many times since thirtythree-AD. How can there be only one? Even in the bible there are four.

Four? I don't understand the assertion.

Four gospels. Four different stories. Four different saviors.

But what—

Come with me.

He walks alongside the rows of books until we get to the music library. There are bins filled with CDs and shelves full of LPs, laserdiscs in stacks and drawers full of cassettes. Eddie goes straight for the section marked *antiquity* and finds the right record. He bumps aside a kid with hands over headphones over his ears to free up a spot next to the adjacent turntable and I come up to join him there. He places the 33 1/3 on the spindle as he flicks a 1/4" jack out of his wrist like a stiletto and sticks it into the output, grabs me by the neck with a cold crushing grip and drops the needle

FWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOSH

33 AD.

I am bent over hurling in full blast on the desert sand at my feet. The sun is high. The heat suffocates me as does the acid in my throat. The sound of thunder: or is it horse's feet: the drums of battle? no—my own heart beating in my ears. I spew again.

Have some respect. This is hallowed ground.

I try to hold it in and he starts laughing. *Just busting your chops. It's okay kid. Just a little airsick that's all.*

Where did you... how...

It's the time and the place to prove my point. Look—

I see we are on a ridgeline along a substantial hill and pretty near the top. The sun is in my eyes as I look up and I can't see but I hear a roar and realize there's a mob around the other side from us about a hundred yards away.

They're getting pretty close there I say and wipe my mouth. *What are we doing here?*

Look up there he indicates toward the crest where I can't see so I make a visor with my hands and realize

Crosses.

Correct. But specifically how many?

So I give him the count.

Now get this he says and jabs me with an IV that's strung up to the temple side on the right of his glasses. I feel the space around us disappear until I am stumbling again on sand and rubble: the same mountain side?

What happened?

Time warp. About a year later. Look I see the same scene playing out though I can distinguish some differences to what I just saw—specifically

The cross—

Only one. But wait I feel a shock where the needles in my bicep and I end up on my knees gasping dry heaves and then Eddie points my head up *Look! Look!* and I count them *one more time*—I'm too weak to protest and the jolt blacks me out.

The species since the dawn of man... fighting with bones and rocks and dying like pigs, living only under animal fear until the brains got big enough to create desire which led to empathy, compassion, hatred, war: the son of the western God was not brought down only once though that was the one we all remember because

he made the biggest noise. Didn't he say we are all brothers and sisters and that means we are his siblings who share the same father: why interpret it any other way than that we are all capable of what he did and for those who come upon the realization indeed they too are the Son of God? stigmata of the soul where the wounds are not so relevant as the deification of the person: the liberation of the spirit from its human vessel that we can be ourselves the light from light and God from God one in being with the Father.

But Jesus is The Messiah.

Jesus was the great reminder of the potential of humanity to achieve the mystic union with the deity and the characters in the Good Book were each messiahs no doubt but why make this socalled he of whose very substance we are uncertain the only and the last? Why deprive all future humanity of the option? Why the literalism of the parables where it benefits the establishment and when the individual could benefit from the Gnostic knowledge of his own potential for divinity: nix it from the record he makes his fingers like scissors to emphasize the point Just think he says and chuckles scornfully the whole world could be swarmed with little christs that save the others and bring them into the light of the deity who they call God if they can't find it within themselves.

Oh when the Saints

come Marching In—

Instead we have the cataclysm of theology that takes the a priori and mutates it until it is a posteori: takes the living fish and kills it so we can cut it open and stare at the guts, take account of the organs and bones, number every scale: when what matters to religion is what was in the fish when it was living in the logic of the metaphor: the very mystery of the perfect being of all life.

He unscrews the cap and takes another swig then shows me to a stack of books in the back end of the section: *this is all you need* he says and runs his finger down a row of spines on the top shelf. *All the wisdom of the elders in a bunch of moldy books.*

I smirk *what do you mean* all the wisdom of the elders? and even though I've just seen the gospel scenes playing out in front of me *firsthand* I tell him *sounds like bull to me.*

Eddie shrugs nonchalant.

Yer call kid and he tosses me the book he had pulled from the middle of the case. *Read it and weep.*

I looked at the cover. Something on *Theosophy.*

It's nothing to worship but it's a step in the right direction. Guaranteed to center your chi.

Okay I'll dig it. But that makes you the heathen demon that turned me from the righteous path to salvation.

Eddie smiling and gritting his teeth.

Well, what did Jesus always say?

Stand behind me, Satan!

And we march out he after I in a partial duck-walk.

I awake on the couch. Another night of debauchery and absurd dreams: trauma from hearing about the jumper. But sure enough it's Eddie's form hovering in the corner when I look up, and I see him take the needle from the record arm and drop it as he mainlines the ¼ inch out straight into his forearm: disappears.

IX. Fuhgedaboudit

That's also right about when Eddie decided to turn me on to his special *vision*: an inscription of the future constantly updating to show him not only the very *next instant* predeterminately but all the next instants after that into a broad web of instants, nextinstants, and the impending end of it all, painting broad narratives of human culture through time: ebbing and flowing in such a perfectly determined pattern that he could slither through it like a kite in the wind and step off whenever he deemed fit along the span of his lifetime: for with his unique condition behind the glasses it was possible through the instantaneous record of visual memory to then in the future *sync back*, whereupon he would find himself within a *perfect reality interface*.

That's really my most valuable secret in this society he entrusted me one night. *These babies record everything I've experienced within ten meters of my cone of vision in a perfect 3-dimensional representation, that can be reverse-engineered and forced back into my neurons. I can recount a ten meter sphere in perfect virtual reality of any event I've experienced in the last fifty years and navigate the scene in high speed for enhanced memory. With the right settings I can set the delay for a half-second for a better time on my reflexes. And if I don't overload the quadroquantum processor protostable-RAM I can project a realtime prediction based on the stream of recorded events that overlays the present field of vision. From the comfort of the workshop one can project these predictions for days, months, years, centuries at varying levels of accuracy as the algorithm evolves, but only as vague poems of what could be. Only under superstable conditions: when the outside temperature is right and the cache is emptying in rhythm with the photonic concentration of incoming cosmic rays, then that's the real ticket: the automatic algometer kicks in and takes the field of vision to merge it*

with the ultraprecise projection and the overlap is perfect such that the sensation is pure ecstasy: as if seeing fully inside each and every moment: the union of future, present, past: you could say Nirvana.

*See I used to think I could achieve some kind of Nirvana with the methods of the last generation—
psychedelics, meditation, the diminishment of the ego until egodeath. In fact heh heh—*

Here he peered around as if he didn't already know there was nobody else there: more a signal to me than in earnest.

I was the Czar of the Brotherhood of Eternal Bullshit

That had me sniggering.

You'll have to elaborate

So he did:

I was living in the hills of Laguna mid-nineties selling burgers out of a truck I'd rigged up with a fryer, grill, soda fountain, all the gizmos. It was a low-overhead operation: besides the initial investment in the equipment I spent next to nothing since the burgers were made out of experimental meat substitute and beef-flavor from China I secured through a middleman at LAX. If I sold one trustfunder a combo meal, I paid for the whole day's raw material. It was a net gain in the first ten days. I siphoned it directly to my Swiss account after I hit a million. You could say it was smooth sailing. Until some dumbshityuppiespawn with the munchies ate five in a row and went into shock. I was at the counter when it occurred. Turned out the beef flavor was a byproduct of Yangzhou's biggest synthetic canniboid manufacturer, who also provided the flavor for electronic smoking device oil. The THC analogs were leeching into the beef flavor transport tubes that had both been bundled together carelessly. Which explained my popularity given that the stuff had always tasted more like cowshit than cowmeat.

After that jerkoff got hospitalized I had to broaden my horizons, so I ditched the truck and took a trip to Asia to see what I could find. At the plant it became apparent that their primary product was my best route to a quick dollar. All you had to do was dissolve some synthcann into an alcohol base, spray it on some plant matter, and voila, fake pot. Back in Laguna I could mix it with the real stuff at 30-70 and quintuple an investment overnight. The best thing was that since my shit was dosed the dopers wanted it exclusively.

He grinned and clicked his teeth

They thought I'd grown some monster strain out of mother earth, since I'd tailored the chems so well that it got you airborne without the alien psychotic feeling of a wet joint, and I couldn't make enough of the stuff to reach the demand on my own. I had to stay clandestine, hence my staff was limited to those I could keep completely on the other side of the curtain. The standard line was that we had a mission, divine purpose, path to enlightenment that required we turn them on to the best of the best, and that everything was safe, non-carcinogenic, truly good for you, like some miracle drug come down from heaven. As long as I kept the product standards up to snuff, then it was selling faster than we could supply it out of a fleet of ice cream trucks that would take to the streets at four-twenty every evening. When I reached a thousand regular customers all I had to do was tailor the concoction of fake marijuana chemicals applied to their supply of fake pot plant base to make it provoke the actions of the mob with curated psychostimulants: when I heard the cops were moving in on one of the truckdrivers that had sold shit to kids, I set one half of them against the other with two different recipes designed to instigate opposing emotions and rage, to draw their unit to the other side of town on my signal. That truckdriver didn't make it too long after that incident of course: but he shouldn't have shoved all that chemical-enhanced fake pot up his ass to trigger a coma.

To get the organization to survive I had to get creative so I started to play music by Ph— exclusively, handed out tickets and t-shirts to customers to get them to follow the band. In turn I sent hundreds of trucks out to every concert and spread more and more of the chineseknockoffgrass. By the time the band had spread its influence to the East coast, I had a network of independent pilots and swarms of carrier pigeons routing tons of the stuff across the continent. At its peak: my product was in 93 percent of street dimebags in both the bay and tristate areas. Eventually though: it broke down. I blame myself. Mass hypnosis is difficult to manage. Some of the guys broke the trance and either wised up and quit or moved onto harder dope. I let it fizzle out and burned my trail, deposited my spoils in Zurich, took a long ski trip. And after all that: having sampled every possible psychoactive chemical yet discovered by man: nothing could match that simpleperfect oneness of the algometer operating fullthrottle so that I could truly invoke a single outcome to every action and know like a prophet how the events around me would unfold and I with the power to will them one way or another with the right moves that occurred without effort: the agency of all I had come to observe and even the ability to observe the truth of everything that can only be understood in that state of persistent revelation unique to the algometer in optimal operation: yet even the slightest breeze would send a shiver through the system to dissolve the eternity of the trip back to the seconds passing sluggishly then fully up to speed and the normalcy of the moment returned.

The reason I bring it up he says to clue me in is you've got what it takes to make it in this scheme I don't know what to say so he keeps saying things are gonna get real messy for a little while. But you are just right for the squad.

What's that?

The team. You know: The cream of the crop. the chosen ones.

But what's it entail.

He ticks his pointer back and forth in my direction *not just yet my friend* and then he hands me a slip of paper and I look at it: *TIHKaL*¹¹ it says in typeset *look it up later. For now: I want you to remember: the answer lies within the moment. Every passing particle of spacetime in its infinite fractal complexity: the thunder of your experience of reality that surrounds you like fog: what is real is in the cross-section of this experience: a vista that requires some dimensional superiority: some supernatural vision: you must discipline your mind and your spirit so you can see the world in its essence—still don't forget: the slightest breeze can screw it all up.*

It's a lot to take in and I'm speechless but I have to ask *so why even strive if it will just disappear?*

Again: the answer lies within the moment.

Ad infinitum...

In terms of the argument yes but beyond the limits of that cruel human invention his lips curl into a nostalgic smile well I can guarantee you this: when you have reached the plateau of the enlightened we'll meet again. Maybe then you'll be initiated.

He turns his heel and walks off, disappears around a corner. I realize the hour as sunlight creeps over the hills and head home myself.

¹¹ Not to be confused with *PIHKaL*

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

X. Do Your Homework

Front page, *Aft City Inquirer*, December 2: *Man found dead in basement of church.* Page 6:

...Damage to the man's face had rendered his body unidentifiable... Parents claim the victim to be their son John Farmer...

If you've read it already you know there's no real detail to the circumstances. No weapon identified and no motive. Only the implication the wound was self inflicted under the influence ... *found to be holding six grams of opioampheticannabinol or as it is commonly known blue dream the young drug that has accounted for hundreds of deaths this year throughout the nation...* with the scene as described it was easy enough to make the connection. *Boy smokes too much dream: boy goes crazy: boy shoots himself.* This was Aft City after all: no stranger to contraband and premature retirement. It was sad in itself as much as it was sad that it was nothing to cause the raising of eyebrows in these times in the Aft. Just as most wouldn't remember either that a week before a man took a plunge from the bridge on I67 and just three days before that a woman asphyxiated in her beamer in Gentry Precipice gated community.

Still with the vagary of the report, the gruesome image of the corpse that showed the area above the neck like a wet red rag covered in hamburger meat, someone might take an interest. Someone like the professor who could remember that shirt ... or was it those shoes ...

He'd lived on the street for a couple years sleeping in parks or at shelters or a motel room when the people were good to him. Playing for tips with a horn and peddling his act to bars and clubs ... *all the greats like Waters and Coltraine and even the pop stuff the kids love.* Until some young fucker with a guitar and a harp came in and stole all the openings but for Monday nights at 2200, which was ostensibly the

slowest hour of the week, and he learned that to have a couple drinks and roof over his head even if no one was listening was a good enough salary for exercising the compositions. *You'll get 'em next time* some shit eating bartender would tell him and then the next week he's already replaced. Which meant he'd need another bar and until then: case in place, sign up, horn in hand, taking sections from *Mood Indigo* or *What a Wonderful World* and adding variation or taking requests from tourists too drunk or Chinese to feel embarrassed when they ask *do you know any Taylor Swift?!* Playing all day and all of the night then if it were summer finding a bed under some wellhidden tree next to a highway where he'd walk with his thumb up keeping it like that sometimes all day trudging along the shoulder until someone good or naive enough would take him to the next city over, next gas station, next bus stop. By that method he'd made it from DC up to Jersey then back down into The South whereupon having been granted enough for the bus ticket and a few weeks of provisions by the meandering crowds up and down the East coast he ended up at the The University where the charitable habits of intoxicated audiences spilling out of holes in walls finding their next fix by tipping the Prof for a couple hits by *The Eagles* or else it was something *real country* that sounded funny on the horn, like a civil war battle hymn, but it's what they wanted and he knew enough Dwight Yoakam to get by, so when he had the bounty in his case it was back to Aft City to start something entirely different: not for love or passion or compassion but for *Profit*. He hadn't been here more than a month and the new venture had indeed borne fruit—but when he saw in grotesque grays on the *AC Inquirer* the strange and familiar¹² corpse of the alleged John Farmer he decided to temporarily suspend all operations.

You wouldn't have known it then—it was not mentioned in the article— but that shotgun so-called suicide machine had appeared to have been set in place by a third party. The Professor even with-

¹² In some versions, *doppleganger*

out this information had that feeling of knowing something without really knowing when he looked at that picture in the paper and he saw those shoes ... or was it those pants ... that he by sensation of predestination knew to open the door and take a look around: just as when he first saw the Warehouse: rain and lightning glancing off the corrugated roof, the flat metal walls engulfed by kudzu, the chassis fading into the stalks and fallen limbs of trees and briarbushes exposed only in lightningflash silhouettes as the impossible heat and humidity of the summer tossed storms across the horizon. The taste of destiny on the tongue like honey: like communion with the spirit: all things clear and novel. Here perusing the photograph was that same tingle in the gut, clenching of teeth, calm and bliss and flowing intuition. From which came forth his recollection of—yes that was it— *that watch*.

There was no watch on the boy's wrist. It was hanging out of his pants pocket: a circle on a chain partly covered by his bloodsoaked shirt so that only half of the case was showing. But the Professor knew that watch and he knew there was more to the story than had been released. It was not so obvious in the chiaroscuro halftone of the *Inquirer's* low res but with the paper up against his nose and a loupe against his eye, it was revealed that without a doubt the clock *had* to be the one he had come to know years earlier while in the circle of certain timepiece aficionados: certain individuals who shared secrets of perception, timespace, fate, epiphany, prophecy, influence, and the great origin and enemy of all these things: death.

The professor was a son of the city so he dug a little deeper and asked a few favors. Tim at the bar knows Jim at the grocery knows Tom at the church and in a week he got the key to take a snoop around the basement. When he pulled up the only other car in the lot was a *Sprinter* van, so wary of a possible encounter he kept alert until he went down the concrete staircase and found the red steel door with the single wired glass pane and unlocked it. All the blood had been removed and covered with

splotches of gray enamel on the floor where the body must have been, but the telltale sign: painted black in capital letters neat on the wall it still said *TIME BLIND* cordoned off by drooping yellow police tape. The Professor moving closer with a pocket maglight he had pilfered from the hardware store could see the paint wasn't paint at all: instead it was burned there on the cinderblock like the trail of a hot knife on wood. He rubbed at it with a handkerchief to test if it'd even *smudge* but as suspected the words had in fact *cauterized* the concrete. Pivoting the light back and forth he saw the phrase shined like autopaNOT FOR RELEASEint under a clearcoat: *time blind* the professor had said to himself trying to remember the meaning of the words ... trying to recount when he'd known that Truth ...

John Farmer had a family and a home and the Professor was hoping he'd left with them some indication of his demise. Early in the morning he staked out the house where the Farmers lived: white sided twostory with a green lawn turning yellow and two cars in the driveway. Mr. Farmer was the first out kissing his Mrs. at the stoop then backing out in his Toyota with the grim look of a stiff out to earn his paper who'd lost his only son. An hour later the lady Farmer came out with her phone pressed to her ear by the crook of her shoulder and both hands digging in her purse and neglecting to lock the front door. Bingo.

The Prof snuck in with gloved hands and toed through the foyeur with his breath held tight anticipating calamity; John's room was in the corner upstairs, wall-to-wall with boxes of all his relics in a dusty hodgepodge so he feared he'd be stumbling for the needle in the haystack when from the corner of his eye right within reach of the doorway atop a box with its flaps sprung open: the black and white marble of a composition book. With a snap of the wrist he grabbed it and snuck back out the front door.

On the bench at the park between Second Ave and First St the Professor fanned the journal from start to end and saw the pages nearly all filled with ink and other articles: paragraphs, poems, sketches,

quips, interspersed with taped-in photos, newspaper clippings, cards, napkins, beer bottle labels. All these questions and half-memories growing to plague him and now a regular *Tale of John Farmer* in his grasp. So he turned to the first page which began—

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XI. The BFQ

There was a warehouse behind the church down Bagger Road, where they used to keep salvaged electronics from cars and boats and other vehicles. Eddie thought we could use the place to practice, or at least get a good séance in. I thought it was a bad idea with the church right there, but Eddie observed that no one was really there much, except maybe Sunday.

I saw his point when we walked by to assess the situation. The place was in total disrepair. Bricks falling off, cement cracked through by roots and grass. Littered bits and pieces of broken glass on the perimeter, all the doors boarded up except for one around back for the priest to go through. But the warehouse seemed strangely intact.

Someone's keeping the place up I told him calm, becoming more uncomfortable with every approaching step. I swear I could smell fresh paint wafting off the concrete block walls.

Kind of fishy, yeah was the cool reply, because Eddie was as unphased as I was unnerved, so he led me to the big cellar doors protruding from the front-left corner of the big black building.

Up close I could see the hinges were shiny, the doors free of any age.

Someone must be in there, I told him, *you think we should barge in like this?*

Eddie deemed my instinct overreactive. *It's as much ours as it is theirs, if there is a they to begin with. You know the code nowadays.*

Yeah, yeah...

He swung open the panels, showing the dark void they masked, and took the first step in. I stood still and uncertain.

Well? he turned and raised a brow over the whirring green lens of his left eye.

Yeeaah, yeeaah... and I followed.

Eddie lit a cigarette and kept the flame on to light the way. The spastic glow sent shimmering forms into shadows along the walls as we descended. I squinted in the darkness, Eddie's gaunt frame flickering yellow around the edges in front of me. Everything beyond was lost to obscurity.

Quite a few stairs to go down I mentioned, faltering in the silence.

Yeah, bit more than I expected he said over his shoulder, *bit more but not that bad going down.*

Mmhmm... I agreed, in spite of the fear overtaking my mood.

Then there was a loud metal clang, and I jumped, missing a step and tripping onto Eddie's back.

Easy he sniped, stumbling against the wall.

I turned to look back up the staircase but it was impossible to see.

Was that from behind or up ahead? I choked, starting to sweat.

I couldn't tell Eddie whispered, *we must be in the middle.*

We straightened up and furthered down, slovenly step after slovenly step.

I don't know, could we even get the drums down these stairs?

Eddie looked back at me, and the flame went out on his lighter. The green disks stared disembodied at me through the shadow.

This isn't really about rehearsal, you know.

I should have but of course I didn't.

Then what is it, tell me.

The spheres disappeared and I heard the rattling of metal up ahead.

What is it? I whispered loud. But as the door Eddie was opening slowly swung out, I saw what he was talking about. A vision of ghoulish pleasure, a faintly lit smorgasbord on a table longer than I could see from outside the room.

Gluttony Eddie explained. He walked through but I stayed put.

Who's the glutton? I whispered after him. But he had escaped my range.

The door began to close so I squeezed through quick and shut it behind me. Eddie was taking inventory of the contents on the table with his hands perched folded behind his waist.

Cherry Danish, cheese Danish, marshmallow, sugar cream, baked potatoes, green tomatoes, red steak, pink pork...

I could see he wasn't exaggerating.

Apple fritters, pesto pinwheels, jumbalaya, Hawaiin pizza...

A million decadent morsels, laid out, end to end, untouched, going sour.

Whose is this?

Eddie stopped and picked up a plum so ripe it leaked red stains on his hand.

The Big Fat Queer.

I couldn't gather.

The what?

Eddie put the plumb down, cleaned his hand on the silk white tablecloth.

He lives down here\ You're worst Nightmare\the Big Fat Queer\A Fabulous Glutton\He doesn't distinguish the lamb chops from mutton. The plumb rolled up against a wine bottle and stopped. *I think he used to be* and he points upstairs *anointed.*

It was too much to bear, the ugliness, the sheer quantity of what would be wasted down there.

This is all for him, for one man? I stared down the length of the table from delicacy to delicacy.

One man cannot eat all of this.

Watch Eddie ordered and shuffled me to the back corner where we wouldn't be seen. I could hear a rumble from beyond the head of the table and heavy feet scurrying closer.

Then at the farthest end the monster emerged: flaccid flaps of shivering fat falling from every body part, and all of it forced up against a face at a chin the size of a waist. He leaned face first into a bowl of pudding, one hand on a turkey drumstick and the other on a plate of mushu. A frenzy of custard, meat shards flying, as he moved down the table to the next platter and the next, engulfing it all without pause. I got nervous as he came closer.

He's gonna see us I said into Eddie's ear *or smell us.*

Eddie smirked *or smell us... Fee! Fi! Fo! Fum!*

He was smiling as he whispered but the glutton was halfway down the buffet and we were only so many feet from the end of it.

If he gets to the chicken wings I'm running I told him so Eddie just put a hand around my wrist and said *Don't. Wait.*

The BFQ came right up to us, so much that we could feel enormous heat emitting from his yellow mottled fat. I held my breath for fear he'd hear me and to avoid the stench. But as Eddie had advised he moved right past us and we were unnoticed until he was safely back where he'd begun. But then he stopped.

Shit, Eddie I realized *the plum.*

A bulbous sweating forearm reached toward the lone fruit but rested its hand instead on the neck of the wine bottle before it. He threw back his head to guzzle dripping purplish splotches onto his

mountainous breasts, coughing and sputtering to swallow at the rate he imbibed. Then with a pat on the gut and a series of belches he pandered back into the darkness from which he'd first entered.

The table had been thoroughly looted, only bones and skin left sticking by the grease to the silver shining dishes.

Told ya so Eddie said, and we went back out the door we came in by.

As I'm stepping into the company van, *Stop* Eddie orders. I turn and see his coy grin. *Do you remember when you were immortal?*

I raise my eyebrows, try to think.

I remember when I had your soul inside me. It burned there briefly, but now it's all smashed to smithereens.

He shakes his head.

That wasn't me or mine or anything else but your own. Who are you trying to impress? Not this mongrel wanderer he says and sticks his thumb in his chest.

I just don't feel a damn thing anymore I tell him *It's all left out through my orifices. The star's all burned up, the sun has set, I've quit my foolish proud-talking masquerade.*

Eddie's mouth grows thin and his eyes follow.

Then take mine back again he says pointing over my shoulder. I turn to look, but there's nothing, just the breeze through the trees. And when I turn back, Eddie is gone.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XII. Complete Your Complex

If you ask Eddie *how can you really be so old* once he's told you how old he really is he may shoot you some shoddy comeback and make you forget he'd ever mentioned it like *old is only a relative term* or *man makes the age the age don't make the man*. Or he may tell you this:

The minute I turned on the glasses I started to exist in a purgatory just fractions of fractions of milliseconds ahead of the unenhanced population. By accelerating my perception it had begun an exponential fast-forward that means while to me this entire millenium could conceivably exist before me then the experience to me would feel just a flash, then forgotten if the ionic deconverting newtonium¹³ batteries ever finally did give out. So I can move almost effortlessly through time. All it takes is the synching of the right vibrations and I get from one chapter to the other like running a thread through a fanned out book. My cells do not feel gravity: my skin floats: suspended in all directions by a phlebology of corpuscles hanging on muscle gripping bones: there is no cellular decay: no atrophy: the oxygen levels are always high with a sigh these glasses have given me eternity.

That's when Eddie describes to me the perpetuation of his punishment in psychotic monologue:

When I was in the CIA, I was working on ultra projects and I landed the gig to handle Tim Leary. I lived over in Slummerville for his Harvard years. That way the docs could call me in after he'd had a large enough dose. He snickered. Then I would program the shite out of'em. I thought it would be pretty obvious the government was behind Leary. I mean he started out of West Point! and could you believe the hippies that thought the orange county acid drop¹⁴ had been organized by a bunch of trippers with big hearts? He was

¹³ Or, coronium

¹⁴ Another notable event: "in my purse, I had a little Buddha, a prayer book and beads, some patchouli oil and incense, and a Murine bottle full of LSD" ... "The cop ingested it all through his fingers and never got around to booking us...they let us the hell out of there."

shaking his head. *All those tabs were certified grade-A American CIA melt your brain quick pills there he let out a full laugh You should have seen the freaks that came out after that dose: man... real messed up. Kinda stuff you can only find in the gutters of The City these days... reminded me of Nam and Agent Orange so I took a deeper look and sure enough it was government invented poison designed to delete the brain cells of the good for nothing punks that came out of that adolescent asystematic psychwave.*

With the Leary assignment I was able to display my natural abilities at hypnosis and in no time I could have anyone mesmerized in seconds. Add that to the effects of the LSD and the results were uncanny. With the simplest persuasion I could compartmentalize the personality to respond to different cues i.e., snap my fingers: dance like a monkey. This was particularly easy with Tim – in fact I'd successfully convinced him to take me for a divine inner voice and incidentally he'd parrot me word for word when he announced new slogans

You don't mean—

I do! My first draft was Turn on, tune out, drop in because I was doing a lot of surfing at the time but I settled for the version that was more unsettling to the general public.

It was hard to tell Eddie's half truths from his tall tales and this one seemed in particular bullshit.

Not so! Those noreasters bring the big waves round couple weeks a year. Sure you look funny on the T in a wetsuit with a surfboard. Cold as hell in the Atlantic in Massachusetts in March though...

I mean handling Leary. Give me a break.

Consider it broken. How bout I cut to the chase. Look: what's been happening to me now started the day I put on the glasses. It was designed to enhance my hypnotic capacity by hyper spinning the stack of lenses in the frames until they accelerate light as it enters the eyeball. After two days in bed the surgery for the lens installation had healed so I'm standing in front of a mirror and I flip the switch—

—Then the mirror mutates and I hit the ground hard. My head knocks the wall and I see my body dragged by CIA henchmen toward a room with a screaming woman inside. The screaming doesn't grow much louder when the door opens: she's screaming through a gag and nearly out of breath. They sit me in a chair and one of them holds my head up while the other takes off his pants.

Do you know who that is?

One of them asks me but I can't recognize her through something like a ketamine haze.

That's Mommy baby boy

Which does nothing to my stoic face inert as a portrait while the agent penetrates her.

Guess who's next? The guy says. Then the glasses reboot and I wake up on the floor in front of the mirror.

Eddie pauses 'cause he thinks I understand him.

Were those CIA just some schizophrenic hallucination or were I and my mother tortured in front of me by my coworkers in an effort to program me?

I nod though either way I feel deluded.

I started to believe the latter and that paranoia drove me out of the Agency. I couldn't stay there when now I felt my colleagues' eyes drilling holes in me every second so I fully defected.

Then the corner of his mouth bends into a lean grin

Not to mention I never talked to my mother again. Not that we'd talked much before that anyway. She always blamed me like I killed my father.

Luckily Eddie decides to take a swig of his whiskey and looks at me and whistles before he says

Ooooo doggie. Ill take another one of these.

And I go find the bottle.

How'd you get in with the CIA? I have to ask him when I return with the Jack in one fist and his glass in the other.

Eddie smiles because he knew I'd ask. He wants me to think I am asking too much. *You know that was the rye talking* he starts but I pour his next portion so I say *then keep it talking* and hand it over to him. He takes it in one gulp.

Let me tell you about a society that predates the Agency and I can see his eyes glowing the familiar dull green glow behind his glasses I've learned means he's trying to recollect something far outside the current timeframe. *Predates the beginning of history really. And to call it a society is—well—incomplete. Society implies the gestalt of a group of people and these entities* his eyeglow emitting the slightest shiver *however they are to be explained in human terms: it is beyond human. These are the figures that guide the guides of humanity. Not the prophets and messiahs, rebels and pariahs, not your Socrateses and Jesuses or Buddhas and Mohammeds, not your Galileos, Copernici, Herodituses, Ciceros, not Luthers or Calvins, Descarteses, Robespierres, nor Virgils, Voltaires, Montesquieus or Marxes, not your Goethes, Ghandis, Joyces, Faulkners, Malcolm X's, MLK Jr's: not even Busto or Rumpf himself: here we are talking the force that all of these men merely rode upon. The wave that takes the boat up on its crest and lets it slide down the barrel or crash over the falls per its own gesturing: and the society I reference is the group of actors taking dictates from that power directly like its puppet so that the actions of those under its influence reflect the closest we will ever get to perceiving the nature of that force and the purpose of its existence.*

Is it God? I interject and Eddie with a grimace tells me:

No, though some may call it that. Even if it were: He Himself knew best not to give it a name: that only will diminish your understanding of it. When you say you believe in God well that's only saying so much isn't it?

Moses himself: witnessing the bush—I am HE WHO IS— just enigmatic enough to escape any real description of the article wouldn't you say? no it's not God. Though God certainly is involved as He is in everything... let's just call it That Force quoteunquote for now.

I acquiesce with a dip of the chin towards my glass.

I first encountered That Force quoteunquote through several mystical experiences as a child: sick and delirious with what they called scarlet fever¹⁵. I knew when one of these experiences was dawning by the familiar sense of expanding and contracting in my gut in my appendages out to my digits and ultimately encapsulating my cerebrum like my form had become a gelatinous balloon inflating and deflating in oscillations. Then like a nightmare the hallucinations of a giant space and in that space all the workings of the universe before me: past present and future splayed out like something glorious gutted and all at once the knowledge of this perfectlybeautiful whole would enter my being until the sensation would subside and I'd find myself exactly where I was before it had happened, as if nothing occurred. At the time I mostly found the experiences unpleasant and generally hoped to avoid them. And the older I got the less often I was encumbered by the phenomenon: until I discovered transcendental meditation. Turned out I had a knack for entering the state of being you might call tantric. I could achieve it rapidly and yet what I call achievement what I really felt what was akin to That Force quoteunquote overtaking me and repurposing my body to its ends. After a couple months in practice I came across a rotten little door along an ancient foundation wall out in the utilities section of the compound. It was half open and I peeked inside: only to be promptly subdued by its inhabitants: men in black track suits and sneakers wearing black sunglasses and black ball caps. Evidently I had stumbled into a highly classified meeting of the Dismemberment Bureau—

He pauses for effect and I take the bait: *the what?*

¹⁵ Late-stage strep

You heard right. The Dismemberment Bureau. They're a far off branch of the Agency with one job and one job only.

Let me guess—

You just might get it right. But I'll tell you anyway. It's their job to get normal sane and even Godfearing men to lose their sensibilities and self-emasculate.

Why would the government devote a bureau to that?

It's not the government, amigo. It's That Force quoteunquote. The society. And they do it for collateral. Their powers of perception go well into the future. Almost as far as mine. They see the future of family trees fully grown and they know where the potential harbingers of righteousness or revelators of the collective unconscious are likely to branch off and overtake the popular opinion, persuade dissent.

So they cut off the branch. They prevent saviors?

They do their part. There's all sorts of groups like them. Some are outright assassins: snipers, car bombs, poison and all that. But this operation is far more sly, more psychological. They get their work done with the same kind of tools I use: the initial hypnosis and the seeding of the neurosis, the handling of the victim until they're beyond repair. If I hadn't nosed my way into that musty old apartment things would have been very different for me. Fate brought me to the bureau and they showed me the ropes.

So you were a member of the Dismemberment Bureau...

Yes—a dismemberer. What a dastardly occupying occupation! You take a man, break him down to the barest, basest gender dysphoric conflict of his psyche, convince him he's a woman. Then you show him a path to the realization of the desire you implanted with the group of Agency affiliated physicians and six to fourteen months later: voila no more danger of reproduction!

But the sex change operation, your weapon of choice... surely its only been in practice for...

