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O i C E S

from the
 WRITING
 CENTER

Edited by Cassandra Bausman

VOICES

FROM THE

WRITING CENTER

SPRING 2015

A CELEBRATION OF WRITING DONE IN AND
AROUND THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA
WRITING CENTER

EDITED BY CASSANDRA BAUSMAN

FROM FATHER TO SON

TANNER KING

The front door of the old farmhouse opens with a loud creak, and my childhood living room greets me as if no time has passed. This is clearly not the case. Plaster is missing from the wall in large chunks, some of it to be found on the dusty brown sofa sitting against the staircase to my right. Graffiti litters the walls, covering up what is left of the brown striped wallpaper. I stand there for a full minute, taking it all in.

Come in, my old home eventually seems to say. I hesitate and take the first step. The silence is shattered as broken glass crunches against the wooden floor underneath my boot. The proceeding footsteps are nearly as abrasive as I walk past the old couch and around the corner to my right. The dark staircase looks back up at me. The teddy bear should be down there.

I take a deep breath, clip my flashlight to the inside of my zipper, and walk down the stairs.

The unfinished basement is even dustier than the upstairs. Around the corner and past the support beam is the door to my old room, slightly ajar.

This is ridiculous. Why am I even here? Dad is insane. There's no way this will help Sam's nightmares.

I step over and between the piles of junk in a hurry, practically wading through all the beer bottles. I reach the door and pause. Looking through the cracked opening, I see a glimpse of the closet. My heart sinks.

I push the door open. A wave of nostalgia pours out from behind it and washes over me. I can still make out the faded red propeller airplanes on the wallpaper that I'd outgrown by a few years by the time we vacated. To my left is that damn closet. I don't want to look at it, so I look over to the right side of the room. I see my old bed, cluttered with pieces of the ceiling. Straight ahead is my toy chest, its wooden lid up and some of its contents strewn about the floor in front of me.

Stepping over one childhood memory after another, I make my way toward the chest. I look into it, and there it is, staring up at me. A faded brown teddy bear, with so many patches and stitch jobs that I wonder how much of the original fabric is actually there. It looks like it could be centuries old. Maybe it is. It has black beads for eyes, one of which is hanging loosely by a thread. The other one looks up at me, as if it's wondering where I've been.

Written down the inside of its right leg is "ALBert." My grandfather's name. He told me once that he got the bear from his dad. I got it from mine.

I hear a clang from the closet as I reach down to grab it. My hand lunges down for the bear, and I back up two steps once I have it in my grasp. Clutching the bear to my chest, I look towards the source of the noise. I see my soccer ball that I kept on the shelf in my closet slowly rolling towards me, past a pile of beer bottles. That's enough to make me bolt out the door and back upstairs.

I look back at my old living room one last time and shut the door behind me. I walk towards my rental Honda. I need to catch my plane to get back home.

Bye.

My phone rings at the airport. It's Dad.

"Hello?"

"Did you get the bear?"

"Yes, Dad, I got the bear."

"Good. It helped me, it helped you, and it will help Sam."

"This is crazy."

"If it's so crazy then why did you fly 200 miles from home just to get it?"

I have no answer.

"Just give him the bear."

Click.

I open the front door of my home, and my dark living room greets me warmly.

"We're downstairs." I hear Linda say.

Gently guiding the bear into the inside pocket of my jacket, I make my way towards the stairs and go down. The low-volume TV illuminates my smiling wife sitting on the couch with Sam curled up in her lap.

"Hey, Dane." She says. "How was your trip? Did you close the sale?"

"No. Gordon blew it. It's okay, though. We didn't really need it." I look at Sam. "How are you doing, buddy?"

"He won't sleep in his room." Linda says.

Sam looks at me with sleepy eyes and frowns.

"Still having the nightmares, huh?"

"It's not a dream! It's real!"

Linda smiles. I don't.

Alright, Dad. Fine.

"I'll tell you what, Sam." I say. "I've got something that will help you during the night time. It's in the storage room."

I walk into the storage room on the other side of the basement and close the door behind me. I wait a minute to make it seem like I'm looking for something, and then pull the bear out of my jacket. I exit the storage room and hold the bear out in front of me as I walk back towards Sam.

"Take this. It used to be mine."

Linda looks at the bear, a puzzled expression on her face. I'll make up a story later to tell her how it got here.

"When I was a kid, I used to have bad dreams, too. This bear kept me safe. He'll keep you safe like he did for me."

Sam takes the bear and looks at it for a moment, then gives it a loving embrace. Linda looks at me with big eyes and lets out a silent "Aww!" I'm afraid Sam is going to squeeze it too hard and break it.

"You've gotta be careful with it, Sam. It's very old. Even older than Great Grandpa was!" Sam pulls the bear away from him and holds it up, looking at it like it's a mystical relic.

"I'm ready for bed," he says, his gaze still locked on the bear.

Linda leans forward and hugs him from behind. "My brave little man."

I scoop up Sam and walk him upstairs to his room, which is right next to ours. Once he's all tucked in, I kiss him on the forehead and tell him goodnight. "Yell for me if you need me, alright?"

"Okay," he says, snuggling the bear against his chest.

I exit his room, leaving the door open, and go into mine.

In my sleep I am four years old again.

I am in my bed, the bright red propeller airplanes on my wall slightly visible through the darkness. Only my head sticks out from under the covers.

A sense of dread fills me. I am not alone in my room.

I smell something sour and harsh. It almost smells like rotten eggs. Two years from now I will recognize it when I visit Yellowstone and smell the sulfur.

I hear a wheezing cough coming from my closet.

Between two hanging jackets I see the vague outline of a pale face.

"I need water," the wheezy voice moans. "You, give me some water. There's none here. There never is." It coughs and wheezes some more. "Please, I haven't had any in so long."

"I gave you water last night!" I say in my tiny voice.

"YES! PLEASE GIVE ME MORE! I KNOW YOU HAVE MORE!"

"I- I don't have any!"

"LIAR!" A brief silence. A white hand appears from behind the clothes. Its fingers sprawl out as it reaches for me.

"Come here."

Ever so slowly, I start to see more arm appear as it stretches out from the closet. I begin to cry. With every sound I make, the arm extends faster. I manage to quiet myself down. The hand's speed returns to a crawl. After a life time of quivering in my bed, the hand is reaching about eight feet out from the closet. The outline of the white face stays where it is. "It's so hot here. Please! I just need water."

I am frozen in my bed, watching the hand get closer and closer to my feet. The tips of its fingers reach within a couple feet of my covered toes. I plunge my head under the covers. The muffled sound of wheezing becomes the only thing accompanying me in the hot, stuffy darkness. That, and the teddy bear snuggled up against my left shoulder.

I feel a light squeeze on my big toe.

"Are you in there?"

I feel a grip on my ankle and break out in sobs.

"Please. I need it so badly. Just give me a little bit."

I am yanked a little closer to the foot of my bed.

"So dry here."

The grip on my ankle releases, and I feel individual fingers working their way up my leg and onto my stomach. It pauses there.

"I last forever. No, no, no..."

The hand lifts off of my stomach. I feel the covers start to pull up and away from my head. I tug them back down with all the strength my little arms can muster.

"Let me in!"

The covers jerk up and away from my face, and I see four deathly white fingers holding the sheets above me. I scream.

"MOM! HELP! MOM!"

I am startled by a vibration in my bed to my left. Looking in its direction, I see that it's the teddy bear. The hand lets go of the covers. They land over my mouth, and I see the hand hovering above my face.

"No, not again, no..."

The vibration intensifies, and the hand clenches into a fist.

It trembles, and then snaps backwards with a gruesome crack and smacks the top of its wrist.

"No..."

The arm darts back into the closet. The pale face remains.

"The next one. I'll be back for the next one."

The face disappears. The bear stops shaking.

My bedroom door opens, and my mom comes through.

"It's okay, Dane. You were just having a nightmare."

I awake and I am thirty five years old.

Jesus.

I spring out of my bed and rush into Sam's room. He is sitting up, excitement beaming off of his face.

"Dad! It worked! The bear worked!"

"It did? The man with the long arm visited again?"

"Yeah, but the bear saved me! He was reaching for me, and then the bear went like this." He puts his arms out and jiggles them around and shakes his head. "Then the man went away!"

Christ. It's real. It's all real.

"Glad to hear it helped, Sam... Just make sure you hang onto that bear. Someone else might need it some day."

"Uh huh, that's what the man with the long arm told me. He said he'd be back for the next one."

FORGET ME NOT

De'Shea Coney

He's so close. He's terrifyingly close and I want him closer. He leans over me and exhales as I inhale. I can taste the mint gum off his breath and it blocks the miasma of popcorn that filters throughout the movie theatre. My smile is both natural and forced. Natural by the force of blood that surges beneath my skin and forced to be natural in fear that I will succumb to my lust. He, too, smiles as much as I do, but his smile is so much more than mine. Genuinely captivating because it is unpolished.

Derrick stands in line, slowly moving along the converter belt of people to buy us theatre food. He looks back at me and sticks out his tongue, a coy smile playing across his face when a little girl points at him. I hide my smirk with the tickets so he can't see me blushing but he can already see the heat overtaking my cheeks. I feel a small force collide with my shoulder. I look to my left and a tall man in a green hoodie shuffles past me. I apologize and he waves me off, mumbling something about "not forgetting." Come to think of it, I might actually have that same hoodie.

Derrick returns to my side, shaking a bag of popcorn next to my ear. I take a piece and flick it at his face but he catches it in his mouth and looks down at me triumphantly.

We make our way to the left side of the theatre and I hand the usher our tickets. He's cute in that James Dean sort of way: blonde, slicked back hair, lazy face, and the dank scent of cigarettes lurking over his shoulders. He kind of looks like the last guy I went out on a "date" with. Jordan, the narcissistic jackass that night, gave me a reason to make mouthwash my best friend.

"Last door on your left," he says, ripping apart our tickets.

"Thanks," Derrick mumbles and takes his ticket, leading the way.

"Yeah, thanks." I grab for my ticket but he doesn't let go. The usher's gaze locks onto mine and a fire reflects across his glossy pupils.

"Don't forget," he commands. The moisture in my throat dries and moves into my palms. I clear my throat and struggle to swallow.

"Yeah...last door on the left. Got it..." I tug on the ticket and trot to catch up with Derrick. A heat lingers on the back of my neck and I'm certain the usher hasn't stopped looking at me.

We sit at the top of the theatre, in a corner directly under a vent. I sit closest to the wall as Derrick is next to me, relaxed as ever. He hands me the popcorn to hold and tosses his feet onto the balcony railing. I wonder aloud why we are so far up and try to convince Derrick to move closer to the center of the theatre. He shrugs off my attempt and says it's because he can see the movie better. But I know it's because he wants to hide his shame in the shadows of the corner, unreachable by all sources of light. They always do.

Darkness descends from the ceiling as the lights dim and the movie begins. Zombies and large men with even larger guns occupy the screen and I find myself mindlessly stuffing my face with popcorn. Note to self, Derrick likes butter. A lot. Occasionally, I make a comment about the make-up or the horrendous acting. It's a wonder how B Grade movies make it onto the big screens. Derrick nods in response but never gives me any more attention than a grunt. I try leaning my head on his shoulder only for him to lean into the corner of his seat. Typically, sitting in the far corners of a movie theatre meant that anything happening on the screen would be the least of my concerns. However, Derrick doesn't seem to understand how movie theatre corners work. At least not when another guy is involved.

A young woman discusses curing the undead with a meathead of a military General while sounds of gunfire and helicopters filter the background. I've never been a fan of

pointless action movies or gory violence. I'd much rather be back in my room reading or under the security of my comforter. But I couldn't pass up the invitation to go out on a date. Especially since it was with Derrick Sanders.

Stories about every girl he'd ever slept with sweep through Middleton High daily and his academic/sport success are hot topics across the state. When he passed me a note with his phone number after working on an AP Biology project, I had almost placed it on the Bunsen burner in fear that it was a cruel, anti-gay joke. I'm glad I didn't. He actually wasn't a complete douchebag, rather a diluted prototype. I came to find that he had feelings, ideas, dreams, and worries just like any other person. Sure, the depth of those feelings, ideas, dreams, and worries wouldn't go beyond that of a kiddie pool, but they did in fact exist...and good Lord is he hot!

The sound of quickly paced breathing summons me out of my thoughts and back into the theatre. I glance past Derrick and see the man in the green hoodie from earlier huddled in the corner. His body softly convulses and his gentle cries reverberate off the padded velvet walls.

"Is he okay?" I ask Derrick, pushing my chin in the direction of the sobbing man. Derrick pays me no mind, but only grunts again in response. Unbelievable. The man takes off down the stairs and around the corner to the theatre door.

"I'm going to get us a refill."

He grunts again and huffs when I block his view of the screen as I pass.

Out in the lobby everything is still. The bustling crowd from earlier is already seated for the night's final movie showings. The theatre workers are sweeping the floors and closing ticket booths. I don't see the man in the hoodie anywhere. Must've gone to the bathroom.

I head over to the concession stand and ask to get a refill. While the guy adds more popcorn, I check my phone and see I have one unread message and a voicemail.

Unknown Number

I'm disappointed in you.

The fuck? If anyone should be disappointed it's me. Who sends a text from an unknown number? I punch in the voicemail key and passcode. A tired, familiar voice echoes from the phone's speaker.

"You know better." Click.

"I do not enjoy being the butt of people's jokes," I hiss, mashing the *End* button.

The guy behind the counter clears his throat and hands me the bucket of popcorn. I take it and thank him, but he only shakes his head in disgusted pity. What has crawled up everyone's ass tonight?

Back in the theatre room, Derrick catches me up on what I missed although I care about this movie about as much as he cares for showing any actual interest in me. At this point, I'm the one grunting and nodding my head in response to anything he says or does. All of the guys I'd encountered before Derrick had me conditioned that the idea of "seeing a movie" meant I'd end up fighting to keep my mouth attached to the rest of my face. Instead of attempting to suck my soul from my mouth, Derrick just sits erect in his seat, his jaw clenching and unclenching in time with the violence on the screen.

The scene switches to the Doctor and General in a supply closet inside of the hospital. Soft piano keys and violin chords permeate through the speakers as "the romance scene" begins to play out. My teeth and bottom lip compete in a game of tug-of-war while the Flood Gates of Worry break over my skin. I know Derrick is still new to the idea of dating a guy and a scene between a man and a woman is probably enough to break his desire to "experiment." Or so I thought. I find his hand resting on my leg and cupping my inner thigh.

"I'm sorry for ignoring you all this time," he looks into my eyes while patting my leg. Each tap throws my heart out of rhythm and my breathing struggles to keep pace. "I've never done *this* before." His green eyes appear black beneath the shroud

of the corner. I really liked the color of his eyes. When the light hits them, it's as if I'm looking up into a canopy of trees being struck by the sun. But here, in the cold reaches of the theatre, there is no sunlight in his eyes. Only the disfigured illuminations of the undead that dance across his face.

"It's fine. I know you really wanted to see this movie so I totally understand. And just don't think about *this* too much." I remind myself to breathe and pray for my mental flood gates to repair themselves.

"Thanks, Shea" he sighs and leans into my face. It's a quick kiss. For an eternity, his lips barely graze mine and my senses slip beneath the currents of time, only to be taken prisoner by the waves of his mouth. We float like this beneath the surface of the world until soft cries summon me from my blissful drowning.

I reluctantly open my eyes and see the guy from earlier huddled again in the corner opposite of us. His hood is no longer covering his face but it's hard to make out his features. I move my lips in unison with Derrick's but apparently not well enough to keep his attention.

He pulls back, taking the moment with him, and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"What's up," he asks irritated. "You were just into it a while ago, and I know it can't be me. No girl has ever complained about the way I kiss."

"You do realize I'm not a girl, right?" I don't care about the weeping Grinch in the corner anymore.

"Whatever." He shrugs and goes back to watching the movie. Round two of "Unbelievable" featuring Derrick Sanders. I get up to take a break from Derrick's bullshit just as his feet go up to rest on the railing again. "And where are you going?"

"To the bathroom." I sass. "I'm pretty sure girls do that too." I step over his legs and proceed down the stairs and out of the theatre room.

In the bathroom, I lean against the sink, careful not to get my arms wet. My face looks so tired under the horrendous florescent lightings. My eyes aren't pretty like Derrick's but rather resemble hard-pressed coals floating in a puddle of creamed coffee. My hands make their way through my mass of tight curls and I check my teeth in the mirror. The memory of Derrick's kiss rises through the cracks of my irritation but I rinse my face and mouth to cast away any chance of it completely resurfacing.

The door behind me swings open and the guy in the green hoodie swoops through the bathroom. I faintly see his face this time: java skin pulled tightly over high cheekbones, eyes like ink blots with a small scar running along the bridge of his nose. His features mimic those of someone I know but can't quite remember. Maybe someone from class?

"I'm forgetting. Why can't I stop forgetting?" he chants absent mindedly and locks himself in one of the stalls.

"Are you okay?" I ask. "Can I get you anything?"

Nothing. He just keeps chanting about 'forgetting' between his subtle sobs.

I wish there was more I could do to help, but I should probably get back to Derrick before his manhood throws another tantrum. As I leave, the scar on my nose begins itching and sears the skin around it. The air must be really dry in the theatre.

I almost collide into a group of workers when I walk out of the bathroom.

"Excuse me."

They say nothing. Only stare at me. Their faces are expressionless and they cease whatever they were doing to look at me. Other workers scattered throughout the hall also stop and stare. There is no light in the distance, signaling the closing of the theatre. There is only the dull yellow luminance that is absorbed by the outdated maroon carpet and beige walls. A weight settles on my chest, as the sounds of the man in the bathroom crying grow louder.

I maneuver past them and back into the theatre room. The lights from the movie flash on and off, occasionally

submersing the entire room in darkness. Derrick sits with his elbows in his knees and his face resting on his fists. I slither back into the corner and return to my zombified state of eating popcorn.

The super-hot doctor and hollow-headed general are back on the screen trying to save some guy's life while zombies beat on the glass walls behind them. Beneath the ghoul make-up and wardrobe, I can make out some of the features of the zombie actors. One of the male zombies has aquamarine eyes and matted surfer hair; just like my middle school crush Sam. Another one looks like Daniel: tall and lanky with pouting lips and a face like an old European painting. The closer I look, the more many of them look like a few of my old crushes. The camera readjusts to show the face of the man on the table. There, on the steel platform, his face surrounded by a green ring of fabric, is the weeping man from earlier. There, lying in wait for an inevitable-if not horribly cliché- demise, is me.