Four score years or so. Before that, tradition allowed the much simpler practice of producing eunuchs. Haven't you read Matthew:19.12: For there are eunuchs who have been so by birth, and eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it. After the dissolution of the castrati by human rights protesters the eunuching organizations lost their well ahem you know their hubris I mean these protesters had them by the—well not in the literal sense of course—I just mean they were crushed as a means of emasculation. As the common classes acquired more and more civil rights eunuch creation went in to such poor taste the society had to find ways to achieve the same ends by subtler means. Freud arrived just in the nick of time—and thoroughly dosed on cocaine which made it all the more easy for us to program him to our needs: usually using methods he himself had invented. Sig as they call him in the parlance of the fraternity let us in to the mind of the victim so we could create conflicts and implant delusions that would motivate said target to selfmutilate.

They cut it off themselves?

We sure as hell didn't do it. Couldn't get caught in the scheme and risk revealing the committee's higher associations. In those cases our guys in the field were the psychotherapists whom these genderdysphorics had been prescribed to visit by physicians on our payroll. In this era we've taken it so far with the litigation task force as to make it the law in CA and NJ that if a doctor thinks their patient has genderdysphoria they can lose their license if they look into the psychological profile instead of prescribing gender counseling. Before that we had a lot of close calls when the targets were given therapy to realize their self actualization through less grotesque means thus averting the desire to and he makes a pair of scissors with his hands below his belt. But to

return to the job description: typically they split the personality and suppressed the conscience until their patient went off the deep end and got the work done on their own dime. The first dismemberers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were mostly these type of weaponized psychologists. Then in the thirties the Germans made it possible to implant the female parts where the male ones had been, bringing reassignment into the limelight. Advances made in the States at JHU up until the seventies when they outlawed the practice there brought us to the level where it was in my day, and you could get a baker's dozen done per year, each. My best performance under orders from HC during a weeding-out campaign I got eighteen post-op completions and one confirmed sterile transvestite. But it had to come a long way to get to that point. We had our snafus.

Let's hear one.

Well I bet you remember the 70s flick Dog Day Afternoon.

Sure: based on a true story. You mean the bureau was behind those two nuts?

Recall the reason they robbed the bank?

To pay for the sex change operation!

Sometimes an operative goes haywire. Falls in love with the target. Tries to go rogue and pulls some stunt like AP as the lead and then they have to clean up the mess with the cops and the feds. The full backstory: he wanted to take his lover down south and out of the watch of the Bureau so he could use non affiliated doctors to try and live out his ahem fairytale. It was a fool's task but he fell for it. His handlers had simply let his brain go to mush in the cultorevolutionary homosexualmilitant social structure of the era.

But what about today?

These days the society has evolved the operation to its intended state as a pseudoscientific narcissistic hedonistic franchise to profit on the multitudinous nature of human psychosexuality. The latest whopper was everyone's favorite BJ—

The B is for ... wait... I think I know...

Badabing, badaboom. Technically BCJ now I should correct.

Of course! I knew that couldn't be a natural occurrence...

How could it be? all-American hero. The quintessential symbol of manliness. But we loved a challenge. Full disclosure: I wasn't set as the primary unit on that target. I only contributed my share of research. I was the one who unearthed hisher javelin fetish and we used that to disrupt hisher heterosexual desire-reward complex with the systematic referencing of javelins in the dreamscapes we triggered with psycho-operative amphetamines hidden in shampoo: there were javelins shooting up from the ground like whac-a-mole, javelins coming out of hisher mother's eyes, a finale with himher being stuck through with them like a porcupine as they shot out one after the other from between hisher father's legs. Eventually we phased in imagery suggesting the javelin was the symbolic equivalent to an extension of the penis. It was shortly after we seeded all the appropriate obsessions that heshe fixated on losing hisher manhood. We had set the balls rolling you could say.

But the celebrity! I mean, MTV... how could your work have gone unnoticed?

You're right heshe was well in the public eye by that point so we had to get the networks to cooperate: but that was the easiest part. With the proper bribes and extortions our PR guys had everyone in the secularsemitic california-manhattan mediocracy eating out of our palms. I don't think any one of us would have fathomed himher to be on the cover of V— postop with hisher legs open but in hindsight it seems to have been inevitable. Last I saw the bureau HQ has the phallus on the wall like a one point trophy.

I thought ~~hes~~he had kept ~~hisher~~ willy.

No sir. We had it hanging there right over the mantle erect and all. Joke is: when you poke the fire don't poke your eye out! That's the place of honor: not like the ones we put to use in the coatroom or the climbing wall. And you're right he wouldn't admit it to the press. Like most postops the resolution of the goal of becoming female only left a feminized male—a third gender. This led to the even deeper conflict between Self and Not-Self in the newly minted Ms. The claims ~~hes~~he'd made while still a he to DS et al were not all self mending as he had expected and with handfuls of prescriptions and hundreds of hours of therapy we had him fully in our clutches. Out of the realm of public influence: no longer the archetypal Olympian symbol of masculinity.

I can't believe it.

You don't have to: it's still historical, stored in our records. The other recent Great Emasculation was that two for one deal, those Wach-uh, Wach-uh, Wachamacallit brothers—

—er sisters would be more PC, no?

Now there was a task for the ages. They got put on our watch list after they hit a little too close to home with films explaining the human race to be a sea of catatonics experiencing their reality as a simulation run by nonhuman overlords he laughs and looks at his shoes no, the society didn't like that one bit. We got them fixated on transitioning in a jiffy and boy did that knock the entelechy right out of 'em: put their prophetic powers to rest real fast.

That's right: they never really topped that first flick did they?

Never came close. We couldn't afford to let another one get through. The fact that their sophomore debut got past our moles on the ratings board was a real oversight on the part of the society: they thought it would

be another flop like Virtuosity (Paramount: 1995) with the obvious plot parallels, and yet instead it made a huge impact and got a lot of people closer to knowing That Force quoteunquote, wiser to the true nature of their existence. So as the top operative at the time I had the pleasure of seeding brother B while my supervisor got brother A.

Then how did you pull it off so to speak?

First we hit them with composite images of their father dressed in drag three times a week under hypnosis and a regiment of LSD and 2cB. Cyndi Lauper¹⁶ on repeat to provide ambiance for the trance: we switched out their briefs for panties and switched out their memories so they thought they had bought it and put it there themselves. Expose them to enough GO'K paintings in the right configurations and the rest was easypeasy. They went into phallic reversion in the first months of the summer aided along by our steady strategic reinforcement. Then wouldn't you know? they had the suckers lopped off right there in LA and were out bragging about it to our cabal of cronies in the press by Independence Day. He can't hold back a guffaw. Independent indeed, hooked on hormones like any chemical junkie...

What a riot!

Can't deny it: they haven't put forth a thesis offensive to the society since, even managed to diminish the true power of the original blockbuster with a sequence of irreverent sequels he shakes his head and those were just the more recent standouts among the victims. After a decade weeding out willies though I decided I needed a change of pace. The society had begun scouting for Soul Rippers after a long hiatus.

And those are?

Harvesters of human souls.

Care to elaborate?

¹⁶ i.e., *She's So Unusual* (Portrait: 1983)

Well In my earliest days it meant you lulled the asset into a trance by whatever method in which you'd specialized and then with a standard surgical scalpel and a perfect flick of the wrist you removed the center of the pituitary gland where the soul is located and squeezed it into a vial.

Just like that.

Well it took practice. I mean a lot of monkeys had to die so I could master the art. Nowadays they have robotic assistance and digital hypnosis—but the oldschool worked fine for our needs and I was adept before I'd even finished the training. It was I who invented the syringe and pressure relief method in the last test of my novitiate. The higherups spotted my talent and after a few more rounds of interrogation I had the pendulum in one hand and scalpel in the other ready for the next great period of my career as a garner of fine human essence.

But if the soul can be harvested—why? What do you use it for once you've got it?

Ah yes: the trillion dollar question. I'll explain: A person's soul is among other things a container of enormous potential energy. When you have the right equipment you can extract that energy and use it for a number of purposes, many of which I pioneered: but in the end, most consumers have the intention to pause the effects of aging. For the young and virile, a dose can bring upon the power of personality—you know, to start a cult, overthrow a government, or sell soft drinks. Most clients are one-time users by the simple fact it's all they can afford: but some people have been taking other people's souls so long they need one just to wake up in the morning, people of endless resources and appetites... but then there are also the less expensive uses after processing and homogenizing: with one ounce of blended human souls you can restore the hair of seventy thousand men. If the souls are all from females, 3 mg of a 9 to 1 mix with folic acid will reverse menopause. And the by-products—the particles which accumulate on the tubes of a soul distilling machine, or the gray embryonic goo that can be separated from the bulk of soul molecules and still contain trace amounts, are typically used as food

preservatives by the of corporate food industrial complex. But the most efficacious use of the substance is to extend a human life beyond its natural expiration in order to overcome death which—well, even with the purest material, it can only work for so long.

So it's the miracle drug.

It has that misnomer. It's not a drug; it's pure life. And when I started, the crude souls were still hard to work with. We had to harvest with utter efficiency because we knew there would be extensive waste due to the processing. They had quite a quota for rookies but I surpassed it in the first six months. Got promoted to Soul Manager, Soul Principal, Soul VP. I had a hundred Rippers under my supervision but I still spent half my time in the field out of the sheer enjoyment of it. We brought in so much product I had a corner office and an Agency BMW after two years, led the collection score board for fourteen quarters before I slipped down second to a hotshot former neurosurgeon fresh out of the academy.

Rough.

Indeed I was doggin it after that dropped my ego down a peg so I started spending more and more time looking for a way to get my edge back. Up to that point I hadn't been in direct touch with the society and the curiosity I felt towards their coterie was driving me to pursue communication. And that's when the Agency decided to try and program me into submission... he cracks his knuckles with a metallic shrill now that you're caught up on logistics, I'll let you know why I'm here: this simple fact of nature: only the marked ones will satisfy the balance.

What mark? what balance?

The day the towers fell there was an unholy combustion: the smelting of flesh and steel concrete and bone...

The smell of the ash

The soul market is typically perpetual, infinitely recyclable, the same soul sold and recovered over and over... the souls are constant, the meat variable... but under the right conditions they may fuse. The heat of the thermite charges and the level of desperation in the hearts of the helpless: the pressures met the threshold. The mechanics were inevitable.

The bodies like ragdolls resigned to their fates, facefirst.

What entered your nostrils, lungs, blood-brain barrier, was sacred: the remnant of the atrocity: human memory made material.

An intermingling with the dust and K: I snorted someone's soul cut with the carbon of a million burnt objects...

Some inextricable part where being has met what has been like a pill stuck in your throat. When it finally goes down there's a mitochondrial connection.

My DNA is worthy. I've taken in the right dark matter.

Unless it's extracted it will always be a part of you. The memories, the fear, the trauma: like it's your own.

He's got the needle out held by the tip and he's shaking it for affect.

This will cure you. Suck it all right out. Schloooooopp. Won't feel a thing.

Bullshit.

Eddie shakes his head and flips the needle in the air to grab it by the other end. Won't feel a thing.

To the core. Numb.

Numb?

As if you could be sliced apart by switchblades. Utterly callous.

You mean as a chronic side-effect?

Only until it grows back. If it ever grows back.

I can't tell if he's already done the operation. There's a pain in the back of my neck that could just be a nervous tick. Eddie is still twirling the needle across his knuckles but I've blinked once or twice. How would I know if I'd lost my soul?

The 3,000 must be replaced for the pendulum to swing the other way. You fit the criteria. It's just business kid, no hard feelings.

So it's already been done.

Eddie closes his fist and the needle disappears. In his other hand it reemerges from his shirt-sleeve. *Not yet* and it disappears off the tip of his finger *because I like your style. I'm willing to make you an offer.*

How's that.

He shifts from one foot to the other and presses the tips of his fingers together, flexing his knuckles, staring at some point between his opposed palms. *I almost had you once back there in school. I couldn't sense a drop of the good stuff inside you. I thought someone had beat me to it.* His eyes glimmer a mild green glow. *In actuality I was relying on my sensors and your soul was off the charts: they couldn't pick it up.*

The near-death experience. The beatific vision.

Your little mystical excursion sent your spirit on a parabola and when I first encountered you: you were at an apotheosis. It was the perfect camouflage. And here's the thing—

He's looking at me now with hands that are spread apart to face me like a mime.

I even poked your neck and zilch, nothin' he's shaking his head yet I still feel his stare but I didn't

consider the possibility that your pituitary wouldn't be where I supposed it would.

You mean—

At first I almost let it get by me: called it tough luck, a fluke: the kid had been had by some other agent.

But NO and he slams a balled up fist into the other hand I hadn't thought of that one possibility—

My twin

You win! and he twirls his pointer in a mock celebration. Your organs are flipped.

I absorbed him in the womb

It's like driving in London: everything's on the wrong side.

But why the surprise? it's all over my medical records. You didn't do your homework?

Wasn't of interest to my parse algorithms, slipped under the radar, but yeah you could say that. Until today.

In the shimmering grim gleam of his lenses I can see a dark pit at each one's center. It's already too late: or has this happened already? The dots fix on my pupils and expand into placid black whorls that somehow overtake my vision and render me blind: I feel the sliver and prick of a needle, but it may be another hallucination as the feeling of the sting multiplies across my skin like the darkness has the needles for teeth: Eddie is whispering something. Maybe it is not Eddie. Maybe they are not whispers. The world is spinning despite the darkness like a gag at an amusement park where the house rotates around you. The purpose of this ride is nothing more than to be a distraction from Eddie who's done it again, mesmerized me, fulfilled his directive, siphoned my soul. *I'll make you a deal kid: you don't scream and I won't kill you.* As if to scream were possible. Is it even Eddie anyway? Auditory delusions. Sensory phenomena. The needleteeth darkness like a porcupine turned inside out around him. The utter loss of focus. Distorted thoughts harrowing one's psyche. Paranoia. Psychosis. Eddie's cackle then is too much a

metal echo. He's empty of anything good: anything that could have stopped me from doing what he asked me to do when I aim the gun at him and he laughing when he said it with the syringe of my soul sticking in his arm: me close enough for all of it to splatter on me when I pull down the trigger, I mean when the smile on his face is all that's left: those ugly glasses smashed burnt sputtering sparks and oil in spurts and whistles.

But see I'll fix them. Because now *I* have them. *I am the one* who will see through the fabric straight through to the other side. Between the layers of the present into the funnel holes of time when it lapses through my cortex from the wires in my eyes. *I will see it all clearly now, I know I will.*

*And I am the only one who will.*¹⁷

¹⁷The first Next Eddie

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XIII. Do You See What I See?

In the alley behind the fence that delineates the backyard of The Tower Eddie has a clear view of the parapet of the roof of the fraternity's satellite apartment building. His perspective is not warped by the distance between his eyes and the top of the building—when he tunes it right he can see there's been erected another structure that looks like it had been thrown together overnight: scaffolding affixed with twobysix planks supporting other twoby framing to form a squirreling staircase interrupted by rough framed ladders where the level changed abruptly and all of it culminating at the top of the makeshift penthouse with a plywood deck and a tarp pulled over four posts as cover. It creaks as brothers send pledges running up and down shouting orders and asking questions as they climb and descend. Eddie follows one of the participants to the top and into the shoddy tent where there's stacks of full racks of beer that he approaches to remove a can and cracks it open with his teeth to empty the contents into his stomach with such speed it's as if he's squeezed the beer out of the can when he crushes it empty with his grip and sends the can tumbling down the mountain of wood and nails he now must navigate down to wait for his next turn up the structure and so on until the beer is all finished. Eddie watches another five rounds of the hazing ritual until from the roof access hatch a boy emerges and speaks with two of the others observing the pledges. The nod is a signal for the game to stop. The pledges get in file and go out the door the other boy had come from. Eddie's got to time it right so he waits...

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XIV. Musical Break

With the bluegreen patina on the mouthpiece the professor is reluctant at first, wiping with the tattered cuff of his shirt in stiff circles, accomplishing nothing. He brings the trumpet to his mouth, forms the downward embouchure, buzzes his lips with the softness of the mosquitoes that show up one by one as the sun sets and the soupy steam air moves towards the grass and vines. Just enough vibration that the C is flat so he corrects it, plays the major scale, the minor pentatonic. Now the fingers cramp unsure of the valves, arthritic. But he goes on to play *all* the scales for hours behind a chorus of cicadas and crickets that accompany the melodies with primordial rhythms and become his metronome. He falls into a blues song, which medleys with another and another, forays on a jazz standard and only stops when his lip starts to ache and quiver too strongly to perform. The insects continue their calls to the night, he drains the spit and wipes the mouthpiece delicately: reverent.

He is placing the instrument back into the lumpy plush of its case when he sees the green has smudged revealing the shiny brass behind. It glimmers in a moonbeam and he bring the horn back to his face to examine. He can smell the bitter metal and is compelled to play again. This time it is as if no time has passed. The melody comes flawlessly out through the valves and he feels goosepimples that start on the tip of his tongue and spread to his neck, when he feels another familiar sensation: Eddie's green glasses aimed right at 'em. So he spins around to hear something to the tune of—

always liked that Thelonious Monk best, didn't you prof?

—and sure enough there's the man with the plan and his arms folded square against his chest so his narrow biceps fill the thin t shirt he's got on without the jacket over it.

Thought I'd be ending up in a Parisian jazz club circa 1969. Not here where the only action is the leaves blowing in the breeze. But this'll do for tonight.

The professor plops his trumpet back in the stippled brown case and pulls up a chair out from where it's been overtaken by weeds and dead leaves. It is the first time Eddie has lingered while the prof is without any substance in his system, clean. Now he can see that Eddie really does have an aura like a misty halo that shivers around the perimeter of his gaunt frame which was something he'd always attributed prior to his own juiced up cerebrum. The delay in his motion really is like a camera moving in and out of focus or when examined more closely a digital video losing bandwidth until it is jammed up with pixels. The jeans and shined leather shoes really are welded at the cuff like two bits of blue and black clay mashed together, or a pair of rubber waders painted to look that way. Now he can see that the seams of the shirt sleeves are fixed in the same way to the flesh above the bicep like they've been melded by heat. And as he suspected: about the perimeter of the glasses where they meet the cheekbones and eyebrows, the rims are becoming enshrouded by skin like it is closing a wound. At the top of it all the shimmering black hair that purports to be slicked back with pomade but is really fused into big ropy chunks that slither gently in the tight pattern of his part. The professor feels like he is seeing Eddie for the first time for truly he is with the veil of the hallucinogens lifted, only to prove that the mirage was the reality and Eddie was like a human fish with scales in the mosaic of his outfit.

How did you get here The professor queries, still entranced by the revelation of Eddie's true appearance *without a record playing?*

*Major advancement in the art, this is*¹⁸... he starts in Yoda® syntax saying *I boosted the pre-retinal cores thinking it would make the translation between nodes less nauseating, but it looks like I've managed to escape the boundaries of direct vinyl to vinyl transport. Yes—in boosted mode I only need the notes to be the same, same pitch camber tremolo duration—and that speaks to your mastery of Crepuscule With Nellie no doubt.* He nods at the professor whose gaze moves from the pulsating outline of Eddie to his encased horn which too has begun to modulate around its edges as Eddie describes its new power.

So if I play the right note at the right time I can summon you with just the instrument, no needle, no other equipment required?

*Yes that's the conclusion at which I'm arriving. Provided of course that I've matched the phrase on my end which is something you know I have the knack for. In fact—*he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his Hohner—*I could use me some crawdaddies, think I'll take a quick trip to the baiyou* and as he overblows the high fifth, he's gone again. The prof has the feeling that with Eddie in the vicinity sobriety cannot remain the status quo so he asks himself *what're we poppin today daddio?* surveys the tables for the proper intoxicant. Even though he isn't dosed yet the revelation of Eddie's form has him in a state of mind that defies the experience of reality to which he is accustomed. It is a strange high he cannot describe and he almost abandons the search for that special little vial when he encounters it behind a three-ring binder holding a copy of *TIHKaL*.

This is it.

Sure is.

They drop and Eddie says *don't trip* so The Prof does what? He inadvertently loses the surety of his footing and kicks the concrete block that's under the short leg of the table with his hazardous chemi-

¹⁸The next phase of Eddie's ability

cal. He feels his weight going over his stubbed toe as the desk stumbles off its plinth and the calcium carbide falls fatefully towards the Bunsen burner: the professor lifts his hand to his face so that when the substance explodes it rips off his ring finger and pinky and his thumb is popped so far out of its socket it's dangling like a chicken neck off his mutilated palm. The drug is taking hold and he can hardly sense the enormous pain where his fingers used to be. He is looking for Eddie but he's disappeared in the confusion of hallucinations overcoming his perception. He falls to the ground and contorts his body in fits. He is in shock, convulsing, bleeding, lost in the dark beautiful terror of the drug—

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XV. A New Enigma

If you ask Eddie what his name means, he probably won't tell you all of it at first. *Eddie Motion*. Don't ask why. If you say why, he'll say *well Y is my middle name*. You say, *really?* he says *yeah, you know, Spanish for* and. So you might laugh it off and start to gnaw on it a bit, like for a week or two, and then ask him again: what's your name mean? And he'll say *do you want me to spell it for you? I think it's pretty obvious*. So you should: on a piece of paper write it down and look at it: Eddie Y Motion. If you see it the first time he'll have a fit. No one's ever gotten it at first. Not the whole thing. I mean you might say something like *Eddie "E" Motion: like Eddie Emotion?* To which he'll reply *ha that's only the half of it*. Maybe you'll think that's enough and you are satisfied but sometimes if he thinks yerwerthit he'll take your piece of paper and rip it into little bits like confetti. You might flip but he'll be cool saying *just trying to help you out*. If you ask again after a month prepare for this: he'll say *my name has punctuation*. One could say so *he's a jr.* or something of that logic but you're way off. Look a little closer knowing now what I'll tell you which is this: *it's not the Spanish for* and *it's the Spanish for* or *that's important*. So if by now you still haven't put it all together and if you haven't kicked around those little scraps of paper each with a different letter on it that Eddie so quickly and neatly tore at their seams and infact dropped them in such a manner that they are in order spelling I D E M O N O D E I T Y there on the ground which if it were interpreted by the clues that Eddie had told could appear to say like some bumper sticker Shakespeare: *I, dEMon o[r] deity?*

After the smoke clears and you can see the green again through the haze it will have been too late. Eddie has already completed the course of his magic. You let him in and he went straight for what

he was after all along. You knew, deep down you knew: but those green eyes, that seismic grin ... If he was *on your side* how could you do anything else but trust him? And there you are with the glasses held firmly in your hands *hell* still dripping with his meat and blood! but you'll put them on anyway. You'll sink them straight into the cornea: needle-first so the light can hit your lobes again, the nerves fire, the serotonin spills, and then again in spite of how this is the first time you have put them on *again* you will see it in perfect form: all your life has led to this point: this is the moment that will put into place the logical order of the present by reassociating the distending phenomena of your psyche with one thing, one goal, one path, one straight line like the fuse to a bonfire set with gasoline, the euphoria, the pain, the pleasure, the *ecstasy* and the terror, that once you have seen it: those low gauge hypodermics nestled *righttight* in your retinas, the present slowly dwindling ... ever dwindling into past and then, by some miracle, in perfect form, like film off the roll, it is there: everywhere you glance: the light again: as if God himself had just flicked the first switch *by what miracle* you will wonder: but stop wondering: It is there for you to see, just see it. You have no other choice now with those two gaping holes in your eyes should the glasses ever stop spinning so learn to love it: *the light* as if the sun had just suddenly exploded into ineffable neon, enormous and effervescent aura, that spiny arching porcupine, that vile circling snake, the *future: the light.*

XVI. Spec Sheet

When Eddie finally shows me the plans to his goggles I see the cross sections and I cringe. They're devised like this: first you align the two tiny hypodermic tubes perfectly with your eyes so they're aimed at the pupils dead-center. Then the balls get hit with Novocain® and the tiny tubes lasercut and inject themselves around each individual lens. From there they form a consistent circuit to your optic nerve and as they begin to spin the nerve interprets the new accelerated signal. But these things rotate so fast they warp the light through the lenses so the waveparticles separate and produce a microwormhole through the centripetal antevacuum and suddenly you are a mystic: because as if by the gift of prophecy you can clearly see and understand the events of the world around you *before* events occur.

They didn't start that way. First Eddie wanted to do it like this: spin the lenses in reverse and keep the goggles hyperdermic. It was just advanced hypnosis in a sleeker shell so that by firing the light-columns out his eyeglasses he could incur the trance on the victim then sneak out his soul through the sixteenth bump on the pituitary gland with a pressurized vial and a scalpel. Quick and painless without any noticeable effects beyond that of a normal hangover in the morning! Anesthesia in its purest form. It was a miracle tool and he had the only effective prototype.

Sometimes Eddie tells it like this:

The things we can see here in our time are terrifying like darkness. They make us blind to the oneness of time. From the rape of the Sabines to the Towers falling we are witness to the horror of our race: humanity: we are all capable of good but we mostly choose to save our own skins: mostly society is

uncharitable and self interested. But when *you* see this then at least *you* have a chance. I'm like *you*: I saw it once—so long ago but still like inkblot paintings on my cerebrum, it is there for me to realize any time I choose to use the *right* energy. That *epiphany* is such an important phenomenon, it never leaves the brain even if it morphs into something wholly different by the time it hits your lips or fingers. That sudden knowledge of everything: instantaneous like a thunderbolt from God to make you suddenly capable of greatness and divinity ... but this revelation is not so easily reached. When you don't get the right parts together and in place before the time comes sometimes your mind can't take it. Sometimes you stick the drill into your eyeholes so you can implant what you *believe* will tell you the future. And only sometimes does it work. So I often wonder: which came first, the *epiphany* or the *holes*? but the answer is always they are one in the same: the moment of origin of my real *existence*.

So yeah I took them out on my own. Robot assisted and drugged to the gills so I'd survive of course. What slammed me was the moment I realized that I didn't have to do it: I could be happy in this evil world of the present but instead I had chosen something very different and even moreso, *beyond evil*. So I have been since that moment in the grip of something *beyond* with the knowledge of all that can be accomplished still there inside me, unrelenting. All this new sight has given me is more of the *ugliness* I wanted to replace in the first place. The future is not any different than right now in terms of ratios: the same evil, the same good. Like a black smog over the earth being fought at with flashlights, that's the unfortunate conclusion, like an astronaut seeing how small the damn thing is and how badly still we treat it, sometimes that's *all* that epiphany has taught me. *He drags from his cigarette*. So fuck it, I use them to do what will get me the most cash. And that's this *he'll say last before he changes the subject*.

XVII. Picka Mantra, Any Mantra

When Eddie cuts out a soul he does it old school. He knows a time before AI assisted robotic extracting drills: when you had to rely on your wrist and not just your wits.

It's dark and on fire at the same time in John's mind. He is in pain. He is in the hospital.

The doctors have placed him on an IV drip and flushed him through with antibiotics, twice, but it keeps coming back. Now they say they have to cut them out and worst case he may die from the bleeding. *Sign here* and he will be under the knife in the morning.

Tonight when he looks in the mirror he sees something red and black, like a swollen fleshy fetus in his throat. That's what they'll cut out and then he can go home.

Now there is nothing but pain and the absence from it when the nurse restocks the morphine in the drip, forcing him to sleep. In the morning some melodrama in the hallway as he is rolled toward the anesthesiologists in scrubs who jibe at him to see how much he's going to need: *how many six packs can you drink?* but before he can recall the answer he blacks out and is awake again in a waiting room behind a curtain with his parents.

Am I done now and after the courtesies they take him home.

There's something in the hospital that happens to his brain, he has begun to think. A subtle voice at night that whispered *no more bullshit*, originated somewhere deep inside him. A fundamental truth he had to take to heart to keep going now as he had always been. *No more bullshit.*

The world becoming all bright and filled with color: his attitude adjusted to find the solace of books and begins to read the ones which meant something once and finds the meaning again, anew, stinging like garlic and neon luminescent. *No more bullshit.*

The motto starts to fade when he falters facing devious foes or devilish women but something divine pulls him to the course even after he has fled The Church. Some particle of his dreams that he can't recognize and yet guides him to the path of light. An ambition for enlightenment beyond society's ubiquitous obsession with success now that there is *no more bullshit*.

So it begins *sans* bull.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XVIII. A Poor Trait of the Artist

What Eddie never tells you is the time it was when he arrived. *Oh sometime before tomorrow between yesterday and now.* Of course he'll leave the same time he came in. It's hard to comprehend the logic for it's threefold: one for the money, two for the show, three for the first two, so they're all the sum total each, also. He might be fibbing when he addles on like that on those sort of things (see that was him again).

I can't even really be sure of the name. If I hadn't actually seen Eddie all those times and actually talked with him—well I wouldn't even bring him up in confessions any more.

Listen...Eddie is there at my father's deathbed when I can't be. It's a mixed blessing. I decided I couldn't just bail on the band. I convinced myself he'd have wanted it that way, that I loved him more than needs honorific justification, that my duty is to my commitments first. I think he taught me some of that but it's all bullshit and I know it's really an evil thing I do by not going and playing instead and the bitter sadness I keep from implanting on the surface of my mind festers sizzling deep into the fleshy part of my spirit and smolders into the meat. The burning rot stink stings my sinuses for the whole gig, the whole year, still lingers...for the truth is on top of all of what is not my fault and could be chocked up to fate, still I'm partly to blame for what happened to Pops. Do you know the horrible feeling of knowing for what you are responsible? For me it's Pops there in his grave. Not that I ever meant for it to happen, honest to Eddie. But after all these years of me mulling it over I'm sorely convinced not a damn thing could have changed it. Do I regret I was involved in what I was involved in? How can I when the out-

come was the increase of total utility? He died so I would be able to live even when I'd pretty much been the one to kill him. It goes like this:

In the early 2000s I began to follow the band The Strikes after they debuted with a record full of hits and a sound that seemed to correct the Rock scene from a dismal spiral of narcissistic designerdrug poppunk and sadomasochistic heavymetal to an antiblues jazzfusion metaglam garagerock post newwave. I was too young to get into the shows so I had to wait for the records or the radio singles or the videos on MTV. Within a year of their arrival to the mainstream the scene had shifted stylistically to match their tone with bands like Rocket, The Haves, The Blank Lines, The Sharps and Flats, who were ushered in by the brand of fan that The Strikes had invented. It was impossible to deny that the style they promulgated was being accepted into the Pop/Rock market at a grand scale and as one of their earliest supporters it was the verification of my prophecy to see them reach the heights of popularity, fame, innovation and I let my enthusiasm for their music and persona influence my own will to create.

Until the third album came out I had been set on becoming an architect. I can recall the exact moment it happened: I am sitting at my desk in the A-school. I am scribbling furiously on a set of drawings. I am listening to the seventh song on the third album. It is like the bottom has fallen out beneath me. The song is such a departure from all the other material that I zone out entirely. The design I'm working on—purely theoretical, paper architecture—loses all its meaning. I realize what I am doing, what I have been doing with such fervor, for the last four years, has been all for naught: here I am listening to the best band in the world take the genre they'd established and turn it on its head and I can't even find the guts to take my guitar out on the street and sing for tips all to impress the gatekeepers of the vapid meritocracy that will drain me of my creative impulse and exploit my talents to the benefit of the highest bidder while rewarding me for evangelizing the same system

I ought to revile. It was a moment of clarity that astounded me in it's power such that I felt a sting in my neck: it was time for me to change my path.

The song ends. The next one is more like the rest though irrefutably original in its own right. But the feeling that had erupted like a revelation has left me shaken to the core. I drop my pen and the drawings fall to the desk in a heap. I look around and realize I am the only one on the floor: maybe the only one in the building. But something sparkles in the corner of my eye like a shimmering green glare that makes me sit up straight and pull out the earbuds. I swear I hear rustling down a hallway but by the time I get there to investigate whoever it was has cleared out. When I get back to my desk I still have the feeling in my gut like nauseau. I grab my backpack with the empty coffee caraffe and the econ books and the cigarettes and I go outside. It's just past 4 am and dawn is approaching from beyond the hills. The feeling in my stomach is conflating with hunger and the precursors of a migraine. There's nothing I can do but return to the apartment and take my guitar out its case and put my ear against the solid wood bod and pick out a melody. It's perfect. Something between a sickly sweet dream and the saddest longing I'd ever had to be what I knew I had to be: a musician: a bard: a guitar man: a genuine rocker.

My roommate is asleep and he can't hear the tune I'm picking gently on the unplugged electric guitar. Something changes in me. I feel the words come from the same place the melody originated: ineffable yet clearly located there in the back of my skull where head turns to neck: the melody and the words flow and I grab a cardboard SINKERS coaster off the coffee table so I can scribble down the verse but it disappears. I go to play the melody again but it, too, escapes me. So I jot down what I can remember but it's not half as good. It's proof I'm too damn tired so I get off the couch and hit the hay.

I have class at noon but I skip it and stay home writing songs. I get two done well enough to try out in public and change to practicing some hits for filler. It's Friday and I know by 7 pm the walking mall will be full of grad students, yuppies, and tourists that will be drunk or kind enough to toss me some bills if I can cut the mustard. So I grab my acoustic in its hard case and my skateboard off the wall and I roll the mile and a half downtown towards the action. I find a spot across a blank brick wall so I can get the reverb effect and hear if I'm off key. The first three songs are three chord classics and I'm able to draw some attention but no pecuniary interest. Some hits by The Coleopteras by request gets me a five spot and after some Buddy Holly and Otis Redding I go into American Pie and a crowd forms. They're in the business casual uniform of some student organization and they smell like beer. It's a hoot. There's a bidding war to get me to play songs by Madonna and Michael Jackson. They start to lose interest after they run out of singles and I bid a gracious farewell and turn my attention to the other passersby whose curiosities have been piqued. I do some blues with the harmonica and ask them if they want to hear an original. There's a few yeahs so I kick it off. It goes well. They ask for another. I play the second song: applause, more tips. It's been an hour or so and my fingers are dulling but I can still manage the bar chords, the minor pentatonic scale. I play off another dozen or so and call it a night. My ego is alight with the mania of a successful performance and the satisfaction of the approval of strangers. I skateboard home and go for the cigarettes but only finish half of one before I have to go inside and write another song, and another, and another. I look online at the schedule of events for the ampitheatre that bookends the mall and there's an afternoon concert tomorrow so I run through some more cover material, shower, fall into bed, run through lyrics as I drift asleep.

Saturday morning I get out of bed and run for the guitar because the song from that morning after the revelation is back in the front of my mind and I have to get it on the fretboard before it evaporates. But I can't

get it quite right. I realize I'm out of tune and when I go to tune the high-E snaps so I have to switch it out and the song is gone. I play the other originals I've written and make a playlist on a sheet of printer paper. It's only 8 am so I work on school at the desk by the window in my room. My housemate emerges groggy from his quarters and we strike it up

What'd you get into last night?

Went out and played my guitar on the mall.

What? Like *and he does an air guitar lick*

Yeah man. Was fun.

No shit! Make any cash?

It's the moment I've been waiting for. I pull the wad of ones out of the top drawer. His eye's are gaping and his jaw drops.

Nice dude! Nice.

Gonna go again today *and I unroll the bills to fan them in front of me let's hope it's fruitful.*

He comes over with his right fist extended and I bump it with mine.

Awesome dude. Living the dream. Awesome. You missed it at Sinkers though. Nother great night.

Always at that place.

Always.

And he goes out to make breakfast.

I should explain I had been playing at that point for ten years¹⁹ so it wasn't as if I'd just picked up my first axe, but something had changed in my motivation like a dose of pure adrenaline.

With the new wave of energy I finish my preparations for the performance: put on new strings, stretch them, put the spares in the case, grab a sweat towel from my gym bag, stack it all in the living room by the door. It's another hot day so I go find my bathing suit. The other apartment complex up the street has a pool that's got a fence around it that's a piece of cake to hop. I can already feel the sweat in my armpits and forehead. No AC in the South ain't no fun.

I go out front and unlock my bike. I could walk but it's better on two wheels. I can tell by the time I've taken the seat it's going to be one of those days when I get two blocks down to the first intersection and a man on a giant unicycle goes by. I realize as the unicyclist passes that it's a post-op transgender at least in the chest atop the vehicle. In a college town there can be no knowing what you'll come across. And this isn't the first time I've seen her, I realize oddly as I recognize the form and features. This is the blacksmith we'd contract at the workshop where I used to work. I thought ~~he~~she had been a dude with a pony tail when I saw ~~him~~her unloading some guard rails off the rack on ~~his~~her truck. Should have noticed the other rack.

A couple blocks later the pool is nearby so I get off the bike and throw it in a bush. I jump the fence in two moves. The surface of the water is perfectly still: the air is like breathing soup. The stink of chlorine hits my nostrils and makes my mouth water like the rest of me. I get in at the shallow end but the whole thing only goes

¹⁹ i.e., once, in DC, the narrator had set up to play for tips in front of the Washington Monument. He started his set and even while he warmed up on *Who Do you Love* (Diddley, Bo: 1957) tourists began to drop loose bills into his open case: cha-ching! But by the time he got to his third number he heard an odd sound: clomp, clomp, clomp like a scene *Holy Grail* (Python, Monty: 1975) only this was truly the sound of mounted federal cops. *What's up slick?* They let him go because he hadn't tried to shut his case and hide the loot when they came trotting up on him, which was a relief, though the one with the Marine Corps insignia on a bicep the size of a cantaloupe made him fork over the cash, all \$22.75 of it, citing that it was illegal to solicit money on government property.

five feet deep. Still, it's big enough for laps so I take a few freestyle. After the sixth kick off the wall I get to the surface and see a truck with some kind of sign on its door pull up. Shit.

I stop mid lap and get back to the coping to pull myself out. I see the sign is for the property management company. Guess the party's over. The guys in the truck could probably care less but they also might get their rocks off to call me in for trespassing. I grab my clothes and the flipflops and I'm soaking wet and slipping to get over the fence but I make it over. My feet are picking up grass shavings as I slip on the footwear and the maintenance guys are getting out of the cab. I find my bike and sit my sopping ass down squish and pedal off with the shirt in one hand. It's still too early to head downtown so I take a left towards the corner. That's the spot where the students hang out. Dive bars of legend etc. When I hit the ave it's clear it's too early for even the brunch crowd. I meander my front wheel in the shoulder along the sidewalk and see the handful of people scattered between the coffee shop, the bagel place, the convenience store. Something is different in how I see them. Is this still the mania of the epiphany, the performance, the thrill of it all like a drug? Or something pure...divine...from the spirit. Merely the senses playing tricks in any case. In other words.: everything looks kinda funny. I'm still dripping from the shorts down. A woman with a broom in front of the bank gives me a look. I turn left towards the quad and breeze along the clay pavers towards the old medical school, the gardens. In the morning sunlight, birds are singing and the sky is azure. Beautiful.

I have a book with me wedged in the utility bag attached to my seatpost. It's a book I won't be able to remember ten years from now. Always on the tip of my tongue: recommended by Miller in some list I'd gleaned from some internet archive and located in the stacks in the library there where the whole shelf or the whole case was an author and here was one book by one guy alone and it was the one HM himself had described as the best one for the purpose I required. There's a bench along a path in the shade facing a confederate statue that

looks comfortable enough. I take a seat and take out the book. It's about a gent who is looking for work and answers an ad for a housesitter. He goes for the interview and finds the patron will let him live there all expenses paid so long as he reads the entire library of books he has in his study. The guy accepts the job and that's where I pick back up.

Would you like to hear the rest of the book? I'd tell you if I could remember myself. You'll have to try and find it like I did. After I finish reading I do remember a feeling like after I'd read the story of the Buddha for the second time—something profound in the gut and the eyeballs. It would stay with me for a while but when I got up from the bench I let it slip into the back of my mind so as to on my mission. I needed to practice. I needed to write songs. I needed to establish the habits of success. And I needed inspiration.

It was almost noon. I get back on the bike. Might as well ditch the book back at the library: I pedal across one quad then another til I'm in the plaza with the book drop. I could use a coffee so I figure I might as well hit the cafe. Inside the dude with the gauge earrings and the nose ring gets me an americano since they don't have drip coffee. I add the sugar. The buzz gets me thinking I might find some good inspo in the music sections. I walk through the first floor forward bay to the elevator that takes me up to the third floor stacks. There's a staircase through the emergency exit that takes me up to floor 3.5 where I can take lift to the mezzanine if I hold the 3 and 4 floor buttons together. From there I can cut across the philosophy and religion archives to the fire stair above the multimedia section. But as I make my way along the catwalk lined with shelves of yellowing reference books I see someone below me: a student scribbling furiously in a frenzy. I press my back against the wall of texts and watch this kid write with both hands while seeming to read from two books simultaneously like some kind of demon.

And then something truly demonic: a man comes from the side behind a row of shelves. He's got a black leather jacket and a 'do like Elvis that seems to merge with his skin like oil on water not just normal clothes and hair. I catch myself before I intervene when I realize he's got something in his hand: if he aims it at me I might not make it out alive.

In what looks like one step the guy gets around in front of the student and is straddling the chair and in a sparkling blur I see his eyes glow green and I realize it must be the guy from the studio.

I try to freeze my beating heart that could be audible or at least it's all I can hear. Still, I breathe as slowly and silently as possible. It seems he hasn't seen me in the frenzy of whatever he just did to this poor kid who's suddenly limp and I realize the greeneyed dude has disappeared. I'm looking around me even though I know there's no way up from this area. Even so, the way he seemed to fade into the air has me unsure of both my sanity and reality.

Then I realize below me the student has stirred and is once again looking at the pair of books but the scribbling has calmed. In the low glow of the painted metal pendants that hover just above, it looks like the kid is emanating darkness or sucking in light like a black hole. Then this victim of some bizarre encounter simply gathers all the books and turns to get up. Maybe I am a mad man.

I figure it's only a matter of time before the creep finds me so I do my best to beeline it onward and out through the CD section which is faster than turning around. I could report it to the person at the front desk but it's some young foreign workstudy guy who probably wouldn't believe me anyway. I decide to go to the catalog and see if there's anything I can find that will point in me in the right direction for the next set. I plug The Strikes into the search bar, just in case there's anything I hadn't heard by them yet and lo and behold, labeled NEW ARRIVAL, a compilation of covers of Buddy Holly songs and sure enough Cassanova was a featured

artist. I find it in the case marked ROCK/POP and bring it to the kid at the counter. Just for kicks I ask him hey: is this place haunted? He smirks and shakes his head. I dunno man. I never see nuttin but then his expression changes except one night when I was here for the late shift... well he looks over his shoulder I never sed nuttin to nabuddy but I herd futsteps cum from de fire stair. I wuz weelin a rack of boox to the stax an eet cot me off guard: ujelly mate-nince wuz de only wunz in de stairz and hallz becuz eef yoo opin de door eet wud set off de alarm: an eet wuz tooin de marnin on a Wedzday. Deez all yoo checkin out?

Yeah motioning to the case. He gets up out of his chair and goes to the shelf of CDs indexed behind the desk. When he gets back he leans in close. I noo a way inna de fire evacuation passij frum de ol East Wing to de North Annex so I decyde to see eef I cud kech wutwuz gon down. Tuk me a cupple minits to git to de spot but wen I finely did and unlach de door I had to stop becuz I cud hear futsteps aggen: an dis time lotz of em. He puts up both his hands and tries to convince me I wayted til I herd de crowd pass anwen I thot de coast wuz cleer I opin eet jus enuff to git my hed out but wen I lookt down de hall: nuttin. He gets back in his chair and glances at his monitor. Yoo havan overdoo fee, yoowan pay it?

Nah.

Arite. Well dats my story. He clicks on the screen and sits back. Y you ax?

I thought I saw something funny. Guy wearing bright green sunglasses. I donno. Almost looked... transparent.

Eets deez hippeez frum de town, man. Dey all trippin. Shit dey on iz proly contagious.

Yeah right I say feigning amusement that's prob'ly it. Well thanks and I grab the jewel case to tuck it in my sack.

I go out the front and find my bike at the base of the staircase. I'm undoing the lock when I realize there's something on the seat: a fortune cookie, unwrapped. Instinctively I crack it open: on the thin

white slip in blue text it says *eddiesnowhere*. Squinting, below I see the fine print: *want to take a detour from the straight and narrow? Are you trying to escape the impending grind of professionalism now that you're at the end of your college career? Think you've really got what it takes to catch your big break?* I can't tell if it's handwritten or typed, original or facsimile: I glance along the rack but it looks like I was the only recipient. On the back where the Chinese vocabulary word should be it says *practice room #13, 1300*. I look at my watch: it's 12:55. I can easily get down to the soundproofed chambers in the basement of the music library in the next five minutes so I spin the left side pedal down and step on it to coast along the ash path crossing the quad that leads to the Greek temple front at the other end. It's 12:58 when I get to the monumental staircase and park my ride, take the steps two at a time, push through the double doors, hustle down the ramp and across the sheet music stacks until I see the door marked *Rehearsal* and swing it open, eyes peeled: *where's #13?*

Someone's working on the solo to *More Than a Feeling* (Boston: 1976) and the melody drifts faintly through the corridor. I've been here before to bang on the ivories they have placed in each room, practice my belting in the comfort of the insulated chambers, perfect songs in private to spare my roommates the required repetitions, though infrequently. I never took inventory of the numbers 'til now and I only count 12. *Shit* I say at my watch as it chimes on the new hour. But I hear a door slam in front of me and I look up to see it's the one at the end of the hall where music stands and instrument cases have been stacked in front. I approach and see it's numbered like I'm looking for, but unlike the other rooms there's no glass so I can't see inside. I slip between the dusty equipment and put a hand on the handle. The door opens and I see dim green light, hear the sound of a trumpet. I can barely get it open enough to fit my body through with the weight of the junk in front but I squeeze in and the door closes

shut behind me. Sure enough: it's the guy I saw at the other library and his eyes are emitting the only light in the room behind the thick frames of his wayfarers.

Got my message I see he says and puts the trumpet down on the piano bench beside him.

Look man, I donno what kinda shit you're trying to pull but you better just respect my privacy before I call the cops on your a—

He snickers and puts his leg up on his knee, folds his fingers behind his head, leans back against the Steinway whose keylid is down. *Campus cops? Please. They won't make it here before I make you into mincemeat.*

I turn and grab the handle again but it's locked. *Shit.*

Just kidding, kid and when I look back he's right next to me, his eyes in mine. *Lucky for you yer worth more to me alive than chopped liver* and he pats me on the head with a hand that's both heavy and soft, prickles me with static. *I'm sorry I scared ya but I had to grab your attention.*

Look man I just—HELP! I scream through the crack in the door *HELP GET ME OUTTA HERE!*

The guy's just shaking his head slow from side to side with his glowing eyes aimed at the floor.

It's no use, kid. I mean come on: soundproof, remember?

Of course he's right so I try and gather myself even though my heart's pounding and beads of sweat are starting to drip down my face. My voice is shaking as the vulnerability of my position dawns. *J-just l-let me g-g-go an' an' an' I won't I-I-I mean what, w-w-w-what do you, whadoyouwant?*

That's better, take a breather, let's start over. He's backed off to take up the trumpet in his left hand while with his right he seems to pull a polishing cloth out of thin air to wipe the brass shimmering green in the aura of his eyelights. *I wasn't trying to freak you. I mean, not yet...*

I swallow heavy and wipe my forehead. *Okay well I'm listening.*

He puts the instrument in the case sitting on the top of the upright. *I saw you on the mall yesterday.*

I'm calming myself so I try and play the cool interlocutor. *I didn't know I had such avid fans. I mean you could have just said something there, didn't have to stalk me.*

Not stalking, my friend. More like taking stock you could say. And I'm happy to say that I think you have what I'm looking for.

I've been so set on this dude's weirdness that I haven't noticed the walls are exposed brick unlike in the other 12 chambers. The corners are dripping cobwebs and while it's hard to discern for certain in the odd contrast of the green light it looks like everything's covered in a layer of dust half an inch deep.

You're in the A-school, eh?

Yeah, I'm a b-arch. I mean I will be when I graduate. I mean it's none of your business.

So the music, then. Just a hobby?

I clear my throat *I was in a few bands in high school. We made some demos. Talent shows, family parties.*

I know you can't tell but I'm rolling my eyes. I mean, no offense: but like I said, just a hobby?

I don't know why I've taken to indulging the inquiries but for whatever reason I have to tell him *Yeah, yerright. It's always just been a hobby. But the other day in the studio I felt like I had a revelation: listening to Julius Cassanova singing that song, you know Cassanova, frontman for the Strikes... It just hit me in a way architecture hadn't in a long time: the epiphany that this could be my fate, I mean music could be what*

I'm meant for. He seems to be engrossed and it's proving cathartic so I keep the spiel going People have told me I'm good but I'm no Cassanova, no Hendrix, I mean I'll never be El Jefe...

I see he's sat down on the bench and uncovered the keys. In full maestro fashion he cracks his knuckles and dangles his hands high above with arched wrists, fingers wriggling.

Take it from me, Del he says and I see he's really done his research *this life is too short to be sitting on the fence* he brings his hands down dramatically but only to play a softly syncopated interlude that accompanies his talkin' blues like we're in a scene from *Casablanca*. *You gotta find the side you're on and stay there. Don't be the grimy guy ten years from now telling stories about the glory days when you could be living the glory days well into your prime.* He gets to the high end of the octave and riffs for emphasis. *All of the greats go through what you're going through now. And holy cow— a comedic crashing chord—don't give up the struggle before you've even had the chance to really suffer for your art. What is that, a light beer belly under that fresh polo shirt? You're dripping in privilege. I hate to break it to ya but you've got a lot of hard knocks to go before you'll know you made it through the fray to your sunny day...*

I've been standing at attention with my arms crossed. I don't know what gives him the authority to sock it to me but I am starting to suspect he's a producer or an agent on the eccentric side so I try and play along to his tune. *I hear ya, man. I know it's a long road but I'm ready. I've been waiting for the chance since I picked up that first guitar, plucked my first powerchord, learned my first Coleopteras song...*

He runs a *glissando* from the high end to the low, wallops off key at the end for effect. *I know kid. I've heard it all before. There's a million people like you, ten million—in terms of ambition, talent, hours of practice. That doesn't lead to success. That doesn't mean that you'll make it.*

Now I'm sweating for a different reason, anticipating some kind of offer. He's talking like he knows me better than myself. I guess a guy like me's just a common thing to someone in the business. But what's with the spectacle? why all the word play? why the green LEDs behind the shades?

I know you consider yourself an artist. From what I saw yesterday well, you're well on your way if that's the game you want to play. But let me ask you about your idols: why do you champion them, mimic them, master their songs, study their biographies?

I put my hands on my hips and gather my thoughts for a moment. *I guess because of the power of what they've created, how it's affected my life. Right now Cassanova's lyrics are the most meaningful I've encountered among his contemporaries, he's the only auteur I can think of that can write a song as catchy as it is consequential, poppy and poignant. Back in his heyday Hendrix did things with his guitar and amps and themes that changed the very nature of the medium, altered the soundscape permanently, or rather, distorted it. And El Jefe...* I put my hands out in front to indicate the obvious well, he's El Jefe.

Mystery man is back up on his feet. *I like your angle, kid. I like your attitude. I think I can help you achieve what you're after: I mean what you really strive for in the depths of your soul. You impressed me out there alone on the street, regaling the natives. But I want to turn you on to some things the jingle of keys care to go for a spin?*

I nod and can't help but look sideways when I say *sure, yeah, okay.*

I see him grab a rectangular guitar case leaning on the wall behind him. He steps past me and with an outstretched grasp like a magician on a tablecloth pulls the vinyl cover off a stack standing in the shadowy corner against the wall next to me, sending a cloud of sparkling green dust all around us. He whips a ¼" cable out from his shirtsleeve and hooks up to the head, links the other end into the jackplate of the

'S1 Broadcaster he's unveiled. His eyelights flicker and I hear the sound of tubes warming up, see the red indicator.

How did you—

Here he tells me and hands it over *let's see what you got*. He goes back to the bench and I hear him start the four-quarter five chord progression, starts to croon with a voice that's not his own, smooth but sharp, round and resonant: *once upon a time you dressed so fine \ threw the bums a dime in your prime \ dint you?*

I find the key and pick a few faint notes that grow louder as the amp hums to full force.

people called said beware doll \ ye bount a fall ya tho they were all \ kiddinyooo

My left hand relaxes and I close my eyes to get in the groove, finding the melody. As the plectrum hits the strings this time I feel something like a punch in the gut that sends me up and over my center of balance. When I open my eyes I don't know if it's me or the world that's spinning. I hear the chords like they're in my head but I can't tell where I am or where the phantom pianist is. The Fender is glued against my hip and my hands are frozen to it in this absurd gravitron. Then everything stops and the floor rushes up to my feet so I fall in a heap on a beanbag with the axe on top of me. There's a couple in bellbottoms and bandanas half naked on the shag carpet making out to a record that I see spinning: it's the same song we had just jammed. The album cover's leaning against a lava lamp and the strange blue, pink and orange face adorning it melts and bubbles behind the floating orbs suspended in the fluid filled cylinder of the fixture. The guy looks up, longhaired, sideburned, pupils dilated. *Far out* he says and his equally intoxicated companion begins to laugh and snort when she sees me, or whatever she's seeing. They return to rolling around and I stand up to assess the surroundings: it's a small room with wood panel walls and a bead curtain over the exit. I grab the gitbox and rush out into a hallway where the din of a full blown fiesta is emanating from below. *Where the hell am I?*

A door opens, hung with a poster of the Hindenburg explosion: a hand reaches out to grab me and pull me in with swift strength. *Rough landing?*

It's youknowwho. *I've had worse I guess. What is this?*

He's smirking broadly and I see a flying V on a stand in the room. *The hall of the mountain king— or should I say, the vestibule of the Voodoo Chile.*

Jimi? I ask him. *Here? But how?*

You wouldn't believe me if I told you... so I had to show you. It's 1970.

The year he—

The very night infact. He's sat down in a fiberglass lounge chair that's at the feet of the four poster. *Listen* he tells me and I strain my ears: it's hard to say for sure with the cacophony below us but I think I hear a heated conversation in the room adjacent ours.

Is that—

The one and only. Plus one. Here he says and hands me an empty glass off the side table *have a listen.*

I put the bottom of the makeshift mic against my ear and place the rim against the wall: *ohmygod.*

I know it's the lawyers but life is not laws or people or money. What I have to give is not worthy of these lawyermoneylovers. I take it from the ethos and bring it to the real people. I give it straight from the godhead to the manwomanhead. The thieving elites don't know karma from a kitkat bar brother. You know they won't let me give it to 'em straight without making their cuts and taking their cut.

Look at your clothes, your hair. You've changed your image beyond all recognition and now you want me to trust you with a cool million? It's not my money mate. How can I convince the execs that you'll be a

smash with this new thing? Cox is split brother. You can't spend a day off dope. The excitement is gone. You have to be the best Jimi. You're King Guitar.

King Guitar? I just played loud, you know, and a lot of things happen, it's all just changes, and I have to sit back and think about it all. But I can't keep the same thing going from yesterday. Look at Floyd, they have the right idea, this idea of space, interior space, I mean I would do it with a more solid beat, but I have to get a bigger group together, use these electronics. I was trying to do too many things at one time, I can't just be put in one corner, you know only as a guitar player, only as a songwriter, only as a tapdancer. I don't care what I do as long as I keep turning people on.

But what are you turning them on to Jimi? We all know about psychedelics already. Every bugger an'is nanny's eaten some acid.

I want to ease their mind a little bit, music is getting too heavy, almost to the state of unbearable, and when things get heavy just call me helium²⁰. I just want to take my recent experiences, look at the totality of it, you have the one half and then the second half, you know, the uh—solution, whatever it might be, and what's the second? you have the experience and then the use of it all. I was going through a lot of changes so I could write the nice parts about it all but now there's been so much that happened, right now it's taking a while. Music is always a reflection—well a reflection like blues—but there's a new thing coming with less words and more meaning—you don't have to be singin about love all the time to give love to the people, keep flashing those words, love all the time. I'd like to take part of it—the change of reality—more color in the streets, whatever happens, new idea, new invention, new gas, it should be brought out to the open, or a new idea of thinking, you know help the human race or whatever, we keep carrying the same old burdens around, and you have to be a freak to be different, and now the freaks are very prejudiced, you have to grow your hair long and talk in a cer-

²⁰ the lightest gas known to man

tain way to be with them, to be like the other people you have to cut your hair short and wear ties, so we're trying to make a third world happen, you know what I mean?

I'm afraid I don't know Jimi. Look, you want to be more political? Take after that Sebastian yank?

Rage against the establishment?

It's not raging against—if it was up to me there'd be no such thing as the establishment so I guess, but it's a blues that's all what I'm singin about—no politics: it all comes out in the music—Communication is comin' on strong\I don't give a damn baby\if your hair is short or long....you gotta practice what you preach. There's a lot of political things happening and I really had to get away from it because I found myself in too much of a box situation, you know if I had anything to say I'd say it to everybody... I just look at it as changes. I just write about the clash between reality and fantasy, you have to use fantasy to show different sides of reality, how it can bend, reality is nothing but each individual in a way of thinking, and establishment grabs a big piece of that, and the Church of England, and so forth down the line. We're going to have this thing called horizon—here to horizon—broken glass that used to be all in my brain, this other one called astroman: looking for peace of mind? well astroman, it'll have you in pieces—and the valleys of Neptune are rising—but all these psychedelic—I don't really know what that means. What is it, like you say one thing and mean another? Something like that, or you can get three different meanings out of one thing, is that what—

Come on, Jimi. It means LSD. Magic mushrooms. Mescaline. Psychedelic drugs.

Well it's the consciousness that comes with that, the different moods. Dreams come from different moods, you have to give them a bit of the dream world. I want to take it in the way Strauss did or Wagner—it's going to take time, it's going to take a lot more time, it keeps breaking down to this question of where are you coming from and where are you going to and then this little girl answers—but it's not really this

massmovementmusic that I want to do. I want to get into symphonies and orchestras but it's got to be on my time—a mixture of the past and the future—that's what all music is anyway, I mean technically. I don't plan to go out with a 90 piece orchestra and play twoan'ahalf hours of classical music—I want to use both of those things, rock and class—rock and classic—without even knowing its rock and classic like it be a whole new thing. We'd like to get this geodesic dome and the whole thing, lay it out perfect, and when it comes to town, it would prob'ly come to town on a train or something, and it takes a few days to set it up, and then you perform for the next few days to just handfuls of people, instead of just putting a big black screen behind you, you lay back and it blossoms, you go in and it calms your nerves, this whole visual scene comes on when we perform.

Jeodesic Jimi, they'll call you. Just brilliant mate. But really Jimi baby, it's just a bunch of bollocks innit? Your best bet has been the festivals and now with all the French Maoists and the Black Panthers an the like the boys in blue always shutting 'em down, I mean they say it's for World Peace and then the paramilitary show up and start preaching.

I donno why they're always trying to kill festivals, so many mixtures of different people, different countries, completely different from the World War II setup, because all the countries were separated, completely against each other almost. We are trying to get them all together with this idea of music you know. With any new civilization you might find yourself involved in you have in every civilization they have their own officers and leaders in government, you just take the best of all politics, all religions, all governments, you just do the best with that and in the meantime—we're supposed to all be gathered in pastures right now you know?

But it isolates the fans is what I mean. And we need more people. You saw IOW, how many people came out, two quid a head...

Festivals shouldn't be about getting so many people, it's just a big ego trip: 500,000 people came, wow great. With 500,000 that's larger than a city in England, and every city has a gang, a street gang, a so-called outcast, so you're gonna get that with 500,000 people—you're gonna have the other side of things. It's up to the people—if they really want to keep it going, they'll keep it going—if they don't then they'll appreciate the music itself, you omit too much in rock n' roll theater when they're all in chairs—we should be able to play free concerts, just cover the expenses from one town to the next town, because we have time, there's no big rush, that's the other end of the business, you put things into this big rush, but there's no reason we can't do free concerts.

And blow the money you've managed to keep in the bank on all the overhead? What are you on Jimi? I think you're out to lunch.

I just want—you know, I just want to get up every morning and roll out my bed into an indoor swimming pool and then swim to the breakfast table, you know come up for air and get maybe a drink of orange juice, something like that, then flop over from the chair and swim into the bathroom, you know go in and shave or whatever.

And how will you pay for that luxury when you're performing all your material gratis?

Is that luxurious? I was thinking a tent maybe overhanging a mountain stream...

Right mate. Well maybe you ought'r retire back to the tent then. Getting to the end of things 'ere I'd say.

I hear footsteps and back off the wall with the glass in my hand to the sound of the door opening. Woah.

Be right back I hear and my companion steps out the door. There's a muffled conversation with the man himself, right there, two feet in front of me and I have to catch a glimpse: with an eye out to-

wards them I can make out the afro, green velvet suit: there's some sort of interaction between them, a furtive handshake: *thanks Eddie* Jimi tells him and I take note of the name. Then the greatest guitar player to have ever lived walks down the staircase and *Eddie*, if that is his real name, comes back to join me.

We're going for a ride.

Whereabouts?

Not where, smarty... but when.

Don't tell me you got a DeL—

Don't be ridiculous. We're going out on a high note. I want you to see something.

He puts a hand between my shoulder blades and leads me down the stairs. There's a kitchen with avocado green cabinets and thick white marble countertops. Jimi's standing there, glorious. He puts his hand to his mouth and then gulps from a glass. There are women in miniskirts and bellbottoms, fringed leather jackets, short dresses, tube tops, milling about and one of them takes his hand and pulls him out the front door. *Eddie* and I skulk to the vestibule and again we're eavesdropping:

Who were they? What are you doing when I'm not around?

They's nobodys. Don't turn square on me. We are all friends baby. Just friends being friendly. Can you be hip with me kitty?

Don't kitty me. You're a disgrace she screams so loud they can probably hear it down the street.

Eddie takes a step back and I follow just in time for Jimi's angry companion to come back in and slam the door in his drunken face.

I can hear him outside saying *oh girl you must be mad...* and she's there right in front of us with her arms crossed and smirking, this jaded lover. *Eddie* signals with a tilt of the head toward another relic on a stand in the foyer: a '67 SG Custom, bone white, with a Maestro Vibrola.

You want to play it?

Me? I—

He walks over and picks it up so I step lightly towards the holy object as he inspects it. *Here* he says and puts it in my hands.

*I can't believe—*though I'm not worthy I grip an Em7 and immediately realize—*Lefty.*

Eddie snickers. *Sorry kid I couldn't resist. But at least you got to hold it.*

I'm never washing these hands again I tell him when he takes it back.

Funny you should say that he says and straps up. There's a combo sitting in the corner and he plugs in: *Flip the switch willya?*

I'm still imagining the way the guitar felt in my grip: the sticky neck salted with the sweat of a guitar god. I put the amp on standby and wait for it to warm up before I turn it full-on and right when I do I hear the hollow wahwah of a funky D7 riff that can only be one song:

Isabella I say aloud and just then a bolt of electricity surges from the cable jack and jumps to my person: I feel the jolt of the amperes traveling through my hands and then it's like I've been punched in the gut: the same dizzying feeling that brought us here in the first place: until I'm gasping for air splayed out on some new ground. *Whathefu—*

Just your luck, here we are in His hometown, 2020.

You mean Seattle? The year 2020?

Sí. 'At'l showya, always be prepared for the next big jump when you're with me.

I see the man, the myth, the legend on a TV screen in front of me: he's got the same guitar *Eddie* had a minute ago. It's hard to take it all in.

There's a show tonight.

No shit? I get back up to my feet and feel a lurch in my stomach, run to the sink in the room next to us and spew. I can see out the window that it's raining: surprise surprise. But then something stirs inside me and I'm enraged. *What's so special about this show? We could have saved Jimi!*

Eddie has the courtesy to turn on the food processor before he says to me *don't fall for that ol' falsehood. Nothing we coulda done to stop his devastation.*

But surely if we just told him. I mean—we could have tried.

Look. It wasn't my first bullfight. I've been in that flat many times. The first time I just told him, like you said, and you know what happened²¹? it hastened his demise: I put him in a panic: he just OD'd earlier.

If that's the case, why not tie him up 'til the critical time had passed?

Another plan I've attempted. I string him up and sit in the room all night: he struggles: he has a heart attack.

But if you knew that would happen, had the ambulance at the ready—

Bad valves can't be stented in '70, that's sixteen years shy—

Well damn it then. Can you at least tell me what we're doing here, ten years later? No wait, that was before—now it's fifty years past—but how can it—

The Strikes.

Serious?

Dead.

Not them too!

No, no—apologies, it's just an expression. But people will die.

²¹ In this case, Hendrix, convinced he had encountered a being from outer space and hoping to prolong the sense of the experience, proceeded to ingest 10 mg of the pure crystallized form of what he thought was psilocybin, but was in fact *psilocin*, the metabolized and far more psychoactive molecule produced by the liver, leading to advanced hypertension and cardiac arrest.

Who?

You'll see. It's almost time. Come with me.

He takes me out and I realize someone has been sitting on the couch in the room where we landed. He's out cold, beer bottles strewn about, drool hanging off his lip. Jimi's solos wail on as we scoot out onto a breezeway. We're above a busy downtown street. I see the broad curves of two stadiums a few blocks away.

Tonight the Strikes put on their last show before—well, we'll get to that. You want to go backstage?

As much as I'm dying for the opportunity our last foray and all this morbidity has me perturbed.

What do you mean backstage? Meet the band?

Sure he says and pulls something out from inside his jacket *see?* It's a pair of press passes.

The rain has faded to a mist that clings to my skin like a cold sweat. We go down and out to the sidewalk. The mix is not far from what I'd expect to see in the Pacific North West ten years from now: hipster dudes in distressed leather shoes with pompadours and undercuts, girls with tattoos and long canvas overcoats covering loose dresses and tight pants, the older ones in denim, flannels, and Patagonia™, thick framed glasses, homeless schizophrenics and drug addicts occupying stacks of cardboard and moving blankets on doorsteps and in alleys with carts full of junk at the ready.

The ides of March are a week away. The Strikes are releasing a new album. Take a look around: this bustling metropolis: in under a month this whole scene will be silent.

How do you mean?

We have made it several blocks and are up against the football stadium when I see the line. I notice the odd fact that many of the concertgoers are wearing construction face masks. Some have gloves.

What's with the getups? I ask *Eddie* and indicate a guy in a black t-shirt with the silver *Strikes* logo and a gray N95 over his face.

Necessary precautions these days. Infact, tomorrow the governor will ban all gatherings over 250 people. But the Strikes wouldn't cancel this show even though it's common knowledge that it will contribute to the spread.

The spread of what?

How can I break it to you... have you read much Camus?

Sure... Le Mythe de Sisyphe, L'Étranger, La Peste...

I'll stop you right there.

Black plague? In Seattle? I step back from the crowd and almost trip off the curb, scanning for rats.

Not quite but that's about right. Une peste pire one could argue. No vaccine, no cure. But the show must go on you know.

I feel my skin crawling amidst the condensation and paranoia grips me. Why are we here? I mean why take the risk?