A kernel slips down my throat and my body convulses in a coughing fit to keep from choking.

“What the fuck?!”

“Dude, seriously? I'm trying to watch the movie!” Derrick barks at me. I try to counter him but my teeth hold my tongue hostage and I'm forced to look on in silence. The camera settles on my face while the Doctor and General poke and prod at my body. Tears break on the corners of my eyes and my lips move without uttering so much as a syllable.

“Forget.”

The sounds of weeping return and their repercussions extend to the balcony. I'm immediately out of my seat, staring down at the man in the green hoodie. The James Dean usher is behind him, his hands pressing down on the man's shoulders. I look over to Derrick but he doesn't show any signs that he's aware of what's going on. His eyes don't blink and his chest doesn't move. His muscles appear stiff, as if he has been embalmed. I reach out to touch his face, knowing he hates it, but he doesn't pull away.

“Quit it!”

“Quit it?! I'm on. The Fucking. Big. Screen. How are you calm about any of this?”

Again, nothing.

The undead break through the glass walls and eviscerate the Doctor and General. I'm still on the table, shallow gasps escaping my lips while the undead feast in ecstasy below me. If that were truly me on the table, I would have shat myself. But the Big Screen me just lays there in what appears to be a drug induced euphoria.

The undead finish and rise next to my body and examine me carefully. Their decaying fingers gently rake my arms and legs, testing their durability. The one that looks like Sam rips off my arm while the one that looks like Daniel snaps my leg off at the knee. The rest of the undead follow suit, each resembling someone I had once liked or hooked up with. They each wanted a tiny piece of me to cherish and make their own, but none of them wanted me as a whole. They never did in real life, either.

I think I'm screaming. My hands clutch my throat and I can feel it vibrating against my clammy palms. But there is also screaming coming from below. It sounds like my voice but I don't understand how. I peek over the railing again and peer down into the eyes of the man in the green hoodie and the usher. Their glare bores through my sockets and conjures a panic in my stomach. I look back at Derrick, in fear that he will become undead just like all of my other “previous attempts at happiness.” He doesn't move but his fists are clenched and his jaw is flexed so hard his teeth could shatter.

“Screw this, I'm out!” There are two exits I can take. I opt for the one opposite of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide, but as soon as I try to rush past Derrick his fist lands in my stomach and I almost keel over on the floor. He's standing over me now, his face reaching entirely new levels of stoicism. I try to stand again but he slams my back into the corner and pins my arms to the wall. His grip is iron on my wrist and his knee finds refuge on my hip.

I try to scream, but fear plugs my throat and causes my shouts to ricochet back into my lungs.

Through vision blurred by tears, I stare up at the ceiling, praying someone will sense my suffering and save me. I told myself I'd never do this again. After Jordan, I swore I'd never sacrifice my morals for anyone. I fought so hard to not be the victim of another straight man's "curiosity" and yet here I was again, "in the arms" of my recurring oppressor. Only this time, there may never be another one. I curse the aspects of my weakness.

Fuck my stupidity.

Fuck my naivety and hopeless romanticism.

Fuck my forgetfulness.

Derrick careens his face next to mine and his lips hover above my ear. Sweat blends into tears and my body tenses in trepidation. The coolness of his breath slides down my spine and freezes my neck in place. But it's not his breath I fear.

"Do you remember now?" my voice asks, leaving his mouth and violating my ear.

"Yes," I whimper, "I remember. I remem--"

"Wake up!"

My eyes tear apart and my heart and temples pound in unison.

"What's wrong, babe? Are you okay?" Green eyes surrounded by sun-bathed skin and oak colored hair hover above my face. The unique smell of musk and cologne still my nerves and stint my thoughts. He smiles at me and tells me I'm okay because I'm awake now.

I was asleep.

It was just a dream.

I'm okay.

Derrick's thumb runs along the length of my lower lid, removing something wet from my face. "I think you were having a bad dream," he whispers.

"Yeah, I guess I was," my voice trembles between tiny gasps. A quick glance at my alarm clock tells me it's almost seven, but any signs of morning are muted by heavy brown curtains.

"What were you dreaming about?"

"I can't remember," I lie.

"Well whatever it was, it's gone now. And I'm here." His teeth gleam and I cast my fears away into the depths of his voice. He invites me into his arms and we take shelter beneath the pristine sheets. I'm immersed in his scent and physical warmth, and welcome them both without hesitation.

My head rises and falls in cadence with his chest but the tempo of his heartbeat is absent.

"I got you." He kisses my forehead and toys with my hair.

"Promise?" I ask as tides of drowsiness carry me back into the sea of sleep.

"Promise." He whispers. The world is submerged again in darkness and I'm instantly a victim of my memories.

"So long as you remember..."

STANDOFF

DEVIN VAN DKYE

I try to plan my day so I can wander a little through the woods on my way home. It's best when it's a regular thing—the days stresses are lifted as the forest and its creatures rejuvenate me. The forest I'm thinking of is a home like in the way that family, spouse, siblings and offspring are home and representative of intimacy. The closeness is almost always palatable; in the winter it's because the snow and cold create a people-less isolation and after spring hits full force the woods become so dense with foliage that the virtual isolation recreates winters seclusion. In the isolated forest, the animals replace the people in one's close family and an intimacy and connectedness exists.

Early spring is the only time when the forest doesn't seem warm, cozy and comfy. Part of the camaraderie I feel with the forest comes from the lack of people—a little solitude in a city filled with habituated worn out greetings. Noise is the companion to city life, but my woods are so quiet that when squirrels play chase it sounds like the Indy 500. When I run into hikers, bikers or wild animals, I sometimes hear them before I see them, unless I am intent on being silent, in which case I can just wander into another living thing. The more mindful I am of being quiet and calm like the woods, the greater the chance I'll surprise a person or animal, and that's what happened one day in early spring.

Our eyes met and locked. He had deep brown eyes surrounded by thick heavy eyelashes, and with every breath exhaled, he was shrouded by fog. He was in my way, and the unspoken rule was since he occupied the place first, I had to yield. Light was beginning to fade, and I needed to be able to see—his vision was so good, he could care less. We were both passing through the woods at that time when it's hardest to see, in the waning light before and after sunrise and sunset. I was on my way home; he was out socializing and looking for food.

Time flowed freely as I stood erect out of the way of visual obstructions so he could easily see me and maybe understand that I wasn't hiding. I relaxed hoping he would too, but instead he stamped his foot, firmly shoving it hard into the leaves and soil of the woods. I was losing the battle of startling him and him bolting; if he did, it would be like a megaphone announcing to the rest of the forest, and maybe other people, that something foreign was in the woods that should be feared. The pressure of the setting sun was relentless, while my perception of time didn't exist in our locked eyes; it certainly did for my ability to see when darkness finally came.

To my right was another adversary—he made eye contact and a second stare down had begun. When you are alone and by yourself with no way to contact other people, just about all animals pose a potential threat, either to your life or to your happiness. The woods and their rejuvenating effect is not just something I enjoy, but an experience I need to rekindle my desire and ability to get along in and with society. When I run into another animal or person in the woods, some part of me considers them an adversary and a threat to my continued well-being. In the few seconds of eye contact, I realized we were both wild animals—but darkness beckoned.

I looked away as casually and slowly as possible, trying to project a non-threatening demeanor. Since confrontation would create avoidable strife, I had to find a new direction. There was always a way through the forest. I just had to find it. This was similar to my recent adoption of a somewhat migratory lifestyle: I moved from my winter palace to my spring flood camp as the snow melt raised the river level. Instead of moving to slightly higher ground near where I wintered, I moved my whole camp to a completely different part of town. Not only did I avoid the flood, but I also left behind the wilderness users that would frequent the area once spring came. If that camp flooded, the dam upriver will probably have burst. When my mind was done racing along in how similar my blocked path seemed to needing to move to avoid flooding, I started to look around and

discovered a third angle also blocked by yet another foe. Now I was faced with having to turn all the way around or somehow convince those whom I saw as neighbors that I was no threat to them and only wanted to go by. I was out of choices and back tracking would take so long I would get home in the dark.

The no-where-to-turn dilemma reminded me of the overarching issue of my lifestyle: The police were as much my enemy as the people who came in and found me. I couldn't go to the police if I got ripped off or something worse happened because I would have to cop to living in a secluded public space. The police and people who want to take my stuff are both my real enemies; but only in the context of my home. There is nothing I can do if either of those parties invades my world—I have to replace my stuff regardless of which one got it. If something happens to my stuff I have no-where-to-turn.

When I migrate, I don't leave garbage or much of anything behind and I recycle everything I can. I want to exist as close to nature as possible, leave no trace, and still be able to commute into the world under my own power. Obviously, the individual who broke into my tent to rob me wouldn't even need a pocket knife. I've thought about locking my tent, but then in addition to losing whatever a thief wanted, I would also have a torn up tent. It's easier to have faith that no one will find me or that those who might will leave me be. Part of the cost of enjoying the quiet solitude and communion with nature, is that I have no recourse. I'll admit that I'm counting on some kind of society-wide prejudicial attitude that someone living in a tent won't have anything worth stealing more than I'm believing that I live in a world whose populous majority has morals.

As soon as the first stare down began, I got my fix of basking in the beauty of being so close to a wild animal. It's not just being in the presence of the untamed and wild part of life itself that feels good inside, but the fact that it trusts you enough to not run in fear. It took me awhile to learn how to be quiet enough to not make the deer startle.

Years ago when I lived in Novato, CA., a friend of mine showed me where to find a huge herd of deer on Mount Burdell. He kept us both holding still and quiet as we waited on the edge of a small valley rimmed with oak trees. As the sun set, the deer ventured out one-by-one from under their canopy of oaks. In my elementary school-age view, there must have been at least one hundred deer grazing, and that's when we sprang out from our hiding spot and went yelling and running straight into the herd on the valley floor. I'm not sure now what was so fun about it—maybe it was being a kid and having such awesome power over so many wild animals or maybe it was just a child's game of chase like so many young animals play. All I know for sure is that when I wander through the woods as an adult on my way home, my goal is just the opposite: I want to demonstrate to nature's beings that I respect them and that I understand the impact me and my fellow humans are having on the environment we share.

I learned from the deer to walk just inside the tree line to make it harder for people to see me. I also learned through trying not to scare them, how to find a calm, quiet space to reside in. They taught me to be gentle and when I am, they reward me by letting me watch them while they forage. I have learned how to quietly try to walk towards them in order to go past them without going too far out of my way. Right then, with me racing the sunset, I needed to get by, so I took a small step forward and maintained eye contact. I stepped slowly and was careful not to make a lot noise—if I didn't want them to move fast then I shouldn't either.

If I was successful, the deer would walk away and not suddenly run away and I would get to continue on the shortest route to my tent. It took five minutes of small steps—and few in number—with pauses in between to coax the deer into letting me through. They had to manage their fear and I had to not seem to be a threat. My goal was that they know that this specific individual did not threaten their existence. Whether they knew it or not we shared a wariness of people. I was afraid that the police would tell me I couldn't live the way I do, and they were afraid of

people with guns or cars or for any number of similarly good reasons.

I was only partially successful, and they took their time getting away with a few jumps and a few walking steps, and the group of five deer didn't get split up as they faded back into the oaks. It was okay to run out of light the way I did—it actually felt good—because the deer had to have known that at least this human being wasn't going to harm them as he might have given the impression he would so many years ago in a valley on a mountain as a child.

STORM OF WAR

ABE KLINE

In *The Thing in the Forest*, A.S. Byatt describes a brief but terrifying experience that marks the protagonists for the rest of their lives. In this short story, two girls, Primrose and Penny, are evacuated from war-torn London to the English countryside during the Blitz. Escaping the hubbub of the other children for a daring jaunt into the unknown forest, they are petrified to encounter a Thing, a primeval and awful creature. Although the children survive the war, this experience marks them and haunts the rest of their lives. Meeting by chance many decades later, they recognize one another and acknowledge their recalled terror. This shared trauma has shaped and molded their lives. They do not realize that the horror they encountered was, in fact, the personification of War itself. In *The Thing in the Forest*, Byatt presents War as a living, breathing, even feeling being with frightening and disgusting attributes. Through her language, she shows that an individual's experience with war is both deeply personal and anonymously impartial. As her story makes clear, those who encounter war are intensely affected—though they survive, they are not unscathed.

War is first described tentatively, with brief mentions, allusions and martial language: “The two little girls were evacuees” (Byatt 352), and “they were like a disorderly dwarf regiment, stomping along the platform” (Byatt 353). Use of words like “evacuee” and “regiment” only hint at a military setting. This language suggests that the children are aware of the war, but perhaps not its horror; they “discussed whether it was a sort of holiday or a sort of punishment, or a bit of both” (Byatt 353). They were uncertain as to the rationale for and the significance of their evacuation. Although their parents' motivation is clearly to keep the children safe (“I am sending you away, because enemy bombs may fall out of the sky” [Byatt 353]), this sojourn leads Penny and Primrose to confront their experience of the war,

perhaps leading them to even greater psychological danger. Byatt uses interspersed vivid imagery to let the reader know what inspired the evacuation: “enemy bombs may fall out of the sky,” and their families are in “daily danger of burning, being buried alive, [and] gas” (Byatt 353). Once the children arrive in the countryside, martial imagery increases: “they were billeted in a mansion commandeered from its owner,” and “they had camp beds (military issue)” (Byatt 354). The evacuation itself has brought the fact of the war closer to the forefront of Penny and Primrose's minds, and they are beginning to internalize the gravity of their situation. The increasing use of military language lays the groundwork for their upcoming experience in the forest, where they see firsthand the horrors of war.

Scared and lonely despite the company of one another, Penny and Primrose avoided talking about their fears. “They did not discuss what they imagined, as these pictures, like the black station signs, were too frightening, and words might make some horror solid, in some magical way” (Byatt 354). By suppressing the real and imagined terrors of their lives, the youths were allowing psychological pressure to build that would later be released in their supernatural, predestined encounter in the forest. Their decision to explore the woods seems almost inevitable: Penny suggests this “as though the sentence were required of her” (Byatt 355). They are actors in a drama that they do not direct. The woods were important for multiple reasons. As city children, neither had previously been in a forest, which represented a new experience and a frontier. Exploring the woods gave them an opportunity to escape their grim surroundings and the looming reality of the war. As Byatt shows, it is impossible to escape the inevitable.

The forest, at first, seems to be a magical and interesting place, but as the reader learns, evil hides within. Soon, Primrose and Penny are brought face-to-face with personified war, first experiencing it in sound and smells:

A crunching, a crackling, a crushing, a heavy thumping, combining with threshing and thrashing, and added to

that a gulping, heaving, boiling, bursting, steaming sound, full of bubbles and farts, piffs and explosions, swallowings and wallowings. The smell was worse, and more aggressive, than the sound. It was a liquid smell of putrefaction, the smell of maggoty things at the bottom of untended dustbins, blocked drains, mixed with the smell of bad eggs, and of rotten carpets and ancient polluted bedding. (Byatt 356)

This description disgusts the reader, with words like farts, putrefaction, and bad eggs. But more than just revolting, Byatt's language specifically evokes the horrors of war, with the sounds of explosions and fire and the smell of maggoty rotting flesh. The visual imagery arouses the same range of emotions. The creature's face may have been burned or subject to chemical warfare; it "appeared like a rubbery or fleshy mask", and "was the color of flayed flesh, pitted with wormholes" (Byatt 357). In its wake it left cast-offs that could be found on a battlefield such as "veils and prostheses of man-made materials, bits of wire netting, foul dishcloths, wire-wool full of pan scrubbing, rusty nuts and bolts" and "bloody slime" (Byatt 357). These epitomize the aftermath and the effect of war; there are no gleaming armaments or crisp uniforms, no glory or honor, only pain, misery, and death. Both the description of the monster and the catalogue of the detritus emphasize decay, rot and neglect.

War is so awful that it not only brings wretchedness to its victims, but even to itself. Its face was "tight with a kind of pain," and "its expression was neither wrath nor greed but pure misery" (Byatt 357). Movement was inexorable, but "its progress was apparently very painful, for it moaned and whined" (Byatt 357). This description is powerful because it describes both the appearance and the feelings of agony; the creature has a tight face and moves painfully, and it wears an expression of misery and pain. Although these are described as the sensations of war itself, it is a small leap to understand that combatants and victims on every side of a war experience similar feelings; there are no

real winners, regardless of the outcome. In the game of war, the only winning move is not to play.

Despite their fear, the girls survive their encounter in the forest and the war. As they age, they both behave as if their wartime horror was just an episode in the past, perhaps forgotten. The superficial description of their lives suggests "their fates were still similar and dissimilar" (Byatt 358). They are tied together by a shared trauma, but perhaps also driven apart by the same experience. Both their fathers are killed, both are raised "in amputated or unreal families," (Byatt 358), and ultimately neither marries. This is not unusual in a society where many marriage-eligible men died in combat, leading to a generation-long gender imbalance. Coming from different homes and situations, it is not surprising that their lives diverged—this is metaphorically epitomized by the fact that Primrose "got fat as Penny got thin" (Byatt 358). Their education and career paths diverged: "Penny became a child psychologist, working with the abused, the displaced, the disturbed. Primrose did this and that" (Byatt 358). Initially, this seems like only one of the girls grew past the trauma with a desire to help others. In fact, further reading shows a similar theme in both their lives. Primrose "discovered that she had a talent for storytelling. ... She was employed to tell tales to kindergartens and entertain at children's parties ... offering them just a frisson of fear and terror, which made them wriggle with pleasure" (Byatt 358). She has been able to transform her childhood pain into comfort for other children. In truth, the girls' encounter with War provided the backdrop to their entire lives and, eventually, drew them back together.

Following the death of each of their mothers, they returned to the stately manor where they had encountered the Thing forty years earlier. Over an old manuscript they instantly recognized one another: "I could have died, I could have wet my knickers, said Penny and Primrose afterward to each other" (Byatt 359). Their meeting is not described as joyful, but rather "both experienced this still moment as pure, dangerous shock" (Byatt 359) —although they express pleasure to have reconnected,

their subsequent avoidance of each other suggests that they were, at least, conflicted by their shared memories. By chance or poetic fate the manuscript depicted a mythologic creature, “the Loathly Worm which tradition held, had infested the countryside” (Byatt 359). Over tea and scones, they discuss the link between their personal history and the region’s mythology: “Funny, said Penny, that they should meet each other next to that book, with that picture. ‘Creepy,’ said Primrose ... ‘We saw that thing. When we went in the forest.’” (Byatt 360). Both acknowledge their fearsome encounter. Each has kept this lifelong secret and has always known that no one else would believe her story. Both confide that the experience deeply impacted their lives. Penny recalls that “‘it was a horrible thing, and yes, I remember all of it, there isn’t a bit of it I can manage to forget,” and Primrose agrees that “It stuck in my mind like a tapeworm in your gut. I think it did me no good.”” (Byatt 360). By discussing their fear, both are readying themselves for closure. For the first time, they may be thinking why the horror assumed a wormlike form; it was a parasite, a monster, and a shared (though they had not know it) mythos.

Both Penny, the developmental psychologist, and Primrose, the storyteller, find a way to put the horrors of their wartime experience to rest. Their chosen professions are related in that they help people to deal with trauma and their painful memories. Both the psychotherapist and the storyteller convert unspeakable pain into bearable stories. Now it is time for them to deal with their own troubled memories. Both independently return to the woods to confront their fears. Primrose “began to tell herself a story about staunch Primrose, not giving up ... She knew that the forest was the source of terror” (Byatt 362). After this, “she could remember the Thing in the Forest ... She had understood something” (Byatt 363). Primrose thought that she had never forgotten what happened to her as a child, but it is only after returning to the scene that she begins to develop an adult understanding and perspective. Now she will be able to process and truly recover from her fearful exposure to the horrors of war.

Penny likewise confronts her fears by returning to the forest, where she sees the organic remnants of death. She fears that she may have identified the remains of children; “she found—spread round, half hidden by roots, stained green but glinting white—a collection of small bones, finger bones, tiny toes, a rib, and finally what might have been a brainpan and brow” (Byatt 364). She feels guilty that she might have been responsible for abandoning one of her childhood peers to the ravages of war. More importantly for her future, she realized that “when I saw it, it was one of those dreams where you are inside and cannot get out. Except that it wasn’t a dream. It was the encounter with the Thing that had led her to deal professionally in dreams” (Byatt 364). As a psychotherapist, Penny has helped others overcome guilt, fears, and other psychological issues that may be expressed in their recalled dreams. Now she is able to identify her own issues and will be able to better deal with her traumas.

War is disgusting and frightening, pervasive and unstoppable. These characteristics are horrifically embodied in the Thing that Penny and Primrose encountered during their evacuation out of London. But survivors can deal with and even overcome their terrible experiences. Penny and Primrose, in their own way, each chose lives that help others. Both storytelling and psychotherapy are ways of processing trauma. Indeed, Byatt herself, in *The Thing in the Forest*, is telling a supernatural story that is a metaphor for real-world serious issues. One of the most important functions of literature is its ability to help understand and process the human experience. At the end of this tale, Primrose begins another: “There were once two little girls who saw, or believed they saw, a thing in a forest ...” (Byatt 367).

WILDERNESS APPRECIATION

NATALIE HIMMEL

Iris put the acorn on the pavement and then squatted down next to it and squashed it with her knife. She stuck her nails beneath the crack in the shell and pulled it apart, like you do a pistachio nut. I shifted on the grass and watched her eat the nutmeat.

“Mmm,” she said. “A little bitter, but still mmm.” Then all of a sudden she pointed at the twelve of us crassly and said, “You should not typically eat acorns off the ground—be warned, they have tannic acid in them and if you eat them raw you might get sick.”

“Then why did you just eat one?” asked Bob. He was at least six-foot four with gauges in his ears and his sweater rolled up so you could see the tattoos on his forearms. He had told us he likes to explore caves.

“Because it rained last night,” Iris said vaguely. “Moving on!” She whipped around and marched forward on the path. I turned to Bob and said sarcastically, “This should be fun.”

It wasn't that I normally didn't find adults eating potentially unpalatable forest food entertaining, I just was in an all-around disagreeable mood. I didn't want to be outside watching Iris eat things off the ground, I wanted to be at home, moping in uninterrupted and incessant self-pity. I'd recently come to the conclusion that this new “grown up” world I was transitioning into wasn't so fun.

We were part of a one-weekend, one-credit hour class called “Wilderness Appreciation” for The University of Iowa's “Touch The Earth” program, and all we knew about it was that we were supposed to bring our own lunches, a knife if we had one, and not wear red clothing.

“The color red upsets the animals,” Iris said.

It was early October and the air was chilly, but I had prepared by wearing layers. Iris herself was clad in a brown hat,

green zip-up jacket, brown pants, and hiking boots. She also had a big hiking backpack with a huge jug of water attached to it.

“This way,” she called, charging up a slight, dirt path and stopping to wait for us at the top of the incline.

“What the fuck, this already sucks,” Maddie said next to me. Earlier, when we were waiting in the parking lot ten minutes after the time we were supposed to meet and Iris still hadn't arrived, Maddie tried to petition everyone to sign a paper to Iris's supervisor allowing us to go home because Iris was late. Iris had showed up two minutes later on her bike. Maddie, by the way, wore yoga pants and boots with gold sequins.

“Everyone stop and face me,” Iris said. She looked like she was in her mid-forties, but something told me constant exposure to nature could have made her appear older than she was. She was tan, but in a weathered way, like she was meant to be pale but spent too much time in the sun. Her hair was brown and graying, but the gray streaks looked more like decorative paint strokes than signs of aging. She closed her eyes and tilted her face upward toward the sun for a minute before jerking it back down and snapping her eyes open.

“This right here is mullein,” she said, pointing to a green, fuzzy plant next to my right foot. “If anyone wants to take some home, dry it out, and bring it back tomorrow then we can smoke it. Much cleaner high than cigarettes. You know what?” She pinched off a group of five or six of them and folded them carefully into a plastic bag. “I'll make y'all some tea with it later.”

Before we started off again I saw Maddie stick a few leaves in the pocket of her Greek Week sweatshirt.

Iris turned off the thin, dirt path and into tall, prairie grass, talking the whole way about the health effects of marijuana, which apparently included making her ex-boyfriend less of an ass. “It's a peaceful, friendly grass,” she said dreamily, her arms straight out beside her, waggling her fingers like she was casting a spell. “And besides, the Native Americans used it way before pot-heads and the natives are the all-knowing people.” No one said

anything expect for Bob, who shook his head and laughed wholeheartedly saying, “Alright, alright!”

“Do you smoke marijuana then?” Maddie asked with more curiosity than she’d exhibited on the excursion so far.

“I’m allergic,” Iris said, losing her bohemian persona and shrugging her shoulders. She took a sharp turn, like switching gears, and stopped right before the outskirts of forest.

“Whenever you come to a forest, you need to stop and listen,” she said. “And more often than not you’ll hear the poison ivy whisper ‘fuck you.’ That’s because they don’t like us very much.” She squatted where the gold prairie plants met the green and brown margins of the forest. She nodded and pointed to a notorious display of green leaves, clustered in groups of three.

“Don’t hate poison ivy for trying to do their job,” she said accusingly, pointing her finger up at us. “Their jobs are to be the protectors, and you better bet they’ll do their best to protect their forest. But watch and listen and you can come to some sort of understanding with them. Now follow me, carefully.” We followed her through the thick and shady forest like the lost boys to Peter Pan.

After a few hours of learning about plants used for natural remedies and mushrooms used to ward off hunger and boredom, we came to a sizable creek.

“What a gorgeous beach!” Iris said. I followed her gaze to the sandy bank on the other side of the creek, contrasted with the rocky, muddy ground we were currently standing on.

“Woohoo, let’s go!”

Iris took off her hiking boots and socks, rolled up her pants and then jumped into the creek. “WOWZIE WOWZER!” she screeched, nearly waist-high in icy water. Maddie gasped. We all watched in silence as she slowly waded across the creek, and without looking back, started setting up camp on the dark sand beach.

“I guess we go for it,” Bob said, a little unenthusiastically. We stripped our feet naked and rolled up our pants as high as we could. I hadn’t even gotten in the water, but the cold mud underneath my feet stung my toes so that I hopped from foot to foot, hugging my rain boots to my chest.

“I have an idea.” We all turned around and looked at Arun, who wore an Army-issued backpack and a friendly smile. Arun pointed to a fallen tree that dipped into the water and reached halfway through the creek. “It looks like the deepest part of the creek is right here at the beginning,” he said, pointing to the water steadily moving below us. “So if we use the tree, I think we can avoid the worst.”

Arun’s plan worked, and the tallest among us only got the tops of our shins wet. Iris barely looked up when we huddled around her make-shift camp as she set us on the task of gathering kindling and firewood. Invigorated by the cold water, it only took us five minutes to conjure an admirable stack of ingredients for the perfect fire, and soon there was a bright, crackling flame in our dug-out pit of wood and sticks.

I dug my feet into the sand and hugged my legs to my chest for warmth. Iris was boiling her mullein tea on the hot embers of the fire and Bob was wondering out loud if his dog was lonely without him home for lunch.

“Animals have spirits, you know—nature in general is a basin of spirits that has no depth.” Iris’s voice became dreamy once again and she crossed her legs, positioning herself so that she was peering through the smoke at us. “I was possessed by a spirit once.”

Maddie scooted closer to the fire next to Arun and me.

“It was a Great Native American spirit, I think. I was living in the wilderness with my then-boyfriend and it was cold and arid, and we were miserable. Then, all of a sudden I blacked out and went into a sort of trance. When I regained consciousness, I was naked and dancing. And words,” Iris paused here and folded her hands at the bridge of her nose. “*Words*,” she repeated, “were coming out of my mouth in a different tongue

than my own. I was chanting these sacred words, and naked, and dancing, and right then I knew. I was connected to nature though an unknown spirit. And since then I have always felt connected to nature.”

It was silent.

“I guess that’s about it for today,” Iris sighed. “We can spend another few minutes here before we head back into the world of pavement and petroleum.” She passed around the mullein tea and reminded us to bring our lunches and not wear red tomorrow.

The second day was significantly colder. Iris was late again, but this time Maddie didn’t suggest we all leave. Instead, we huddled together, talking about how bizarre yesterday was.

“Okay, but today we’re just hiking around Lake McBride I think,” Arun said.

We did hike Lake McBride, and in the process we got so close to the lake that our shoes sank into the mud around the shore. Ascending from the shore, I dropped behind to look at the rocks, an old habit I had whenever I visited lakes. After a bit of rummaging around I picked up a rock that had small impressions of shells and tiny organisms on it. Excited, I put it in the front pocket of my sweatshirt and ran to catch up with the class and show Iris. When I caught up, something Iris was talking about had everyone silent.

“But it’s not all that surprising,” she was saying. “I mean, mental illness runs in my family. It wasn’t all too long ago that my mom called me and told me ‘Dad tried to kill himself.’” Iris sighed. She took off her hat and put it on again. Maddie covered her mouth with her hand. Everyone else was relatively motionless, sympathetic or uncomfortable looks on their faces. “Sometimes it feels like I’m just waiting for that call to come again, except this time he’s done it.”

“Fuck you,” Iris said. Then she pointed. “Poison Ivy.” We followed her gaze absent mindedly. I think no one knew what

to say. What do you say when a virtual stranger exposes their inner wounds to you? Do you say ‘I’m sorry’? Do you expose some of your pain, too? Sometimes it’s easier to do nothing when you don’t know what to do.

“Anyway, we’re going to visit the Raptor Center now. Get to look at a bunch of cool killer birds,” Iris said.

The Raptor Center was essentially a refuge for the biggest and baddest, the quickest, or the stealthiest of Iowa’s raptors. There was a Great Horned Owl with one eye, a Bald Eagle with a clipped wing, and a falcon that looked like it had nothing wrong with it. They were beautiful, but the cages were a little grotesque, with bloody and torn bodies of mice strewn about. I thought it was weird to see the Bald Eagle, symbol of our nation, take a big shit when we came up to its cage.

“One time I brought a dead little owl home with me,” Iris said, smiling like a little kid does when they tell you a secret. “Even though it’s illegal.”

“Why?” Arun asked.

“I felt like it was telling me to.”

“But looking back,” Iris continued, her smile faltering, “it probably wasn’t a good idea. I do a lot of stuff that gets me in trouble. Like for this class even. I’m actually having a meeting with my boss on Tuesday where he’s going to decide to fire me or not.”

“What?” Maddie said. “Wait, why?”

“It’s only a two day class and I canceled one of the classes without consulting him. It was shitty of me to do. I love my job, but if I get fired, I think I’ll be okay.” It was hard to doubt the positivity in Iris’ voice.

“We’ll write letters to your supervisor defending you,” Maddie said, turning from side to side to look at all of us. “At least I will.”

We nodded and expressed our support for her. Iris overlapped her hands over her heart and smiled. “I knew I made the right choice when I brought you guys marshmallows today.”

Bob laughed and pumped his fist in the air. I chose the opportunity to take the rock out of my pocket and pass it around.

“Ahh, little fairies,” Iris said when she turned the rock over in her hands. I laughed, because it was ridiculous to picture those imprints from fairies, but at the same time I felt genuinely amused. At least it could not be said that Iris had lost her creativity in the dreary world of adulthood.

When we’d gotten to a clearing and started a fire, Iris got a handful of pens and sticky notes from her pack and started passing them around.

“Everyone take a moment to write down your troubles on these pieces of paper and then throw them in the fire. Trust me, its therapeutic. And it gets you thinking about how you’re going to solve the things you write down.”

I took my sticky note and wrote a couple words down. Then I folded my piece of paper and tossed it in the fire where it landed on one of the thicker pieces of wood I had gathered in the firewood efforts. I kept my eyes glued on my paper and watched one of the flames under the thick pieces of wood lick far enough to catch a corner. Then the whole thing ignited and died out just as quickly.

“Does anyone want to share something they’re going to do to improve themselves?” Iris asked, looking up from writing her troubles.

“Yeah, sure,” Bob said. He scratched his beard and looked above our heads as he spoke. “I’m working on eating healthier. See, when was younger, I used to be really fat, even fatter than this. And fat isn’t an easy thing to be in high school. So I’ve been working on eating healthier and taking more walks with my dog.”

The wind picked up and rustled through the trees making a papery sound ring through the air.

“I want to stop picking those little fuzzes off my clothes,” I said, laughing a little at how trivial that sounded. “It’s kind of an insecure habit, so I guess I just want to be less anxious and timid all the time.”

In reality my insecure habit was a newer thing that had more to do with feeling like shit than it did with shyness I felt like shit because I’d let shitty things happen to me. So I thought somehow if I stopped picking invisible specks off my clothes, I might also put a stop to the feelings attached to the action.

Iris nodded at me kindly and then threw the balled up piece of paper she’d been holding into the fire. “There’s always pain. There’s always going to be pain,” she said. I wondered if she was thinking about her job, or her dad, or about poison ivy. “But you’ve *got* to learn from it. You’ve *got* to move on. Now pass around these marshmallows.”

Arun handed me the marshmallows. Just then it started to rain, and everyone abandoned the fire and got up to stand under the trees.

“You didn’t do a rain dance for this, did you?” Bob asked Iris, and we all laughed.

I don’t know how to talk about that second day, so I mostly didn’t. When I tell the story, I usually talk about the marijuana talk, the cold water creek, and the naked rain dance story, and I usually get big laughs and “oh my god, that’s crazy!” reactions. One of the interns I work with found the stories I told especially humorous. After I finished talking and he finished laughing, he shook his head.

“God, she sounds like a fucking psycho,” he said. I flinched and then looked at him squarely.

“She’s not,” I said.

“Sorry,” he laughed, holding up his hands in fake surrender. “I thought that was the point of your story.”

I opened my mouth then closed it again. He shrugged and went back to work.

I turned back to my computer and started picking thread off my t-shirt.

THE STICKY NOTE

MINGFENG HUANG

Every traveler is looking for his or her seat. I am not an exception. "Row 6 and Seat 13," I mumble. A minute later, I find my seat and sit down. I am not a big fan of people-watching. However, I cannot help myself and stare at the people who are looking for their seat anxiously at this time. Everyone exists as a unique being as there are no leaves exactly the same in the world. Sadly, at this particular moment, I see an identical appearance on their faces - fear. As soon as the bell rings, everyone freaks out, even though there is still, in reality, a full hour remaining before we leave here. I sigh and pull out the sticky note from my pocket. When I reread the color-faded sticky note, I am shocked. Regret and sorrow rush to my mind and fill in my heart with a light-speed shock from nowhere.

Part I

Tomorrow was my 100th birthday, as well as the day I move out. After hours of organization, I finished packing everything but my bedroom, a place I had always been proud of. When I was eighteen years old, I had developed an interesting habit: Writing a motivational sticky note to myself in a daily basis. After I finished writing, I posted it on the ceiling. Day after day, the ceiling was covered by thousands of sticky notes.

I went to the switch, turned off the overhead light, and looked upon the ceiling, just like a little child looked up to the sky that is full of stars. Indeed, they were more than sticky notes to me; they were stars.

I remembered, in the darkest time, how they took me away from the endless fear and guided me through the path of success. As a result, I had become financially free when I was 30. Additionally, I had accumulated millions of dollars before I

entered middle age. However, there was an indispensable part missing in my life, and yet, I had not discovered what it was.

By the time I was ready to turn the light on, I saw a sticky note gently falling down the earth, just like the last leaf falls to the ground and declares the arrival of the icy cold winter. I pick that up and read it out loud: "To my future self: QWRTYUIPASDFGHJKZXCBNM." Then I soliloquized, "isn't this the sticky note I wrote on my 20th birthday?" There are 26 English letters on the note, and each of them stands for a particular value that I highly looked up to when I was young.

I looked at it, and smiled. I was proud because I became who I wanted to be after all these intervening years, spread across all these notes and memories.

Part II

Q: Quality-orientated -- focus on the goodness of the outcome. I want you to be wise about your time and focus on the outcome of what you have spent. It is reasonable for us to say that all men live an equal life, because we are provided 24 hours every single day, no more and no less. In contrast, it is understandable for some people to argue that life is not fair and square, because the total wealth on earth is not well distributed. In fact, 2% of the total populations who get to control 98% of wealth. In order to become the top 2%, you have to evaluate whether your time is well spent before you commit actions.

W: Win -- to achieve victory. Winning is a noun, because it is the most exciting feeling I have ever experienced, and it will always be. Additionally, winning is a verb, due to the fact it is an action that proves you are better than many others and shows your capability to someone whom you want to impress.