What are you saying he says and flashes his set of phony credentials *you don't want to meet the boys?*

I'm overcome with anxiety but it's a fair point. These are my idols after all. I survived seeing Jimi so ...

I'll try my luck with you.

Eddie smiles *this life is on your side* he replies and we go to the front of the line where a pair of beefed up bouncers in black SECURITY shirts are scoffing at each other. He shows them the cards dangling from lanyards and we get the pat down. *No harm, he's not armed.*

We go in the press entrance through concrete corridors with tube lights suspended above us painting everything in a yellow haze. Somehow Eddie knows the way to go and we end up right outside the door of the proverbial green room. A bang at the door: *Anyone home?*

I'm not there quite yet: my thoughts such a mess, like a little boy. *They're right there?* I ask.

I can't see beyond this wall Eddie tells me sarcastically *but that would be my best guess.*

The latch clicks and a guy I don't recognize is inspecting us. *Who you with.*

The Stranger. The boys know me, don't you fellas?

Check it out, Eddie's arrived! I hear someone say: Is it Nic? Or Nik?

The guy opens up and lets us in to the chamber filled with crappy velvet couches and folding tables covered in *hors devours* and them: The Strikes: Nic, Nik, Adal, *The Breeze*, and of course—

Julius Cassanova I mutter through quivering lips, the frontman to end all frontmen, lyrical genius, master of modern music, savior of guitar rock.

Where were you a month ago Eddie? You coulda met The Burn.

So I've heard. Had a prior engagement. I knew you'd be in town so I figured I'd wait it out. I see you haven't grown up and calmed down any since last year.

Not in these days of evil presidents JC tells him and Nik chimes in *It's the best years of your life they want to steal.*

They haven't acknowledged my presence until *The Breeze* looks my way and says *who's the intern*.

I feel sweat and cold hands but I have to say something: *Big fan, just uh, just taking notes for uh, the article you know*.

The fivepiece exchange glances and JC addresses Eddie: *What article?*

Eddie recovers *no, no he's just kidding. Off the record as always*.

Adal has been picking his guitar from atop an ottoman, legs crossed, and he runs through a set of arpeggios I don't recognize: new material? but they haven't released anything in five years! I mean, as of ten years prior to now—then he puts down the axe and says to me *so what's the true story kid?*

My cover's blown so I take another stab at it: *I love the music, guys. You're my favorite band*.

Guffaws echo from one to the next. *Gimme a break Eddie. What's with the fanboy?*

No I mean it. I believe in you guys. I promote you all the time. My old band, The Filibusters—I mean, even when I play solo—I always do a couple covers.

The Filibusters, eh? The Breeze interjects. I guess that makes you Mr. Smith.

Shitty Smitty Adal quips from the rainy city.

Oh, Seattle... such simple Fucks JC adds on

Well I'm an East coaster originally I reply *Jersey born. But now I'm down South.*

Shitty Smitty from Jersey City Adal corrects

or the Dick from Dixie JC offers.

I'm callin him carpetbagger says Nik. Nic smiles and rips through the solo to *Tuatara*, saying nothing.

Eddie jumps in to redirect the conversation: *I notice none of you are in masks. Didn't you see they're letting the kids in with masks on?*

Guess it's a masquerade eh? Adal says with a smirk. *Can you believe this shit? Just the man pushing paranoia to control the masses.*

Some of these schmucks are lighting up my feed asking for refunds, postponement JC continues like *they're gonna turn into zombies if they go to the show, you know, T-virus²² and shit... pussies.*

Well what about your buddy The Burn? What would he say?

If The Burn were in charge we'd all have free healthcare so we wouldn't have to worry about virus bullshit. Until he's in the big seat people are going to have to die like the slaves they are to the cruelty of insurance company corporate capitalism.

I hear it can spread among the asymptomatic... and you know at the show in Vancouver, there was a positive case in the pit that gave it to seventeen people at least. And each of them, well, I don't have to explain that to you, do I?

JC looks put-off, emotional: it's a look I've never seen on his countenance so solemnly held in the purest stupor even at the most illustrious moments of his performances, his career, when lesser frontmen would have wagged their tongues or run across the stage to drop into a kneelslide, JC would just stand there hunched over or even *turn away* from the crowd to convey the utter discipline of his nonchalance.

Who's this guy we're talking to here? Not the Eddie I know. Hey! Security!

The guy who let us in looks up. *I'm sitting right here, man. You don't have to yell.*

²² Or, *Tyrant Virus*, a man-made derivative of the progenitor virus, first generated in 1978.

It's just an expresh—you know what this is turning into a drag and we have a show to put on. I mean these people paid their money and we can't afford to cancel over a bunch of pandemic panic driven by media moguls and industrial dictators. I mean the album drops one month from tomorrow Eddie—then he stops and hits his hand to his forehead as the other bandmates groan —oh wow, congratulations Eddie, you got it out of me, the fuckin launch date. I better not be reading about this in The Stranger tomorrow JC says and sends a vicious glare in my direction before he walks up to me and sticks his two fingers in my chest. His muscles are much bigger than I remember from the music videos I had seen, his accelerated age clearer up close and I think how would the JC I think I know ever become the JC I'm seeing now before he pops the collar on the livercolored trenchcoat he's got on and looks over to the guy behind us Seriously Mike let these fuckers out.

Sure thing boss he says and puts down his copy of Rolling Stone to open the door you jerks leavin or do I have to bust some caps with a hand on the holster of a concealed carry against his appendix.

I'm dumbfounded to say the least. Eddie's turn has me startled, just after I'd spilled my guts to the greatest band around. I mean in the time where I'm from they've been written off as broken up: to see this was like witnessing a resurrection. As we go back out the door I hear the echo of more insults: Shitty Smitty the Dick from Dixie and Eddie Volution, two pussies in a pod. Hey that could be our next song...

I wait til we're well down the hallway before I say anything to Eddie Volution.

Man, that was awesome! I mean, those guys were assholes, but whatever, thanks, I guess and I feel my sternum where I'd just been assaulted by The Julius Cassanova. So it's Eddie, right? Eddie Volution?

He smiles from one side and says in some circles. But mostly it's Eddie Motion if you must know.

Well Mr. Motion, I mean I guess I don't know where to begin would be the cliché of the moment given what you've shown me. I'm still trying to figure out if someone put acid in my mouthwash or something. But if

*this is reality and you did just take me backstage to meet The Strikes, why the strong talk? why the instigation?
what were you getting at?*

He takes a step ahead of me and turns on his heel. This is the last event in the historical record that greatly precipitated the spread of the virus in Seattle. Tomorrow, the governor will ban all events over 250 people. Of these thousands of people in the theatre, ten percent of them will be positive in two weeks. A lot of them are students from out of town. They bring it home with them when they get let out early and have to return to their permanent addresses. The locals who have it do their damage in their jurisdictions. And when all is said in done, ten thousand more people will have been infected from this one event, two hundred will have died.

They know the risk?

It's common knowledge to those who have been paying attention. But even The Strikes are only human. You heard JC: they can't afford to cancel so close to the show starting. They want the cash same as any of the so-called evil capitalists they were berating.

I thought they were, you know, the last real artists... but it's all business I guess...

Feeling disillusioned?

Definitely.

Good. Because there's one more task to undertake. And it's not for the innocent. You have your big boy pants on?

I look down and realize it's just a figure of speech I took seriously in my lameness. When I look up Eddie's got a phone out and tells me our Oober is arriving shortly.

Oober? I ask him I'll follow your lead though it goes without saying given the course of the night thus far: or has another day elapsed? We go out where the bouncers let us in and I'm overly aware of the

fans now. I hear coughs, sneezes: I hold my breath. A car pulls up with a black *Oober* sticker in the windshield. I point to it and ask *what's it mean? Oober?*

From the German über; designating a person or thing that exceeds the norms or limits of its kind or class: i.e übermensch; in this case an allusion to the abbreviated form of übercab and ultimately meaning the utter destruction of the taxi industry as you know it. After you and he opens the door with his hand outspread towards the interior.

We get into the back of a Toyota sedan with scifi angles and swoops that make it look airworthy. The driver scans us both and then looks at Eddie:

You going to Kirkland?

Yessir.

I look at him oddly. Kirkland? Like the brand?

Same one infact. That wasn't the main act. What's going down in Kirkland is truly ugly.

You can say that again the driver injects. You guys sure you need to go over there? Maybe you should call somebody else...

How's two hundred bucks sound Eddie responds and the driver shrugs *okay.*

We head out along the ruins of an old elevated highway. I can see the stormy sky over the Sound glowing bright gray and turquoise as the sun disappears over mountains in the distance. There's a brightly lit pier with a slowly spinning Ferris wheel. The wipers are set to mist and they squeal against the glass out of tune with the music playing through the radio.

In 1918 an influenza pandemic tore across the world. Men in perfect health, fighting condition, warriors infact, were being decimated by a germ—they didn't even know what viruses were back then—that would cause an initial infection and weaken the body so that a secondary infection—usually viral pneumonia—could

wreak the fatal blow. There's a common theory that World War I was ended more by the virus than by anything else.

Sure, I mean, I think I remember that from back in high school...

It was a global calamity. Back before it had become widespread among civilians the countries at war recognized its epidemiology among troops but decided to cover it up to save face lest the enemy be empowered by the knowledge of the invisible scourge. They called it Spanish Flu because the neutral Spanish press could freely publish news of the spread and was wrongfully pinned as the originator. Historians have since then theorized the source was farther East. But the point is, once it hit the general population, the stigma associated with the virus lead to shame, secrecy, advanced the spread as polite society turned up their nose and kept business as usual.

Is that what we're dealing with here? Another bad flu?

That's what some people in power will tell you but it's a red herring. They'll just be trying to buy time when really they know it's a novel virus, something mutant, attacking the lungs with a ferocity that makes the Spanish Flu look like el-sniffle-o's.

Why are we going for this ride, then? I've noticed the scenery has changed to the dense evergreens of the county along the highway. Clouds have been blocking out the sky but they move away to reveal a full moon through the windshield. I feel a scratch in my nose and start to panic, holding back a sneeze: get a grip.

A month ago a guy came in through SeaTac from Wuhan, China with symptoms of the disease. He tested positive for the virus and stands as the patient zero of record in the States. But like I said back there, the virus spreads through the asymptomatic, so really it could have been among the populous for much longer.

China only admits the virus is rampant when it can't hide it anymore, which is four months ago as of now, but that too can only be considered at best a delayed reaction. There's no real way to pinpoint the exact start and the Chinese government have killed off the whistleblower who tried to warn us as of a month ago he says counting on his fingers and that means a month from today—you know, Easter—the count will be 1.85 million infections and 114,000 deaths worldwide.

My God I say and do the figures in my head that's a 6% kill rate!

Sure, on the surface. I mean we'll never know the truth since you can't tally every case that's occurred—currently. I acknowledge the point and Eddie points through the window. We've slowed down next to a little park in a suburban neighborhood. He's pointing to a cluster of large building across the arterial.

That's where we're heading, the Heart of Darkness. He gives the driver his half of the bargain and we get out. The car squeals away like a bat out of hell and we face the hospital, ominous.

When we get in there, just try and keep your distance.

From what?

Everything.

We cut across the road and are walking swiftly through the campus of departmental building that skirt the larger hospital complex. After we get through the parking lot there's an enclosure for the dumpsters close enough to the wall that we can get up into an exhaust vent. Don't worry this one is out of service Eddie tells me I've already done the once-over.

We shimmy in and up until Eddie stops at a patch of dots of light coming up from the grill below him. Hold your breath he tells me and removes the perforated metal panel, presses his hands to both sides of the wall, and lets himself down through the hole. I crawl up and stick my head down. It's a staff room

of some sort, totally empty, but there's a table right below me that should be near enough to comfortably break my fall. I sit and swivel around on my ass to dangle my legs through and then with a total lack of grace, send the rest of me falling *BANG* on the table sideways.

Need a doctor? Eddie asks *well yer in the right place*. He gets out of the seat he'd been sitting in backwards and transfers to a wheelchair, throws a tight ball of lavender cloth at my chest and tells me *scrub up. Oh—don't forget your mask* and I recognize the elastics of an N95 in the bundle. I don the purple costume and strap the respirator across my mouth and nose. *How bout a push there friend?* We go out to the hall.

Here the scene is controlled chaos. There are nurses all in blue masks and gloves rushing out of rooms and along the hall. As one of them crosses our path I see weary bloodshot eyes behind fogged lab goggles. Despite the rush one of the doctors in a yellow gown yells at me *hey! put your gloves on* and from the other side a nurse next to a box of blue nitriles laterals a crumpled pair towards me. I pull them on *snap* and keep pushing. Eddie feigns illness and subtly gestures to the next room.

Here he says and waves his hand over the keypad. The latch clicks and he opens the door with a bare hand that I notice is textured in such a way that it appears synthetic. Inside a patient is laying in the bed. The face is covered in a protective shield and I see clear blue flextubes tailing out hooked up to a machine with a clear acrylic cylinder containing a vertical accordionlike pump that rises and falls in a gentle rhythm. *Number 13.*

What do you mean?

There have been 12 deaths here already so you do the math.

Christ.

About to meet him Eddie says pointing up. *Not to make light of the situation. This poor soul is on its way out I mean.*

All I hear is the metered breaths of the ventilator, the beeps of the heart monitor that are tragically far apart. *Can we help 'em?*

No, too late for that now. We're mostly here to hitch another ride Eddie informs me and gets up with a swift push off the armrests. He grabs me by the wrist and puts my hand against the vitals display. I grab the tall metal stand holding the IV drip to steady myself and when Eddie hits his hand to his temple there's a wondrous flash that quickly subsides. The room is similar but not the same. Eddie's in a leather armchair. There's someone in the cot next to me with the IV drip, catheter. Could it be, wait—no

You're about to witness his Wildest moment Eddie hints and I step away in a hurry as he asks to the senseless old man laying there dying *why'd you do it, Jefe?*

The nonchalance of the haggard beard caked with dried spit, the faintest twitch of the heart conveyed by the beeps that have the same tempo as prior to the teleport.

So many times, all those girls

I sense the stillness of the austere white room with the machines and the stainless steel sink, the difribillator on the wall.

No priest can save you now. These are different times.

Are his eyes open or is the swelling too intense?

Before there would have been damnation: the gnashing of teeth and all that. Lucky for you we need the commodity. You'll be spared the eternity of suffering by the total obliteration of your being. I'll extract what's left of the grimy soul that's nested in your pituitary and when the cycle resets and this whole charade goes back to zero?

No response

You won't be in the equation. He pulls out the syringe, scalpel.

*A vision: you are sixteen. you are on the beach. there is nothing between you and he. he is inside you.
the tent above you is collapsing as you realize what you're doing.*

Just as I suspected

The sand between the crack of your ass and the feeling of him entering you

This is sick.

Outside the highschool where his kids go, before the soccer game

*the anxiety alone...I mean to desecrate all those girls and have to get in front of thousands of
people, their parents...the guilt alone. How you managed this long is simply proof of good material. I mean
for extraction. High value on the market, that is to say. Good is not the right word for your stinkin soul. Look at
you old man: you will be dust and those girls will still suffer.*

*Without the sound of the monitors there is only the faintest expanding and collapsing of the
chest as El Jefe labors to breathe. Eddie has the needle out and he taps the rim of his glasses cause I gotta
get this one right boss. Gonna slow things down for a bit. The room spins and Eddie with the robotic finger
set up to grasp the neck just right initiates the extraction and as the needle hits the skin another vision:*

*There it is for all to see: the immortal stud on the cover. Nothing could take him down. The biggest BS
on broadway now bucking like a bronco.*

*That night with the moon and the sound of the waves...the sand in my toes...when it was over and I had
to clean it up with tampons: he just left me there.*

The coke at prom...the pills in college

Who would believe me if I told them? And what's the point now?

The threats and the sleepless nights. Waking up covered in sweat and tears. The immortal stud. Fuck him.

Aptly put Eddie says as he regains his grasp of reality and stabilizes the needle to finish the job *scchloooooop* so it fills with the crystalline cosmic geluloid that glows a deep blue hue and begins to warm in his palm. He adjusts the dial on its cap and slips it up his sleeve. El Jefe is on his last breath. He got it right in time: just a millisecond more and it would have been gone. His eyes drooping in the expiration. The hands totally limp. It's over. *Kaput.*

I'm still reeling from the feeling of the girl's experience so vividly set before my eyes a moment ago. I hardly realize my foot on the wire that had powered the life support: I must have inadvertently unplugged the device. *I killed el Jefe.*

Eddie sniggers and flicks the chamber of the hypodermic with a *tink*:

Like the girl said: Fuck him. He unscrews the needle in half to put the parts in his chest pocket and his hand comes out gripping a harmonica. *Hold on* and I try and steady myself but to no avail before he bends an E to Eb and I get sent once more through the universe, the feeling of falling for an impossible length before I snap awake and kick my legs beneath my sheets, flail my arms to grab the mattress in desperation, realize I'm screaming and my roommate bursts through the door.

You okay freakshow? he asks with trademark eyebrows raised high on his forehead.

Shit, son. Hell of a dream, man. Hell of a dream. He laughs and leaves, closes the door behind him. I lay there thoroughly spooked.

Later that day I decide to hit the streets again. This time it proves to be fruitful in a couple of ways. At the pedestrian mall there's a Sonny Landreth concert and I stack up down at the other end by the whiskey bar and the bistro. There's enough passersby en route to the concert for me to stack up a

nice pile of bills before the show starts and drowns out me and my acoustic. I get some scattered applause from folks at four tops on the patio of the bar after I pull off *Kodachrome* (Simon, Paul) and call it a night. As I'm about to lock up a guy walks up in shorts and Birkenstocks. *Hey, that was pretty good, man!* He's got a look on his face like he's on to something.

Thanks I tell him and he asks *Hey are you busy tomorrow morning? See, I'm a radio show director, and well, we had a guy drop out from the lineup. You think you could, you know, fill in?*

I stand back and grin *Yeah, yeah of course!* I'm looking around to see if it's a joke *You want me to play something on the radio?*

Yessir, we'll have time for one song if you're up for it. You should do an original. Bring your stuff to our booth at the farmer's market tomorrow. 10 am. Great he says and puts out his hand *see you then.*

I skate back home in a fury of anticipation. That night I practice the song I've written and choose one. Then I practice the *hell* out of it until I have it solid. I decide to not even drink that night so as not to risk losing the brain cells I would need for a perfect performance. The morning comes soon enough and I'm out with time to spare, case in hand, skate to the spot and see the station has a studio set up in white canvas tents. The guy I met is there with the hosts and an intern who looks younger than sets up the mic and gives me the run down. *Alright just wait for our cue and then give us a little bit about yourself before you play.*

Alright I tell him and think of what knowledge to put out into the radioverse.

Hey, what's your name, man? I think before I answer: *I'm Eddie. Eddie Motion.* Obviously it's bullshit but it feels like the right move.

Alright Eddie well here we go in five four three two

And we're back live at the Aft City Farmer's Market where I'm happy to introduce our guest, the

Downtown Busker of the Week, here to play Back to the Middle but first why don't you tell us a little about yourself Eddie?

I swallow dry but regain my composure and tell the people *Just want all you people listening out there to know that you can do anything you think you can do if you put in the hours. Put the work in and you can pull off anything you can imagine. I'm just trying to bring the good vibes to the public and if you want to catch me live again see me Wednesday night at Sinkers* I say when I remember it's the night they host an open mic. Then I strike up the chords and sing:

See me walkin down funktown street

I'm just movin' tryin' to feel the beat

Hardly stand in the shoes on feet

Ain't no chance I'm gonna take that seat

Move up fast and then walk down slow

Two o'clock and nowhere to go

All the people I used to know

They're goin back to the middle

To the middle

They're goin back to the middle

Sometime's tough times come on strong

Keep you workin hard all day long

Nothin to show and the money's all gone

Makin you feel like did it all wrong

But I don't care bout the rap on that sheet

I'm just groovin, tryin to feel the beat

Never catch me admit a defeat

Not goin' back to the middle

To the middle

Not goin back' to the middle

There's a musical break and a short solo but something goes SNAP before I start to sing again:

They just kicked me off funktown street

They don't want me walking that beat

No new clothes and no food to eat

Gimme a hand and I'll give you my seat

Went up fast and then came down slow

Lost my chance oh please say it ain't so

All the people I used to know

They went back to the middle

To the middle

They went back to the middle

When the number ends I look down sure enough the high e is snapped and dangling like a shiny piece of hair. Then I realize there's a crowd around me clapping and the hosts are in on it too. The intern

comes over and powers down the mic as they transition to the commercial and he remarks *hey, did you break a string?*

Yeah man, shoot.

Ah, nah man, didn't even notice!

The guy who'd found me on the street comes over and concurs *Hey, did you break a string? Didn't miss a beat! Nice man, real professional. Great song too. Just great. Hey, Wednesday night you said? Over Sinkers?*

Yeah that's right. Don't know exactly when I'll be on but show starts at 9.

You got it Eddie, great job.

I say goodbye to the crew and get back on the board, take a detour through the market stands hocking organic arugula, baked goods, tie-dye t-shirts, homemade jewelry, essential oils, soap, syrup, statuettes built out of car parts: then, as I get to the far end where this parking lot links up with the main road, I see a stand stacked with guitars, amps, effects pedals, music stands, and tons of boxes filled with old vinyl records that fill every square foot save a couple traversable lanes for browsing, and the closer I get the better I can see the guy in the tent: blue jeans, black leather jacket, big wayfarers on even though it's overcast: and yet, when I'm right there in front of it, to strike it up over the beautiful archtop of pre-war Gibson that's hung high on a wall made of stacked record boxes behind him, *poof!* the whole thing disappears like a mirage and I look around: nothing abnormal. Just the empty parking space where the disappearing booth and the guy with the odd familiarity of someone I'd seen before had been a second ago.

It will feel like a long three days before the Wednesday gig. I told you, there's tragedy in this tale, but not in the musical aspect. The open mic was a smashing success. I met the manager for the bar, who

asked me to play the Tuesday night slot. The guy from the radio show showed up and asked if I could open for a bluegrass group at the art museum on the following Friday, and handed me some promotional tickets. I accepted both invitations, drank a pitcher, drove home still tipsy on the empty 2AM streets of abandoned academia. When I got up and over my hangover the next morning before class I put a ticket in an envelope with a note *come down and catch the show if you can make it love Del aka "Eddie Motion"* and licked it shut. It was going to my Pops up North and I had to spend a solid half hour searching for a stamp so I could drop it in the box on the way to the grounds of the University. I remember classes from those days like being on autopilot. My dad called me on the weekend *way to go Del! You got a gig, eh?*

Couple gigs, actually. Tuesdays at the bar now, too.

Well that's great. I'm gonna come down for the Museum show, for sure!

But on Friday he called again, sounding hoarse, exhausted.

I'm sorry, son a dry hacking cough I don't think I can make it he sneezes as soon as I'm over this bug I'll catch a show. Tuesdays, right?

It's a major letdown but I told him all was well and to feel better. The next day the museum show went off without a hitch and I even got a handful of tips. A couple guys who were milling through including one with a crash cymbal in one hand and drumsticks in the other came up to me and asked about a jam session so we scheduled for Sunday. Like a miracle we hit it off immediately and even knew enough songs between the four of us to play the show on Tuesday. I called up the manager and confirmed that would be alright and he asks us our name: *The Hoaxes*.

On Monday I got another call from home but it's my mother who's over Pop's place sounding upset. *He's in the hospital Del. His lungs aren't working. They have him on a ventilator.* I couldn't believe what I was hearing. *But how? I just talked to him!*

The doctors say between sniffing and clearing the throat some horrible virus. They don't know what it is. They say it looks like SARS.

But I thought they got rid of that years ago.

Me too baby. Me too. He's in the ICU so I just had to let you know.

I'll come back up I told her as soon as I can as I thought of the gig the next day.

So I played. The Hoaxes were a hit. Sure we had to dodge a few flying plastic cups full of the beer on special and only got 80 bucks to spread four ways but the energy was so potent and vivid that I almost forgot about Pops' condition. Until I got the call on Wednesday morning in the midst of a merciless hangover: *Pops is in a coma*. So I packed up and got the car ready to hit the road.

How can I explain the anxiety of the drive from the dorm to the hospital? The overwhelming terror, regret for having played when I could have been with him, the hours on the road stretching to unfathomable expanses of time and space, unbearable when I encountered the gridlock of the northern highways, the tears swelling as I tried to hold them back or had to brush them away to see as dusk fell like soot all around me. When I finally got to the hospital I found out I couldn't even be in the room with Pops since he might be contagious. I managed to keep the sadness inside for a few more hours but inevitably we were all in tears, my family and I, in the fluorescent waiting room before the ICU, waiting in an imperative we'd all wished to overcome and yet prayed would not end should it lead to what we all felt was coming: until a woman in a pink blouse and khakis with a trained look came out and asked us to join her in an office where she explained *he lost his ability to oxygenate and the machines could not stop the brain damage* and a list of other problems: renal failure, weak pulse, all in the past tense so that when she finally told us *he's passed* my mother was well into hysterics and I, head hung low for the strength has left me, wept deftly into the crook of my elbow on the plastic surface of the desk a mess of snot and teardrops.

I wish I hadn't known what I know: I wish I hadn't wanted what I wanted so bad: I cursed the name I'd taken from what I thought was a dream when really it had all been *for real*, but *how*? In the desperation of my adolescent desire for things whose consequences were immaterial in my imagination: success at any cost, fame and acclaim, communion with the godhead: these all carried a price, just like that bastard had shown me, before he turned me to a carrier of the futurevirus, turned my spittle patricidal when I embedded it in the adhesive of the envelope, *damn you Eddie* I screamed when I got back in the car, yet knowing I was incapable of abandoning the path I had set forth on now, still cursing him *you sick motherfucker, damn you, Eddie Motion* and I knew through the static of the radio that crackled in the bluedarkness of the dawn that mystical dreamdemon was listening with a coy grin *shouldn't have tried to impersonate The Master if you didn't have the guts to go all the way* he sent back to me by an unmistakably unholy brainwave: *shouldn't have taken my namesake if you didn't want to don the mantle* and I curse myself for impersonating what I thought was naught but a specter on my big radio debut as the meaning becomes clear *but buck up kid, the worst is over, you're over the hump: now nothing can stop you.*

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XIX. Subsynthesis

After the Mandalay Bay shooting Eddie shows up in my office. It's well after five and everyone else has taken off. I'm polishing off a set going in for permit: he makes a shadow over my workstation: I turn around and there he is glasses flashing.

Time to get to the bottom of this one he tells me and signals the news headline on the browser I'd just opened on my screen: *Over 50 Dead and 500 Wounded in Las Vegas*. He taps his temple and the lights go out. I realize he has me by the wrist when illumination returns in a roaring blur and now we are in the back of a limo with drinks held in circles through the walnut trim on the console in front of us. I can't see who's driving through the opaque glass between us and the windows and our seats are tinted so I barely see the outline of the city streets around us. Then I realize I'm hearing gunshots dampened through the car's body and competing with the jazz that's playing on the speakers but I look at Eddie who nods and presses a switch to lower the window and let the scene outside in: the screams growing louder as I see the crowd surging towards us. Eddie taps the glass and the driver steps on it. We are flying over the pavement and I realize the jazz is *Bahia* by Coltrane. Eddie taps again and the driver accelerates again. The song is playing like a CD skipping so that every other note is deleted yet the song still has melody, harmony for the musicians' timing is mechanic, perfect.

Why this song? I ask him as the limo starts to change form *why the limo?*

Eddie taps again and the scene goes black. This time when the lights go on we are still in the limo but I see that we've come to a stop in front of a giant pyramid with an enormous sphinx right next to it. I lean forward and puke all over the floor. Eddie hands me a vodka tonic with a lime on the rim.

Clean up kid. We're hittin' the ground level.

I rinse my mouth and step over the puddle of vomit and out the door that's being held open by a bellboy who glances at the mess and swallows hard. Eddie drops a bill in his hand and I spit out the remaining swill in the landscaping.

The Luxor.

We are walking towards the entrance beneath the resting paws of the sphinx but before we get to the main door Eddie pulls me to him. We peel off in the direction of the *Excalibur* next door but stop when we hit a utility box nestled into a hedge which Eddie pops open to flip a few breakers. I see a man-hole cover in the pavement path descend and Eddie gestures toward it. *We're going under the East Towers.*

The steel ladder down is metallic and the chamber clean like it has all been well maintained. Sanitized even. Eddie hits a button on the wall and the opening is sealed overhead. I see him glance at a watch chained to the breast pocket of his leather jacket as he pauses above me. *Hold up.*

I stop and try to look down between my body and the ladder but it's too dark to see. Then there is an enormous flash. Eddie puts the watch back in his pocket as a huge boom sounds from far below. Rings of light have begun to illuminate with resounding *thunks* that grow louder as the tube of light grows towards us. When the lamps around us turn on he points down and we recommence the descent.

When the sun reaches its Zenith the light is sent down future-diminishing lenses in the capstone and obelisk that allow the photonic particles to be directed down the perfectly perpendicular carbon alloy tubes until they are simple photons that proceed in two beams then are collided in a refraction chamber a mile below the surface. Here the light reacts with an immense underground body of water to generate the subatomic steam to spin an array of diamond forged turbines each one at seven million rotations per minute to generate the electricity to power all of Las Vegas.

I stare at him in amazement until I realize I've paused and he's urging me ahead.

This tube lights up at high noon due to a glitch that fires the circuit in reverse and initiates secondary lights by the emergency backup system. Think: like a hiccup then your throat lights up. It lets us get in where we would be locked out otherwise. Which means we get to see the inside of The Machine.

What's there to see that you didn't just describe? I ask with a lurching stomach as I realize how high we are above the ground balanced on the narrow rungs.

Plenty. He grabs the rails of the ladder and hooks his feet to the outside. *See you down there kid* and he drops near-freefall. I hear the metallic ringing of his descent grow fainter and I weigh my options. I could get out now through the porthole above that has not yet latched shut, hit the casino, comp some drinks, forget about Eddie and what he wants to show me, catch a plane back in the morning. But what the hell: it's Vegas baby: go big or go home. I start to climb down.

After an eternity of steps I tap a toe into thin air 'cause I've reached the bottom of the ladder. Eddie's signaling to drop. It's a good six feet.

Take the plunge. Break your fall and tumble to your hands and knees. Won't hurt much.

I do the maneuver and Eddie drops down gracefully beside me.

*A tour of the machine*²³.

Apparently we have landed in a conduit to whatever lies ahead or behind us in this murky tunnel with lights dimmed to a cool green glow. They haven't been switched on like the ones we'd encountered down the manhole only illuminating with the power of the green *ENABLED* LEDs.

I see the light grow brighter and Eddie's clasp the Ray Bans in his thumb and forefinger so the glasses can cast their light to lead the way. He aims it to the front of where we've landed then back again.

²³ See also: Floyd, Pink, i.e., *Welcome To...* (1975)

Well he says which way you wanna go?

I jolt in amazement.

Didn't think I'd be expected to choose.

Well at this level we can go either way.

Forward I guess.

Let's go for it.

We trod following the strings of glowing green dots and Eddie starts explaining.

Imagine the density of the human brain but in architecture and engineering. That's what we've got here. To keep the power in control. This one fuels Vegas; there are others in every major city. NYC, beneath the Chrysler building. Chicago under Sears. Denver has access through the airport. Seattle through the WaMu and the Central Library.

Why two in Seattle?

Not enough sunshine of course. Even with a thousand times the collection power in each facility it takes two whole collector apparati to keep the Pacific Northwest operation running. There's a similar setup in Pittsburgh with their thirty something days of sunshine a year: beneath the Cathedral of Learning and the Carnegie Institute.

We keep walking until the glimmer of a door lite catches my eye.

This particular base is special.

He clicks a code on a keypad I see caught in the light of his lenses and the door unlatches. There are cameras above us but Eddie assures me they're blind. I opened it in safety mode. They still run this place on DOS.

Eddie's indicating to another pair of doors.

Left one gets us to the Board of Directors: right one to the R&D.

Let's see the R&D

He opens the door and we land on a catwalk above a terraced field of offices and cubicles, desks, break rooms, conference rooms, restrooms, a full leather lounge here and there. The platform is perched in darkness high above the rooms full of employees and Eddie hops in front of me to point *that's the action. All the churning to make the butter.*

I nod and follow him as he strides along the perimeter and I see we're in a massive dome that spreads endlessly in every direction until the light from the workspace recedes into black.

Are we subterranean?

Beneath it all. Beneath the foundation.

The catwalk extends another hundred yards and I'm worried someone from below will see us.

Don't worry Eddie says sensing my apprehension they'll assume we're janitors. Can't see us from down there without the cameras anyway.

Eddie this is incredible I start to tell him because the enormity of the dome has me baffled and I can't think of what else to say. *And these people like ants from uphere.*

You said it: the human anthill. That's what the military guys call it whenever they see it. See-- the Tower of Babel-- when it collapsed-- they didn't just stop the operation. Ever since they lost the tower they've been spreading it out like oil on water down here: gutting more and more of the mantle to make these Domes of Existence.

There's a whole civilization down here.

People spend their lives here. Born into the system in one of the hospital areas. Sometimes children are taken from their mothers by the state under extenuating circumstances such as neglect or abuse and then directed here. Or they have agents abduct them from orphanages.

He stops and grabs my shoulder.

I've done it. It's not fun he rubs his fingers together but it's lucrative. They grow up knowing nothing of the surface except as necessary to appease their curiosities and prevent discord.

We continue til we get to the end and lean on the railing to peer out over the landscape one last time before Eddie opens the door next to me.

Now I'll take you to the higher-ups.

We are in a chamber with a stench that grows as we walk down a hallway. Where's all the garbage?