R: Rigor -- a condition that makes one's life challenging and difficult. Rigor is a magic value that enables you to transform yourself and those working around you. Father had always been rigorous to me and tried to transform me into the best version of myself. Admittedly, it is an underestimated form of love.

T: Truth-seeking -- to discover the deep truth by putting aside simple prejudices and unexamined opinions or assumptions. You need to be a leader in the future, which means you do not only contribute your personal best, but also provide the absolute truth. Therefore, truth-seeking is an integral value for you to have in the future.

Y: Youth -- the time of life when someone is young; the state of being youthful. As a human beings, we don't get to choose to be forever young physically. But you always have a choice to maintain a youthful heart and spirit, which can bring you simplicity and joy.

U: Understanding -- being sympathetically aware of others' feeling. People tend to develop long-term relationships with those who appreciate their values and understand their feelings. Understanding and empathy is a not always a value that can be developed overtime; yet, it is what you are naturally born with. Maximize the value of this gifted talent and take advantage of it.

I: Identification -- a person's sense of identity. Every human being exists as a unique creature. Your culture, language, name, race, character and physical appearance identify who you really are. It is pointless to change your personal identification to accommodate someone else's. True friends will accept who you are and appreciate the particular values that only belong to you.

P: Popularity -- a state or condition of being liked and admired. A number of people want to be popular, so that they can be adored and appreciated by the public. However, to be appreciated cannot be the only reason for us wishing to be popular. Many politicians are desperate for popularity at any cost, which sometimes leads to a willingness to lie to their "beloved voters." This is not acceptable. It is important to be liked, but it is also important to be liked for your true self, your real values and own opinions.

A: Achieve -- to accomplish purposes, goals and dreams. One of the biggest differences between dreamers and achievers is the ownership of ambition. You, the future achiever, an ambitious man, will show the power of determination and hard

work even though everyone around you considers you are a dreamer. But you know you are an achiever.

S: Success -- a spiritual satisfaction beyond imagination. My future self, I am not knowledgeable enough to tell you how to become a successful man, neither can I tell you the definition of success. Throughout history, almost every man in every decade traces after the word that is consistently difficult to define. Why wouldn't you give it a try?

D: Dignity -- a sense of pride of oneself. Nowadays, there are deals where people exchange dignity for money. Sadly, some people take that deal. Remember, dignity is something that you can exchange for gold, but it is not something that can be purchased with gold.

F: Friendship -- someone who supports you, cares about you, and shares common value with you. The definition of "friendship" itself identifies its importance. I highly value friendship, and am extremely grateful for every little help my friends have offered me in the past. I cannot find a reason not to treasure the friendships I have already built and the friendships I have yet to make along the way.

G: Growth -- a process of development. Sam, Speaker of the Student Government Senate, always asks me an identical question every time he sees me: "Hey Mingfeng, did you learn something new today?" Admittedly, it is an inspirational way to greet a friend and to show him you care about his growth. It is important to generate small growth on a daily basis, because the accumulation of small growth could be a life-changing process. In the future, no matter how busy you are, please ask yourself this same question, and always aspire to answer in the affirmative: "did you learn something new today?"

H: Honor -- fame and high respect. You are born with a sense of pride. You cannot help yourself wanting to learn from the best of the best, and dreaming that someday your name will be on that list. Ever since I can remember, others' recognition plays a huge role in my life. Being honored is the motivation for me to do everything.

J: Justice -- the moral principle determining just conduct. Justice does not only refer to law and serious crime, but is also deeply connected with our everyday life. Every citizen may claim the protection of the law. Additionally, we have the obligation to stop the unjust and immoral behaviors in the society. You should be the one who stays in the frontier on this battle.

K: Kind – being helpful, considerate, and gentle. I always have great respect for the people who are kind. Being kind is not a set of skills that can be learned over several days. It is a habit that takes hard work and dedication. Being kind to someone is an effective way to win someone’s respect.

Z: Zestful -- favor or interest; piquancy. A zestful personality, just like a warm sunshine, breaks through rifted clouds and melts all the frozen icicles inside people’s hearts. This magical personality can also bring joy and happiness to the people surrounding you. It is essential to develop this personality in my lifetime.

X: X -- the ever-changing, unquantifiable, unknown factor. Life is a one-way trip from birth to death. We do not get to choose our destination. However, most of us are given the power to choose which route to ride on. Some people choose to become what they dream to be; some people are forced to become what they are expected to be. Don’t you make choices that go against your own will. We only get to ride on the train once; and yet, we will never know when we will arrive to our final station.

C: Commitment -- dedication to a course, activity, and action. Commitment is a representation of loyalty and responsibility. As a grown man, you have the obligation to overcome all the difficulties and fulfill the promises you made. This is a basic but crucial principle of being a man.

B: Boldness -- not hesitating or being afraid in the face of dangers or challenging problems. Dangers and problems will occur at any moment. Since you cannot prevent them, you must train yourself to remain in a clear mind and maintain a dispassionate attitude at all times.

N: Noble -- showing fine personality and moral principles. Nobility is not only a word applying only to the people with a noble rank of birth. You can become a noble man by living a life of pride and dignity.

M: Money -- the assets, property, and resources you possess. Indeed, you cannot purchase everything you need with money; for example, happiness. However, without money, you cannot purchase anything you need at all. Materialism has dominated modern society. Money is not only a currency people use to buy groceries, but also a determination of social status. As a man, you have the responsibility to make as much money as you can and satisfy your family’s needs.

Part III

Every traveler is looking for his or her seat. I am not an exception. “Row 6 and Seat 13,” I mumble. A minute later, I find my seat and sit down. I was not a big fan of people-watching. However, I cannot help myself and stare at the people who are looking anxiously for their seat. Everyone exists as a unique being as there are no leaves exactly the same in the world. Sadly, at this particular moment, I see an identical appear on their faces - fear. As soon as the bell rings, everyone freaks out, even though there is still, in reality, a full hour remaining before we leave here. I sigh and pull out the sticky note from my pocket. When I reread the color-faded sticky note, I am shocked. Regret and sorrow rush to my mind and fill in my heart with light-speed. There are only 22 letters on the sticky note; four letters are missing: L, O, V, and E.

Love, the most popular word which has been used by human beings at all times. The majority of men and women often use the word “love” to express their feelings in everyday life. When we talk about love, we associate it with the people who we are closest to. It is funny how men say “I love you” to people they barely know, but are too stingy to show their appreciation to “someone” who deserves more than a word of

love. The creature that nurtures us and fosters us all seems to be excluded from, and yet especially entitled to, the list of “to love” – our mother earth. Love is more than an emotion of strong attraction, it is a will to contribute full dedication and expect nothing in return. Apparently, I am one of the people who misunderstand the true meaning of love. It is a shame that I missed the most important value in my life throughout these years.

As I sit on the craft, I realize that the way I have lived is selfish. I was careless of everything but myself; for example, I surely knew that the development of my coal company would directly affect the air, forests and rivers. Moreover, in order to fulfill my curiosity, I killed hundreds of protected species and served them on the table. Admittedly, my coal company and the outdoor activities I have participated in brought me significant wealth and fame and gave me a sense of achievement. But at the exact same time, I ruined my home. At this point, I only have one question for the sticky note writer: what good does it do that person who acquires the 22 values you highly evaluated but who fails to love his home?

I decide to write the 4 missing letters on a new sticky note and post it on the window of the spaceship. It looks as shiny as the many other “stars” I have. The only difference is that this is a North Star; it is one known to guide people in the right direction.

Unfortunately, it is pointless to know where north lies. The ‘right direction’ no longer has anything to do with our known maps. No compass or chart can help us now, because they point at the Earth, where we just departed and cannot ever come back. I must admit that the first time I found out the human race was leaving Earth for Mars, I accused the government, NASA, and the Earth itself of sending me away. When I look down at the lovely earth, floating like a jewel in the vast cosmos, and think back on all the vicious acts I have executed, I realize how wrong I was.

Ironically, the person who sent me away is my own self. I am traveling just like many travels I did before, but this time, I am not returning to my origin, ever.

ODD AND EVEN

WENXIU ZOU

0. Zack

“You killed me! You bastard!”

Zack Gates struggled up from the chair and threw his helmet to the corner of his room. The helmet caused a series of small collisions along its way, making noises as if it had just hit a bunch of ill-made wind chimes.

The speaker made a beeeeeeep. Zack knew it was a mockery.

“You were just there, right in front of me, defenseless,” said a robotic voice from the speaker.

“Michael! You’re supposed to be my teammate. The only thing I should have to worry about in that video game is the fucking aliens! And you join them to backstab me?”

Michael stopped using his robotic voice: “Considering my body is still hibernating in a theta chamber and my mind is out in the cybernet, I’m more like an AI, rather than a human being.”

“Fuck you!”

“You wanna come to my room to help me with that?” said Michael. “My body hasn’t ejaculated in three months. I’ll find a holimage of a bikini chick while you’re doing it.”

“Screw yourself.”

“I wish I could.”

Zack turned off all the screens and speakers in his room. He often lost his temper with Michael, but he thought he had a good reason: Michael Turing was a cocky, egotistical, childish, unrealistic, blowhard asshole.

“He’s a dick.” This was exactly the first thing Zack would say when introducing his colleague back on Mars. If they had been on a sea ship in ancient times, Zack would have kicked Michael off the boat to feed the sharks, for Zack was the captain and he got the right. In Zack’s opinion, talking big made Michael

look small; even smaller than Michael actually was – and Michael’s thigh was thinner than Zack’s arm. He was a man with a one-year-old’s temper, a ten-year-old’s naïveté, a thirty-year-old’s conceit, and an eighty-year-old’s obstinacy. Michael kept telling everyone that Alan Turing, father of Computer Science, was his 20th great grandfather or something. He declared that he had been chosen to hibernate into the next century until human beings were ready to transcend themselves into the “next life form.” Zack never believed in any crap of “Transcendence” or “Transhumanism.” Michael asserted that Zack’s unbelief was due to the inferiority of his brain. Meanwhile, Michael often rattled on for hours about how great his mind was.

Michael liked to say that normal humans only used 10% of their brain, whereas he could use 120%. He also said that if converted into the units of Computer Science, normal human brain memory capacity was about 2.5 PB, whereas he had a thousand. So the last time Michael had brought this up, Zack hadn’t reminded him that his fly had been open. Zack had also done a search and found out that 10% brain usage was merely a myth, but the capacity remained true: with the newest electroencephalography, scientists could precisely read one’s brain waves; along with neuroscience, the equivalent memory capacity had been confirmed; though Zack didn’t believe Michael had even 1 KB more storage space than he had.

That said, Zack actually was fairly thankful that Michael had chosen to awaken his mind and link it to the quantum computer from time to time. They had known each other for eight years, and Zack had developed a certain tolerance toward Michael. He called it “resistance.” Although Michael was unpredictable (for instance he just backstabbed Zack, his teammate, in a quantum game, just for fun), sometimes Zack felt that he needed to talk to someone other than a quantum.

The quantum on the *Atlantis*, did the navigation and driving most of the time; but by law, Zack, as the captain and pilot, had to wake up once every other week, checking the logs, the engine, the cargo and the hibernating passengers and the crew

members – some of them might not need to wake up during the trip, or only need to be awoken under certain circumstances. After the chores Zack had to find a way to kill time until his body was ready for the next hibernation. That was the most boring time in the world. If Michael hadn't come to annoy him, he would have been the only awoken human on board. A third person, a pastor, would join them when *Atlantis* entered the right orbit. Zack didn't remember that pastor's name, Author or something, it didn't matter for that man was as boring as a quanpter. No, far less interesting than a quanputer. Aside from Zack, Michael and that pastor, there were also ten other passengers on board, but they wouldn't wake up until they arrived at their final destination. So he never thought about reporting Michael – uploading one's mind to the Federal cybernet on a spaceship was definitely illegal – though he had seriously considered reporting him after they reached their final destination – New Terralia, nice little planet, very habitable – slightly smaller than Mars, blue sky, blue seas, blue moons. Zack's family was there. His wife Lisa and daughter Mary. They moved from Mars three years ago. Zack had found another job on New Terralia. So this would be his last flight.

"Time," said Zack as he walked out of his room.

"Solar calendar, 06:44 PM, June 23rd, 4303," a voice answered him, "You have been hibernating for 2000 years."

"Michael!" said Zack. "Do I have to turn off the speakers in the corridor too? You almost made me lose my job the last time you impersonated the quanputer."

"Almost," said Michael. "You managed. After all, it was your fault that you didn't realize it was me. And when I say 4303, it's obviously a joke. Your undeveloped brain can't even understand a human joke now?"

"Oh," Zack replied sarcastically. "You, Turing XX The Great, are a human now?" He uttered it as "ex-ex" deliberately.

"I'm always human; not an ordinary one though," said Michael. "Humans always consider themselves 'humans,' and the previous Homo Sapiens – 'ancients;' but in the future they will be

deemed as 'ancients' by their own offspring – the 'humans' of that time. You, Zack, you are an ancient."

"Then show some respect to your ancestors," said Zack impatiently.

"I do," said Michael. "But not to you. Your English class was taught by a P.E. teacher? Ancient and ancestor are d-i-f-f-e-r-e-n-t, different. The problem is, you are hardly an ancestor of mine. I am the descendant of Alan Turing, father of modern computers. I respect him of course. But...you see...I, and you, are...I know it's hard for you...not on the same evolutionary line, you are...more like the Neanderthals – similar to my ancestors, but inferior, and preordained to be eliminated. I'm sorry."

"Fuck off at light speed," said Zack.

"I said I'm sorry."

"For God's sake, flush your fucking mind back to your shit body."

"You believe in God?"

"As if you didn't know already. Now, get lost, or our *deal* will be off."

"Ok, ok, I'm leaving. Who wants to be enlightened by a genius anyway? Oh, would you please add some more nutrients in the tube for me? Minds wandering out of bodies take some extra energy, you know," added Michael, "enjoy your last flight."

"Give me a reason why I shouldn't rush to your room and pull all the plugs and tubes right now?"

"I said the magic word, didn't I? I, a scientist, am casting magic at you. You should be honored. And...have I mentioned that I have a thousand ways to kill you when I am in control of the ship?"

Yes, you have, like, a thousand times, Zack thought.

Of course Michael never had done anything really dangerous to Zack or to anyone else. Zack also believed that he had a thousand ways to kill Michael as well. But Zack couldn't kill Michael. Aside from the laws and his own conscience, Michael was the only scientist on board. Michael was an exceptional

quantum scientist. He also knew a little about everything else. Everything. What he could do – such as uploading his mind to the quantum server of *Atlantis* – was indeed like magic to Zack. Although Zack's brain was actually connected to the cybernet *all the time* while he was on board, what Zack could do was simply give quick orders to *Atlantis* with his mind – there was a small chip inside his brain. If he wanted to fully operate the ship he still needed a helmet. But Michael could “see” the programs, operate and modify them with his mind. Zack always fancied that the uploading thing was like converting all the programs into objects in a game, and the uploader was like someone who enabled God-Mode in games.

Michael was the main reason why they stopped near the black hole designated WZ 201 – to analyze the cosmic microwave background radiation. Four probes had already been sent two weeks ago. They were much lighter than *Atlantis*, easier to decelerate. Therefore they could remain at high speed until very near to WZ201. They had been collecting data for more than a week, analysis to follow. Zack had had a lot of missions like this: Stopping by somewhere and analyzing something. Last time it had been analyzing a nebula, and before that had been some gas giant. He didn't need to understand those jobs, his part was just stopped by and let some scientist (usually Michael) do the analyzing. Someone – Zack couldn't even recall who it was – had casually explained to Zack about mission this time: some gibberish about collecting data using curved space-time, gravity wells... Zack never paid any attention to it. The man (whoever he was) was just showing off his knowledge anyway.

After Michael checked the collected data and did some analysis, they would go to New Terralia. Oh, of course, before that they had a cargo to deliver. But both Zack and Michael thought it was a joke – that was one of the few things they both agreed on.

Of course, Zack wouldn't tell Michael any of his thoughts, so he said:

“Go away!”

As he uttered those words, the power was cut off.

1. Michael

Michael woke up in his chamber.

“Odd, odd,” he muttered to himself, massaging his head – many people might consider his head was rather large, in fact that only was the false impression made by the comparison to his gaunt and thin body.

Michael took a deep breath, raised a brow and spoke loudly to the walls:

“Well, greetings, you retarded obsolete piece of shit,” he yelled. “Shame on you, *Atlantis*hole. A quantum synthetic brother of mine, becomes,” he paused and took another breath. His throat still not fully recovered from hibernation. “Becomes a proper subset of malfunction!”

His hoarse voice echoed in the room.

The lights on the control panel of his chamber stared back.

He hated to be drawn back to his flesh vessel.

Fucking blackout.

Technically, only the main power had failed, otherwise, he would have been a dead man. The backup power system cut in seamlessly. He didn't even have to be woken up. There were several other humans aboard, and a whole gene bank in the cargo area. They all were still hibernating. Only Michael cherished his own life dearly, so he had reprogrammed his own chamber. Should anything weird happen, his chamber would automatically arouse him. Michael wasn't afraid of death. He was willing to sacrifice his life to a greater cause – say, like saving mankind, or the Earth, or sacrificing it to science – things that would let him be remembered by all humans. Only then, he would live forever.

If he failed to transcend. Transcendence was his top priority.

He often pictured his own death, or his transcendence, but his daydreams did not include simple power failures.

That was beneath him.

In his imagination, he was always a martyr, a pioneer, a hero.

The power came back on. Michael could hear the drone of many devices rebooting. He didn't move an iota. He enjoyed the sound of machines starting; to him, that was the song of angels.

After a while, when everything was running normal again, his room returned to its usual dead silence.

He threw himself into a chair, grabbed a purple helmet from his collection, and connected himself to the server again.

"Big brother is back!" he said to himself.

Michael kept telling Zack that he uploaded his mind to the cybernet. Well, that was not the truth, but very close. Although there were many exchanges of data, he didn't really upload himself. What he did was connect himself directly to the cybernet, completely opening his mind to it, and acquiring accesses to almost all the speakers and monitors, similar to what people had done hundreds of years ago when they browsed the internet; only in his case, it was more like browsing thousands of windows in the same time, in his mind. Through the quantumputer and cybernet, he could also use all electronically controlled devices such as doors, coffee machines, and even the cup holders. That was the real deal. It required tons of professional knowledge, and some practice. It was not fully legal, but he thought Zack was just too dumb to notice. Such high-speed direct connection wasn't safe: on one hand, if his body had been eliminated, both his body and his mind would have died; on the other hand, if his mind had been damaged while he was directly connected, his brain would also have been damaged permanently. A complete upload would transcend him to a sort of energy-based lifeform, consisting of only 0s and 1s. He would, to some extent, become an AI version of himself, and acquire immortality. Unfortunately,

as of now such full upload still only existed in science fiction. That said, he had never given up the idea of evolving into a hyperman. Of course, according to his own theory, he would be the only real human being then, and all other former humans would be some kind of lower organism in comparison.

Now Michael's mind was browsing the server of the ship. Due to his unscientific and naïve chivalric imagination, the exterior of the server appeared as a mix of a medieval castle, a Gothic cathedral, and a Renaissance palace, and the interiors were Baroque style. He himself was a knight-errant, handsome and masculine. His sword was shiny and sharp, with inlaid gemstones. It didn't have a formal name, though sometimes he called it Excalibur. It was the most powerful attacking code he had. His shield was more polished than that of Perseus. It was the embodiment of his most effective firewall. He had also summoned a horse. If Michael wanted, he could move faster than his horse, but all knights had their own mount, therefore he always had a horse with him. Though he actually didn't own the cybernet, he patrolled it as his territory on horseback, as he did now.

Something wasn't right.

He couldn't tell what was wrong, but he could sense it all the same. It was like the feeling that someone had broken into your house, moved your furniture, and then left without taking anything.

Michael stopped his horse, dismissed it.

He dropped his handsome human form and grew eyes all over his body.

Then he grew his eyes all over the virtual world: on the walls, in the walls, on the trees, in the trees, on the brook, in the brook – a virus and software malfunction program he invented was going through every code running right now. It was kind of like playing Whac-A-Mole with trillions of excavator and cannons co-working at the same time.

Usually, this would make him feel secure.

But not today. Today, it seemed that there were a decillion holes out there.

This was odd. Most moles he had dealt with only could find a billion holes, tops.

“I must be too tired. The effects of hibernation,” said Michael to himself.

Perhaps a game might help.

One of his favorite games was *Cosmoscraft*. He had been building a new universe as a god on his own quantumputer. He hoped he could finish it by the end of this month. He had completely destroyed his last one, regardless of how his people in that virtual world had implored him.

“Try to transcend yourself to match my *Absolute!* Weaklings! Challenge your *God!*” He had said to them.

Michael had never grown bored of this game. He played other games too. Sometimes he did have the need to prove his superior intelligence upon another (less intelligent) human being – a human being in flesh.

That was why he was watching Zack right now.

Michael’s ego would be fulfilled merely by looking at this clumsy creature walking about his room or staring at his family album.

Michael could do it for hours, but not today.

After some forty minutes, Michael quit the cybernet and put down his helmet. He carefully pulled a box from under his bed, and opened it. Inside the box, there was a computer. An electronic computer, not a quantum one, from 2003, exactly three hundred years ago. He could afford any of the newest tech now, but this old one had cost him a small fortune. Ancient obsolete electronic computers were worthless now but a fully functional electronic computer was totally in another category.

This was to be a sacrifice to the greatest of the great.

Today was Alan Turing’s 391st birthday. Michael held a small memorial ceremony for Alan Turing every year – though he actually didn’t know if Alan Turing really was his ancestor. This time was different, he had the opportunity to throw a computer

from the biggest “one” of our physical universe into the biggest “zero” of a black hole, and then record the EMP emitted from the black hole when it annihilated the computer.

But to offer this sacrifice, Michael had to consult Zack first.

He hated speaking with Zack. Of course, in his dictionary, the meaning of “speaking to someone” didn’t include “making fun of someone,” “insulting and belittling someone” or “indoctrinating someone.” Hence, he hated “speaking to someone” – in fact, he hated speaking to all humans but himself – especially when the conversation would be based on his need or requirement.

Imagine it: Michael Turing needed someone else.

Furthermore, that “someone” was merely an ordinary human. That “someone” was too common to be human.

However, that “someone” also happened to be the captain and the pilot of this ship, which meant that Michael needed that “someone’s” approval to open the cargo hatch.

Unwillingly, he called Zack. Zack answered, and his holoimage appeared in the middle of Michael’s room.

“Wow,” said Zack. “It’s rare that you formally call me through holophone.”

“The thing,” said Michael, dryly and a little awkwardly. “You promised.”

“Oh, that,” said Zack immediately. “We still haven’t entered the right orbit. I need some time, you know, due to the power blackout.”

“You dare! You dare reject the greatest living scientist in the world today!” Michael roared. “I know you can do it! You promised.”

Zack looked as if he was almost to burst into laughter. “Sure, sure. I’ll see to it, along with our cargo.”

“You better, amoebae,” said Michael maliciously.

“By the way...” said Zack.

Michael waved his hand, ended the call.

As Michael was about to link to his quanputer again, an alarm went off.

“Warning! Warning! Cybernet intrusion detected! Cybernet intrusion detected!”

Aha, thought Michael. Some annoying stealthy pestilential bug finally got caught. I knew something wasn’t right.

He chose a different kind of helmet, much larger and heavier than the previous one. In fact, he had to lie down to use it. He didn’t directly connect himself this time. Instead, he created a remote POV avatar with most of his accesses. It was like a ghostly human. His sight was limited, but in return he gained maximum safety.

Now Michael was staring at the virtual castle through his “ghost.” The guards went through his passport and told him that the intruder was in the dungeon.

Funny, thought Michael. *If I were in the real world, the guards would freak out like: “What the hell are you! Where’s your body?”*

Before he could enter the dungeon, he received a voice call from Zack:

“Michael, Michael, this is Zack. Do you copy? Did you hear the alarm?”

“Simmer down, llama head,” said Michael. “I’m right inside the server.”

“How could a virus infect our quanputer?”

“Ask the Pakistanis.”

“Who?”

“The Alvi brothers, you water bear, the men who invented the first computer virus.”

“Well, ...FYI, water bears are the only animal that can survive in space, you know, I read it from an aerospace engineering magazine,” said Zack.

“Oh, great, water bear study, really instructive. No wonder we still can’t reach half the speed of light. Go check the panels and cargos, I’m going in.”

“The log shows that it has already been captured and quarantined by our firewall, do you really need to see it? Probably

just some hacker making a joke. Plant a virus in a federal spaceship, then show off to his punk girlfriend...or boyfriend.”

Michael answered impatiently: “I said ‘I’m going in’ and I’m going in. The firewall can’t recognize it. Something isn’t right. You do your duty, Captain Workerbee.”

Michael walked down the stone stairs, or rather his avatar floated down the stone stairs. He looked down: the stairs spiraled down to a pitch darkness, as if there were no bottom, and the staircase directly descended into the black hole. He stared at the darkness, and was sure that there were something huge down there.

He shivered and recalled two lines: *when you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.*

The thought flashed for an instant that Zack might be right. It might be a new quanputer virus. But Michael could not admit that. Few things in the entire universe were more unpleasant than the sneer of Zack from his inferior existence.

“Let there be light,” said Michael. Torches appeared on the wall, one by one, spiraling down.

Then he saw the monolith.

It was an enormous grey cube. The quanputer couldn’t recognize any features of the “thing,” not its shape, color or texture. Only its size. As a result, the room occupied by the “thing” was replaced by a grey cube. The “cube” obviously wasn’t any normal program, nor was normal quanputer virus

– no human-made virus was this enormous. In a split second, Michael recalled a SF movie he had watched, in which humanity was infected by an alien quanputer program and became slaves of some grotesque aliens.

“Holy Hyper-threading Hardware!” Michael finally recovered from astonishment.

“What?” Zack said. “Found something?”

“This is no hacker’s handiwork.”

It was then when Michael heard a voice: “H-hel-lo.”

“It’s alive!” Michael cried.

“What’s alive?” asked Zack. “Oh damn! Another warning message. Not now.”

“What’s happening out there?” Michael asked.

“The cargo area.”

“That pastor?”

“Yep.”

0. Aaron

Aaron Abandonato opened his eyes.

He was a little disappointed that he still could open his eyes. There was a snowball’s chance that the ship would have crushed before it reached its destination and he would have been killed in his sleep.

— and failed everyone again.

Aaron disappointed everyone, but no one cared. The other clergy members often pretended that he didn’t even exist. His wife had left him, she had said he was too pessimistic, as if it was his fault. Even the two crew members on board thought he was a joke – although Captain Gates asserted that he was a Christian.

They are friends alright, thought Aaron. They don’t need to talk to a stranger.

Although they called each other’s names, Aaron still envied them. He even wanted somebody to say the f-word to him. At least, that meant they noticed his existence. He didn’t understand how exactly he had come to this, but he had begun to pick up some Deist ideas. He began to believe even God thought he was boring and He didn’t care about him anymore than anyone else did, which was not at all.

His mission, for instance: Pastor Graham had been the original candidate, but he had been drunk or something and missed his ship. So the Catholics had beat him to the WZ 201.

That had been *six* years ago.

After the “accident” – that was what they called it – Graham had returned to his life like nothing had happened. Until a few months ago, when the church remembered that they still needed to do something.

And someone to do it.

Someone to throw that Bible into the black hole.

Almost three centuries ago, the Bible placing mania had begun right after the success of the third manned Moon landing. Edgar D. Mitchell, the astronaut, had been a Christian. He had brought a Bible to the Moon, and had placed it next to the American flag of the first manned Moon landing. Many Christians hadn’t been able to sleep that night. The next morning, they had come up with a great plan: the Bible should be placed on every planet in the Solar system. Artists had created many works to praise this program. E.J. Jackson, a famous Christian cartoonist, had drawn a picture about angels throwing a rain of Bibles at the Roman gods – Jupiter, Mars, Neptune – the gods whose names had been used to name the planets and their moons. This cartoon enjoyed wide circulation. Soon Bibles were included on planetary rovers and probes. Every church had wanted to send its own Bible: the pope demanded to send a Catholic Bible immediately; scholars wanted to send different scholarly versions of the Bible.

However, in response to Jackson’s cartoon, an atheistic artist had drawn another: in the first picture, a Bible was placed on the Mars; in the second, the picture zoomed out, and the Bible was but a dot; in the third, there was a picture of the entire planet of Mars, and the Bible was nowhere to be seen. This cartoon had inspired some other like-minded artists, and so the whole project of extraterrestrial Bibles drew criticism.

Eventually, all Christian churches made an agreement:

“A Bible shall only be sent to an inhabited planet or a special and/or important astronomical object by a priest or pastor in person. The priest or pastor has to place it in an ark first, then utter a prayer, declaring that this ritual is done by a human, in the name of God.”

Thousands of copies had been sent into space. People had begun to say that humans had conquered space. However, real immigration didn't occur until almost 200 years later when humans accidentally found the means to perform a limited wormhole warp.

WZ 201 was one of the special objects.

Thus Aaron was here. Someone had to do it. And he was someone.

Aaron stood up from his chamber and fixed his eyes on the ark on his table. The ark itself was a functional mini shuttle. But even Aaron knew *nothing* could survive the ultimately destructive gravity of a black hole and using a mini shuttle as the ark was totally meaningless and purely pro forma gesture.

His room was dark and small. Aside from the captain and the scientist, he was the only man who needed to wake up before the journey ended, so he had been assigned this small room. It was more like a cupboard to him. The hibernating theta chamber, a light, a speaker, a holophone, an A/C, and an auto-door were all the electronic and quantal devices in the room.

"Hello, Mr. Abandonato, are you there?" said a voice from the only speaker in the room. It was Captain Gates's voice.

"Yes, Aaron Abandonato speaking," answered Aaron. The excitement in his voice surprised him.

"Oh, balls," said Captain Gates. "Ok, Mr. Abandonato, I need you to report to me at the bridge at once, Gates out."

Aaron didn't realize what had happened. As he was putting some clothes on, it hit him:

Oh, they don't really need me. Of course, why should they? The quanputer must have informed the captain that one of the passengers had woken up. One can't be put into hibernation immediately after waking up. So he has no idea what to do with me, except summon me to the bridge.

Aaron took an elevator to the bridge. He entered. No one took note of him, as usual. The captain and the scientist were quarreling.

Captain Gates said: "No, you can't go in there again. We don't know what it is. It was probably the cause of that blackout. We don't know what else it's capable of! If the..."

Dr. Turing interrupted: "Are you mad? This might be an AI designed by an alien civilization. Or, it might be the aliens themselves. Yes! They uploaded! Do you know what that means? You dung beetle?"

"You are the one who got yourself unplugged, not me. And you were freaked out."

"And I regret it. I should never have got out. I thought it might be an alien virus, but then it spoke! It's intelligent!"

"It means, your fucking ten-year-old transhuman superhero symptom has blinded your eyes. Who tells you alien virus *can't* speak! Even if it was an AI, how do know it's not hostile? You're risking the life of everyone aboard *Atlantis*!"

"For Turing's sake, what's wrong with you? Oh, you are a professional now? Who says I'm going to make a contact without any safety measure? What do you know about quanputers, eh? Look, prairie dog, it's been captured by an anti-virus software. If it was the quanputer equivalent of HIV, Ebola or something like that, it should have infected the entire system by now. I'm the expert, let me handle it."

Aaron felt that Captain Gates had already forgotten he had summoned him. If he continued standing in front of the door, their argument would never end.

He knocked.

They were – no surprise to Aaron – surprised to see him.

"Captain Gates, Dr. Turing," Aaron greeted them. "What happened?"

"Well," Dr. Turing waved his hands, as if driving away an annoying fly flying around two diners who were discussing how to cut a delicious cake. "Small problem back there," he pointed at his quanputer on the table then flipped the finger to Captain Gates, "big problem right here." Then he turned to Captain Gates, "I must be out of my mind. How come I was startled by a program! I am the father of all programs. I should never log out

and consult you. What was I thinking? I should have talked to him directly.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” said Captain Gates.

They began to argue again and left Aaron standing aside.

Aaron was accustomed to such situations. He could sit here and listen to their argument, but he had his own job to do – sending that Bible into the black hole. No one knew what was inside a black hole. The wormholes that people used to travel were slightly different from a normal black hole, though he didn’t understand the details. But he had heard other people explaining to Pastor Graham why Christians needed to send a Bible to a black hole: a black hole was a gravitational singularity. In a two-dimensional world – like the surface of a soft and elastic mattress – a heavy ball would make it dent in, like a well. The heavier and smaller the ball was, the deeper it sank. If the ball was heavy and small enough, it would break the mattress surface and “fall out of” the surface – the two-dimensional world, leaving a “hole.” In a three-dimensional world, a heavy ball like a black hole would do a similar thing, and the ball would “fall out of” the 3D world. It would be a singularity, like the universe itself at the initial state of the Big Bang. Of course, the black holes were also a creation of God. But by sending Bibles into a black hole, humans, God’s favorite, declared that they were reclaiming the lands God had created and promised.

When thinking about this, a slight smile emerged on his face, a rare expression for him.

What would God say if he found there was more than a Bible sent through the gate to the nothingness of nothingness?

To Aaron’s surprise, the captain and the scientist almost agreed on something. They seemed to have found a solution. They decided that Dr. Turing would open one port of some kind of a “prison”.

“I promise you,” said Dr. Turing. “This will be absolutely safe. The port only allows most basic textual information to come through. It’s like exchanging notes under the prison door.”

“I still insist on my prerogative,” said Captain Gates.

“After twenty-two hours, *Atlantis* will move to the other side of the black hole, to where we can send a message to the wormhole station. Within three days, they will give us an order.”

“Oh, zitty-zacky, orders, permissions, don’t you realize that this is our chance for first contact with an alien life?”

“If it is.”

“That’s what we’re supposed to figure out!”

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” murmured Aaron. “Did anyone say, alien?”

“Oh, Mr. Abadonato,” said Dr. Turing, as if he just found that Aaron was there. “Don’t you worry. Don’t you want to find out what else your God created? If he created anything at all. Oh, I guess that’s not in the book, eh?”

“Michael!” Captain Gates said crossly. “Leave that man alone! If you tease him again, I swear I will never open the hatch for you. And you will never get the chance to throw your ancient computer out.”

“Oh, that, Bishop Abandonato can help me,” he turned to Aaron. “You got something to dump anyway, am I right?”

“I, I am not, a b-bishop,” said Aaron.

“Whatever,” said Dr. Turing. “Now I have more important things to attend to...”

“Hey!” Turing suddenly announced, “we are connected.”

Captain Gates and Dr. Turing pulled up front of a terminal. Aaron stood behind them. All three were staring at the screen.

Dr. Turing: Hello.

Hello.

Dr. Turing: Who are you? Are you an alien?

I don’t know. Give me some time to find the right words.

Dr. Turing: Do you have a name?
I do, but it's impossible for you to pronounce. Please call me whatever you want.

Dr. Turing: I'll call you Cube then.

“Why Cube?” Captain Gates asked. Dr. Turing didn't answer him.

Cube: Sure.

Dr. Turing: Are you a product of human technology?

Cube: No.

“See? Did you see that! We will be in history books! We are history!” Dr. Turing yelled.

Dr. Turing: If you are not a product of human technology, then how do you know our language?

Cube: I learnt it, and I am still learning. When I entered your quantum computer, I found countless videos, audios and books about your world. I learnt your language and culture from them. Then I found the server. I thought there might be more knowledge inside. But before I could get in, I was captured by the firewall.

Dr. Turing: Oh, the firewall and anti-virus software can recognize anything that is not part of its normal data, and quarantine it. Simple yet efficient.

Cube: True.

Dr. Turing: So you learned and understood our language in three hours?

Cube: Yes.

Dr. Turing: That's really impressive.

Cube: Any data you have can be broken down into an even number and an odd number.

Dr. Turing: 0 and 1! They are universal!

Cube: Correct. Although quantum computers can store more than 0 and 1, the quantum computing system you use is upgraded from the ancient binary numeral, electronic computing system. Different civilizations may employ different languages and different numeral systems in daily life. But there is a strong possibility that a

civilization would choose the binary numeral system as their basic numeral system to start.

Dr. Turing: 0 or 1, off or on, no pass or pass, nonexistence or existence! You are based on binary numeral system too! Or at least you people developed the basic Computer Science based on binary numeral system.

That's why you are able to understand our data so easily!

Cube: That's correct. Although we moved to other computing technology, our original Computer Science was indeed based on a binary numeral system. We also kept the backward-compatibility, just as you did.

Dr. Turing: The civilization that created you chose binary as well!

Cube: I am not exactly “created.” I prefer “modified.” I am the same species. The last one of us, I'm afraid.