Straight ahead. On conveyor belts that pick it up from each part of the conglomerate. The link we took is a fire escape from the access manhole we descended to this segment of the disposal infrastructure which services the thinktanks.

What're they?

Think: tanks. Literal glass cubes full of debating intellectuals fielding from their plentitudes of junior thinkers out gathering research who phone-in on demand so the topics expounded by the debaters can be interpreted by the critics who surround the cube in an ampitheatre taking copious notes and progress the industries in the direction determined most utilitarian to the needs of The Society. In direct contact with their representatives should the situation arise. Like in 2001.

What happened in 2001?

It's complicated. Where we are is the back house of the maintenance chambers. Where the debaters retire after their sixteen hour shifts. Four hundred meters from the thinktanks themselves if we take the vent ducts.

I'm game.

Eddie jumps on top of a steel shelf bolted to the side of the room we're in which has concrete walls and a metal roof. From the step he can reach a ceiling panel with square holes that he grips like a bowling ball and twists with enormous torque so that it swivels up and out of place and he can lift himself up into it and then indicates I should do the same. It's a tough one pulling up my weight by my fingertips so he grabs me by the wrist and whips me up quick inside the square metal duct. It's low overhead and we have to move prone through the maze that's intermittently lit by dots of light sprinkling in through the grates along our path.

We're in the neighborhood of the political operation Eddie whispers back to me. The duct is about to branch off and he goes left. I take a look down the right and Eddie explains *that's all the marketing divisions. Also good to keep up on for your own sake. But I think you'll find this more enlightening.*

He's looking more excited than I recall I've ever seen him: or is it just the glimmering lights from the grate below us casting shadows on what's really just his steady cool grin and shimmering green goggles: a projection of my own anticipation. After a couple more turns Eddie points to a vent and signals me to listen. At first all I hear is a rumbling din but with my ear up against the metal I can discern the colliding sounds of argumenters, orators, mediators and a broad range of cheers boos and heckles. I turn to get an eye on what I'm hearing and have to strain it to bring into focus the scene below me: a harrowing forum where the debate is occurring.

There are two pillars placed in the center of an ellipse whose limits extend so far in either direction they disappear from view. The crowd of people is milling in two spirals that brink where the pillars

delineate the division of the two halves like spinning hurricanes on a weather satellite image with small groups whisking off the edges to form circles that emerge from and meld back into the main throngs in fluid patterns whose purpose is difficult to decode. The pillars hold platforms high above the flowing mob and on each of the platforms is a podium in the round where the speaker is encircled by several rows of seats with their occupants clamoring on foot and emphatically gesturing their arms to get the attention of the person at the pinnacle who is so fervently projecting his own theses into the microphone on the stand in front of them that their offerings; despite the desperate manner of their delivery; go unheeded. Opposite him it's the same scene and I have no way of registering who is winning let alone what the topic could be as they ceaselessly harangue one another and the audience that swirls below and rises up around them shoulder to shoulder in terraces of benches and rows of folding chairs only used as pedestals for the most avid participants who raise their fists and shout or turn to one another for hand shakes or to wag fingers in the face and yet even these minor actors seem never to pause their dictation as if every mouth could run perpetually.

What is this I ask Eddie when I realize I've been gawking for more than a moment.

The Central Argument. Here take these he says and pulls a pocket pair of binoculars from his jacket. I put my eye against one of the lenses and spin the dial to focus on the two main attractions. I see they've got their pedestals festooned in opposing colors. In fact there are scaffolds and ladders surrounding each pillar to allow two crews to post wheatpaste posters over the ones already there and through the glasses I can see both pillars have been covered countless times over with voluminous propaganda that I wonder if the structure itself is a byproduct of the layered glued sheets.

It's been going on since the 1950s in this location. Before that the debate was held in Delaware.²⁴

Where?

DELA-where. The first state. It won the privilege until this chamber was constructed during the nuclear tests. So-called underground detonations were used as cover for the completion of most of this apparatus.

But what do they discuss?

It's hard to explain. In fact it's impossible to get it into plain English. The terminology has evolved into a jargon that only has meaning to the highest and most thoroughly indoctrinated initiates. The language has been transformed so that logic alone is purveyed and as such the streams of thought have no beginning or end only points upon points upon counterpoints upon counterpoints ad infinitum. There is no dialectic: no conflict-resolution. The balance is absolute such that every posited positive has an equal opposing negative. The session will last as long as the two high-ups have the consciousness to keep their mouths moving and then they will be taken away for their understudy to step in who then has the privilege to speak until he can go no longer.

Blithering Filibusters. But what do they talk about?

It's minutae of minutae. Sadistically microscopic. Topics that bear no relevance to practical matters. Classifications of such inane particularity no one with any sense of efficacy would dwell on the subject.

So why does it happen? and with such vigor? perpetually?

Eddie puts a hand on my shoulder.

This is how they reinvent society. He holds his other hand in front and passes it across the vista in front of us. Every government begins here on this floor. Affiliates of every agency are tuned in. They record every word verbatim for the record. All possibilities of thought on every topic whatsoever have been expunged on

²⁴ Forming a forum

this floor before it's chewed on by politicians and regurgitated as policy. This is the life force of the political being. This is the source.

The swirling fields of people below have the choreography of bees in a honey hive shouldering past each other in a choreography that I now see follows the gestures of the two supreme debaters like marching bands following drum majors. It's clear the competing swarms have their own compositions to follow but the speed and volume of their action is moderated by the motion of the hand or the angle of the chin of the chief orators. Though their digits are microscopic from my vantage point and through the binoculars I can make out a system of hand signals that seem to direct the motion of the peripheral mobs' fist-raised caterwauling. It's clear the two heads of the debate are not simply arguing one another but largely attempting to urge the mob to pass from one side to the other at the seams of the groups' interaction that have edges like weather fronts colliding on a satellite image and at these borders I am struck by the fact that there is horrific violence taking place in some places so that puddles of blood and limp bodies form in bursts and then are quickly broken up and the gore removed by slithering teams of riot police and white vested medics that disappear into elevators rising from the ground at intervals so they can bring the victims beneath the melees. I see some successful deserters stripping their colors and fleeing across the line of scrimmage to the opposite party who throw them new clothes and guard the traitors from the enforcement that tries to recapture them.

It's a fight for the majority I observe to Eddie who is otherwise ready to move on *Those people are tearing each other to shreds down there.*

He nods. *Down in the thick of it things get ugly. By the time the message reaches the ones on the lowest ground it's been spun into nothin' more than bipolar epithets and battle cries.*

I see one man grab another's and slam it into the ground as hard as he can so that it collapses into a splotch.

It starts out at the top as an even argument between the untouchables but down in the pits it's just slogans to fight by.

Adjacent to them there's a pair pummeling each other to exhaustion.

The more civil boundaries are maintained by middlers who don't have the zeal of the ones inclined to actively gain more ground but even where it looks peaceful there are plots and counterplots to incite subversion.

No one seems to care about the assaults—the murders.

As long as the status-quo follows what's prescribed by the society above the bloodshed is tolerated. Eddie gestures to follow so I leave the post. It all measures up eye for eye and tooth for tooth so what's the use of justice? they need the thing to run smoothly and if it takes a little blood to oil the gears...

That was a lot of blood.

I see Eddie's eyes flash in the darkness ahead so he must have stopped to face me.

All things are relative. Try and keep your stomach. We crawl through the narrow tunnel until Eddie chimes in:

Back when I started the glasses it was more about stuff like this. Digging into the big questions. Following leads. Getting into sticky situations. In the infancy of the protocol which I've dubbed epiphanizing the glasses gave me images of everything the same way it had given me normal thoughts prior: with the epiph settings on I could read ahead in any situation as effortlessly as breathing. As if the neuron chain had been set on a switch the whole time waiting for the right stimulus to zap it. It kept me one step ahead of the targets on soul-searches and combined with the hypnosis protocol I could snag as many souls as I wanted in a day.

We start moving and Eddie keeps talking sideways to me.

Of course I eased into it how much I let on to The Agency. I knew they'd be swooping in on the tech and I kept it for my days off he snorts. At that point I was throwing most of the souls away. It was like Audubon shooting birds down for his books: I'd get a hundred a day and then only a dozen specimens worth keeping of which just one or two were actually useful. It's still hard to unload an unregistered soul on the market even these days and back then it was damn near impossible. But I didn't care. The value was in the practice. I had to invent a technique with the upgraded hardware so I took the extra laps strictly weekends and holidays. Until the day I decided to plug them in for good.

His eyes flash again this time from a beam of light gleaming through another grille in the duct.

Then I was fulltime.

I hear an electric whir and realize he's jamming his pointer finger into the bolts around the grille and undoing them by spinning the digit like a power drill.

How did you—

Mani-upgrade. Standard finger drill attachment.

But you're real hand?

Sitting in a jar. A cryogenic containment cylinder to be specific. If I ever want to reattach it. But it's only sentimental value so long as this thing keeps ticking.

The bolts hit the floor of the duct sounding off like a cymbal roll taptapaptaptap until they're all out and he can pop the lid off.

After you.

I step through hand and knee and he follows suit.

You just saw the grand forum and I know it's quite a site. Everything like a smoothly running mechanism and the constant drama of battle. I told you what they talk about in there: the miniscule questions with

no clear correct answers that pertain to all governments of all corners of the world. Topics so seemingly benign like the cost versus benefits of a variable tax for cheese in proportion to the population of cows in Sri Lanka and Pro-Con adjusting the factor of building occupants to required water bottle fillers and number of pink fibers to be mixed in per printed banknote to the stuff that comes down from the uglier side like maximum quantity of discarded lead to be allowed in public drinking water in minority-dominant communities or optimal reduction in hospital success rate as a means of stabilizing insurance profit deficits. The two sides take the topic and run it until a new one comes down from the higher-ups. The material of the debate is recorded and sent out to analysts who catalogue it and engineers who decide which bits will be sent into the field. Did you hear about those ambassadors in Cuba?

With the headaches?

And the ringing in the ears. Neuro-psychological warfare. They were getting hit by one of my former colleagues. I could tell by the symptoms and the description of the phenomenon.

The Agency was zapping our guys in Havana? What for?

To get them indoctrinated: in on the deal. But they successfully resisted he clicks his teeth the result of the debate sometimes changes policy beyond reason. So they create a wave pulse recording of the necessary agenda and send it into the forehead of the unwitting agent.

Why'd it go wrong in Cuba?

He's shaking his head.

Bad tech. In my day it was detailed specialist level. Highly sophisticated. They converted to the ray gun in 2001 and there's been higher failures since: it just won't stick. The tradeoff has been the ability to set up the machinery everywhere. There are millions of projectors.

Who else are they targeting?

Well mostly it ends up being piped into senators' bedrooms and governors' mansions for subliminal delivery at night or with the right setup on quiet loops throughout the day: lasso the free will by convincing it it's making its own decision when really the engineers and agents are just running their typical conditioning regimens. What was specific to Cuba was the urgency of the situation. They needed something done quick and they got sloppy on the execution.

What was the point?

I don't know. We could look it up in the archives. Everything is predetermined by the material of that debate. It could take a while but we would find the file.

What file?

The ORE. The Official Register of Events. TRUTH in the local parlance: The Real Undeniable Thing that Happened. Everything that needs to be fed into the mainstream to maintain the status-quo.

But where do the topics come from? Who decides the course of it all?

We'll get there. It's not what we're going to see next but it's down the line.

*The duct has begun to curve gently and slope down. I'm leading the way so I tell Eddie *this ain't level* but he just eggs me on anyway. It's an even ramp for a while and the curve straightens out but I have been totally disoriented. *Keep going almost there.**

*Finally the glow of our desination emerges and I pick up the clip. As I get closer I see it's red shimmering light that glints about the surfaces inside our tube in wavy lines. *Water?**

Close.

He takes something out of his pocket

Is that a...

*Yoyo*²⁵

Thoughtso...

He flicks his wrist and sends it out through the grate hooking down to splash below and then return to his knuckle with the sound of a zipper. He holds it to his face and I think I see a slivering tongue reach out to lick it.

Not as deep as I'd expected he claims and pockets the toy and then *Now get this* and he says and pushes me from my feet so I fall flat on my ass. What I fall on is inclined and I'm sliding head first on my back accelerating. There's a noise ahead of me: blank and steady like a radio out of tune. But as I get closer I realize it's the rushing of a river. There's a roar and the liquid hits my head. I gulp in panic and take an unintended drink as I struggle to hold my breath and find the way up and the taste of salt is on my lips. I'm kicking and thrashing my arms but the fluid is glowing red all around me from the safety lights above. I've expelled all my oxygen and I'm starting to lose vision when a green glow catches the corner of my eye. It's gotta be Eddie. There's adrenaline in the hope of survival and I find the energy to get to him. Here he is sitting crosslegged on the mouth of the slide that had spit me out green eyes glowing in the fuzz of the red bulbs. He starts talking as I'm fighting the current.

This is the river. It runs through the whole facility.

The salt is congealing on my face. I'm starting to feel like I'm covered in it.

Look around you. It's enormous.

²⁵ Dunkin' a Duncan®

He's right: the vault is broader than a city block. Up and down I see holes in the wall like the one I fell out of. It's a wonder I wasn't swept away in my plunge. Or maybe I was and Eddie has teleported to follow me downstream.

It's running slow today so I figured you could handle the drop. Slowest its ever run historically. Every day a new nadir.

What is it?

The peace. It slows down the supply.

What do you mean the peace?

Up there! The peace. The lack of violence.

What's that have to do with this I ask him as I tread my legs and swim with my arms up stream to stay in place. It still feels pretty fast moving to me.

No this is an outlier. Something imminent ahead I'm afraid. Never been this slow for this long...

What is it? Water from where?

Eddie's lenses are gleaming orange in the haze of the red glow. Liquid splashes off the concrete platform in front of him shimmering in the red bulbs sideways as they pass past his lenses. *Not water.*

What I taste the spray from a splash on my lips salt I say the ocean?

An ocean of a sort he corrects me *at the source. These are just conduits for distribution through the entire infrastructure. All the way to the smallest vein.*

I'm confused.

Don't worry it's all been sterilized, de-viralized, radiation filtered.

What the hell is it? Oil?

Close he says before I know what he'll say next—

Blood

I begin to thrash and grasp at the rim of the platform but my hands keep slipping off. Eddie reaches out and I feel his grasp pull me up with pneumatic force. His palm is rubbery: latex gloves.

If it's so sanitary then why the protection? I ask after he pulls me from the current.

I always wear these. You just never noticed.

It's no better on the land: I can feel the coat of blood scabbing on me. Eddie walks to the wall of the vault behind him and spins the handle on a spigot. He comes back pulling a line of hose that's bulging as it trails behind him. *Close your eyes* he tells me then hits me full blast so I slam against the concrete curving up behind me. This tastes clean: *water*.

Sorry to hose you but I thought you'd feel better.

Christ I was covered in it I say before I vomit into a puddle in front of me and I see the blood there in the vomit so I throw up more: *I swallowed it* I sputter.

Just a sip. Don't worry junior. It's safe. I guarantee it. Here let me get that off your face he offers before he opens the nozzle again. It knocks me back on my ass.

Jesus just give me a break I say then think of what I was swimming in and take it back *Shit. No. Hit me again.*

Cominrightup FWOOOOOSH HHHHHH

The wind goes out of me and I go black. I see bright shapes that fade from neon to gray. I see my mother, my father: the light grows brighter til it's all that's there. But just as I feel a euphoria overcome me a pain interrupts from my stomach and my lungs. The gush had knocked the breath out of me.

Enough I tell him. *Enough*

Everything is still black around the edges. I hear the sound of the river grow to a roar. My head throbs. I feel Eddie take my shoulder in his hand. *Take it easy. I told you its pure. Nothing but platelets and plasma. You should feel rejuvenated.*

What the hell man? That's disgusting. Fuck. I'm still spitting out bits of red that have stuck to my teeth.

You ought to know how this place operates he tells me. *You saw the killing floors at the forum: you said that was a lot of blood. Well listen: this is a lot of blood.*

I don't get it. What are they doing with it?

Consuming it.

They eat it?

Some do. That's the habit of the lowest ranks. Most take it intravenous.

And you?

Shaken not stirred he quips. A bitter metallic taste is lingering in the back of my throat like after a hard run.

Where does it come from?

The bodies above us. Surface-dwellers. You know: people like you.

But how does it get here I ask pointing around me and swallowing dry.

Anyone who dies and has their body handed over to or recovered by the authorities provides their last supply through their networks of cremators and morticians. Wars provide the most consistent flow but besides that and natural disasters a lot of it comes from the living: their medical samples, what's collected during sur-

gery, crooked donation centers, heck: some green field agents will induce a nosebleed in the sleep and leech it off for a quick buck.

I'm soaking wet and starting to shiver. Eddie takes note: he draws in a deep breath and puts a hand on his temple then blows on me and I feel the heat of a hair dryer all over until I'm thoroughly dessicated.

Let's keep moving he says and we go down the tunnel in front of us. It gets narrower and the ceiling lowers as we go on until we are back on our hands and knees crawling.

Look around you. This alone could power lower Manhattan for the next decade.

I gaze along the vast corridors of equipment at work: rows of transformers and substations exuding glowing heat and humming all around us. My eyes only reach a fragment of the infrastructure that spans continuous forwards and backwards through this tunnel and as many other tunnels I don't know about.

The sum total electricity from this device is enough to supply all of man's current needs: all the buildings, trains, lights, and even the entire world fleet of vehicles if they were all electric. There's so much of it that comes out all they can do is try to store the excess in batteries. Most of it just gets let out and turns to heat. The main contributor to global warming has been the heat from the dissipation of energy from this device. It's what's really melting the ice caps.

If there's so much energy to be had with this then why the oil?

They aren't after the oil.

The river.

They need the blood more than anything. It's their nectar: the endallbeall. If it's not oil it's something else: look at the course of history. First the game was conquest. Territory wars. Battles for survival. Killing for

your next meal. Then it was for pecuniary gain: precious metals. Slaves. When the land and the gold began to run out the politicians took over and used their philosophies and persuasions to incite civil wars, riots, uprisings, coupes along political boundaries. But the awakening of the '50s and '60s and the call for peace between even political opposites like the USA and communists prevented adequate bloodshed from wars over ideologies. Which brings us to today: with oil it's a simple premise: everything depends on it and it's running out. Everyone who drives a combustion car or consumes an item from the gaspowered distribution chain is complicit. So when it's time to invade, secure, and occupy the violence happens with minimal protest.

And the blood begins to flow...

As long as they have the manpower to supply it it's just the blood they're after. Not the oil itself. Half the major operations that are undergone are based on pure fabrications of oil-rich areas.

Like Desert storm?

The archetype. 100,000 Iraqi casualties. The Agency created an entire new department after that. Until Desert Storm the only Mideast department was on the Gaza strip. Afterwards: the Iraq-Specific Post-Altercation Resource Conservation Wet Activities Regiment.

ISPARCWAR?

That's it. Led by a secretary appointed by Busto I himself. Closely observed by the president. At first a task force no bigger than the West African Response Military Operations Program

WARMOP.

The common name for it yes. But the growth was exponential after the war against SH. Busto I knew he was setting the path for a decades long investment when he started the department and he siphoned the contracts to his own people early so that by the time it took off in the 2000s under Busto II he could collect on the

agreements he'd made behind closed doors. And yet he shakes his head even though these political maneuvers among our presidents have led to seemingly enormous quantities of the red stuff and he bends down to pick some up between his fingers this is nothing compared to what goes on elsewhere.

Whereelse?

I mean the communists. China. Russia. All their affiliates. To them he says as he looks off to the distance this is nothing and flicks the scabbing scum away.

What do you mean?

The operations there are similar in terms of technology. Their purposes are essentially the same: they are all after the blood. But the scale: the enormity of it. Out there in Siberia they have fifteen thousand acres of perforated surface to bring the ones they've collected from the gutters of the cities or the most remote farmlands or plucked from the ranks of the opposition parties to be pressed of their contents with giant spiked steamrollers into a collection basin the size of West Virginia. In the tundra up there they can chill the blood and store it and that's just one finger of the whole apparatus. It's enough to keep the parties going in the Caribbean, South America, the Mid-East. With excesses on the black market and more to spare. All resulting from the constant enforcement of strict laws that allow the abduction of civilians, incitement of riots, policies leading to war, the proliferation of plagues, denial of basic human rights. Same as the protocol here in that sense: but as I said: it's the sheer scale of it. In China this infrastructure supports 1.7 billion. It makes ours look like a sippiecup.

My God

There is no God for these folks. That is the irony. Their role in NCM. The reason I brought you here is to tell you this: the epicenter of our Armageddon: this spectacular machine beneath the pyramid of light: it is a symbol as well. Even in the Fourth Dynasty the pyramids were meant for a much more ambitious cause than

mere glory in the afterlife: the fact that they placed the mummified corpse of the king in the central chamber indicates the intention of the building as a shelter.

for what?

Fallout. So the pharaoh could resurrect himself from the afterlife after the destruction. After the destruction of the Earth's surface and atmosphere.

The pyramids were built as fallout shelters?

That's what we would call them. Back then it was with the symbolic knowledge of something catastrophic looming that would descend from the sky and destroy civilization. Now we know their fears to be inevitable: the destruction of the atmosphere with pollutants and industrial byproducts, World War III, nuclear holocaust, worldwide radiation poisoning.

So Doomsday is Nukes.

Thousands of them. All at once.

The Apocolypse.

Nothing else to call it.

We're on the bleeding edge of MAD.

Mutually Assured Destruction.

Not just as a concept: in its kinetic form. The spring is unwinding. The point of no return has been well passed.

You mean you know it will happen.

They knew in 2600 BC it would happen. We all know it will happen. The question has always been: when?

And look who's got his hand on the button.

Rumf.

None other than the tabloid emperor himself. And the peninsula is on the brink worse than 1950.

Think back to that time: HST: the first Nuclear Bomber ordering the police action to keep the South separate from the North in order to appease the Soviets who had bargained it in WWIL. HST like RJR failed at business before he eclipsed the Republican Convention and took the chair without the typical legal and political experience associated with the position.

That sounds familiar.

You're catching on. HST was a witting pointman with the agenda, placed in the seat by the complicit organizations banded together: the Freemasons, the CIA, Certain Churches, the KKK: to be able to pull off what he did required the persistent brainwashing of the general public but now they need a patsy to unleash the ultimate evil and so they'll bait him into flipping the switch on the beginning of the end of humanity.

The... the antichrist.

The manchild in charge of nuclear warfare. Sure enough the death by fire that's been prophesied. Like I said they had all the signals like the horn before the train not to mention they had been the ones who'd laid the track.

Now it's coming at us with a full head of steam.

The evil doom approacheth and we all know it. People have forgotten the infrastructure already in place from the first cold war: look at Nebraska: filled with fallout shelters: and Rumf supporters: have you ever spotted the plaques denoting the building was built to the standards in the City? not to mention the trillions of

dollars spent on military and government shelters in zones civilians can't access. There's a whole other civilization emerging in preparation for the destruction of this one.

Preppers.

A whole system for surviving in the poison that's been embedded in our society by The Society thusly this emergent civilization will be solely at the will of The Society and inextricably at the mercy of That Force.

Wasn't the same attitude back in the first cold war. The records show: they knew it wouldn't really happen back then. In those days they were extorting the people by their subconscious to garnish the fear: program after program of so-called security measures and protocols: so successful it went so far as to get the public to take the notion of nuclear disaster for granted: duck and cover like a desk would stop the obliteration of the body's molecules atom by atom. The culture of fear was promoted so they could get the sham shelters built and graft the resources needed to buy every possible protection for the elites when it actually does happen.

You're right: people don't seem so afraid these days: they're off their guard.

Another program of tragedy fatigue handed down by The Society, That Force. It's all in a logical succession: one event worse than the next in a crescendo that culminates in the culling of the population. You know it's true: you feel it in your bones. You see it in your nightmares. Today a theatre is shot up. Tomorrow a massacre at a concert. A bomb on a train. Eventually they'll use a dirty bomb. Biological agents. Viruses. Poisons. And it always leads to the nukes. Or more accurately: The H Bombs. Total global calamity.

Why? If we know it will happen? Why haven't we stopped it?

Those who lead us to this end were not innocent humans acting in the best interests of their fellow man. It was fueled by greed, desire, hunger for power, the temptations of the unrighteous path set out by The Society. Back in '62: FC and E"C"G writing manifestos of the merits of Cuba's inevitable martyrdom in a nuclear at-

tack on the USA: we were almost there in 13 days but luckily even the USSR²⁶ thought those psychopaths were too hard to handle...

But the ones in charge of it all...what do they have to gain?

They think they will gain the world. Rid the place of the rats. Open up the real estate. You know, more shoulder room.

That's it?

Simple as that to the superficialities of their wealth-mutilated consciousnesses: their morality eroded by the wanton desires reinforced in the milieu of the uppermost echelon, thus allowing the ego to override characteristics of compassion, humility. The ones of that mindset aren't accounting for the long term effects of the explosions: the way it changes the atmosphere when the amount of nuclear emissions pass a certain threshold: destroys the ozone layer: lets in the radiation from the sun and the Van Allen belts: cosmic Rays: radioactive ions.

Fire and Brimstone.

Of course that was using the best terms they had. But the end is the same across the board: only the chosen ones make it. We can't revel in the accuracy of the revelations though. There's no time to spare really. Today's the day.

What day is that.

Eddie looks at his watch.

The day I make the leap. Travel back to what I've calculated as the turning point towards doomsday so I can steady the first domino.

I'm looking at him sideways. It's not the kind tactic I had planned to participate in.

Keep it steady sure. But what about the next one? And the next?

²⁶ Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

The dominoes aren't the best analogy. Usually when you do it right the removal of the first incident in the chain results in the erasure of the entire chain. It's more like pulling the plug or cutting off the head: absolute.

And otherwise what?

An enormous boundless chaos: the collapse of the internet and the end of all major electrical networks, long distance communication, federal-insured bank notes along with bitcoin and its analogues with stocks bonds mortgages all as if they never existed and credit gone so its martial law among tribes not independent autonomous or united states any longer with the destruction of all systems of legislature and justice.

How many dead?

Like the Good Book said: Two-thirds.

Jesus

On his way any minute now I'm afraid and he looks at his watch again you see: Mandalay Bay was a sign of what's to come. An attack on the country itself through its music: strike fear in the heart of the heartland: a trumpet sounding the commencement of the end of it all: and then this alone and he points around him at the streams of blood and caverns and pipes leading to the network of bureaucrats and engineers and managers and politicians, analysts, operatives, paramilitary, governors, laborers, doctors, lawyers, and all the tradespeople needed to keep the whole thing going already in control of so much of what the people up there do with their lives: they will crawl like rats out of gutters and collect what's useful from above after the destruction and they alone shall populate this spinning sphere of mud and fire. Hidden in the shadows the whole time right beneath yer feet.

The meek shall inherit the earth. I always thought it meant the poor.

The meek—*let me tell you about a guy I like to call Mr. Gullible:*

Mr. Gullible fell into the same bloodbath as you ca. 2019. He had a similar reaction: I mean with the puking and all. But to be honest he and I... well... we hit it off a little quicker than us two he says pointing between us but not belaboring the point so I was able to take him in a little deeper than you if you'll forgive me

Sure I tell him and I really don't feel offended but what'd you show him?

The same thing I woulda shown you if it weren't the climax of a debate down there. You see: the Good Book: it's always True: But you have to know the meaning.

Howso?

In this case, the word meek: the definition has usually been adhered to the poor, or the relentlessly contrite: meek in terms of desire, meek in terms of sin. But what I showed Mr. Gullible here is meek in a different sense: meek in that they've submerged themselves beneath society to deceive: to persevere in their fecund miniscule pathologies as the nihilists and hedonists propagate the world above: truer to the etymology along the Greek line, from praus, a horse trained for battle²⁷—all that potential just waiting to be unleashed. In that sense it still applies: just as the mandalay shooter in his absurdity was the antichrist in miniature: no sense of good or evil: just acting on the voices in his head: controlled by The Society: but the meek masses we're speaking about, well... he takes a deep breath for the first time in a long time they're literal.

Literally meek?

Pipsqueaks in every sense of the word. Mr. Gullible and I took a ride down the river until we were marooned near the plateaus of the first borders of the general population. When he got up out of the blood I told him where to hide: there were natives coming. And sure enough: from our vantage point: appearing in every

²⁷ According to a very wise guy, some scholars, etc.

aspect of its form to be no different than a typical person: the figure poked its head up over the bluff under which we had taken refuge. I told Mr. Gullible: be perfectly still because I knew in the darkness they'd never mistake our forms for intruders: we were beyond their understanding in the obscurity. And yet this fellow proved overly curious: so as we sat there motionless holding our breath the chap came bounding down the side of the hill of concrete and steel but even though he had sworn to silence as the man came closer Mr. Gullible could not help but gasp: the body running towards him was not growing in size but shrinking: until he realized: the man was no bigger than a mouse: and this mountainside was merely cresting up above his shoulders. And the gent saw us motionless and though he stared for a minute he could not ascertain us from the craggy surface of the hillside so he headed back up from where he'd come.

You mean—those people we saw—are all—miniscule?

I mean: meek is an understatement. Think: matchbox. But that's what we're dealing with: a world above run by this miniature simulation below: and they shall inherit the earth. The same phenomenon that brought us big people to prominence on Earth: just as we evolved from the ratlike protomammalia that survived the apocalypse of the dinosaur age the next phase of the world's population will be begun by these little fuckers.

Then Eddie grabs my hand and hits his temple. I feel the world leave my exterior and reemerge until I am back in front of my apartment building with Eddie there next to me. Now you know what's underneath it all he says with his thumb down in front of him keep an eye out for 'em. And don't make me regret I showed you. There's still more to see.

I realize I've finally made the trip without the urge to puke. I'll keep it downlow with a wink and a finger pointed towards the ground.

They're always watching he reminds me before he pats my shoulder and warps off into a nexus of spacetime harmonies. I head back in and call it a night.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XX. Good Ol' Olfactory

He remembers the smell like an itch in a place he can't reach. The air outside held the stench of dust like charcoal and copper, like blood in your throat when you've run too far. They are standing on the deck, his parents with looks on their faces of awe and relief, something miraculously evil having brushed over them marked as if marked with sheeps blood and no matter how bad it was, at least it was only *that bad* and not worse. John cannot smile, feels terror like the dust suspended in the air, all around him, invisible, but stinking. When he heard the news after school that day, he climbed up the tree and stared out to the street. It was the only thing to do, he feels in his bones, something spiritual to be found up there staring out at the street as other neighbors come out to their porches their perking noses inhaling ubiquitous sadness. The leaves above him shake but he does not notice.

XXI. Browse Free or Die Trying

It's right around midnight and the professor is queued up to view the Geminids in the frigid darkness of the clearing East of his encampment. He can't help but notice the crescent moon is shimmering in a way that's too Cheshire for comfort. Sure enough, here comes Eddie from behind a cluster of Anglojap yews with his eyes off for once, just as the first meteors appear against the perfect black sky dotted with spectral specks that fade to the background in the glory of the incandescent atmospheric spectacle.

Trying to sneak up on me? The prof asks.

Just cutting down on light pollution. Wouldn't want to spoil the view. Our close friend Phaethon he points up to the streaks of light flashing above *always a helluva show. It's blue, you know.*

The prof gazes up at the streaks of debris flying off the asteroid and disintegrating miles above like smears from squished lightning bugs *how can you tell?*

They find out next year. I mean, the scientists. Picasso was the first to realize. Inspired the period that launched him to prominence in fact.

How so?

To those in the know, he was making the point: Don't believe the mourning-for-Carles bull. That was just to sell more paintings. I mean if he was so broken up, why'd he go and bed Germaine? a subtle snicker really, what happened to Pablo: after he left Paris for Madrid, out there between places he finds himself dining in Barceloneta the night of the big show and he indicates his chin towards the heavens as the particles burst into flame above him he has the epiphany: I too fly closer to the Sun than any of my peers: I too emit on my

surface this cerulean hue that defies all preconceptions of what my being ought to be. But this is about Picasso's other prediction, the pixel²⁸, or should I say, the apotheosis of the pixel, the internet. That's the real reason I'm here.

The worldwideweb?

The oneandonly. That's why I've got the blues. It's about to end as we know it.

The prof is confused. But I thought you said Y2K was a myth... and we're well past '00 anyway... I mean... what are you saying?

It's the eve of a transition, you know, a B.C. to A.D. kind of thing—except this time we'll be losing our salvation, not entering into it. You see, in the net polar future there's a propaganda machine like never before he shakes his head you think Stalin was bad. This is Stalinonsteroids.

Whatsitmean? net-polar?

The opposite of net-neutral. When yer netnooch the world is your oyster. You ever see a map of the internet?

Sure. It's got branches out in a billion directions like an enormous tree.

It's the supertree of liberty. No kinks, no stops: boundless, ergonomic, expanding cellularly from centers that are interconnected and by some miracle of society most of it is free.

That miracle being?

Net neutrality. The government stops the corporations from imposing exclusionary sanctions on internet material so everyone gets an equal shot. You go net-polar and the whole thing turns into a racket. I mean more than it already is: you thought pop up ads were bad? how about pop up ads that track your computer on

²⁸ As evidenced in the invention of cubism. See: *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon* (1907), etc., esp.: *Portrait of Ambrose Vollard* (1910).

behalf of advertisers to pepper you with more pop up ads? how about search engines that only display results for sites that pay fees? no limit on the ISPs' power to provide bandwidth to the highest bidders. Mom and Pop sites don't stand a chance if the whole thing is paytoplay. Suddenly the internet is just another traded commodity and the ones who could barely afford it before will only be able to access the government issued garbage. So what happens? they get raised on populist propaganda of the prevailing party and are purely prescribed the agenda of The Society.