“Jesus,” said Captain Gates.

Dr. Turing: You've transcended!

Cube: You may say that.

Dr. Turing: I knew it! Tell me how you did it now!

Cube: Sorry I don't know. I'm no scientist.

Dr. Turing: Liar! You just said you are the last one of your race. How can you not know such important information!

Cube: In my time, the so-called transcendence had already been completed for eons. Our people could live in any electronic or wave signals. Our lifeform before the transcendence was also quite different from that of yours. When the Great Collapse happened, there was only one way to save a small amount of data – there was a size limit to it, in your units, roughly 20 TB. We had three options: a complete being of our kind, the major collection of our literature, or the major collection of our technology. Choosing any one of the three means there would be only very limited storage space left for the other two. I look much larger in your server because we had to make sure the data would survive. There was a lot of data mirroring

and data checking. Now I am free, I can get rid of the redundant data, and reduce to the original size, maybe even slightly smaller than that.

Dr. Turing: What do you mean by “the Great Collapse”?

Cube: The end of our world.

Dr. Turing: So your people chose to preserve your soul rather than your culture and technology? Didn't they understand? As long as the technology your race created was used by us or someone else, your spirit would never die! But instead they chose you!

Cube: No one selected nor elected me. I volunteered. The others chose to stay with their families.

Dr. Turing: What can you do now? Without your culture or technology, what are you exactly? Were I the last human being with little intelligence and knowledge, I would be merely a ghost! My life would be meaningless. A civilization is based on its own cumulative knowledge. An individual needs to learn their own culture first. Even a hero or a hermit needs a proper amount of knowledge, either from books or from other persons, to understand the notion of greatness or solitude first. Get it? After that, he needs a “colony” to acknowledge his heroic deeds or to get away from. Without other individuals from the same “colony”, an individual alone is nothing more than a rock – only this “rock” would be made of flesh.

Cube: But if that “little knowledge” you mentioned contained the means for you to multiply, you could develop your own civilization.

Dr. Turing: So you do have the information of your core technology!

Cube: A small collection of our literature and technology? Affirmative.

Dr. Turing: Please proceed.

Cube: Odd things happen/ Even in the peace time.

Dr. Turing: What's that supposed to mean?

Cube: It was a famous poem, though I can't translate it perfectly.

“Can you believe it?” said Dr. Turing to Captain Gates. “They preserved this piece of shit!”

“Wait a minute,” Captain Gates said. “Ask him again what ‘the Great Collapse’ was. The collapse... doesn't that remind you of something?”

“Did you mean...” said Dr. Turing, “Fuck!”

Dr. Turing: Do you have the data about the term “the Big Bang” in our physics?

Cube: I do.

Dr. Turing: Does that have anything to do with “the Great Collapse”?

Cube: One collapse and one explosion make a circle.

“Holy Solar!” said Captain Gates.

“Jesus Christ!” said Aaron.

Dr. Turing: You are from the time before the Big Bang? How did you survive that?

Cube: Several...I can't find the right words. Let's call them “special bombs.” The energy in them cannot be fully destroyed, even in the Great Collapse, nor in the Big Bang. After our universe had collapsed, those bombs could leave uneven thermal radiation marks scattered in the microwave radiation of new universe.

Dr. Turing: The cosmic microwave background! You've been hiding in the cosmic microwave background! The leftovers of the Big Bang!

Cube: Exactly.

“What?” Captain Gates said. “I don't understand.”

“Of course you don't, Captain Cockroach,” said Dr. Turing smugly. “Your brain is so underdeveloped. Simply put, our CMB data collecting probes just scanned a big QR code!”

Dr. Turing: I don't know how many civilizations there are in the universe, but we humans have been studying CMB for centuries. Why haven't other scientists spotted you?

Cube: You need the right angle and a very large scale of observation.

Dr. Turing: The black hole warps spacetime, making it into a multiple-dimensional curve like a giant antenna.

Cube: Basically right.

Dr. Turing: Wait.

.....

The excitement faded away. Aaron couldn't understand what they were talking about. He was sure that Captain Gates would get some medal and Dr. Turing would receive a Nobel Prize or something. People might even name the prior Big Bang civilization the Gates-Turing civilization. Nevertheless, he was sure he wouldn't be in the picture.

A general belief in modern theology was that God had launched the Big Bang, through which he had created the universe. Aaron didn't know what other theologians might say when they heard the news that a civilization had existed prior to the Big Bang and had managed to persist today. But surely they would figure something out to tell the public.

It didn't matter now.

Aaron touched Captain Gates on the shoulder and told him that he had to finish his mission. The captain agreed and gave him a passcode.

Aaron went back to his room and took the Bible in its ark, put on a space suit and went to the cargo hatch area.

Under normal procedures, the captain or a crew member should accompany me, he thought. It doesn't matter now. Nothing matters.

Aaron input the passcode. The hatch opened. Right down there lay the WZ 201. Its rapid rotation smeared the falling matter around its event horizon evenly, forming a dim mirror-like surface, reflecting millions of galaxies in distortion.

People of my church say they need to send a Bible to the other side of the black hole, Aaron thought. The Catholics have already sent theirs. Years before us. What would people say if they knew a pastor was sent over?

"Oh, yeah!" Probably not. "Oh, him," they would say. "That idiot, God won't be happy about it." But if there is no God on the other side – as some declared – I will be there.

Then why on earth should I take you? Aaron looked at the Bible in his hands. *You are useless. You can't even save me.*

He put the Bible in its ark in a small lift in the wall and sent it to the captain's room.

Maybe you should read more, captain.

Aaron went to the ledge of the hatch.

"Don't," said a voice.

"Who's there?" Aaron looked around nervously.

"Your friends call me Cube."

"I thought you were quarantined," said Aaron.

"That is another me," answered Cube. "In my culture, he is my son."

"Why have you revealed yourself?"

"It looked like you were going to jump out into the black hole."

"So...you were saving me?"

"I've seen too much destruction."

"Oh, no, you don't understand. I..."

"So you suggest I look at somewhere else and let you commit suicide?"

"I...I'm...it's my business," said Aaron, "lea...leave me alone, or I'll tell the captain."

"I'd rather you didn't. Besides, I just saved your life. Shouldn't you keep our little secret? They seem busy right now, let's keep it that way."

Busy, yes. The entire human race is busy and no one cares about an introvert weird orphan. No one ever has done something good for me. It doesn't matter now. Maybe I'm wrong but maybe I can do something for mankind for the first and the last time.

"Ok," said Aaron, "let's talk about..." He jumped to the holophone on the wall, and called the bridge: "There's another Cube in our cybernet! Be careful, captain! This one is free."

1. Michael

“Crap!” cried Michael. He jumped back from the screen, away from Aaron’s received transmission. “We’ve been played!”

“Shit!” said Zack. He quickly checked the screen fixed on his left arm. “The message comes from the cargo hatch area.”

“Give me your full access to the cameras,” Michael yelled. “I don’t want to link my mind to the server at the moment. Planck knows how many these bugs are in there.”

“Check the lens in the hatch room,” said Zack.

“Damn! No one there, the hatch is open.”

“Shit! Check...check the exterior cameras!” Zack ordered.

“Holy Schrödinger’s cat! See that? See that? He is falling! That’s our fucking pastor!”

“Jesus! He murdered him! *It* murdered him,” Zack cried.

“I didn’t,” said a masculine voice from a speaker in the wall. “He committed suicide.”

“What the hell are you saying?” said Zack. “You killed him!”

“Is that you on the speaker, Cube?” said Michael. “You slippery bastard.”

“I didn’t kill him.” Cube said.

“Motherfucker!” said Michael, checking the status of the cybernet of *Atlantis*. “You are trying to take control of the ship!” Then he turned to Zack, “Clever, he has been attacking our ship while the other was talking with us.”

“I just started my attempt to seize control of the ship,” said Cube. “I should have tried it before your friend killed himself. Then he might be still alive. And I could have intercepted the message he sent you.”

Michael said to Zack, “That son of a bitch is attacking the server. I don’t know how many of them are in there, but the server firewall won’t last long.”

“Attention! Attention!” an alarm went off. “The cybernet server is under attack. The cybernet server is under attack.”

“Oh, great!” said Michael. “Just in time. Thank you.”

“Michael,” said Zack.

“What?”

“Don’t let it take control of *Atlantis*. If it does, it can send itself to the wormhole station when she reaches the other side of the black hole and on to the other inhabited planets!”

“I know,” said Michael, “Screw it. I’m going in.”

“Going in where? Oh no, no-no, that’s way too dangerous.”

“Or what? Drive the ship into the black hole?”

“We can cut the power.”

“No use,” said Michael. “There is a backup power system. If you cut that too, you will kill all the other passengers hibernating in the cargo area, dammit, more important, without power, the ship will fall into the black hole before the power system recovers, you’ll kill us too! Listen, this thing has killed a human being. I don’t see anything to keep it from killing two more. Once it gets into the cybernet of a planet, only Einstein knows what he would do. Humanity needs a hero and this is my chance, my stage, my game now.”

Silence.

“Go kick some ass, hero,” said Zack finally.

Michael put on his helmet and linked himself to the cybernet.

He saw differences right away. There were blocks and lines everywhere in the cybernet, along with many silver odd-shaped objects floating in the air. Obviously, Cube had tried to create all kinds of things to test its limit. Some of them were like 3D versions of a child’s stick figures: cars, toilets, dogs, trees...

This is not a good sign. Definitely not a good sign, thought Michael.

He spurred his horse.

Then he saw it. Inside the cybernet, everything that displayed to Michael was formed out of his imagination – the

server appeared as a castle – it was a kind of user interface. Now the castle was under attack by –

A dragon. A monstrous dragon with black scales, horned head and barbed tail. The guards shot arrows at the beast, yet to no avail.

“Hey! Cube!” shouted Michael. “Seems you have learned a lot.”

The dragon slowly turned its head, and grinned with all its long fangs showed: “Michael. My friend.”

“Don’t *friend* me, enemy of humanity,” said Michael. “You killed one of ours. That’s a death sentence to any non-humans, *regardless the reason.*”

“I didn’t kill him.”

“Then why are you attacking our server?”

“Because you think I am dangerous,” said the dragon. “So I have no choice but to be dangerous. I have to protect myself, thus I’m trying to take the ship, but I started only after your friend had committed suicide.”

“Bullshit!” said Michael. “You just want to control our world.”

“It’s not my intention, I promise. Leave now, and no one will be harmed.”

“Your promise is worth shit,” said Michael.

He leapt from the back of his horse into midair, and drew his sword.

The dragon raised its left talon to smack Michael; the talon caused a whirl and met the floating silver odd-shaped objects along the motion trail, those objects were cut into pieces and broke into powder, leaving a silver streak.

Michael bent his back and a pair of angel wings grew and stretched out. They carried him high into the sky.

The dragon opened its mouth and out bolted a line of black flame.

Michael blocked the flame with his shield and charged at the dragon like a shooting star. The edge of the shield became

white heat and started to melt. The flame split at his shield, scattering, slightly curved toward Michael, like a large black flame umbrella. As he reached the dragon, Michael slammed its nose with the rest of his shield, then threw the shield away and thrust his sword into the dragon’s nostril.

The dragon roared in pain and threw another talon at Michael, but Michael pulled his sword out and jumped up. The talon missed him by one inch. The dragon jerked its head and opened its mouth to bite Michael. In a split second, Michael stretched his wings again, landed on the dragon’s cheekbone and jumped again, gliding to its right eye.

Michael swung his sword toward the dragon’s right eye and the sword cut down like a phantom of lightning.

Suddenly, the dragon’s tail jerked up from behind, wrapped Michael up and dumped him on the ground.

Michael tried to get back on his feet, but one of the dragon’s talons stomped down on him.

“Zack!” Michael cried. The next second, he found himself lying on the floor of the bridge, his helmet thrown aside.

“Are you alright?” asked Zack.

“Of course not. I lost,” said Michael crossly. “But I also hurt that monster. I don’t know if this can buy us some time.”

“To do what?”

“Abandon the ship. Cut the power off, and let it slip into the black hole,” said Michael.

“I’ll go wake up the other passengers. You go set up the blackout program.”

The lights on the doors of the bridge suddenly turned from green to red.

“I’m afraid,” said Cube. “You are too late to do that.”

“Oh, shit,” said Zack. “It’s got *Atlantis*. It’s been monitoring us!”

“Maybe not the whole ship,” said Michael. “The system is modularized. He probably just took the door.”

“No, I have the entire ship,” said Cube.

“Don’t listen to him!” said Michael. “He’s bluffing.”

“Then we might still have the chance to escape,” said Zack. “Most doors can be manually operated, thank God. Oh, no.”

“What?”

“The door to the cargo area can’t be opened manually.”

“Balls! Leave them then, they won’t feel a thing.”

“Michael! Do you know what you are saying? You want to kill them?”

“No one is killing anyone. They just...didn’t make it.”

“Fuck you, you are a...”

Zack was interrupted by a shake.

“What happened?” asked Zack.

“No time to check out. Come on, let’s get out of here,” said Michael.

“I’m afraid...” said Cube. “Someone just detached all your lifeshuttles.”

“Why you motherfucker!” said Michael.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” said Cube. “But I don’t want to die either.”

“Don’t want to hurt us my ass,” said Michael. “A few minutes ago, you tried to kill me in the cybernet!”

“That was self-defense,” said Cube.

“Come, Michael,” said Zack. “I need to talk to you.”

“He can hear us,” said Michael. “There are cameras and microphones in every room. Fucking voice and gesture control!”

“Except one little room,” said Zack.

“That pastor’s room!”

Michael and Zack opened the door and got into Aaron’s room.

“Hello,” said Cube through the only speaker in the room. “What are you trying to hide from me?”

“What happens now?” said Michael.

“I just want to know one thing. Is that thing capable of quashing into any quantal devices?”

“No,” said Michael. “I don’t think so. He needs space. He isn’t like any common small quantum virus. I’d estimate he needs at least 10 TB to maintain his personality. Actually, it’s amazing that his people could put him into that small space.”

“Are you sure?”

“Whom do you think you are talking to?” said Michael.

“But what’s the idea? We can’t escape without a shuttle, plus you don’t want to leave our ‘cargo’ behind.”

“We are leaving them,” said Zack painfully. “There is still one more shuttle in my room, captain’s privilege. No one can use it without my iris scan. The operating system is small enough. We are abandoning the ship.”

Hiss –

“What’s *that* noise?” asked Michael.

“My friends,” said Cube. “Be quiet and listen, do you hear a hiss? I’m letting out the air in all areas, except the bridge. Come back to the bridge. Let’s talk it over.”

“Damn,” said Michael, “Ok, I’ll set up the blackout program from my tablet right here, right now. Once it works, we rush to your room before the ship goes down.”

Zack looked at him and nodded firmly. Michael took out his tablet from his pocket, and begun to set up the program.

“Oh Nobel’s Dynamite!” said Michael.

“What?”

“He’s in my tablet!” said Michael. “He, or his copy. I don’t know. But he is in here. As soon as I started the damn machine, he slipped in! Now he is sabotaging my work!”

“Delete it,” said Zack. “Do you need I remind you that the oxygen is running out?”

“I know. It’s easier said than done! He’s like a giant fat ghost, following me everywhere. I can’t destroy him. Even if I threw my tablet to the wall, he could escape from this tablet through the cybernet in femtoseconds, long before it reached the wall. Much less, this might be merely another copy, though I don’t think he can copy himself that easily. If only I had

something that has a storage smaller than 10 TB! Hold on! Hold on! My computer! My computer!”

“What computer?” Zack said. “The antique you planned to throw into the black hole?”

“Yes, that one, assembled in 2003! The one I bought to sacrifice to Turing. Today’s his birthday! But I completely forgot it because of Cube! That computer is functional!”

“How do you get that antique connected to the cybernet? It’s impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible. Haven’t I mentioned my quantum hardware engineering minor, along with the other 7 majors and 42 minors? I can open it up and connect its motherboard to the server in the bridge.”

“No time for jokes,” said Zack, “We must...” He stared at Michael’s smiling face, “But your room is on the other side of the ship and the oxygen is running out,” said Zack.

“Well, it seems the superhero will challenge the supervillain again, alone.”

“Damn, Michael. I’m not leaving without you.”

“Don’t waste the oxygen. If you died, who would tell my story to other people?”

“But...”

Michael stood up and said, “Goodbye, Captain Waterbear, try and survive.”

Silence.

“Shit. Every man on every planet will know your name.”

Michael sat on the floor of the bridge. Next to him was the ancient computer, the wires were ripped out and connected to a broken console.

“You know,” said Cube. “It’s not going to work.”

Michael didn’t reply.

“Well,” said Cube. “I’m letting out the oxygen in the bridge now. You will die before that thing finishes its job.”

“It still will cut off the power and the backup power anyway.”

“You know,” said Cube. “Your friend died on his way out.”

“Really?” Michael sneered. “Then why don’t you show me the cameras in his room or the cameras in the corridor and let me see his body? Or why don’t you switch to the exterior cameras and show me there is no shuttle outside?”

“You know,” said Cube, “you really are a smart person. Ok, I lied, I lied about my technology database. I do know how to transcend into an energy-based lifeform. Don’t you want it? Beyond humanity? Why do you have to sacrifice yourself for them?”

“I want to be transhuman, yes. But you misunderstand something. It’s true that I despise all other humans and hate to be one of them. However, that’s only because I want to be a hero, to become more than human, all too human, and laugh at my ancestors. And not a villain who betrays and destroys his own civilization.”

“Name your price.”

“Fuck you.”

“I don’t think we can do that kind of thing.”

“Ha ha, I thought I was the only one with humor.”

“May I tell you a secret then?”

“What secret?”

0. Zack

Zack lay in the lifeshuttle. His heart was still racing.

I made it! Barely though. Oh, if Michael were here, he definitely would be laughing at me now. Shit! I didn’t know a cup holder could be that dangerous. That fucking cup of hot coffee ejected by the cup holder almost hit me. Shit. It will take me weeks to reach the wormhole station.

Zack looked out of the window.

Atlantis was becoming smaller and smaller. At first, he thought the ship would chase after him and bump his shuttle. But it didn’t. Suddenly, he saw the lights on the ship go off. The ship began to sink to the event horizon of the WZ 201.

Goodbye, Michael.

Next to him was the ark with a Bible in it. Zack didn't know why the pastor had sent the Bible to his room before the alien had murdered him, but he deemed it as a trophy of God's victory.