Political brainwashing. Dictatorial control. Unfettered monopolies. The most powerful open and free network on the planet made subservient to the plutocracy. I see your point.

As I've seen it's a predetermined outcome. The computation's already been set in motion. The gears are spinning. All you can do is wait for the inevitable.

But surely you could do something.

Eddie's smile is on before the prof finishes the sentence because he knew he'd say it.

I could but why should I? just be kicking the can down the road until the next schmuck administration has the reigns. Sure might score another decade of freedom if I were to pull out all the stops but really in the scheme of things it's not worth the effort.

But you stopped the demolition of the towers.

That was for my personal salvation he says with a sour look. This has no repercussions for my trajectory. I'll be surfing the web just fine. You know how I operate: firewalls don't phase me.

But the capitalistic manipulation of all the knowledge of the internet. It's the start of a new dark age. A new Byzantium.

Eddie's getting frustrated which is uncommon.

Look man I've got enough targets on my back and besides the ones who are worthy will be able surf the web just fine. I mean the real deserving hackers will prosper just the same. What's a couple million more politico-media sheeple roaming around in the world anyway? Not worth the skin off my—

You know it's worse than you're letting on. This is the network we're talking about. Every node. In the hands of the evil bankers. The New Robber Barons.

So befriend a banker or a robber baron. Look if you want to do something about it—

He stops. It's a moment of initiation. Up until now the prof's just been along for the ride. But is Eddie really suggesting—

Tomorrow, high noon, at the FCC, they're taking a vote. Three Republicans, two Democrats. Guess who wins? You want to change the outcome, you take the glasses.

With that he rips them from his face and throws them away. As they're coming towards the prof hovering in the air they spin like a discus and he gazes at them full-on. It's set like a grenade and that's when they flash: the mere glimpse sends him careening through a spiraling void that centers somewhere behind his eyeballs. Its incomprehensible and he's outside of his body. When he reenters a conscious state the prof's nowhere near Eddie. It's a balcony and there's AP of the FCC. He's looking at him mouth agape and the prof hears a voice; it's the other line coming through his headset: *The threat appears to be fictitious. The vote will resume following the sweep of the premises. Hello? Mr P—? Hello?* In a blink Eddie shows up next to him. Now AP is hooked. Eddie starts talking.

That's as far as I'll go bub. You have thirty seconds. Tell him what to do.

But what do I—

29. 28.

He turns to him give his orders:

Today, the vote will go as planned so as not to draw attention, but afterwards you will ignore the lobbyists and politicians who persuade you with circumstantial economic promises and you will deny the super conglomerates that try and bribe you in exchange for influence. He pauses but he can't lose more time. And you will fight undercover to keep the net neutrality laws in place. The prof picks up the pace on the verbage: you will task the CIA with disrupting the net-polar environment the repeal creates through your connections with the Director of National Intelligence it's spiraling into contrivance to fulfill the necessary logic of the outrageous directives but he can't stop now and privately fund cells of hackers to break through the net-polar firewall against the laws that you yourself instated.

Suddenly, AP gets an alert look in his eyes. The specs have slid slightly down the prof's nose over the course of the jibberjabber. He can tell AP can see him and with a jolt he sticks out his left and grabs the prof by the neck. The glasses fall off his face and he looks at him with his own eyes only: AP's sputtering and gripping the prof's throat tighter and tighter.

Without even thinking the prof gives the falling specs a quick toe kick like a game of hackysack and bygod they float up and around AP's arm and loop the bridge of the prof's nose to land back on it. He scrambles to recuperate the train of thought:

You will then hold a second five-person vote and you will all vote pro net-neutral to reinstate the net neutrality laws.

Times up Eddie chimes in and the prof's stomach's is in his head again. They land back where they began. Eddie's patting his back to aid the vomiting. The prof stands up and see Eddie's begun to laugh.

Whoooooowee now that was a close one! Reminds me of myself at your age he says still smirking *and I gotta say, the meat and potatoes, I mean getting the CIA involved. You will fund cells of hackers...that cracks me up.*

So's he really gonna do it? He thinks of the image of AP's shoulders hunched over wrist limp pouring the coffee in his hand on the ground and his head stuck in front of him with his tongue out and his eyes fixed on Eddie's glasses like a zombie right before they zapped out of there to here. Could that eyelid drooping drooling hypnotized subject have absorbed a single thing the prof had said?

Eddie snorts and tells him *if you have the touch then he'll follow the orders.* He dusts off his jacket and gets up next to him. *He managed to re-emerge thanks to your foul up but by the grace of the glasses you had him at a subconscious level so maybe you were good enough to seed him with the order. One way or another everything you said is in his code now. He'll have to encounter it at some point and that's when the touch will show its evidence—he resumes laughing—or not. Ah man we should have just pushed him off the balcony it's a side of Eddie the prof has rarely seen.*

No we. No me. This is your scheme. If anyone asks: you don't know me. Got it?

If you say so.

The stellar display has largely finished and the two walk back to the lab. *Man, all that conspiring made me hungry.* He drops the needle on a copy of Patsy Cline's Greatest Hits and the prof braces himself. They slip through the wormhole to a waffle house where *Walkin' After Midnight* (Cline, Patsy: 1957) is playing from a vintage jukebox.

Eddie steps back from the skillet with two steaks dangling, speared on the knife and fork in his hands. He plops them down on two plates in front of the prof. With the tip of the knife he points to the strip of fat along the edge of the meat.

This is the part that will really kill you agreed?

A nod.

Watch.

He slices his steak lengthwise, left to right, so that the last cut is the piece of fat in one solid piece.

You wouldn't eat that, right?

He nods again.

But—

He starts dividing the steak widthwise, so each piece has a little bit of fat on one end.

If I present it to you like this, you will consume it little by little until its all in your gut the same as if you'd eaten that evil slice on my plate all at once.

The prof starts to carve the bits of fat off the end. *Not if I know how to do this.*

Now Eddie's nodding. *Exactly right. The establishment is feeding you the little bits in a row, hoping you won't notice. Banking on the fact that the accumulation of the instances will hasten your demise. But if you have the knowledge to discriminate the part that's pure gristle, well, and he chews a bit off the end of his fork, then you're just getting the meat.*

JM said it like this: there are more instances of the abridgement of the freedom of the people by the gradual and silent encroachments of those in power than by violent and sudden usurpations. *The majority of the population is kept sedated by the nickel and diming to death of the heroic aspects of the personality: diminish the ego by the proliferation of fear-mongering news stories. Overprescribe narcotics and antidepressants. Or more directly: calcify the pituitary gland with fluoridated water. It's all to get the gristle down your gullet so the guys at the top can maintain their agenda.*

Which is. . ?

Total domination of the environment. Control of society. The power to siphon the energy of God fearers and science worshippers alike. An all-encompassing lifesuck whose rewards are the accumulation of enormous wealth, access to endless pleasures, and the extension of mortality. Guys like AP perpetuate the problem through their position in society but it's The Society that's telling them what to do. So even if you did manage to change the status quo this is deep in the infrastructure of the human condition.

Whenever Eddie starts one of his *know your overlords* diatribes you know what's coming next: he's gonna recount the experiences which led one by one to his ignominious condition sneaking shadow to shadow inducing hypnosis with slew of mechanisms and mantras to perform the required surgery on unwitting targets. Each move parlaying the spoils of the first victim and the next, until he's so imbued with the sacred energy that he can attempt another leap back, to before the glasses. But every time it's the same, he will say with dismay—he accumulates the chi, adjusts the dial, spins the record and drops the needle, yet it's all in vain. He wakes up with the glasses in his eye sockets, welded to his neurons even though its only seconds after he'd undergone the surgery being so soon after that the pulsing pain reverberating from some center within his brain to the front to the edges of the skin around his skull so deep and penetrating that even the tips of the hairs on his eyebrows seem to irradiate waves of agony across his forehead. Beginning again the cycle that leads him to envisage the method, reap the glands, subsume the energy and attempt the leap, only to awaken just *after* the operation, again, no better than before.

One of the side effects is now Eddie knows a secret that lets him teleport through vinyl record player needles. He discovered it and began the *vinyl revival* to increase his maneuverability throughout a network of microvibrations intercepted by the incoming/accelerating lightwaves entering his goggles. With a ¼ inch jack backwired direct to an IV needle he'd stuck in one wrist he could turn on the player

and drop the arm and twist the rims around his lenses like adjusting binoculars. Then he'd go perfectly still for what seemed like an hour every second until just the right frequency was reached and *poof* he'd disappear into a miniature vacuum that popped like a firecracker over the LP.

As long as I could plug in then I could zip from node to node as if in an instant. Because I was hacking not just space but time and space I could convince the current atomic structure that I was quantitatively in two places at once: then just one again.

I needed to increase my network so I invested in the vinyl industry at a time when it was being surpassed by magnetic tape. It was purely in my own self interest: I could tell immediately the fragility of the new medium with its advanced sound would trigger the digital music encoding frenzy that left us with lossy formats that dissolve the sound and reconstitute it mercilessly solely to enhance the speed of the transaction... and then how would I trust my particles to be resewn into perfect order as they do when going from record-to-record? I had to keep the production of the platters alive or else I would lose my Audio-bahn sotospeak. When magnetic tape came out it was obvious vinyl had not yet earned obsolescence: the weak plastic spindles were constantly jamming or the fine film unwinding and filling up the gears of the tape deck. But you couldn't take a turntable on the road or on a run so I knew it would catch on for convenience alone. I began to spread rumors about the tape that would deter potential buyers.

After CDs came on the scene I lost a lot of ports. People were throwing out their phonographs and installing Sony soundsystems. In the 90s, whenever I walked through the suburbs of LA during garage sale season, the silver platters would be unsleeved and stacked up like dinner plates. Naturally I stockpiled. But what good is

a bunch of records sitting in a warehouse? I had to increase distribution. So I took my racket to the street and started to push it hard.

I approached the market first with the concept that a manufactured relic whereby the novelty of the item is its simulation of an earlier era rather than its actual objective value would be desirable to the masses. I emphasized the way the record was a double deal on artwork: in one beautiful package you get the music in the LP and the graphics on the cover. To lure in the audiophiles, I just had to emphasize the groovy notion that you can have the actual music itself in a physical form, as if the musicians had literally carved their sounds into the disc and not just coded it into some digital approximation. I knew that once I'd repopularized the form among even those seekers of hi-fi that I could increase my routes exponentially as they reobsessed over the nuances of the old medium. Still, I had to play the vinyl market for over a decade before I started to see the best results, and it wasn't until the early 2000s when the grassroots people surged their hoarding that the scene was satisfactory to the requirements of widespread translocation. Then I could really start jumpin' jukeboxes he says and indicates with his thumb to the antique in the corner playing the end of the song we'd come in on.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XXII. Rob, Peter, "Toupee" Paul

Okay, now let me tell you a story:

I was out living in Tahoe for a stretch in the twentytens. I spent a lot of time at a bar called Petros n' Cephas where the softball teams held their after parties. One night I overhear a couple talking about a business venture they had been introduced to by a dentist in the area. The lady is a teller and the dentist's wife had mentioned something to her about business opportunity while she did the transaction—a sizeable sum into a million-plus account.

They had the couple to dinner and the dentists talked about their sons: former navy like him. They flew: he was in submarines. And so on painting the all-American portrait of the perfect trueblue family over a generous dinner until the talk of the business began:

You know I've been a dentist for thirty five years now.

That's great!

He does spectacular dental implants. People fly here for him says Mrs. Dentist, about to blush.

It's a great profession. It has really done us well. We thank God every day for our success. But it's a partnership. It's bureaucratic. Messy. Some years it feels like we're only breaking even from my day job income.

The real secret to our success is in our other small business Mrs. Dentist chimes.

I don't know if we could run a small business properly Jack admits *with our careers* he says pointing to Jill and himself *and you know how it is with church and family...*

Well do you like making money Jack?

Of course. Doesn't everybody want a bigger piece of the pie?

See: I like your attitude. You're astute. A real winner. You'll understand that the plan is simple as this: what you put in is what you get out. The more profit you want the more effort you put in. Some people only put in thirty minutes a day and they can make up to ten thousand a month! says Mrs. Dentist gawking and *there's no initial investment at first.*

Well you have me hooked says Jill with her eyes widening *what's it all about?*

And Jill may I say that you have always been the best of service at the bank Mrs. Dentist chimes in with coffeepot in hand *both of you have such great assets to invest in this type of thing.*

So what is it exactly?

Before I share all the details you'll have to read something first the dentist says handing over the thin book with a smiling suit on the cover *if you think you can handle what they describe here then let's talk about it over coffee.*

It's only at the end of the night as they are shaking hands at the door Jill noticed something and Jack noticed that she had noticed. In the car with the doors closed he asks *what was that?* and she says *his teeth, or rather, his lack of them*

What do you mean Jack's dumbfounded I saw him smile!

Those were dentures!

No!

Yes! I could tell! they were just like my father's!

The dentist with dentures? claiming to be a success?

—and he kept using his tongue to stick them back on the roof of his mouth.

You've got to be kidding me!

What a strange evening...

They roll back home to the condo by the ski mountain. Jack has work in the morning: Jill in the afternoon. They don't think about it for a few days and then Jill tells Jack *Mrs. Dentist...*

Yeah?

She's been texting me. Asking if I've read the book.

Fair enough. It's not very long. I'll read it tomorrow.

Good. Good night.

The book is about something they refer to as *multi-level marketing*. The propaganda doesn't get into any logistical specifics of the ploy: the author's main tactic is to tell the reader how rich he is before saying how great these so-called *multi-level marketing companies* are: *the wave of the future* and other cliché commendations. The most the author can claim in experience with the matter is *I have invested in a number of these companies* as if everything to learn is a closely guarded secret until one is *initiated* with the purchase of the marketing materials, guidebooks, seminars where promoters shower you with pamphlets and entry fee forms, books full of advice *like this one* pretending to be based on sound economic principles: when rather it all conspires to form the textbook definition of a *pyramid scheme*.

I've read the book. It sounds bogus to me.

why's that?

I did some research. The type of thing they're describing—it's only legal under certain circumstances. The reason they remain popular is that there are so many infractions and not enough enforcement.

So it's easy to get away with. I get it.

That's not the only thing. Rumf is in it.

Ronald Rumpf?

The one and only. Presidential candidate extraordinaire.

What's he have to say?

The same vague bullshit: this is so great, this is the next big thing, trust me you will get rich like me.

But isn't he... bankrupt?

Personally, no. But his businesses failed four times. Billions in debt. And the funny thing is, the way he ran things: I mean not honoring contracts, not paying people who he owed: it's presented as a virtue in the book. They say it's good to go into debt. It's like their main tenet: pay yourself before you pay others, which is the same as saying, don't pay what's due.

Doesn't sound like a sound business strategy to me. What do you think we do about the dentist with dentures?

Well let's tell them we read the book. I might be a fool for saying this but I kind of want to see what we're dealing with here.

Okay.

They arranged to meet the couple at a coffee shop near their condo. They brought the book with them.

How did you like the book?

Very interesting. A lot of things I hadn't learned before.

Did you appreciate the descriptions of the conventions? We'll be attending one next month.

Yes, that seems great.

How about the marketing strategy? Do you think you're up for it? It's all about building a network of friends, family, colleagues...

Sure, of course, yes we're both people persons.

Ha! Fantastic. Just fantastic. And remember, the best part is you can use the resources of everyone above you in the company. It's like...well, an upside-down pyramid.

Here the dentured dentist lifted his hands and gestured downward toward the table in the shape of the V of the upside-down pyramid. Jack looked at Jill and imperceptibly raised his eyebrows. It was just as he suspected. The rest of the meeting would be frivolous, looking for a clean exit.

Sure, it sounds excellent. A great opportunity.

For most people it won't take more than a couple hours a week. But as you enroll more distributors and move up you get a bigger cut. Very lucrative at the highest levels

It certainly piques our interests. The kind of thing I think we would really excel at.

I'm so happy to hear that. It's encouraging to us, who will be your mentors at first. We'll provide you your starter materials, get you set up in the system.

And it also means we will get most of the profit, but you'll still have a good starting cut. And only until you get up to speed. Then you'll get an increase.

We could certainly use the money, way things are going these days.

It's going to take a lot of hard work, but once you get the hang of it, you could be making thousands. At the top, we're talking six figures—he laughs through his synthetic smile—but not everyone is cut out for it. Are you sure you have what it takes?

Well we are definitely going to have to mull it over but I'd say we are great people for the job.

The couple's countenances with a sheen like home shopping network hosts as they end the conversation by way of the common formalities.

On the drive back Jack and Jill go up the hill to their condo and get a drink of water after all that coffee.

That was eye opening Jill says and bites an ice cube *I never expected I'd be dealing in dental Ponzi schemes.*

It's a strange world we live in Jack says and *pass me that vinegar and brown paper, will ya? I gotta get ridda this headache.*

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XXIII. 'Nother Nursery Rhyme

Eddie's got a pretty funny theory on the sphinx. He thinks

The sphinx asks you this: what has four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs at night? And the answer is delightful: man.

But the Sphinx is just a cheater, makes up its own rules. It's been granted the magic of persuasion by its beastly constitution: part lion, part eagle, part serpent, part woman: it is mostly animal yet it has a human aspect in fact its face... so it does not play by human regulation alone but rather as a chimera of the two types of being... Egyptian animal-god creatures of ill-logic who form from rivers and bits of cursed flesh... and when it asks its question of morning noon and night it is not being entirely honest. These sentences are not conveying the literal expanses of time, they are symbolic: so the sphinx's riddle is not truly answered by Oedipus when he recounts an answer that's illogical to reciprocate the answer required by the monster. The monster would devour him but because it is part human, Oedipus is allowed through by the human interpretation and the sphinx is said to have perished. But as you've seen firsthand it remains granted the divine right to devour those who fall for its tricks to our day.

How do I know?

Do you remember your Jynx?

What do you know about Jynx?

That she was a sphinx. Not the original beast by any means but a descendant and still the vengeful keeper of an enigma.

Jynx? From Sinkers that night?

Have you met another? Of course her, she's the one you ditched before you met me. You're welcome by the way.

For what?

The Sandy decoy.

Wait how'd you—were you at the frat?

Long enough to dose her with 2cb and you with more cocaine.

You must be mistaken. I don't do any coke

Not that you would know about party boy. I meant it wasn't the first time I'd spiked your drink—or in this case, gluteus maximus.

I guess that's a separate issue: but let me get this straight: you contrived that hookup to stop me from getting with Jynx? What gives?

What gave was George Finkey's skull to the sidewalk if you don't remember.

That was Finkey who died?

There was a lot more to Jynx than you understand. She wasn't giving you the full story when you and she had your little rendezvous at the beermuda bars. In fact she was lying.

I never saw her after that. Never got her number.

See the pain I saved you? Could have saved your life even. Could have been you instead of Finkey that night.

What are you saying? What's the truth about Jynx?

She only claimed to be Egyptian. Really she was a Saudi princess. But because her father was in the American oil business she got to go to school in the States.

So of course she chose—

—The University. The place with the academic reputation of the ivies crossed with the party habits of the eighties. I don't have to tell you how great it was then. And as fate would have it, you both found the same quantum nexus at Sinkers.

Quantum what?

Like a string in string theory. A joint between universes. The point on a mobius strip of spacetime where one surface becomes the other. A cosmic coincidence of uncommon consequence.

I think I get it. Star crossed lovers and all that. I still don't see how Finkey got defenestrated.

It was the night of the stairway to heaven. Yupsi was sending pledges up a flight of stairs hanging off of scaffolding that they had spent every night of hellweek constructing at the top of The Tower. It was the crescendo of it all: find a date and bring her up the stairway to heaven. You were guaranteed to get some. All the best and bimboest sorority sisters were bidding for positions to go up the ladder. But Finkey fell for Jynx just like you did and he wanted to press his luck. So he took her up instead.

I knew he bagged that...

Jynx wasn't the one who got bagged that night. She didn't realize what he was going to do up there, and he didn't realize she was being covered by a pair of bodyguards at all times because her hand was betrothed back home. For him it was the usual: said a couple lines, went in for the kiss. They took him out with a silenced shot from the top of Apartment 7.

Je—I mean—My Go—

It was the kiss of death, so to speak. But it was his fate. And Jynx's gone home to the emirates. She'll never be back here. It's all blown over now and the justice was mishandled per her immunity as the sphinx of our epoch—since George could not solve her riddle she devoured him. And only Oedipus can slay the sphinx.

According to legend.

Well let's just say that's one that holds true. When Oedipus displays the wisdom to surpass these ancient theologies where the rules are not of any truly logical quality he destroys them and replaces with them his own: patricide, matricide, and the promise of an eternity of self-inflicted blindness—sure enough it was the very thing Freud made the central conflict of sexual maturation when he invented psychology, the science of the mind that turned the logic of the Greco-Roman religion on its head—Oedipus, hell, let's just call him Eddie, is like a pseudopsychologist encountering the primordial conflicts of the personality and resolving them in the place of the beholder, by the perverse reality of his actions: the population in general only experiences the shadow of these urges to rape and kill, but Eddie unknowingly did so by the prescribed lines of his fate. By this he liberates the rest of us from the need to actually do so, and thus by mercy of that Force, the rest of the population with its unresolved dilemmas merely harbor this hatred for their fathers and desire for their mothers that accumulate as microscopic moles on the soul tissue with all their other fears and anxieties so that most souls need to be treated to remove them. But you've managed to avoid all that—

Eddie and John are in the Swellmart parking lot. John took the company *Sprinter* and they've been standing in the back for the transaction: an eighth of the *good stuff* meaning it's been touched by an angel. John didn't really recall the details of their first meeting, back in college, but he remembered Jynx. The relationship with Eddie had been rekindled through a certain social media professional network and that demonesque doublecrosser had known that the fog of John's memory surrounding those days at

The University was ample cover to recast himself as the amicable dealer. John took the *Sprinter* cause he'd been working late on framing plans. It was just as Eddie'd required, the unibody with its lack of rubber bushings allowing the conduction of joules across frame and body at just the right wattage to sync this part of the plan with the grand scheme: in an instant he sticks his hands up against the ceiling and exudes the *exact* amount of volt-amperes.

Suddenly John is standing with his members outspread like a starfish, fully erect, balanced on the insides of his feet in the apparition of a Vitruvian man, complexion wrought in a grimace, hairs of his afro sticking out straight from the static, completely stupefied as Eddie monologues, nonchalant:

This is the time. Almost the moment. The signs are all in place: the equation is balanced.

John mute and outstretched, enraptured, covered in goosepimples.

Every time 'til now it's been a gamble but we've reached certainty: inevitability: the truth.

He's talking to the floor with his elbows locked. John as if he's being inflated. Eddie relaxes his stance and reveals the scalpel, the syringe.

I take you in boy, and the whole thing will change. I only ever needed one more and that's yours. A suitable sacrifice into the threethousandfold. The full replacement. It was never meant to be like the way it was. It was always fated instead to be like a miracle among millions when the sign would emerge and with your contribution it shall be. Busto and his cabinet: the Vice, the General, the Secretary of State: the CIA, the FBI: a thousand contractors, twice as many mercenaries: these are the apparatuses of The Society: these are the ones who interrupted the Sacred Cycle with their Satanic rituals, their wealthworship.

No change in John's state other than his eyes have begun to bulge more profoundly from the sockets and thick blue veins are popping across his skin. Eddie speaks in tongues like a record going backwards then explains *the words are lost on you but the incantations summon That Force and it is That*

Force alone which may restore the way of the universe: that it shall not befall the cosmos to persist in its misalignment. That the immortal gyroscope spinning in the core of the earth would correct its tilt and the bloodpowered power plants would remit their stores. That the trembling oppressed would be reborn in the next imprint as gods, the gluttonous oligarchs cast to the streets: but you will be immortal.

Eddie's goggles have begun to vibrate in his sockets like electric razors. John's eyes bulging to their limit before they explode and Eddie grips the rims with his two hands to rip them from his head along with shreds of flesh and flecks of bone that incinerate as Eddie draws nearer to the mutilated elevated face of Farmer and presses them straight into the blackred holes. The wound cauterizes as fast as the frames hit the skin and Eddie drops like a ragdoll. John is set free from the agonizing suspension and slams face first on the floor: the glasses kick in.

Everything is rewinding. Eddie is there with his hands on the glasses and his face like two gunshot wounds and the skin about to bond with the metal now unbonding and rebonding when Eddie's hands then wrists then arms and elbows turn liquid and flow into John's face until Eddie's face is there against his, melting into the form and the two become like beads of mercury that merge and unmerge before a surge of spiraling light erupts from the lenses and sends Eddie back to the floor in a heap, Farmer facedown on the ground splayed out spread eagle across from him. He stirs, twitches his legs, attempts to move his hands to no avail. The pain in his face is unintelligible in its enormity. He cannot tell if he is blind or if his eyes are looking at the darkness of the floor. *But your eyes were exploded.*

The state of the corpse is hard to discern. He cannot hear a sound. *Were your ears exploded too?*

Then there is a familiar cackle. A grasp from between the shoulder blades with robotic precision that holds him up so his limbs fall limp like a marionette. He can see shapes *but is it only in your mind?* he can't move a muscle. There's a jolt from the fist that's got him gripped from behind and he hears the

echo of a heartbeat.

You were dead there for a minute eh kid?

John opens his mouth to speak. He begins to squirm in pitiful contortions as his limbs gain strength.

One more thing before you go.

The space in front of John's eyes is taking form and glistening with grandeur. It is the room of the hospital. The golf ball in his throat. He is asleep in the bed. Eddie's voice is surreptitious, bold: no louder than a whisper:

No more bullshit.

The guy with the glasses takes the driver's seat. He has to try something he's never tried before: take the whole vehicle with him. He pulls out his cassette of *Little Deuce Coupe* (Beach Boys, the: 1963) and slips it in the dash upside down, FF's to *A Young Man is Gone* and slips the shifter to N. He revs for a solid minute and a half til right when the song changes key which is his cue to drop the clutch and slam it into reverse with a hand against the temple. It sets off the energy pulse that puts a hole in the continuum and enters back in to it five years earlier, same city, same coordinates, same parking lot: but before it was a Swellmart it was a church. The car and its passengers reassemble molecule by molecule with a thud that makes the body in the back shake. The driver feels his grip on the wheel which means he's fully formed, conscious: time to finish the job. He gets out and goes around to open the tailgate and grab the corpse with the head gone where the eyes blew up, by hooking it under the armpits with his elbows. With the blood starting to stain his jacket he goes around the back of the church down the concrete staircase to the red steel door with the wired glass pane and unlocks it. He's been dragging the feet of the

lifeless young man and he steps back in through the doorway to position himself and give it one last good shove. It drops splayed out on the enamel coated concrete floor of the basement. With his hands free again he finds a folding metal chair hanging on a rolling storage rack and sets it up just in front of the crotch of the body so it looks like it fell over backwards. Then he goes back up the route to the van, stepping in the same footprints along the path of ash that links to the lot. When he is back standing passenger side he pops open the door and reaches under the seat to pull out the sawedoff shotgun and sticks his thumb and pointer into his front pocket for the shell. He loads it and racks, turns about-face and slips along the same way to the scene.

Back in the basement he gets on a knee and sets up his shot. He's got to aim it at the reverse-engineered angle it would have taken to put the hole where it is in the skull and against the big timber beam that shakes and sheds a decade of dust when it absorbs the buckshot in an enormous *BANG*. He places the gun in the hand of the cadaver, finger on the trigger, positions it in a way to appear to be the source of the wound. Then he's got to get to the van, careful to brush his footprints away behind him as he makes it back along the route and swiftly takes the driver's seat. This time he inserts a cassette to aux adapter into the tape deck that's linked to an mp3 player. He hits *play* and the first eight bars of *What Happens Next* (Satriani, Joe: 2018) come on through the stereo. As he starts to rev he sees someone coming out the side door to the narthex. It's the janitor whose spot he's taken appearing alarmed like he'd heard the shot. The guy doesn't notice at first but then he sees what looks like grand theft auto and starts to scream and run at the van, that's when the first bridge to the song drops and so does the clutch in an instantaneous *pop* like *another* gunshot: yet it appears to the confused custodian that the driver had disappeared before his very eyes, which he rubs and blinks hard to confirm the apparition, before remembering his cell phone and dialing 911.

But in the basement the scenery is not yet complete for there is the sound of footsteps down the shaky wooden staircase leading up to the ground floor—a dim light growing as it approaches the body with the weapon and the fallen over chair and not a scream, just a subtle electronic whir and a beam of light is focused at the wall across from the feet of the corpse. It traces the slow pattern of molten letters until a phrase is laser etched in large all caps: *TIME BLIND* emblazoned by the laser bearing witness who disappears up the stairs as the sounds of sirens and reflections of flashing light indicate the arrival of the police in the parking lot.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XXIV. Need a Hand with That?

Without the most of his right hand fingers how can he be expected to make his bread on the street? You only need three fingers on your right hand to play the trumpet proper, and here he is with two and a thumb, thankgod. The horn's unwieldy leadpipe slipping on the sweat of the stubs where his knuckles used to be and his left hand fumbling at the valves like a drunk's or a child's. When he blows he hears the a sound he's been unaccustomed to for three decades now, the horrible squeal of a novice echoing in the lab, a cackling banshee, a dying animal. He blows again: same result. How can he build dexterity in his weak hand so far now into middle age? Old dog, ancient dog, disfigured dog. Somehow he blows again, harder, till his chest burns and lips ache producing shuddering shrill explosions that threaten to burst eardrums if not wake the dead. If only he had kept his chemicals straight, hadn't gotten stoned, hadn't ever started the lab in the first place. Would it not be better poor and sick on the street, with the horn held proper by his *whole* hand at least, the more dignity in that? rather than a crateful of cash won off college kids and adult addicts with potions and poisons promising something better than reality as communion with the ether... was he after all chasing the money or the sensation of testing the sample? and was that sensation any better than the one when someone threw a fiver in his case and smiled, stuck around for a few songs, clapped at the end... there the communion was at least embedded in something tangible *a posteori* and not with origins in the squirrely squirming depths of the psyche which fights itself and seeks death if left unobstructed by God, by morality, by this compassion which he felt there busking for tips like an orange Buddhist seeking alms. His mind churns as the sound continues on its own, a ringing in his ears. He can remember scales and modes and sees them pasted in front of his

eyes but they do not make their way to his left hand fingers, the phantom digits of the right twitching with ghostly desire. The tears well up and fall down his cheeks which shiver from the force of the trumpet's cacophony and scatter wet down his neck and collar. He imagines the pipettes, beakers, UV light bulbs exploding like the joke about the opera singer who shatters the windows, sees the spiral tubes busting from one end to the other, the room filling with glass dust that has entered his lungs, mutilating his insides so they melt out his ass. The professor now empty deflates and the sound stops.

These days the prof has been struck each morning by the peculiarity of his dream perspective. In the moments before awakening when the parts of his dreaming can still be recalled, there is the awareness of the narrative itself and how the point of view would be described in the conscious state. He realizes that his assumption has been, really without any assumption being made, that the dream occurs in the first person—he is looking through his eyes at the dreamscape, sees his hands in front of him over the faint feathered bridge of his nose, partakes in the action with his limited peripheral vision. But now he has come to sense a different point of observation more like the third person where his body is visible to his dreaming mind's eye and not always from the same angle. Like a well filmed piece of cinema: the frame is always changing and sometimes he interprets it at a point between first and third person. Could this be the sensation of the *second* person? He has always learned it that the second person is directed to *you*. I.e., *you are driving down the road and you see a yellow car*. Are these dreams the second person in real time? Some form of ego attempting to abscond from id and superego with free will in hand to direct the protagonist of the dream who seems to be both the visible imagined manifestation of the body/mind dialectic and the conscious experience of the *cogito ergo sum* person all merged into some oneness of inexplicable being? In those vivid moments when reality is so surely what is in the dream—there is the

terrain around him real as the dirt he tramples and smells when awake, yet say in a moment of terror the expression on the face of the dream body becomes the visible part like a picture in picture or rather a pan that starts from behind the eyeballs and sweeps around front like a sudden glance in the mirror. The out of body feeling he has had with some substances but concise and without the perversity of an alien chemical passing the brain barrier. *The way God wants it.* But is it God who guides his dreams or do devils sneak in to confound him? Not all dreams have great meaning to him and some seem to exist just to deceive him. Take the dreams of his wife next to him: telling him she loves him, she forgives him, and the feeling in his gut of rapturous elation. This is not the hope of God but the shanty promise of a devil laughing at the tears on his cheeks when he blinks awake in his cot under the dawn that breaks into the rotten laboratory. The guilt overtaking him even in this decade since she left when he had at last forgotten. But then that is the way God wants: the worms at the sores of the Stylites that if they fall out to place them back in. The flagellation must not become the white noise but the galumphing melody. And so these shifting perspectives of the dreamer make the narrative something more than just story but rather experience that cannot be ignored even if by consciousness—no: they register deep in the psyche or swim up from their determined lot within it and he is grateful for the fragments he has recollected which importune his soul to grant him a glimpse into the weirdness of divinity.

That is the same state he stumbles upon the night that Ronald Rumf is elected president after falling fast asleep for a fleeting hour having seen the prediction in *The Paper* that Rumf was expected to win after taking Ohio. A vivid scene where he is in the crowd surrounding Rumf wearing a *Miss America* sash only this one says *Mr. President* and somehow he manages to hand him his business card, sees Rumf scoff but slip it into his pocket anyway. Next scene he gets a call: it's the man himself who says *I'm dropping by* quite literally, arriving on the roof of some imagined penthouse apartment the prof could never

really afford in his chauffeured flying car, takes him for a jaunt over Manhattan so they can hover in the airspace between Rumf Tower and 666 Fifth Ave. *What we've got in store for ya... It's gonna be yooje, professor* with his stocky face glistening red in the glow of the skyline's array of aircraft warning lights. Then he stirs awake and sure enough: right there on the cracked screen of his refurbished phone: the digital version of The Paper blazed with big capital letters *RUMF TRIUMFS* to indicate the nightmare was true.

With the new reality he finds himself in, he recalls another night vision—he is at an airfield for the Navy and the planes are painted bright royal blue with stripes and stars like *Captain America*. Then an officer steps forward to talk to him dressed in a uniform matching the easteregghish plane. It is a vision of America the Brand and the cartoon reality that will coincide with this transformation to complete capitalism: a totally trademarked society entrenched in a rat race against the fat cats of Europe and Asian communists. Would Rumf truly usher forth this vision into existence or was it all the offbeat speculation of his anxious mind made manifest in the unconscious? could it be not both a vision and a fear? as so often such things are.

He stares at the headline scanning for something to counter the fact but it stays ingloriously intact and there is no cease to the gnawing in his mind *what next* on repeat til he is furrowing his brow and clenching his teeth *what next* and the thought of making good on his offhand declarations that *if Rumf wins I'm leaving this country* with the foolish certitude that such a thing would never happen. Now his conviction seems in the infancy of supporting some great endeavor away from the pigs and racists of the continent to escape the overwhelming insolence and ignorance that is the only conceivable explanation for the straits they have just entered with *Rumf* at the helm.

Surely The Paper itself is largely to fault for the victory with its emphatic support of Rumf's opponent, *tBotC*, to the point of saying *okay everyone, let's us rest on our laurels for a bit 'ere kick the shoes off,*

have a cocktail. This puppy's in the bag! with polls predicting an 86% chance of Rumf *losing* until the votes started to come in and he had the clear and distant lead by midnight. If they had advertised a scenario where her opponent's victory were less certain maybe more would have been done to canvass the poor bastards who had been goaded to think Rumf was their common class hero by a man whose career may best be described as one shanty pyramid scheme after another arisen from a shifting foundation of hot air and personal threats and nurtured with unfurnished promises backed by laundered money.

Yes, The Paper had brought a complacency to the intelligentsia that acted mostly to opiate away the fear of losing until it seemed to be the absolute least likely conclusion—so the law of averages holds true and the least possible chance still occurs even if only once or twice in two hundred years of western democracy—and The Paper: champion of the opposition, voice of the rational majority, Narcissus scribing all that's fit to print, gets caught in its own reflection and would rather gaze lulling at itself, its genius, its omniscience ... all the facts mere phantasmagoria worth dirt in the census of this country of misogynists and bigots who certainly don't read let alone read The Paper. *Shoulda lied to 'em and told 'em it wasn't such a sure thing and therein would have laid the truth...* but it's too late now: it's all over: something new and strange has begun.

Do you wonder how he did it? Eddie chimes in. The professor hadn't noticed him there in the shadow of the corner of the bedroom but now it seemed obvious that he would have something to do with this. *How the underfunded underdog got all the states in the middle and most of the South?* He's sipping a cup and the steam is fogging his glasses which are glowing just gently enough to indicate they're running. The prof can smell the coffee maker like it's been on for a while. The record player is skipping at the end of a record of Piano Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, Op 111 (Beethoven, Ludwig Van).

Clue me in.

First: the knowledge of the game of the system.

You mean the Electoral College

'Course. The strategy to win the Electoral College is not the strategy to win the popular vote. It's set up to prevent any fully terrible president from being elected. And here we are sniggering smugly so he gamed the system. He motivated a population of voters that controlled the key states and got them to the polls hence: acquiring enough electoral votes to become president-elect and soon enough....

Don't remind me.

... President.

Eddie's eyes flash and the prof sees the familiar smirk that means he's up to something.

But would you believe me if I told you this plot was actually hatched 18 years ago?

It is difficult to catch the gist so He looks at Eddie with raised brows.

18 years ago, having targeted this year as the Grand Finale to its latest conspiracy against humanity, That Force created a swarm of newborns from its flocks of surrogate mothers in the wilderness of the Rust Belt. With the cooperation of agencies such as my former employer these offspring were nurtured into taking the orders of a certain brand of politicians through a certain media conglomerate. In other words: the talking head reading the prompter says jump these poor bastards say how high.

But why Rumf?

The rule of lineage applies to Rumf as it has always to the figureheads of the evil empire. His ancestry on his father's side goes back to the Nazis as is well known. But his mother's side goes back to King John Lackland.

Who is..?

King of England 1199-1216. Signer of the Magna Carta. The bad guy from Robin Hood.

Ooh... so?

This has been true for every other president in the history of the country. The Society needs it so to be able to predict with genetic exactness the acts of the Executive. It's all part of the plan. Anyone can ouiki the etymology of the name Ronald and see it comes from the Scottish Rofnald, Rufenald, Romnall all meaning all-mighty ruler of the world.

You got to be joking.

Oogle it. I can only lead the equines to the H2O. His destiny has been unfolding according to the plan for centuries. These are enormous conspiracies we are dealing with here. It's hard to explain how deep it goes in one sitting. You have to see the endless range of underground facilities, the rivers of blood. The only reason this moment feels different is because the election manipulation was choreographed at the highest levels. Because Rumf had been prophesied by the leaders of The Society in the Original Operative Predictive Statement—

OOPS?

—you can say that again... but seriously, it had been thusly foretold that he would be unlikeable among the reasoned class when the dawn of his predetermined reign would arrive, so with fair warning The Society had ample time to initiate its brainwashed bystanders breeding processes the necessary two decades before they would be able to vote as well as forge the necessary documents to keep them off the record until they would be required. Then on the year of this election the swarm gained eligibility and hit the polls as a wildcard population reversing all other predictions and putting Rumf in the white house. They were busing them in from the boonies and staging them as recent college graduates to whichever jurisdictions needed the boost at the ballot box. In their cloistered upbringing they had been convinced through the systematic brainwashing techniques

of their captors that they could use their influence on the rest of the world to make the country perfect, and as their first venture into society after a life of captivity they proved to be a truly silent not to mention fully manufactured majority.

A swarm of clones at the polls putting Rumf in the big seat ... sounds reasonable enough to me. A classic attack on democracy. The scope of it though ... the surrogates, the slaves ... how could they keep it under wraps?

The phantom voters were just the icing on the cake. The network exists literally underground in bunkers where human beings are kept as reproductive slaves. The Russian propaganda on FBK, the hacking of the opposition party, the deletion of emails: it all had to come together perfectly in the religiopoliticomediasphere before the masses could be released and take to the polls. But it wasn't all braindead zombies ... you know I logged into the NCM website a month before the election. It would have been a revelation to the press if they had seen what I saw. There were more hits than had ever been recorded before in the history of The Movement. A numerology of statistics in front of me explaining demographics, census data, personal surveys, and economic indicators thanks to the massive enrollment which all of a sudden reminded me the moment had come for there to be a new Caesar. Had 18 years really passed? It was not clear in my original futurescene whom specifically the man or woman was to be: even tBotC had been a descendent of King John and fit the mantras of the prophesy as I had been able to interpret them. But I saw the surge of the religiousright on NCM and it was immediately obvious we were entering the next phase of the agenda which could only mean Rumf would clinch the seat. Which is why I'm tapping you.

The professor stares into the whirring green eyes and glances to his desk of chemicals.

You mean the drug lab?

Precisely.

Eddie lifts a flask and takes inventory of its contents.

This must be a cousin to MDMA with the characteristics of its crystalline formation he takes a sniff very clever though not novel. Surely we can find something better than this.

What's the plan?

Eddie broods a bit longer to build the drama holding beakers and vials at various angles with furtive glowing glances as if deep in an inner dialogue.

The plan, my friend, is to dose the world.

I hand him my thumb and pinky in the shape of a phone *it's nineteen-sixty-seven. They want their acid-freak-universal-free-love-scheme back.*

I told you about The Hamburger Joint. I have the knowhow. That was smallfries on what I got in store for ya.

I don't know if I am ready and willing. I blew up my hand remember? He holds the evidence in front of him.

Eddie grits his teeth. *You want a new one?*

The Prof is taken aback but considers the possibility of a ruse. *Howthehell...*

Eddie taps the glasses on the rim with his thumb, the fingers in a monkey fist. *I got a lab too my friend. Where do you think I go to fix up these babies? Jiffy Lube? And just so happens I have some manitronics from the ripper surplus. They're set for soul extraction ,but I could be persuaded to rewrite the code for your requirements if you were to scratch my proverbial back.*

These manitronics... they're prosthetics?

Biorobotic digit enhancers. I'll need a donor for the fleshy parts but that won't take more than a quick teleport to the Aft City Morgue. Then it's just a matter of sewing the apparatuses together and linking the nerve endings to the wires.

Prove it.

So Eddie takes his left wrist with his right hand and twists it a half turn. There's the sucking sound of a lid coming off a jar and when he pulls forward the hand comes off at the wristband of his watch which the professor can see is actually dressing up the seam where the socket is for the plugs at the base of the detached palm.

Have a look he says and tosses it to him so it lands in his open grasp.

The Prof prods it with amazement. *I thought you were old school?*

My right is real he says wiggling the digits *but I couldn't resist an upgrade for the left. Granted, that's a secondhand hand—I swiped it off a workbench on my way out the door of the agency. Don't know who owned it originally but he had it stuck on hibachi mode.*

Hibachi mode?

Even rippers have hobbies. I'll admit I had some fun with flying chunks of beef before I reset the prog, but now I've been using it for high speed coding and tuning the spectacles.

The professor is admiring the handiwork, the nylon hairs below the knuckles, the creases of the convincingly textured rubberized palm. *I'll admit I'm impressed. Can you set it to play the trumpet?*

I figured you'd ask that... 'course it can be done. The hand hops down and crawls to the professor's case like a scene from the Addams Family. It unlatches the lid and grasps the horn by the bell, balancing it straight up and down while it walks back to the prof on middle and ring fingers, mouthpiece end up.

He lifts it delicately and the hand dangles, swinging around to the valves like an acrobat assuming the position.

Go ahead, let 'er rip.

The professor blows and the hand runs through scale after scale *perfectly*. Plays Dixie at the end of the G major for punctuation. *Incredible*. The hand hops down and runs back to its owner who pops it back in and puts an inquisitive look on his countenance.

So whaddaya say?

Okay he tells him. I'm in.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XXV. Live In the Moment

At the top of the ladder we are in a perfect sphere of white reflective glass the size of a living room. I get out and stand askance on the sloping surface. Eddie's opposite me about the hole in a half squat with his hands on his hips. He's looking straight up when I spin around to face him. There's a gradient from the bottom to the top where a dot of light like an iridescent golf ball is suspended.

This is momentous Eddie says with his chin up.

How so?

In and of itself I mean.

but I don't get the meaning.

A moment he signals around with both hands inside one.

I look around the rotund bone white chamber. Some kind of art installation?

Not exactly he snickers it's a perfect emulator of the space-time continuum.

All that inside a giant white ball?

The post-gravitational interior simulation does take the form of a sphere in the human perception of its shape but it's your brain that's inside the ball. This floor is flat.

A hatch closes from where we'd entered. The light takes an even balance over the surfaces and I lose all sense of perspective. Then I see the golf ball lower to the center of the room. Eddie points a finger out like a gun and his thumb is the hammer. I see a wire come out his fingertip like a dancing cobra that hovers its head about the small sphere of light while Eddie's eyes cycle bright and softer glows until it finds what it's looking for and strikes.

These glass beads are finite. Every one was created at exactly the same time. But each one has a fingerprint of complex infinitesimal anomalies that could in theory be decoded and reprogrammed that is—

There's a pulse like a speaker blowing out. Everything turns black until I realize we are standing in the bottom of a shallow bowl sitting so high from the ground that I can't see how far it is below me: the ladder chute we came in on is a stem for the platform whose rounded walls have disappeared and while I know it extends half a mile below and there must be thousands of similar objects around us, there's no indication of anything other than an absurd and absolute darkness just beyond the perimeter of our glowing zone. The ball of light drops and hits the hatch with a dense thud. Eddie bends down and picks it up and the floor flattens so I fall on my ass closer to the perimeter.

—until today. Polished diamond he informs me as he feels it between his thumb and the forefinger whose tentacle has retracted *one of 144K in the world. All they've managed to produce since the beginning of this infernal machine. Painstaking process.* I've gotten to my knees and I'm looking over the rim to the abyss below me. The only light is from Eddie's eyes and they're spotted on the marble *sorry for the jolt.*

What are you doing with it?

Looking for the spot he tells me.

I realize the space around us has the vacuous silence of being underwater. My skin is tingling like it's covered in menthol. *Something's in the air.*

The atmosphere here is ionized. To provide a medium for conduction. That way all available free energy is focused on this diamond core. Then at the centerpoint a hyperdense photon beam is merged with the amplified atmospheric particles. The spot on the core aligns with the apex of a modulated wave pulse converting the photons into postphotons and the moment is produced. Or if you prefer—it happens.

So what's happening now that it's off?

This is one of billions of nodes in the accumulated field that perpetuates reality for the entire civilized part of the world. A system designed to reach anyone with the wires for electric current. Each pulse occurs in succession to account for every millisecond that passes. The pulses we're omitting with this shutdown will be replaced by the first tier redundancy ring. They'll flag it and run a troubleshooter within the next three seconds.

He's found the spot he's been looking for on the crystal marble and has his glasses trained on it as he holds the tip of his finger just above the surface emitting a bright beam of dense light. *However* he says and drops the diamond marble on the floor so it spirals down towards the center *when I replace the bead and restart the system with this modified core at this precise moment* and there's an echoing squeal that grows louder as it rises from below the platform sending light in alternating patterns as the chamber illuminates and the sphere re-forms around us with a perceivable static *pop* so I'm sent rolling down towards the center like a bowling pin *then the system will lapse entirely and we'll have our window for the modification.*

With that he grabs my wrist and taps his temple to send us careening through hyperspace. I feel his presence as we swoosh around at warp speed when like a hallucination or a magic trick the glasses are off Eddie's head and floating there in front of me. When by some instinct I put them on, a maelstrom rushes before me: blueblack smoke and orange fire: the sound of explosions like firecrackers on the Fourth of July: the towers falling. I know it is not a nightmare but a vision: or is it a memory? The certainty is that it is not a dream this time: it has happened. *The smell of ash from all the way over the bay two hours away. The bodies falling like ragdolls from the windows. Fire melting steel and concrete: unholy combustion: the incineration of flesh bone muscle tooth wedding rings simultaneous. Some part of hell emerged here like a flare on the sun just two hours from Aft City wherein lies the center of the universe now torn a new one.*

The boy remembers the smell like an itch he can't reach. The air outside held the stench of dust like charcoal and copper blood in your throat when you've run too fast, too far. They are standing on the deck: his parents with looks on their faces of awe and relief: something miraculously evil having brushed over them as if marked with sheep's blood and no matter how bad it was at least it was only *that bad* and not worse. He cannot smile. Terror like the dust suspended in the air all around him invisible but stinking. When he heard the news after school that day he was walking home with his friends. It was one of the guys the next year up who told them. No adults had been cleared by the administration to relay the information en masse to the kids as it was likely some of their parents had been there when it happened but this kid had an older sibling informant. The rest of the walk was near silent until they got to the T where they parted ways.

He got to the back door and looked at his reflection in the full pane glass: this kid's body of soft features and baby fat. Just a few days before he had been beat up and sent to the bottom of a dog pile at recess. He spent all afternoon and night imagining how to kill himself. Through the glass he can see the TV is on: there are images of the burning buildings: people leaping to escape one death for another. Now the absurd nature of life dawns on his child's brain and alters something in his soul that he cannot fully sense. It is like his head has been cracked open and a new type of confusion stuffed in so that when it's sewed back together the anxiety seeps into every inch of him even out to his fingertips growing cold and clammy. His mother sees him at the door and comes to open it.

Something happened in The City today

I know.

There were probably some of your friends' parents there

I know.

They all watch the news but his mother has seen enough by then and leaves for the kitchen. His father is off work early but it won't be for long before he'll be working late every night to get things back in order after the consequences of the disaster take hold on the industries. *Aft city: backdoor to The City* everybody says. Everybody old enough to understand what happened will remember this forever: whatever the *this* is for them.

In the morning his mother calls him out to the porch. His father is out there with his older sister. *You can smell the ash she says from The City.* It is like the stink around the highway by the factories and the taste of dirt. After a little while he sneaks around the side to climb up the tree that overlooking the street. It was the only thing to do: he feels in his bones something spiritual to be found up there staring down at the street as other neighbors come out to their porches with perking noses inhaling the ubiquitous sadness. The leaves above him shake but he does not notice. It's Eddie up in a crook with a walkman still listening to the tune that brought him there.

Don't worry so much kid he's saying so you think it's in your ear *this was bound to happen no matter what. Just gotta roll with the punches. Swallow the weeping. Try and forget the pain. It's written in the book: it's got to be fulfilled: on the record: predetermined: had to happen this way: couldn't have stopped it.*

Then the punch line.

Just kidding kid. I can make it go away. Just listen to me kid. It'll all be okay.

He is not listening with any conscious form of cognition but Eddie's sending his thoughtbeams straight to the poor kid's earbones with a remote auditory modulator.

It's all just a phenomenon as basic as the atom. Inherent to the structure. Aberrant only in your mind: to your emotions. You must fluctuate with the posturing timewave that pulses through history and then you will find you can erase it: the agony of fear and mourning occurring both at once will dissipate.

Craning your neck to hear something tingling in the branches above you.

Listen to me kid. It was all intricately planned. Yes the dominoes were tipped but I'm gonna go back and stop the tipper. Capiche? I mean I can fly back in time and caput the whole shebang. You've got nothin to be sad about. It was just a ploy kid. They had it all set up from way back before you were alive. I'm only here to tell you kid that this is your destiny. Because you have something I need kid: something I'm gonna take from you when you least expect it. And then you'll be nothing kid. I mean you'll be something you never knew and it's gonna change everything: we won't have to go out the way we were going to kid. You're gonna be a hero.

Eddie hasn't taken his headphones off and now he's poised on the highest branch so his voice is but a whisper in the breeze: you'll understand when you're older. Looking back I mean. You'll rationalize. Maybe you remember this exactly as it's happening now but by then it will feel like a dream. Nothing in the past is truly eternal because it can be changed; but only I can change it. So I'm gonna need you to do what I'm gonna tell you now:

Your id is the only thing that's picking up Eddie's murmuring besides the hair on the back of your neck.

Don't you remember? You knew this would happen. The book report two years ago on Revelation. Your teacher freaked: I mean you were only ten. I sent that whole thing to you in your sleep. The nightmares, the visions of horror, demonic faces: these were the scalding countenances of the victims due to The Society, That Force, embedded in your eyewaves by my equipment. I had to show you so you'd be in the loop early. Had

to spread rumors and make you the laughingstock of the class so you'd toughen up from the daily beatings. You knew this would happen but how could you have known?

You are thinking of the images on TV: the collisions, explosions, bodies dropping, the structural collapses: you feel the confusion in the stink of the ashes from the destruction that has floated over the bay on cool autumn wind: the death stink of the tragedy and the impossible sorrow for all those lost and their loved ones: the paste in your throat growing chalky until it is choking you and you are crying.

Don't lose it, kid. Now I'm gonna really need you. It's simple: Live like a saint. Practice morality. Keep your conscience clean: do what you know is right even when it's more difficult than the alternative. Strive for divine intervention: search for the face of God. When you encounter what He has to tell you do not take it lightly. Let in the Truth and ignore the lies. Keep your head and spirit centered on being a good person.

Then the rustling dies and Eddie's voice is audible:

Because I need your soul kid.

With a snap of the wrist I am back with Eddie inside the sphere. *What was that* I quip and pull out of his grip *what the fuck was that.*

Eddie's face is straight. *That was what was before what I have done with the modification.*

The towers in The City... falling... all those people... but I don't remember it. ... but the person in the vision... the boy... he can remember and I remember through him... the dust in his nostrils is in my nose now. The screaming in my ears. The sadness in the pit of my stomach. The fear, anger, confusion.

Three thousand—the magic number—dead. In this new moment the deceased have been replaced for the equal and adequate sacrifice thanks to my handiwork.

You killed them?

Their replacements. The people who benefitted from their deaths. The evil politicians and businessmen who stoked the hostility with middle eastern oligarchs in order to cultivate a culture of violence and religious zeal that would generate the society of guerillas who would become the band of terrorists used as a scapegoat for the disaster resulting from the compliance of greedy government administrators to oil men and military-industrial megacorporations whose actions are dictated by the agendas of the most powerful and malevolent people in the world. I found three thousand members of all these affiliated parties and picked them off.

But you killed them? Three thousand people.

If it makes you feel better you can think of it like they ceased to exist. I assure you, the last three thousand souls I've taken were the most deserving persons: every one was carefully identified through a perfect simulation of this system and the input I'd gleaned off a rogue server. I took down the necessary agents and changed the course. Sometimes that meant people had to die. It was just math. Had to be done and now the towers still stand. Their occupants still live.

This sounds mirthlessly miraculous.

I considered it my mission for that very reason. Through this alteration I thought we would usher in the Pax Americana that would lead to the liberation of the impoverished class and the free proliferation of philanthropy by those with means until the whole society reached a peak utility but I was wrong. It wasn't the towers that led to the end. It was something else.

Rumf.

It did not matter that I'd balanced the equation and stopped the towers' destruction. After I'd executed my program I saw the numbers weren't changing. Rumf's ascendance goes further back than that. It's embedded deeper in the DNA than I'd calculated. We are almost ready.

What are you I hadn't noticed Eddie was right up next to me with his finger at my neck. There's a whirring sound like a dentist. I see a metallic flash and feel a poke in my neck. *You son of a—*

Glitch he says and sticks his finger into the center of the sphere *is the only way to reset it again* and there's an electric jolt from all directions as his digit hits the perfect centerpoint like an explosion of light. I feel devoid of the person I thought I was a moment ago. Like some mesh of particles had been pulled out of every part of me and now I was riddled with holes but it's conflated with this sensation like rapture now that I am surrounded in light and I can't even see Eddie through the brilliance. *Are the light beams in the holes where my soul had been?* I don't think I say it aloud but I hear Eddie answer: *this moment is forever in you now: in every part of you that you know to be your being: every feeling and memory and action and reflex, thought, realization, prayer, habit, desire, regret it is there now and it will be there always. You are the bearer of the burden. One day your time will come and you will expire and you will know that with this you stopped the end of it all. You are the one who must restore the pattern to a positive pulse. You are the anti-Rumf* I am nauseated as I absorb the horrible illusion of the memory of the day the towers fell into every pore and Eddie keeps his monologue going *you are the sacrifice so that Rumf does not bring the country to its end* now in the apex of the finitude of my existence I hear only the emptiness of a thousand dying persons, three thousand: see only the blinding emptiness of an eternity without God or anything else to ascribe it meaning or its inhabitants purpose so that when the light overcomes everything I resign all sense of self to nothingness.

Eddie with his fingerwire latched on his neck so that when he collapses it snakes out like a retractable leash. *Good boy* he tells him and pats him on the head as his peripheral resets into his pointer. *You'll be just fine kid* he quips and takes the cell phone right out of the guy's front pocket *just going to borrow this* and he turns on an app to find the song he needs by *The Strikes*. When he taps play he disappears

and the phone falls to the floor and I wake up in my bed to the sound of my phone ringing. It's Eddie. He says he wants to tell me a tale:

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XXVI. A Coronavirus Carol

We think of today's society as the pinnacle of complexity. We have computers, which spawn networks, which spawn data clouds, all based on input sequences of zeros and ones which are fed into electrical brains that provide outputs, which become new inputs, processed into new outputs... the enormity of the datasphere and the impenetrability of the fundamentals of software and hardware creates the perception of the greatest ball of confusion to ever grace the earth. Everything is said to be this or that revolution but don't forget revolution can mean both the abrupt events that bring on something new and the full circle of something resolving its commencement.

But it is not. The basics of our biology, the elementary particles, the physical forces. This is the greatest mystery, the mother of all intricacies. The things that are not man-made, but predate man are truly the strangest, even having remained unchanged since the beginning of the universe.

I am not going to take you that far back. Even these gizmos can't do that. But let's go twenty thousand years. The Old Stone Age, the Upper Paleolithic. There are no LPs, sure. But somewhere, a homo-sapien has broken the tip off a hollowed out bull-horn, and puts it to his lips: he blows a raspberry, and oi-la, it's a B^b, extra flat. Hold this wire in your teeth while you find the note on that trumpet of yours. And hold your stomach, this will be abrupt.

[illegible]

[illegible]

²⁹ Great Scott! You're not really going to read every *great* on these pages, are you? Oh well, only 669 to go...

And now the liquid goes straight down the gullet so he can find That Force again on the other side to encounter its being and succumb to its demands. First the convulsions, then the departure from consciousness. If he could open his eyes they would be black now not yellow, the pupil enlarged and the iris but a thin line at its border. But he cannot and instead the eyelids twitch to indicate that he has begun to see, insomuch as sight can exist in such a state, surely to interact with That Force which some describe as a huge sparkling dome a thousand miles beneath the earth, or as bouncing self-replicating kaleidoscope spheres that speak in marvelous tongues and imbue one with deified love. It must be a different thing for everyone, but it is really all the same might One of That Force, which contains all good and evil, contains even God, all gods and supreme beings, nirvana, Samsara, the Yang and the Yin... he encounters it and his human brain, though more capable of logic than any other creature on the planet, is overrun with data and crashes. He collapses. The eyes stop to twitch. The pulse which had quickened now slows to a crawl. He is That Force now, is the spirit, is death.

But this is not his end. The thread of his fate was spun longer than this. For hours he is there on the brink of the next realm in the solitude of the cave. Outside the men search for animal flesh with weapons made of the bones of the last kill. The women suckle the progeny in a horde around a fire of branches and brush that the adolescents collect amidst hunting games and brutal childish dares. The weak are beaten to death with rocks so their insides may be cut out and examined by the curiouser of the bunch, their jaws broken off so the teeth can be inspected and collected like coins to trade with other collectors of body parts. The ones who cannot give birth or exhibit perversions are sent out of the clan to wander like wolves until the real wolves find them and tear them to shreds. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The sky fills with clouds and empties again. Insects create a din in the wilderness. A baby cries and is shaken back to sleep.

Now watch the Shaman rise. He has seen things he cannot comprehend. His skin is even tighter now after a day without food or drink. The ruderalis fire has died to its embers, the remaining contents of the gourd have spilled on his chest and the floor and dried to a sticky paste. His mind is a race of colors and concepts for which he does not have the words, for words have not been invented yet. But he is wise and knows the journey must be conveyed in some manner. So he takes a few wavering steps to the mortar and pestle where limonite and hematite are ground with burnt bones and calcite to make the spectrum he requires. His calloused fingers with their gangly gnarled nails are the brushes and he grabs the colored dust with precise and furious motions that send echoes through the cave and after hours of pressing it against the walls in the patterns he saw while under the influence, the skin on his palms is opened to add the red of his blood to the pigment, his signature and the signal that he has exhausted his art. He falls on his ass and admires the oeuvre until he can no longer bear it, closes his eyes to sleep.

Look, there now: back where he'd held the séance, a wanderer has stumbled upon the gourd and the embers. He is hungry. He picks it up and scrapes up the spongy mushrooms and bits of dried wheat that are glued to the bottom of the vessel. It tastes like dirt and piss but he chews it like a delicacy and swallows eagerly searching for more. He comes to the place where the Shaman is napping and as the chemicals cross the blood-brain barrier he witnesses the painting which appears animated in the state he is entering. The animals of the forest and the silhouetted hands dance among geometric anomalies that peel off the wall to surround him, enter him, and sing like a choir of angelic voices in verses that have no syntax, only weightless form and the mystery of something yet to come. He breaks into a fever and sweat covers his body. He is ecstatic, he is enraged, his feet seem to move of their own volition and his hair stands on end while his heart beats out of his chest. He

bends over and vomits which startles the Shaman awake, who springs to his feet with the pestle in hand and clubs the tripping intruder hard on the back of his head.

He is not yet dead but his breathing is shallow. The Shaman is zealous for the breach of his perimeter. There is only one place fit to put the fallen wanderer, an unholy place deeper in the cave that will swallow him up into primitive hell. He takes the man on his shoulders and starts to walk toward the empty black tunnel where his painting stop and light from the fire stops dead in its tracks. He knows the way with his eyes closed, guided by his hand dragging nails against the wall feeling cracks and burrs that offer the direction in a Braille he has learned from the other times That Force has driven him to this place where intruders must be disposed. A familiar bulge in the earth before a left turn where a faint light grows brighter with every step until at last the ceiling covered with glow worms that dangle on shimmering threads of silk flicker their tiny beacons and show the opening to the place the Shaman seeks. He throws the body first through the passage, then crawls in after on his hands and knees. Now he is within an enormous rocky dome, like the one in his visions, where even more worms commune in a swarm on the ceiling over a great depth that reflects the worms' light in water from the ground that pools and mixes with the minerals to make an oily black sludge that slowly seeps through channels and over the several other bodies he has cast into the pit. Somehow the floor is teeming with rats that too have found this terrible necropolis as if sent by That Force to strip the flesh from the bones of the ones the Shaman has damned to their final resting place.

The Shaman crouches and puts his hand on his eyes to summon the demon that will take the man's soul and mix it with his. He places his hands on the torso and is ready to push when, like a locust taking flight the man springs from the ground and leaps over his attacker. He has been feigning weakness until this moment and now he is poised to send the Shaman to his doom among the rats and sludge. He lunges and grabs him by

his neck, throws him over the edge, barely stopping his momentum from pulling him down with him, and the Shaman hits the ground sending black rats and slime flying out in all directions. The man runs back through the opening but the Shaman is not undone. He stands and the rats avoid him as if repelled by a magnetic field. Even the sludge gives way to his steps toward the wall which he knows has enough crevices and handholds for him to climb from this hell and return to his domicile. He struggles but reaches the plateau and begins the familiar route back to the murals.

The wanderer has become disoriented in the maze of dark passages that offer no comprehensible direction to one who has not committed the place to memory. He stumbles one too many times and bloodies his knees, then cracks his toe with another unfortunate step. He hears a strange noise overhead, like wind and the whistle of coals popping in the fire. It is a flock of bats and they fall on him in a flurry of claws and teeth, searching for food on his flesh, gnawing the lice in his hair and picking off bits of his scalp along with the bugs. He runs, not knowing where to, hits a wall and falls unconscious as the swarm continues to feast on his skin with a thousand prickling teeth. When they have had their fill he is a red lump on the floor of the cave but still by some miracle breathing and when he awakes to the stinging that has covered his body like a fire he can see a light somewhere and he walks despite the misery of the wounds until yes, daylight, where he can fall on his face in the dust that sticks to his bloody flesh and fills his gasping lungs.

What this man does not realize but what I will tell you now though it won't be evidenced in any symptom of his, is this: a bat in the swarm carried an Orthopoxvirus which had generated a second hairpin loop when the genome gained its one-hundred eighty-sixth kilobase pair by random mutation encouraged by exposure to Radon. This bat bit the wanderer inside of his mouth, successfully transmitting the virus which begins to spread almost instantaneously in the open wounds of the skin and multiplies ten million fold as he lays festering

in the dirt. A vulture will descend on the body tonight, take some skin in its beak, and head back to its offspring. But before it reaches its nest, a hunter will send a spear through its wing and fell it, bring it to its family, and eat part of it raw. The virus will incubate in this man, who will spread it to his family, who will spread it to its clan, then the clan who comes to steal its spoils and finds instead them all covered in macules and dying slow painful deaths. They inspect their sick cousins and are promptly infected themselves. They bring it to their community. And so on.

Eventually it gets back to the Shaman who has survived his bout with Patient Zero and is back to his old tricks with the gourd and the painting. What he does not know is that when he fell to the floor a rat who had encountered the bat and developed a similar strain of the virus nibbled his toe and gave him a shot of the disease, inoculating him.

Blow that horn again with the wire in your teeth. See now: The Shaman finds he can walk among the infected and not fall victim to their fates. He develops a greater sense of the deity. That Force strengthens in him and sure enough the society notices. He becomes their God, grows fat on their offerings, sometimes eating their healthiest children, properly roasted, which they attribute as sacrifices to ensure health for themselves. He notices there are other bipedal hominids in his region which you and I would recognize as homo erectus and Neanderthal, and sends the sickest wiliest homo sapiens under the influence of his cult to spread their smallpox and destroy them. They are not as strong as the homo sapiens who sometimes survive: they are decimated, then obliterated, to extinction. The Shaman becomes the smallpox king. He is painted in synecdoche on walls as the only white hand in a sea of spotted hands. He lives for two generations, three generations.

Blow a G#. Look at his offspring, the smallpox princes, populating the territory and continuing the cult, developing ever more complex rituals and languages, illustrating the rules in their murals and ensuring the

proliferation of the disease to keep their grip on the people they rule and plunder for offerings. Some will grow fixated on the sacrifices of humans, some develop fetishes for bizarre sex or violence and some are benevolent and make little distinction between themselves and the common people, except for their inherent superiority as Masters of the disease.

The point is, it is not until twenty thousand years later that the terror is ended with the eradication of smallpox in the twentieth century. Twenty thousand years of a disease that could have been quelled by humanity yet was instead encouraged to spread by the men in power to keep that power. Fast forward to the eighteenth century: hum something from The Alchemist (Handel) on that harmonica. There's Doc putting that special cowpox pus in the kid's bloodstream. He's gonna get a case of cowpox but it won't be so bad. Two weeks later Doc takes some pus from a smallpox patient and tries to infect the kid—but he's been immunized. He invented not only the first smallpox vaccine but also the first vaccine in the West: as with many things in India they'd been doing it for a lot longer before then.