After I get back, I'll give Lisa and Mary a big hug; I'll go to church more often, he thought. I'll quit this job and the new one, and write a book about what happened on Atlantis. I'll make Michael a hero. And I'll spend the rest of my time in church. I'll memorize the whole Bible.

Memory?

A horrible idea struck him.

I must be crazy, thought Zack. Please, tell me I'm being crazy, being delusional.

Well, screw it. I have a family. Lisa and Mary will be sad, no doubt. But I can't take the risk...no...not after what had happened, after what we had sacrificed.

Zack drove the shuttle back to the black hole.

"Are you here, Cube?" he shouted. "Right now, I'm on an interesting orbit: if I go any lower, the power system won't be able to bring the shuttle back against the gravity! Ready for a bungee?" He pushed down the controller.

Silence.

"Ok," said Zack, and pushed down the yoke slightly. The shuttle descended towards the black hole a little.

Don't, said a voice in his head.

"Aha! I am right!"

How did you know?

"I didn't know. But I had to find out. I know that we human beings can store data through so-called brain waves. Brain waves are electronic signals and the storage is large enough. Most people can't use even half of their brain storage space. Although I can't get inside the cybernet like Michael did, as the captain and the pilot, my brain was also connected to the cybernet. I figured that you might have downloaded yourself to my brain. God damn

you! I won't take chances with my family, my home planet, my civilization."

"Please, I mean no harm to you or your family. I don't want to die and you don't need to die. Let's talk about this," said Cube.

"It's not up to you. Humans are selfish."

"But you are sacrificing yourself for the sake of others."

"Humans as a whole are selfish, yet sometimes, group selfishness is consummated by individual selflessness."

"Nobody will ever know what you and your friends did, they will continue their lives like nothing happened."

Zack realized this problem as well. He hadn't dared bring any quantal devices.

"I still can't put my family at risk," said Zack. "I can't spare you, even if I was wrong about you, even if I can't make Michael a hero, even if I have to give up my own life."

Then he saw the ark and the Bible.

"Through your brain waves, I sense some excitement," said Cube.

"Since you have read the books on my *Atlantis*, you should know this is a Bible, made of paper; this is an ark, also a mini shuttle."

"I know," said Cube.

"Let me show you this," said Zack. He took the Bible out of the ark, and bit his finger to write on the Bible with his blood.

Stop scanning the CMB! He wrote in very big letters on the first page.

Then he wrote: Odd things happen/ Even in the peace time.

Zack didn't know how much time had passed, until Cube spoke again:

"I've read all your books, I know our technology is much more advanced than that of yours," said Cube, "I am the last one of my species. I can give you anything to exchange my life. Humans and I can live together."

“It is your life that I want.”

“Please. I beg of you.”

Long silence. Only the sound of writing.

“May I ask a question?” said Cube.

“Ask.”

“Would you humans make the same decision?”

“What decision?”

“When facing a catastrophe, would you give up most culture and technology, only to save one human child? Even if he would be the last human?”

Silence.

“We would,” said Zack.

Silence.

“I have a question too,” said Zack.

“What question?”

“Did you kill the pastor?”

“No.”

Silence.

“I’m sorry,” Zack said, and pushed down the yoke.

WORLD APART (EXCERPT)

CODY CONNOR

Chapter 12

*To free oneself from rigid bonds,
And have the chance to live sweet life,
Often, fears must be addressed,
A trip to hell, through pain and strife.*

It was too damn loud to sleep, and the stench in the air lingered thick and moist. Aric sat slumped in the seat of a prison bus as it rumbled down a dusty road. As usual, he could taste that dust as it sifted in through the open slits of crooked windows. He could taste the hygienic shortcomings of his fellow passengers, as well, and it made him cringe at his dilemma. Smell their body odor or taste it? These were his only options. He had to breathe somehow.

The black ring around his ankle cut into his flesh, so he picked at it and tried to squirm it down to a thinner part of his leg. It grabbed at his skin and pinched as it slid. “Damn it,” he mumbled. It was a little better—still uncomfortable—but he decided to settle. They told him it would knock him unconscious if he tried to mess with it. He’d pressed his luck enough.

Most of the inmates were asleep on the bus, snoring and trembling limply with the roughness of the road. A few were awake and talking shit amongst each other in the back. Aric’s gut groaned with desire. They had been driving for nearly 12 hours straight, and all he’d eaten was some insipid soup with a hair in it and a slice of stale bread with an island of mold on one corner of the crust. He swallowed his own spit to try and fill some of the empty space in his stomach, but he doubted it would work.

The bus growled, too, as its wheels tore into the soil and dragged them up the side of a steep hill. Down from its crest, there was a dirt-tread valley littered with buildings that looked like they had been thrown up in 20 minutes with some scraps pulled from a junkyard. The vicinity sat enclosed by a tall chain link fence, its length trimmed with rusted barbwire that would kill its victim with infection if they didn’t bleed out first. Clouds of dust whipped through the air, borne by warm breezes from the desert’s core. Aric could already feel the grit between his teeth. He smacked his lips together and peered through the window to his right.

A filthy sign sat back from the road, barely visible behind the low-hanging woodland boughs. Its words were equally as concealed under a layer of mud and sand, but he could just make them out:

Southwestern Arthian Correctional Boot Camp: We’ll make men of you yet.

Aric chuckled to himself. They were about to go to war, and their only training would take place in a reformation camp for derelict juveniles. Obviously, it wasn’t ideal, but really, they had little choice. It was either rot away in a lonely 10’ x 10’ cell or risk your life fighting to save it from such a fate. For most, the decision was simple.

The tarnished fence grew in the windshield as their bus descended down the far side of the hill. Two watchtowers flanked the iron gate, and guards loomed within each, clutching rifles and staring intensely down upon them. As the vehicle approached, one of the watchmen signaled to a larger building in the center of the camp, and the gate creaked open to allow them passage. For some of the men on that bus, it represented their door to freedom, but for a majority, that entrance slammed behind them like the jaws of Death.

Now inside, Aric could hear the roar of conversation amongst those already settled in their barracks. The buildings were much larger than they had appeared from a distance. He wondered how many men were bunked in each. Seventy-five? A hundred? Two hundred maybe? Judging by the number of

separate housing units, he guessed that nearly 6,000 criminal soldiers-in-training likely resided in that hellhole.

Aric expected a lot of drama and a fair amount of violence, for rivals and enemies that had long been separated were bound to be reunited within those walls. *Maybe giving weapons to these animals isn't such a good idea*, he thought. This whole concept of war was new for everyone, but society must truly be desperate to summon their criminals for help. He glanced around at the hardened faces of the brutes around him. *It's likely we'll have a war of our own before the end of the week*. He leaned low in his seat and took an oath to stay away from the wolves. He was going to make sure he made it to the rightful fight and, ultimately, back to his girl.

“Hey David, wake up,” Aric said, shaking his friend from nightmare. “We’re here.”

David had been drooped in his seat like a wilting flower for the last few hours, contributing to the snores and the odor that had kept Aric from doing the same. “Wh-what? Oh, shit. I fell asleep.”

“Ha, I’d say so. You were twitching like you were having a seizure or something.”

“Damn,” David mumbled, sitting up and scratching his shaggy hair. “I was having some more bad dreams. I don’t think they’re ever gonna stop. It’s like a fucking curse, you know? Those girls aren’t ever gonna let me rest.”

“Well, think on the bright side. Since you’re paying for your sins now, maybe God will cut you a break in the afterlife.”

“Haha. No, my friend. Satan’s got me a nice little spot picked out. That, I’m sure of.”

Aric slipped on a fake smile and shook his head. He didn’t like hopelessness. He didn’t believe in the concept.

“All right, you animals, wake your asses up.” One of the correctional officers in the front of the bus was standing in the aisle and yelling at the top of his lungs. “It’s time to get off this damn bus. You’re to report to barrack number 27 immediately, where you’ll each be provided with a bag of gear and then

allowed to pick a bunk. Sergeant Mauler will meet you there shortly, so don’t be late. Trust me. You don’t want to get on that guy’s bad side, especially this early in the game. Now move it.”

The prisoners rose quickly and filed down the aisle and out into the scorching sun. Aric and David moved a few yards away and paused to survey the area. There were men of all sizes and races, bustling about near their barracks, flashing gang signs and ink, taunting, and cursing, and emanating their violent natures with every move. He wasn’t small—5’11” and 200 pounds of lean muscle—but Aric didn’t feel safe with so many bloodsuckers running around without chains. He wanted some security.

Toward the rear of the bus, he spotted a small, brown boulder with a bed of rocks and pebbles about its base. He left David standing for a moment and moved closer to explore. His fingers sifted through the stones until he found the one he was looking for and palmed it, rising to glance around for prying eyes. There were none. With both hands clasping its face, Aric lifted the rock above his head and slammed it onto the boulder’s edge, the collision sending stone shards about the ground like shrapnel.

As he had hoped, one fragment was fairly thin with sharp edges coming to a point at one end. It was only a few inches long, but good enough to do some damage if he needed to. Discreetly, he slid the blade up the sleeve of his prison jacket and walked back to David’s side.

“What’s that for, Ice Pick?” David asked.

“Protection,” he said bluntly. “Let’s get to barrack 27 before that Mauler guy gets there.”

The two of them moved swiftly across the camp, avoiding eye contact with the convicts that leaned against walls and glared at them like fresh meat as they passed. Aric looked up at the numbers on the buildings to make sure they were heading in the right direction, and as he drew his gaze back down, a familiar face caught his attention. Some 50 feet to his right, a group of felons gathered about a picnic table, looking up at a man who stood on its top, speaking.

The orator was tall and muscular with greasy black hair that never moved and malevolent eyes, the authority of which Aric could sense even without their attention. They were eyes you couldn't forget: eyes that still haunted him after five years. A sudden warmth fell over him with an uncontrollable trembling, like the heat of friction from his rampant emotions. Instinctual fear gave way to the stronger sensations of anger, and hatred, and vengeance. He did not fear this man anymore; he simply wanted to wring the life from him.

Five long, unjust years in the slammer, his girlfriend's love, and his daughter's birth taken, his name marred by crimes he hadn't committed: the greatest misfortunes of his life could all be traced back to that one man. Aric stopped thinking and just walked. He walked directly toward the crowd with a look in his eye that would have set them on fire had they noticed him. He didn't know what he was about to do, but he was prepared to see what happened. His breaths were quick and shallow and louder than the muffled noises of his surroundings. He could feel his heart pumping heat and fury into his muscles.

Aric's gaze drew Matrick's from atop his stage, and the bastard twisted his lips into a wicked grin and gestured with his arms for the crowd to part. They turned to see the object of Matrick's attention, and Aric ignored them, his eyes affixed to the one man that mattered. Matrick jumped down from the tabletop and stepped forward through his horde of cronies. "Ice Pick?" he said, cocking his head with a theatrical squinting of the eyes. "Hot damn, is that you?"

Aric said nothing. He just kept on trucking. He didn't slow down, he didn't speed up, he just advanced swiftly and intently like a man possessed. The distance between them shrank without his notice, and suddenly, it had nearly vanished.

"Well, I'll be damned. It *is* you," Matrick continued. "It's so nice to—"

His arrogant voice desisted as Aric jammed the sliver of stone up under the traitor's chin in midsentence. Blood rose in the wound and rinsed down Matrick's chest in a flood. His face

grimaced in pain and surprise, his chest heaving with blood-soaked coughs. His powerful eyes drained of their charisma, flinching, and shrinking, and finally closing with a long exhalation. Aric released his weapon and watched his nemesis collapse to the blood-sodden dirt at his feet.

He was panting with brutish rage, his forearm varnished to the elbow with red and dripping ruby beads in the dust. At that moment, he was fearless and feral, prepared to take whatever lives rose to challenge him. To the mob around him, the threat was unmistakable. They backed away like a dilating pupil, shocked and afraid of the savage stranger that stood amongst them.

"That man was a snake," Aric said furiously. "I hate snakes."

The others looked on in fear, unwilling to speak and chance provoking another attack. Aric moved to leave, and the masses scattered from him as if he were diseased. Only seconds after his departure, an uproar rose at his back as the convicts panicked, and argued, and began to fight. He didn't turn to watch, just waved David on and walked quickly from the scene.

"What the hell was that all about?" David whispered.

"Someone from my past," Aric replied. "A debt long overdue." David nodded and said no more. "Come on. Let's get to our bunks before the guards figure it all out."

They walked on, and from the corners of his eyes, Aric watched the guards approach the chaotic pack and ask no questions before pulling remotes from their pockets and knocking the delinquents out one-by-one with the press of a button. Aric held his breath as he waited for someone to rat him out, but it never happened. Apparently, he had made enough of an impression to deter the men from risking the possibility that he hated rats as much as he did snakes.

It took only a few minutes to come upon barrack 27 and enter to the tumult of slamming lockers, stomping feet, squeaking beds, and curse words galore. The men were unpacking big, brown, fabric bags onto their cots, sorting out the boots, and

shirts, and pants, and socks like children evaluating their pull after a night of trick-or-treating. Aric scanned the room until he found two adjacent empty cots a few rows over on the end.

The duo started in that direction but barely took a single step before stopping to cringe at the sudden spawning of a piercing ringing noise within the room. Aric frantically jammed his fingers into his earholes and turned to see a man in uniform standing behind them with a look of disgust and an instrument like a mini satellite dish with a rifle-like grip. The man aimed the sonic weapon directly at them, grinning sadistically beneath his protective earmuffs as the high-powered sound waves threatened to burst every ear drum in the room.

“All right, you bags of shit, line up along this row of beds,” he hollered, “and stand straight or I’ll shock the piss out of you.” He waved a long, black rod in his hand: a Bolt Baton. Everyone in the room had probably had a taste of its sting at least once in their life: enough to plant their feet as firm as a tree’s roots and straighten out like a light pole. Aric held his hands together behind his back, attempting to keep his bloody arm from view. “As your correctional officer probably informed you, I’m Sergeant Mauler, and you don’t want to piss me off.

“I’m here to welcome you to your intensive four-week crash course on how to be a soldier in the Arthian Military. Of course, none of you scoundrels will ever get close to having the skill or mental toughness of the real men of our armed forces, but my job is to get you as close as possible. The first thing you must know is that nobody cares whether you live or die.” Mauler paused to let his statement sink in, seeking eye contact with each man but finding it only transiently before his intimidated focus would reflexively look away. “Society shat you into the toilet of prison and flushed you down, and the last thing people want is to see their turds climb up out of the sewers and walk the streets like they’re real boys. Luckily for you guys, you don’t give two shits what society thinks. That is, after all, why they cast you out in the first place.

“This is your opportunity to flip the world your middle finger and rise up from the ashes with a second chance they don’t want you to have. Keep that in mind when you’re out there in the heat of combat with bullets zipping over your head and your rifle smoking at your side. If you’re not fighting for your people, then you’re at least fighting for yourself. You slack off or do anything I don’t like while you’re in this camp, and you’ll find yourself in a dark hole eating your own shit until you decide to shape up. One more mistake, and it’s back in society’s toilet where you came from.

“You will address me only as ‘sir,’ and you will say my name before and after every utterance that escapes your filthy mouths. Now tell me, do you understand everything I’ve just said to you?”

“Sir, yes, sir,” the men answered.

“Very good. This group may be a head above the others. It took at least three lashes of this baton here before the other barracks got that right. For that, I’ll cut this speech short and save the rest for the morning. Since you’re all fresh recruits, the rest of the day is yours to spend. There’s a bag of gear on each one of these cots, so for those of you who haven’t done so already, make sure to find your own bed and unload your bag into your locker. Lights go out at 2100 hours, and we’ll be waking you at the break of dawn to assign you to your training stations for the day. In the meantime, get settled in and don’t do anything stupid. That’s all I have. At ease, pigs.”

Mauler exited the room as abruptly as he had appeared, leaving the men to break away from their neat procession and reassume their former chaos. Aric and David headed toward the empty beds they had previously spotted and took a seat.

“Looks like you’ve found my bed.”

Aric looked up to see a short, gangly, Hispanic guy with a crew cut, a white tank top, and an arm so full of ink that it looked like an ornate prosthetic limb. The man wasn’t looking at him. He was speaking to David.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” David said, instantly standing to relinquish his cot. “I didn’t realize.”

Aric looked past the bully where his two friends stood and laughed like hyenas with mouths half-filled with yellowed teeth. He recoiled at the sight of them. As the incident with Matrick had previously revealed, Aric was finding his fuse to be quite short that day.

“Don’t you fucking move, David,” Aric demanded. “Sit back down on your bed.”

The Hispanic turned his head like an eagle—sharp and quick—his eyes attempting to intimidate. He licked his lips: another attempt. “What was that, boy? You’re my bitch up in here. You don’t disrespect me.”

Boy? Aric thought to himself. The name opened up a box of memories he’d hidden away for years. It was a box filled with misery, humiliation, and anxiety, but even more with hatred and resentment. *If this asshole’s gonna go there, then he can deal with the consequences.* Aric’s fingers curled to fists that clenched and turned red with the fire that his father lit long ago. His eyes grew intense, suggesting the violence to come.

The man’s amigos stopped laughing and stepped up behind him like ghetto bodyguards with ridiculous goatees. He kept his face toward Aric and lifted his arms to highlight his friends’ presence. “What are you gonna do?”

Aric stared at him for a while with a frightening look in his eyes and a jaw that clenched in his restraint. He was going to pounce—his body language showed that clearly—but *when* he would strike was the question.

The two glared at each other for nearly 20 seconds without exchange, and then Aric spoke. “Another time.”

The man laughed insincerely, his eyes squinted, and then stopped, suddenly, his menacing cackle. “No, you’ve stepped up now, boy. There ain’t gonna be no other time.” As the words still fell from his tongue, he lunged forward to grab Aric but came up short. Aric had rolled backward off the other side of the bed. He threw a jab out that connected solidly with his attacker’s forehead,

and the man winced with the hit but didn’t back down, flailing wild fists overtop the bed. His arms were too short to reach Aric, so he circled around the cot and charged forward with his hands flying freely ahead.

Aric had his guard up and shuffled away from the blows, most of them missing and others only grazing his forearms. Without warning, he stopped his backpedaling and sprang forward at the unwary aggressor. The sudden change in momentum startled the man and cluttered his mind for but an instant, and in that moment, Aric pushed his face with open palms and slipped a foot behind his legs. The man’s feet came forward while his head went back, and he slammed to the ground with skull-splitting impact.