And what's that have to do with today? I ask him under my breath. We are among a crowd of dapper dressed gentlemen in top hats and canes who are so enthralled by the spectacle of the immunization they haven't noticed Eddie and I having teleported in instantaneously. Before one of them can raise the alarm Eddie takes a finger and sticks it inside his cheek. With a swift flick he creates an audible pop that sends us for another loop and now we are in a dark room full of teenie boppers in poodle skirts. The radio is playing Lollipop (Chordettes, the) and Eddie points around at the kids who are dancing around us.

This generation: they have no sense of what is to come. They could never fathom what is going on halfway around the world he looks at the watch he's pulled from a chain inside his jacket 11 years ago today they were torturing monkeys in the Ziika forest.

Where the hell is that?

Close to it I'm afraid. Opened up a portal that day—hey!

Yea?

Youwannasee?

Na—

But it's too late and he's ripped us through another hole and all I hear is *smoke smoke that cigarette/puff puff puff and if you smoke yourself to death/tell saint Peter at the golden gate/ that you hates to make 'im wait/ you've got to have another cigarette* (Williams, Tex). Inside a lab: stainless steel desks strewn about and covered in test tubes, pipettes, papers, cardboard boxes, rubber gloves, masks in stacks, aprons in bundles secured with blue twine, racks with plexiglass goggles hanging by their elastics, and at one end a glass wall with holes for the arms to enter through and fit into the black rubber gloves sealed to the glass at the perimeter of the openings. The song is coming in through the taupe twill of the tube amp radio the size of a washing machine in the back corner. *Incidentally, Doc here is out enjoying a Pall-Mall at the moment. See, they've got all these monkeys chained up in cages out there he points towards the exit and what they do is wait for them to get infected with this contagion so they can observe the effects as they die slowly.*

The horror!

He curtsies most certainly, sir. Drives even the most callous scientific mind to smoke. Not your modern sense of common decency by any means. But the endgame is this: because of the experiments, the virus mutates, makes the leap from primate to primate, meaning monkey to person, and then...

The '15 epidemic... I know the story... microcephaly, etc.

Surely. Next up we have... he leads me to the radio and starts to adjust the knobs. The fuzz clears and I hear *Look up that lonesome road\before you travel on\look down, look down that lonesome road\look up, look up and greet your maker* before a tumult of disintegrating spacetime flattens us and pops us back onto the airframe of an airborne helicopter painted in olive drab and earmuff headphones that have materialized on our heads. The tandem pilots don't notice us riding shotgun and seem to be smirking at whatever it is below us.

San Francisco. 1980. Take a look comes Eddie's voice crackling through the headwear.

I can't see much at first from the altitude until I realize *people? Partying?*

You got it. Here, take a closer look and he hands me a pair of GI binoculars.

I put them to my face and scan the squirming crowd. *Looks like... if I had to guess... gays?*

And proud of it he affirms. The dress code is minimal, S&M on the one end, daisy dukes at the other, and I'm astounded by the amount of people, almost all of them men, bumping and grinding and generally making out indiscriminately. *These people are a real threat to the straightlaced power structure who aren't big fans of the whole samesex love scene.*

The orgy spreads for a couple of blocks. I see a couple of carnal acts in progress up-close and have to look away. *Well it's not exactly PG down there.*

Sure, I mean, in light of MF's praise of pleasure for pleasure's sake, among his followers there's nothing besides the usual slew of VDs to stop them from going all out, and combine that with his critique on the subjugation of the masses by the few who dominate them... needless to say the conservative institutions of the period are not big fans of this scene from Sodom and Gomorrah, and since penicillin is saving the sexually diseased from the most of their woes and eugenics have gone sorely out of style, they need something new to cull these homosexually liberated leftists.

AIDS?

Fraidso. These guys he points to the pilots aren't in on it, but I had to show you why it spread so fast. It's been sown across the city by false vaccinations at gay-friendly clinics, unwitting gigolos infected by agents, the malicious tools The Society uses to seed death, fear, discrimination, hate—fodder for the majority to cast its aspersions against the ones that threaten their sense of right and wrong, keep the death rate high—and all at a time when the queers were starting to gain acceptance. That lab we were in, it's become a New Normal. AIDS was isolated by similar means, allowed to spread by folks with the desire to decimate.

That's when the guy sitting starboard notices us sitting shotgun and can't believe his eyes, almost sets off a Hellfire as he fumbles his joystick to shake us off.

Better split Eddie says and he pulls me off the chassis so we're falling towards the swarming partygoers. He pulls what I think is the ripchord to a parachute from his jacket pocket but then I see it's a ¼" attached to a blocky radio, mimes for me to plug it in so in desperation as we approach freefall I find the jack and link up. The sound is unfamiliar, oriental sounding music. I begin to see the details of buildings and trees and fear engulfs me before *zap* we are in another sterile room and I hear angry foreign talk.

Allow me to translate Eddie says and we duck below a stainless steel table.

A gruff voice, stern, severe: *He's telling her she must bring something back to him*

Softer, higher pitched, pleading: *She says it's too dangerous, sure to be caught at the airport, impossible to carry on her person.*

The man again: *He tells her there are ways to hide things that cannot be detected by airport security agents.*

The young woman: *She protests claiming the dishonor of such a violation.*

What are they trying to smuggle I ask him *where are we now?*

Wuhan Eddie informs me in the bowels of the university here. The girl is an exchange student, from The University.

The University?

One n' only, place of many mysteries. But this one is hidden in plain view: you see, the student has been part of the recently outlawed gain of function experiments on the SARS coronavirus. It's all on the HHS website, the creation of the chimera from rat and bat viruses that are able to reproduce in human lung tissue. She's been tasked bringing her research home after spring break and as you can imagine she's not exactly thrilled.

Who's the muscle?

Party member. One of President X's guys. He's following orders.

The student is crying.

He just threatened to kill her parents and grandparents if she doesn't pull it off. He's not kidding, either.

I put two and two together. Wait—is this—I mean—what happened to Pops—that trip to Seattle—I'd repressed the memory of Pop's passing so long I'd forgotten he had brought me to the hot zone of the very virus these comrades were discussing.

It starts here. Or one could argue, in that lab in The University. But the first real outbreak centers on this poor city.

You sonofa—

I make a leap to grab him but I can't get hold before he zaps me back to my bed where I wake in a cold sweat, grasping into the air above me at someone who's long gone.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XXVII. Don't Mar My Log, O Captain!³⁰ Or, Ante Bellum Maximum

It's a room ten stories below the ninth hole where the lights are dim. They are in the chamber to contain their conversation in the event of a bug say from Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Cuba. A monitor is hung from the corner and Eddie would be on it if he didn't know how to avoid the cameras, one furtive sidestep after another. There are paintings of palm trees on the walls and Eddie strikes a pose to blend in with the pattern: arms out, hands dangling. He kneels and peeks an eye around the corner: it's the head of the USSR³¹ who's entered and is let into the chamber with the other two cohorts: one in a turban and one in a yarmulke. Right on schedule.

He waits to witness the handshake. That's his cue: he turns on the glasses. The walls recede to eery wavebands of particles and Eddie dosidoes his way up to the vice, Rumf, the President, the Prime Minister. When he moves through space in this phase it is exponential so that with every part of every footstep he accelerates and to get to the chamber is merely a quarter roll from the heel to the arch, and he wobbles to find the proper fulcrum like he's scratching a record. He finds it and he's in the chamber wielding the scalpel and needle *swoosh* and by the time his toe hits the ground, he is out of the room entirely with the syringe fully loaded. It is the middle of the day and golfers have accumulated on the fringe. Eddie ducks out from under a sand trap in his leather jacket just for kicks: a bleachblonde woman in a white skirt and pink shirt screams. Eddie turns back on the glasses and disappears.

He's is at the airport with the goods in the pocket. At the gate they check his loot: *diabetic* he explains so they hand the kit back fake insulin and all. He gets to the scanner but it's broken—when the

³⁰ Not to be confused with *My Captain!*

³¹ United States Senate Republicans

TSA had her back turned he'd managed to sneak a magnet onto the hard drive—so they let him through the metal detector with his glasses still on his head. His seat is in first so he grabs a cocktail and settles in. It's half an hour to New York.

On the ground he's in the back of a town car and the flags on the front are not US. He hands over the spoils and takes the envelope with the other. *Twenty million. Count it.* So he does quick through the glasses. The man is in a black suit and his gray beard bristles off his cheeks like rabbit fur as he smiles to feel the weight of the syringe.

You got it right in the middle of the deal?

Spot on. Timed on a nuclear watch. Coordinates plotted from the futurescene. He signals to his wrist. *Went in right above the earlobe.*

He looks at his watch again and a tinkling ring begins from the chamber of the hypodermic he's just handed over. *See it's a feisty one. Had to dampen the vibration with a sedative or it would have cracked the polymer.*

The bearded man holds it up to the light overhead. He removes a leather glove from his right hand and brings his finger to the tip of the needle *prick* and a drop of blood runs to the surface and brushes the metal. He can't hold back the slightest shudder.

It appears to be potent.

Indisputably. He's got the money in his coat and his hands are in the front pockets. *Shall we call it then?*

Yes, yes. He taps on the glass at the driver standing outside. *Thanks son.*

You got it pops.

Eddie steps out and onto the steps to Penn Station. He zips the coat up to cover the dough. It's too late for anyone but drunks and junkies to be hanging around the subway so he's got to be discreet. But that doesn't rule out a little kindness: when the train arrives he flips a hundo at a bum with a bottle as he crosses the threshold. *Go get yourself a new pair of shoes* he tells him through the crack between the gaskets as the door shuts and the train pulls away. The bum: drunk and bewildered.

It may be late but the people Eddie's dealing with are on a different schedule. His next stop is in the village. It's a penthouse whose owners have a couple kilos of something he might be interested in. *Came in from Switzerland through Canada. Guaranteed sterile crystals. Perfect geometry. What we sampled was pure. I mean it delivers.*

Eddie inspects it and asks for a taste. He dips in his pinky to pick up enough dust then dabs it on his tongue. It has the desired effect. Eddie hands them a wad and they give him the briefcase. He'll spend the next hour at a diner in the bowery before he can rent a car to take up to New Haven then Cambridge where he's arranged to meet his uranium man and his plutonium man respectively. Their loyalty isn't cheap: ample funds are required given the liability of the acquisitions. To get the uranium an insider at the facility alerts the thieves that a force-on-force senario test from the Nuclear Regulatory Committee is underway. Then a ballasted diver in leadlined Tyvek sneaks in through the water cooling intake and navigates to the depository. There he has to dismantle the concrete overpack that's surrounding the storage canisters through a weak spot near the insertion point with thermite drilling explosives. Once he's through he's gotta detach and disassemble the duplex steel apparatus and get the payload into his own shielded container until he can transfer it to the smuggler's special briefcase off site. All within the two-hundred-eighty-five seconds it takes for the NRC drill to occur.

Needless to say Eddie gets in the cab for Logan two million poorer but richer one briefcase. He checks his luggage with the courier waiting for him at cargo. *Pleasure doing business* and he's got it all en route to his hideout in LA so that he can catch the next flight to Amsterdam. There's some time to kill so he takes a seat at the bar and drinks dirty martinis, extra olives. It's a long flight across the Atlantic.

At Schiphol he takes the NS to the tram and finds the hole in the wall on *Tweede Rozendwarsstraat* where he meets his Dutch connection for the vials of dimethylallyl diphosphate and L-tryptophan and the vacuum catalyzer, plus *claviceps purpurea* in suspension. He takes the Thalys to Paris, gets cooking at the apartment in *Saint-Germain* where there's a lab he's been lent for the weekend. By the next morning there's enough finished product laid in welded seam bags between the lining and the leather of his jacket that if the bags rupture and it gets on his skin, he'd OD ten times over. Lucky he's got the touch, so it's smooth sailing and he's back in NYC after the red eye.

The reactives are at the cargo service brought from the courier disguised as footballs in a lead-lined duffel along with a jockstrap for cover. The half life of the containers gives him four hours to move them to the neutralizing safes stashed underground at his main lab in Jersey. He rents a Jeep and hits the turnpike, the parkway, finds his exit as the sun dips below the trees along the pavement and renders the sky in pinkorange hues that turn purpleblue by the time he gets to the fire road which will branch off at an ancient oak covered in cut-in graffiti to the abandoned tunnels where he's headed with an hour to get the cores repackaged.

It's heavy duty on the dismantle so he gets the equipment from where it's locked up under a steel hatch to a room he's dug into the tunnel floor. It's outfitted with twelve inch thick lead wall safes that will hold the cores when they've been removed from the pigskin vessels. Eddie unhooks the safe suit from the wall and gears up. Before the vault there's a chamber with glass and apertures for the arms to go in to

take apart the temporary shields from around the plutonium and uranium and while they will still be guarded by their primary layer of heavy lead this concentration will poison a person in 4.7 seconds even fully protected by the Tyvek® and a gamma blocking barrier. With the glasses on he'll be able to do the process in a hundredth of a second anyway, so he clicks them on and with the proper steps and the bolt driver, he has the things placed in their new home the double-redundant safes encased in this underground lair in the highlands of the Jersey shore until the moment shall occur that will cue it is time for the next leap.

Eddie puts a couple thousand of what's left of the dough in his pockets for the trip to Aft City. His bike is stashed there in a storage container for safe keeping when he's on a trip but he always ends up back in Aft city. No need for accommodations because Eddie never sleeps anyway. He'll get the bike and do some business for a client in Colorado who uses a natural lithium spring bath to infuse the product before distribution. Due to the nature of the process, he needs the raw material from a college age crowd, so Eddie pulls on a hat from The University and gets back in the jeep to drop it at the rental service by the greyhound. It will take the length of the trip to run through the specific targets he's assembled from social media, suited to the special stresses of his clients' demands: a couple of athletes, a comparative lit major, an architecture student, an engineer, and a pre med to run the spectrum of traits the man will want for redistribution. He heads straight for the practice field to find the team he's looking for scrimmaging with the mark in goal: highest ranked out of high school and top ten in the division. The second component is the forward who Eddie can see even in the brevity of his observation of their play has the best aim at the goal, agility, overall skill. They are like a great swelling mass of perpetual energy with every shot taken, every goal deferred, that bursts when the ball changes sides or the goaltender is finally breached. He'll come back for the operation when they've gone to the lockers so he gets a leg over the

bike and hauls over to the library. Third level in the stacks by the sixth bay at a carrel facing the window: the lit major with a pile of books and a laptop typing furiously with the right hand and scratching notes in a spiral notepad with the left pausing only when the sheet is filled to reveal the next with a swift flick of the wrist. In the reflection of the window pane Eddie can see the eyes have bugged in different directions like a chameleon's so that one's on the screen while the other drifts lazily over the ink on the paper: this kid's been so high on Adderall® for so long that the neurons are mutating to gain the ability to bi-read the texts while writing notes. Finally the student has Sartre's *Nausea* in hand and both eyes trained on its pages, when Eddie lunges: the scalpel out alongside a needle Eddie spins the chair around so the kid, suddenly staring now in the green glow of the glasses, is perfectly still and the scalpel can reach around the back to the nape of the neck to make a quarter inch incision, relieve pressure for the needle that enters into the gland and suck out the material. Then he replaces his utensils in the pocket of his jacket before spinning the chair back around to break the spell and vanishes leaving the stunned victim with a feeling of insatiable emptiness: surely it's the result of the passage he's just encountered: but really it's that now the soul is gone and the student will float cold through life until a new one grows back, if it ever does.

The engineer is in the adjacent building at a desk in the silent area using the public computer. Eddie logs in down the line and slips a pen drive from the cuff of his jacket into his right hand while with his left he's blazing through lines of code on the command prompt. There's a beep and simultaneously on the engineer's monitor, rapidly spinning green discs have overtaken the screen, have the poor sucker hooked. Eddie strolls to the back of the target chair to put a hand on the top rail and leans down as if to talk to the engineer privately. Really he's slid the next hypodermic to his palm and when he gestures towards the screen like he's explaining the article he pulls off the operation from the back of the skull while

relieving pressure with the scalpel from the side so the two scars are more evenly spaced. It's a success. He pats his victim on the back and goes to take his drive from the computer which lapses the engineer back to the present: upon the inevitable disenchantment there will be from now on, in cold anxiety the absence of something indescribable yet intensely not present, for without the memory of the catalytic moment of Eddie's operation it will be stuck there in the back of the mind with the lingering pugnacity of a toothache *the thing that's missing* until, if and only if, within the gland there's a second molecule, and then dependant on the replacement molecule budding, in four to seven years a new and fully formed replacement may emerge.

The time is right to rendezvous with the teammates who are strolling out of the locker room as he emerges on the concrete ramp behind them. They are passing by a reflective panel in the storefront façade and Eddie takes the opportunity to get them both with the glasses so they stick like mannequins poised midstep but they've got the corner of their eye in both Eddie's real lenses on one side and the reflection in the glazing on the other so thoroughly baffled to be totally frozen and they have released themselves to the operation quick so Eddie like a chef filleting at hyperspeed one syringe and scalpel in each hand, each instrument held between two fingers like a *Spock* sign, and snatches them simultaneously in this moment of camaraderie to guarantee an optimum level of positive energy in the specimens. These kids, too, will feel the utter despair that follows the operation and abandon their interests in being the best, party too much, get caught with pot, lose their scholarships, drop out of school. Not Eddie's problem: he just needs the material.

The premed may take more assuaging, so Eddie is prepared with a narcotic tap in case he needs to tranq the target. The lab is well below ground level in a building built into the side of a hill so that there's a terrace protruding out the back off the sterilized area and the offices. Eddie follows a group of

interns in through the front door then picks the lock of the first office he encounters to obtain the lab coat from the coat hook and the entry codes off the hard drive to access the Plexiglass® cubicle where the premed is administering cocaine to lab rats. The director says it's a study on the efficacy of another drug termed *Uncaine* that can wean an addict off the coca plant product like *methodone* or *Nicorette*®. The student doesn't even notice Eddie's entrance with a clipboard that he uses as an excuse to hold his glasses aimed low until he is right in front of his victim and grabs the ears so the eyes are in his eyes and the tip of the nose right up against his: for the element of surprise is crucial in a dry extraction: and yet it only takes the first hundredth of a hundredth of a second to realize the hypnosis would not take with this one and it was time to administer the sedative. He stings the neck with a flick of the wrist to get the needle in the jugular and the chemical immediately renders the student still, while Eddie takes his spoils and prepares a stimulant to zap the anaesthetized student back to consciousness. It's a pinch and a tap on the base of the skull, and he's gone before his victim comes to, sees the cocaine dropper has fallen in the cage so that the mice swarm to it unfettered and are OD'ing and dying one by one.

Eddie has saved the architecture student for last as it should be an easy take. No doubt this one would be crouched over a drafting board or hunched in front of a computer in the studio facility where the arch majors only took leave of on certain fragments of weekends and holidays. It had been the same in Eddie's day and he found this one as he expected: at the assigned desk with a project laid out and a red pen in one hand to scribble furiously on the set of drawings. Eddie is in position to pull it off but he waits: something is not right. It's a feeling he's gotten before this time, occurring as his gaze meets the aspiring architect's face straining gaping eyes over the design drawings and he knew at once the thing he needed had already been taken: he was targeting an empty case. Time for plan B. Eddie takes off out the hallway and back through the lobby to the entrance that spits him in the direction of the next stop: the

cluster of bars known to University dwellers as *the beermuda triangle* for the three corners of the blocks that contain most of the popular spots.

These were fabled times for The U. Everyone was *in* on something. Sure enough—*Playboy* would rank The University *#1 Party School* this very year: the land of milk and honey, extra honey. The streets first flowed with alcohol every autumn when they shut down the block at the end of the summer before the start of the semester, then consistently through the end of finals in a state of perpetual festivity. One center of the action is *Sinkers*, especially out back on the patio where local performers would play for petty cash, free beer, infrequent tips. This place was a shade of the garden of earthly delights: ubiquitous hedonists taking aim at one another to *hook up* while getting loaded on pitchers of beer and shooters. It's a collegiate paradise. One big hoedown

This is where Eddie will first meet the prof, horn at his mouth, attempting a rendition of *What a Wonderful World* to please the unattentive crowd.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

Apocrypha

XXVIII. Soul to Squeeze/Breaking the Girl (Medley).....285

XXIX. Soul Sacrifice.....287

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

LIMITED RELEASE
NOT FOR RESALE
(C) L.G.

XXVIII. Soul to Squeeze/Breaking the Girl³²(Medley)

With her it was different. I know it's the classic cliché of any naïve knave impassioned for his first true love but I felt she was my Soul Mate.

Your Soul Mate Eddie snickers.

I told you it was just my adolescent pinings.

The Soul Mate Program was begun by the Byzantines in the final descent of the Eastern Empire. At its origin, though equal in secrecy with the current program, it was nonetheless restricted in its advance by the barbaric technologies of espionage available to those proto-medievalites. Atop horses and carrying daggers bows and arrows, the forebearers of the Soul Mate Operation were a gallant bunch mostly assigned to the task of pairing up the most ambitious men of the court with their hand-wrought maiden agents.

Hand-wrought humans?

Not so different from today. Of course in the absence of test tubes the method was less surgical and relied heavily on the use of narcotics and psychology to ensure a suitable offspring would be generated...

These are euphemisms for forced procreation?

The same way you say drunk hookup, you mean statutory rape. But yes, we are on the same page. The elders of the order were matchmaking for That Force and the fruits of their labor were a class of human agent that had the unique purpose of finding their host soul and acquiring it, as far as was possible in those days, as product for That Force just as today the Soul Mates culminate their role with the final harvest. You see, the Soul Mate is a special assignment for those in the 99.9999th percentile.

³² Hot Chili Peppers, Red (Blood Sugar Sex Magik: 1991)

That's one in... a million?

You got it. The cream of the cream. As soon as they register with the medical professional at the hospital they get a signal and start computing a match. When the surrogate pool would be too narrow to guarantee a perfect companion for a highstakes client, we'd have to expand it. There were a few methods. Raiding the sperm banks and fertility clinics was the first measure. This would do in a pinch if you got lucky with a suitable donor, otherwise the second straw would be the kidnapping division. Don't look so appalled. We didn't kidnap any kids. Just adults so we could you know, sample their material. But when it was a snipe operation they called in me. And I could get the goods almost as fast as a soul. I'll admit it's sloppier dealing with ovaries and vas deferens than it is stickin' the hypothalamus. Heck sometimes those unwilling volunteers lost both. But there's another type of soul mate—in my line of work, it's sort of a side-effect, i.e.... [text missing]

XXIX. Soul Sacrifice³³

Sssomethings wrong-g-g-g-g... he stuttered sputtering bursting into the room in a vapor cloud adjacent my 33 1/3 of Herb Albert Presents Sergio Mendes and Brasil 66 (A&M: 1966). I jumped to my feet and toward the turntable, sure he'd flail and dismount the record as his limbs swung like striking cobras in the frenzy of his arrival. I hadn't expected him to come that night before my twenty eighth birthday and as I approached him for an explanation I heard the needle drop and sure enough amidst his spasms he'd placed a new disc on the sprocket. It was a live bootleg of *I am the Highway* (Audioslave: 2003).

Thththththethethese can't be his last days. He isn't at his expiration date. It must bbbbbbbebebebe a mmmmmmmmmiscalc or a ttttttttest

A test of what?

An eveveveveevent analysis... but no that'd be much too much to come back and ererererase...

What's all this to me?

To me it's all... I mean it should be all to you... but wait I've not yet considered...

I tried to hold him up but he was out before the musical break had begun its last crescendo. I looked at the DIY label with a title that looked either typed, or had it been obsessively handwritten? spinning slowly as the lyrics renewed: *Paramount/ Austin, TX/ 2011*. I listened to the full length of the album before I turned in. It was only the next morning that I found the account sitting on my dining room table that Eddie had left there and it spelled it out like this³⁴:

³³ Santana (Woodstock: 1969)

³⁴ The following is what I can recall from the documents I copied on June —, 20—, following the aforementioned encounter with Eddie. The original transcription was deleted in the blasé manner of the twenty-first century, with an inadvertent click of the mouse. No tearing of pages or burning of manuscripts required when the medium is the ol' zero-and-one. I admit I shouldn't have attempted to clean my hard drive after three drinks but the-

EYES ONLY

Special Report on the Deaths of CC and RA

April —, 20—

This report pertains to the collusion behind the coinciding deaths of RA (b.1940) and CC (b.1994).

The purpose of this report is to bring to light the incidents which caused both RA and CC to die on the same day.

Following my dismissal from the Agency I was left to doing contract work for the various clients I could muster. Among these was the Television Giant, RA. His promotion of the right wing agenda left him with wealth beyond imagination and yet as he grew older, I watched a greed grow in him like a genuine hunger lest he starve to death. In the absence of real moral direction, and in spite of the purportedly Christian agenda being dispersed alongside the politically funded conservative jargon concocted by a team of writers funded by globocapitalist supercorporations, still RA acted as if his guiding tenet was the virtue of acquisition itself at every level: acquire more viewers, acquire more ads, acquire more profit, acquire more mansions, acquire more secretaries (and then in the end acquire more lawsuits). His media conglomerate was the rare modern platform where science could be punished, i.e.: deny the atmosphere is full of CO₂, deny the ice caps are melting, deny that the incentive in an unregulated capitalist society is to destroy the resources of the planet by transforming it into junk—all in order to fulfill the economic needs of a financially driven empire and appease a majority of consumers hooked on the entertainment aspect of the programming. All it required was the entire absolution of the target's intellect through derogatory language to compel them of the stream of fallacies, and eventually the conscience dulled enough that the viewers had only to surrender to their desire to be ignorant and join the

se are the times we live in and what can be done but to try and recapture the fading glimmers of Eddie's aura when he arrived that night for the first time in a panic.

mob—and here's where I got involved. See, the real exploitable asset of the setup is (and I was the first to discover with my proprietary measuring devices) that every second the members of the viewership tune in, they're losing a bit of their souls.

Through a short chain of mutual acquaintances I became consultant for RA on the design and manufacture of the devices required to collect the stuff, so I devised the slow-drip soul collector to get a microgram per millisecond out of each eyeball that was standard output for a cathode tube television. But as I have mentioned, nothing was ever enough with RA and what he truly desired was high output, so under his patronage I configured a method using similar processes pioneered on the TV network by which the emotional energy generated by fans at a rock music concert could create the volume of soul he was seeking by leeching it off with high-capacity collectors.

At that time, ca 1996, RA was transitioning to become head of The Right Wing Network (RWN). We had created a prototype to be vetted by investors from the society and were ready to test it in a live environment. CC's band was playing a televised concert and we had our collector field hidden in speaker cabinets up and down the scaffolding.

At the concert RA and I were in the crowd holding frequency adjustment controls. We saw CC unleash one of his haggard howls and the crowd bopped up and down in gelatinous undulations that signaled their optimum output was being reached. I signaled to RA that the time had nearly come to set the collectors to their maximum intake. So as we agreed, when CC launched into the final chorus, we turned up the collectors and felt an enormous pulse. We thought all was well so we left the apparatus on. But the pulse, an event with a magnitude we had not anticipated, had caused a coil disruption; immediately the collectors became amplifiers, which had the consequence of frying the brains of everyone within its range. And none were so fried as CC himself who

suddenly tore his guitar from its strap and threw it underfoot, breaking the neck with an enormous boom that totally blew out the collectors, ending the amplification and causing the crowd to stay another twenty minutes before they left, thoroughly piqued by CC's exit.

I had tried to keep eyes on CC as he ducked backstage but it was too hard to tell from my vantage whether or not he would even survive the night, knowing the amount of damage we had caused with the collector. I ran and told RA that I was going to follow up on CC in his room. Backstage was a maze of ropes, roadies, groupies and management from the venue trying to keep the roadies from harassing the groupies and there I was able to slither between the legs of an enormous bouncer until I was right next to CC sitting in the makeup chair with the vanity lights off holding his head massaging the lobes where I knew the pulse had destroyed enough neurons that he may never have functioned the same way again.

My kit of needles had enough amphetamines to kill a horse and enough HGH steroids and adrenaline to bring it back to life. I had to move fast, but I knew the measurements by heart so I filled the syringe and grabbed CC by the hair and had him under my gaze in less than a second. On his face had froze the restrained agony at what we had done to his brain: the pain was such that even being mesmerized he had opened his mouth as if to speak—had I not had the pocket watch pendulum in one hand and the hypodermic in the other so that with a couple of twirls of the wrist and a quick stick through the cheek, going up into the lobe, I had administered the dose in such an order that could resuscitate the destroyed neurons. After I had done the deed I slipped out the same door I'd walked in through and back out under the bouncers legs.

I stayed a moment to watch as the band mates arrived from the stage and shouted at the door until the bouncer finally broke it open where they found him passed out on the counter, most likely in shock as I'd likely left him reeling from the cocktail I delivered straight to the gray matter. They were assuming an opioid overdose

which was only partly right since fentanyl had been in the mix to numb the spots that would be repaired. And just when they were ready to call the doctor, CC was back to life and cursing at his headache and saying he would kill the sound guy.

Deciding I could do no, I rendezvoused with RA in his office where he was seated behind his desk in an armchair. He spun the globe on its axis and ran his finger along the equator. The whole thing will be mine he told me when we get that thing working. Did we get anything from this mess?

That's when I took out a little vial from my front pocket and held it between my thumb and pointer upright in front of his nose so he could see I had a soul there labeled CC.

That will do it for today he told me grabbing for it but I put it back where I'd had it.

Not for nothing daddio I told him asking where's the cash? which he pulled out from a drawer at his waist and hand me to count: a million and a half. Give me two.

Fine.

So I handed over the vial and split.

I didn't hear from RA for some time, but when he called me next he was not pleased: that soul was no good Eddie, are you trying to hustle me?

After some bad press following the ADL's critique of his last public anti-Semitic comments, he'd shot it up with his own needle setup, one I'd rigged him up for an emergency. But with a soul like CC's, finer mechanisms were required: at best, RA could get a part of the embryonic goo into his system with the rest passing through the small intestine. Knowing this had probably occurred I grabbed the latest prototype of the glasses which I'd programmed to hypnotize stubborn victims like this one and zipped to his quarters on my bike. Inside I found him holding his guts. Go lay an egg I told him but he altercated: no then I'll lose it I know it's gone

through me instead of in me which was exactly what had happened, but in his state, even with part of CC's souls absorbed he could not resist the glasses: when I flipped them on I easily got him in my gaze. With a couple nods I had him on the john and he dropped the big one whereupon sure enough a silver streak of shimmering light shot straight up his asscrack and glanced off a pudgy shoulder blade where I snatched it midair with a photonblocking vial. Judging from its exit out of RA's internals, the soul appeared to still be viable so I decided I would return the remnant to CC. I dialed the glasses to end the spell over RA, and as he came to, I told him he would be fine now that I had administered the soul solvent through his navel, which he fingered confusedly in his comedown daze with pupils like black dimes. It was the best success I'd had with the glasses at that point, and as far as I know RA had no idea he'd been duped that night.

With CC's soul secured I had to find the best way to return it and restore what part of it could still survive after the beating it had sustained. I tracked him to a recording studio where he was preparing for a solo tour, me posing as a blind keyboardist in a supporting group to get in the door, but when I got close enough to him I handed him a pill knowing full well he would take it when I whispered codeine.

Sure enough he did it through his nose about a half an hour later, and that's when I brought the vial and syringe from the kit in my pocket. I was attempting a transfer without any of the normal safeguards—vibration dampening laser guided needles and the like—and my mode of entry—the scalpel—was practically a relic. Even with a perfect transfer, reunion was not guaranteed and I predicted that after the soul had been ripped away and shot through RA's shithole it would take a macromiracle to get CC back up to snuff. So I took a deep breath and went to work: first the incision through the left temple, then the numbing of the thalamus with a provocain-cocaine solution to prime for reception of the soul in the pituitary gland. I stabbed the needle through the temple at the angle I'd previously calculated (having practiced the night before on a plaster and

latex model that matched his cranium) and sure enough it sent the shimmering glimmering goop back where it had started. The question of whether the soul would re-assimilate to its origin may not have been answered in those moments but it appeared to stay in place for as long as I was there, which was not much longer since he was reentering reality as the soul clasped on and reestablished the animus. I scrambled, and since then I hadn't thought much about it—until yesterday.

With the soul particles lingering in RA's system, I believe a quantum pairing had occurred between the two. Indeed as RA took on more formidable positioning in the media market at the RWN, so did CC split up his band, in accordance with the principle that the observation of one quantum particle assures that the particle's quantum pairing will appear exactly the opposite of its observed partner. Thus the events of RA's life began to pair bilaterally with the events of CC's life in equal but opposite instances until the imminence of dualdeath manifested in the expiration of the fallen network magnate: when that tiniest fragment of CC's soul that RA had managed to ingest was detached at the moment of his passing, by the mysterious quantum law that had allowed the same soul to be present in two places at once, so the remainder of the soul that had been implanted back into CC was destroyed along with it and he was left empty—devoid of his very being—on that night he took his own life.

If I had never sold the soul to RA that night things would have been different. I ran the scenarios through the algos and it plays out much nicer in seventy three percent of event chains. I keep trying to predate that night with a vinyl transportation but I can't locate myself in the timewave before I am there outside the evacuated venue with two mill in my pocket and the realization I had already sold off CC's soul, so the cycle continues.

This report is concluded.