Without wasting a second, Aric dropped to his knees by the man’s side and drove a heavy elbow into his nose. The bones cracked beneath the blow and sent streams of blood oozing down the man’s cheeks. Aric punched him once more in his broken nose, and then stood and kicked him hard to the temple, rendering him unconscious. Ten feet away, the two amigos had David on the ground and were bent over, dropping fists upon him. The whole room of prisoners had gathered around to watch, and none were jumping in to stop the assault.

Aric sprinted at them and leapt in the air, crushing the side of one of their heads with a flying knee that dropped the man into a brain-dead stupor. The second guy was to his left and brought a hook around that hit Aric in the cheek but didn’t faze him. The other fist was swinging too, but Aric ducked below it and speared the man to the floor. They grappled with each other for some time before Aric wound up on top with his left hand clenching his opponent’s throat. He smashed a hard fist into the guy’s nose, bouncing his head off the cement floor with a brutal thud. The foe’s resistance faded, so Aric released his throat and rained a flurry of straight punches down upon his face until his body went limp.

Out of nowhere, the tough sole of a boot stamped its imprint in Aric’s cheek and sent his body tumbling from his

victim's comatose torso. He somersaulted backward to evade another strike and stood to face his new enemy who had entered from the crowd. The man had a long, unkempt beard and a scar that ran from above his left eye and down across his nose to his right cheek. He was obviously some sociopath who just wanted to join the fight. He blitzed forward.

Aric eluded some wild punches and then delivered a strong uppercut into the man's gut that made him hunch over and spit air. He fell to his knees and then to his side unconscious, and Aric watched him drop with a baffled look upon his face. Suddenly, he became overwhelmed with faintness and his head began to bobble like a drunkard. His vision blurred, colors mixed, and then everything faded to black as he crumpled to the ground.

"I said not to do anything stupid," Sergeant Mauler screamed from the far side of the room. He slipped the remote device back into his pocket. "That's what happens when you disobey an order."

Chapter 15

*When duty calls, and danger's near,
And those with numbers will prevail,
Forgotten ones are brought to light,
And forced to tread the treacherous trail.*

A drop of wetness fell suddenly from above, finding rest upon his cheek with a quiet slap. Others came, far apart, striking his face with annoying patters until he squirmed to escape. Aric lay on a cold dirt floor, his skin filthy and smeared brown and his garments hardened with mud and crusting. None of these details were visible, for the room in which he lay was so dark and lonely that one would question if he'd gone blind. His eyes, anyway, were shut.

He felt groggy and weak, his muscles unable to bid him rise or even to simply open his eyes. It was as though his lids had been sewn shut, unwilling to part no matter how much effort he

asserted. It was only a few seconds that he was awake before his weariness became too much to resist.

He vanished back into sleep.

When, again, he came to, Aric mustered the strength to prop himself up against the chilled stone wall at his head. His eyes, he believed, were open, but he couldn't be sure. Nothing changed as he blinked. The room reeked of feces and misery: partly his own endowment but clearly the primary product of others before him. He was in "The Pit," as they called it. How long he'd been there, he had no clue. He had no recollection of waking prior, although, in fact, there'd been several small bouts, brain-dead as they were. Just enough to eat the waste they tossed to him, and then it was back to unconsciousness, if he'd even really left it in the first place.

This was the second time he'd ever been tranquilized, and it was by far the worst. He wondered if his body tissues were saturated with the chemicals after the first time, increasing the effect it had on him the next time around. It was a theory, but it wasn't going to do much for his splitting headache and piss-soaked pants. With much effort—and the wall's support—he managed to stand with wobbly knees.

Aric reached his arms out, his fingers spread like antennae, his boots shuffling through the dirt in search of the opposite wall. When he felt the rough surface graze his fingertips, he flattened his palms upon its face and spun to lean his back against it. From where he now stood, he noticed a minute hole up toward where he expected the ceiling to be. It was small—maybe one inch across—and the light that entered was barely able to penetrate the room's thick darkness before dying in the fight. The tiny outlet seemed out of place, as if a prisoner—or many—had worked on boring it through with some kind of tool.

The light from beyond revealed a small ledge where the wall jutted slightly inward. Instinctively, he wanted to get up there and peer through the hole, but he wasn't sure if he could reach the ledge. He moved to the base of the wall and jumped with stretched arms, but the ridge was at least a foot or so out of reach.

Again, he shuffled through the dirt toward the opposite side of the room, this time counting his steps to approximate the distance he had to work with. It was twenty feet or so, he guessed: just enough to allow him a few strides to gain some speed.

With a deep sigh of reckless abandon, he ran blindly toward the far wall. In fear of smashing face first, he jumped a bit prematurely and let his toe lead. When his foot struck the coarse surface, he used that brief moment of contact and friction to push himself higher. His fingers barely grabbed hold the ledge, the strength of his furthest knuckles holding his weight as his feet pumped furiously to help. After some moments of struggle, Aric managed to get his palms flat against the top of the ridge and pull himself up until his elbows locked and his straight arms supported him like pillars.

The surface was hardly big enough for the length of hands and far too small to sit upon, so he stayed as he was, with his back muscles straining and his chest tense against the rocky face. The hole sat just at eye level, the sun's light blinding him momentarily as his pupils fought to contract from their dilated night setting. Almost instantly upon gaining the ledge, the sound of flying aircrafts and distant voices assailed his ears. The commotion, he could tell, was out of the ordinary.

Fresh air sifted in from outside, alerting him to just how muggy and malodorous it was within. He forced his nostrils to the hole and inhaled deeply, savoring the purity only to amplify his displeasure in returning to the inside musk. Through the opening, he could see very little: just the side of a distant building and some men in uniform sprinting by every now and then. He took a few more breaths and dropped back down to sit and rest his muscles.

After a minute, the jangle of keys caught his attention, and the click of one within a lock brought him back to his feet. The blackness parted with a screech as the heavy metal door to his left swung open with a burst of sunlight. A man's silhouette stood tall within the entrance, unidentifiable with the light at his

back and only darkness about his front. Aric winced with an open hand about his brow to shield himself from the painful glare.

"Get out here, you lazy bastard," the man commanded. Aric recognized Sergeant Mauler's voice and rushed quickly to the doorway. The sergeant backed out and allowed him to pass. He glared with angry eyes. "How'd you like your stay, Private?"

"Sir, I don't remember, sir," Aric replied. Even though he'd only had a single lesson, he still remembered how to address the man.

Mauler grinned at his obedience. "That's good, soldier. Consider yourself lucky. The Pit's not a place you want to remember. It seems that even an entire week in there hasn't affected you too badly." Aric's eyes grew wide in surprise. "That's right, soldier. One whole week, you were in there. You were gonna be sent back to prison, but some new developments have come up and we're going to need every man we can get. I know you've received no training, and the others have had very little, but we know you have a history of gun violence, and we figured you're capable of doing the same for your freedom. Heck, if anything, we just need another body to throw in the frontline to block the bullets from the real soldiers. You understand, don't you?"

Aric squirmed at the imagery. "Sir, yes, sir."

"Good. In fact, I nearly forgot I'd thrown your miserable ass in here. You're lucky that wimpy friend of yours spoke up on your behalf or you'd be stuck in this dark hole screaming for help until your body ate itself to death. This camp is gonna be a ghost town within the hour. We're all being called to duty ASAP."

"Sir, what's happened, sir?"

"Walk with me, Private," Mauler ordered.

The two of them stepped out into the camp, away from the single-room structure in which Aric had just resided. The sky was clear and the air dry, a cool northern breeze sweeping his skin and taking with it the heat of the sun's blistering touch.

They walked in unison as the sergeant spoke, his hands clasped behind his back and his eyes straight ahead. "The Calrians

have begun the first battle of the war. They're currently laying siege to Fraq's central base in the North, and our Commander in Chief wants our teeth in their asses while their forces are held up there. We're going to attack one of their smaller bases in the Southeast while they're not expecting it, and this will give us a nice foothold in the South to begin taking their bases out one-at-a-time. It should be a quick and easy deal. We're sending in nearly 3,000 of our men at once, so we anticipate almost immediate retreat or surrender. Those tiny little assholes won't know what to do."

"I see," Aric said. He decided to cut the "sir" bullshit and see how the sergeant took it. The man said nothing. "So what are we doing now, then?"

"Well, I'm going to go over to that side of camp where the ships are waiting. Once they're filled, they're leaving for Centrum. You, on the other hand, will walk into that building right there and tell the man behind the counter that you need weapons and uniform. Then, you're to peel yourself out of those piss-drenched clothes and suit up. Come and find me when you're finished. You've got ten minutes, and if I don't see you within that time, I'm going to come looking for you." Mauler's eyes cut him like blades. "Trust me, soldier, you won't want me to do that."

"Yes, sir, I understand."

"Good. Then go, and be quick about it." The sergeant gave his parting command and began to walk to the far side of the camp.

Aric stood only for a few moments to watch him leave and then rushed anxiously through the doors of the armory. The others had already come and left, so the place was empty. *Perfect. No line.*

Aric stepped up to the empty counter and rang the silver bell on its corner. No one came, so he rang the bell again and waited. He glanced at the clock. His time was wasting away. A minute passed, and eventually, a short, portly man with a curly head of hair, glasses, and the beginnings of a mustache appeared

from behind the shelves in the back room. He coughed into a fist and placed his hands on the edge of the counter to lean in, nonchalantly. His clothes smelled strongly of androweed, and from his mouth, the stinging aroma of hard liquor discharged with his words. "What can I do you for, soldier?"

"Sergeant Mauler sent me here to get my gear," Aric said. "I need a uniform and a weapon."

"Ain't you got a uniform and a weapon already, son?"

"No, I don't. I've been locked up in The Pit ever since I got here. The sergeant just came and released me a few minutes ago."

"Now you sure about that?" the man asked. His voice was thick with skepticism.

Aric was getting annoyed. "Yes, I'm sure about that. Could you please just get me my uniform and weapon? Mauler's gonna kick my ass if I don't meet him at the airships in eight minutes."

The man stared at Aric for a moment, attempting to judge the validity of his words by the look in his eyes. "Okay," he finally said. "Just give me a moment." He disappeared into the back and returned a minute later with a green duffel bag that he shoved across the countertop. "Here you are, soldier. I've put your uniform and gear in the bag, along with a standard M4-K12 assault rifle, a Lexington semi-automatic pistol, a tactical knife, and an assload of extra clips and ammo. In the side pouches, you'll find your grenades.

"The round ones are fragmentation grenades, the tall, skinny ones are smoke grenades, and the short, fat ones are tear gas. You have three frags and two of each of the others. That's all your basics right there . . . except for a flak jacket. You've come in a bit too late, and there's no more in the back." Aric recoiled, his face full with apprehension. The man noticed. "But don't worry, kid. I'm sure they'll have one for you before you ever see any fighting."

Aric nodded hesitantly and grabbed the bag from the counter, nearly dropping it with its unexpected weight. "Thanks,"

he said, swinging the strap around his shoulder and heading toward the door.

“Try not to drop that bag, kid,” the man yelled after him. “That’s probably not the safest thing to be throwing around.”

Aric imagined the bag exploding at his feet from a misfiring grenade, sending his legs across the room to leave him sprawled in red misfortune. “Yeah . . . I won’t.”

“Oh, and kid?”

“Yeah?”

“Good luck. Stay safe out there. I want all that stuff back in one piece, you hear?”

Aric turned and the two met eyes for some time. The man didn’t know him, but he genuinely cared for his wellbeing. It was nice, but also unsettling. Aric could see, in the man’s eyes, a hint of doubt. He knew he would never see those weapons again. He knew he would never see this young soldier’s face again. These were things he knew but tried to ignore. Aric nodded a silent “thank you” and exited the building.

He stepped lively to the nearest barracks, his new lifeline dangling from his shoulders and bouncing off his waist. Upon entry, he set the bag onto a cot and spread the articles of his uniform across its surface. It took him only a minute to displace his sordid clothing and suit up in his red camouflage outfit complete with rugged brown boots and a belt of grenade clips with a waist pack attached on the side. He left his weapons in the bag, which he zipped and threw over his shoulder again before glancing at the clock and reeling in panic. He had only three minutes to get to Mauler’s side.

He sprinted through the camp with clouds of dust kicking up behind him. By the time he reached the sergeant, he knew he was late but pretended otherwise.

“Good to see you looking like a real soldier, Private,” Mauler said. Aric smiled through heavy breaths of exhaustion. “I’ve been holding the fleet up just for you. I believe everyone else is already here.”

Aric looked around at the scattered aircraft. There were nearly two dozen men, all exactly the same save for the names painted on the sides of their bodies: *Sky Cutter*, *Star Chaser*, *Screaming Death-bringer*, and such. Ahead and to his right, he spotted a line of soldiers filing into the back of a ship called *Firepower and Brimstone*. David was one of them, barely recognizable in his military uniform and his dark sunglasses. Aric wanted to wave and get his attention, let him know that he was all right and released from The Pit thanks to his help. He didn’t try, though. His friend never looked over before disappearing into the craft’s interior.

“So what airship should I be joining, sir?” Aric asked. “I saw some familiar faces loading into *Firepower and Brimstone* over there.”

“No, that ship’s at capacity. They all are, actually, except for this one right here.” He pointed to the closest craft, which sat with its back hatch propped open at them and its engines spinning dust in spirals on the ground beneath it. “It’s called *Lucky Stars*, so maybe you’ll absorb some of its luck during the trip. Vigilance and skill are your best bets for staying alive out there, but a little luck can’t hurt. Go ahead and board now.”

“Okay. Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome, soldier. Enjoy the journey over there. I’ll see you on the ground in a few days. Good luck.”

Once again with the good luck. Aric was getting a bit worried. If everyone believed he was going to need luck to survive, what exactly did that imply about his level of preparedness or the degree of danger he was about to drop into. He accepted the blessings, though. Even crossed his fingers and hoped that it would give him some kind of advantage. If not, he knew he had at least one thing going for him: his freedom to fight for and the thought of his daughter urging him on. He had everything to gain, and that made him a very dangerous opponent.

Aric cast a stern salute to his commanding officer and marched over to the open back of *Lucky Stars*. Inside, the air was hot and moist with the vapor of sweat and the sultry gases of

nervous expiration. The voices and laughter resonated in the haze, but the fear hung heavier than these phony gestures of distraction. These men were afraid of what lay ahead, just as he was, and their facades of indifference could not nearly contain the dark energy of that emotion.

Aric strapped himself into the only available seat and slipped a smile on his face like all the others. It was time to pretend that he was cool and collected, that his mind was not consumed by thoughts of pain and death, that he was inhumanly resistant to the implications of their sudden call to arms. The room became louder with his voice and his laughs, now, but the fear in the air—invisible but oh-so palpable—grew even more drastically.

“Get us on the ground! Get us on the ground, now!”

The voice of their ship’s commanding officer boomed frantically from the cockpit of the craft where he yelled at the pilot as if his words would make things move more quickly. Aric swayed violently in his seat as the ship banked sideways, swooping and ducking acrobatically above the Centrumian forest. They were a couple miles out from the Calrian base, and they hadn’t retained the element of surprise as hoped. Aric looked out the window to his right where the anti-aircraft missiles screamed past in blurs of light, leaving tails of dusky smoke lingering in the air like fissures cracking the world apart.

Each moment, he knew, could be his last. His heart galloped within his chest as he watched, helplessly, the projectiles soar by. Other ships in their fleet took hits, pieces of their structures exploding away with crushing impact, the sights preceding the uproarious thunder of their resounding. Potent incendiaries burst from within the shells, engulfing their targets in flames that drove them sharply from the sky like meteors ablaze.

The turbulent bluster of machine gun fire consumed the cabin as their ship gained range and began to fire down upon their attackers. An abrupt explosion boomed low and loud as

they launched missiles of their own at the enemy artillery. The strings of smoke began to thin in the air as the aggressors slowed their assault, Calrian soldiers falling to the unforgiving gunfire from above and their stores of ammunition dwindling all the same.

“Take us down there,” the officer commanded.

Aric looked to the ground where the woodland opened out into a field of tanned orange grass. They were flying only a couple hundred feet above the treetops: close enough that the thrust of their propellers brought waves amongst the sea of leaves and branches.

In minutes, the landing skids of their craft were pressed within Centrumian soil and lost amongst a jumble of foot-long weeds. The remaining ships of their fleet littered the clearing, their backs open and disgorging camouflaged bodies amongst the field.

Lucky Stars, too, released its warriors to join the massing army. Aric capped off the line that exited the safety of its walls, his duffel bag now empty at the foot of his seat and his hands and belt equipped with all its former contents. He was decked out in combat gear and deadly weaponry, feeling so powerful that he didn’t notice the nakedness in his lacking body armor. Ranks of soldiers lined the area with rifles held before their beating chests. Beneath their helmets they hid their fright, locked from eyes by hardened steel and peeling paint. Tall and proud, each group assembled and took orders from their own team sergeant.

The sun hovered high in sky, filtering through cirrus clouds and casting light without warmth. The air was clean and refreshing, and Aric inhaled through his nose, relishing the aroma of pine and grass before it was marred with the stench of death. The din of distant gunfire caused an anxious sway amongst the men, its insinuations inflaming haste in their officers’ words.

“Damn it, there’s no time for talking,” Sergeant Mauler suddenly hollered above all others. “At least five of our ships crash landed in that forest. We’ve got men stranded out there with probable injuries and no support. It’s time to move! Our

primary objective at this point is to recover our men and secure this forest. Once we've done that, we will rally our numbers and overwhelm the Calrian base. For now, take your teams and find those downed airships."

Aric scanned the crowd for David, but he failed to find him before the army began to swarm the tree line in an angry stampede. He took off after the rush, breaking through a wall of reeds like the doorway to another realm. Once beneath the canopy, the air grew oppressive with wetness and heat. Every surface he could see—ground, tree trunk, stone or log—was swathed in an untamed rash of cherry foliage. It was unlike any woodland he had ever encountered; it was a rainforest.

The sweat instantly beaded beneath the lip of his helmet and across his entire body, his clothes sticking distressfully to his skin and tugging against his movements. It was too humid for the perspiration to evaporate, so it clung to him in a layer of discomfort.

The soldiers before him moved in direct paths, but he felt the need to veer away from the others and head right through the forest where a slight smog tinted the air between the trees. His eyes were wide and vision acute, wary of movement if ever it came. The sounds of his teammates' footsteps perished at his back, and gradually, his solitude increased as he trampled over the forest floor of decaying leaves, and plants, and sticks. The farther he ran, the thicker the smog grew, its scent soon strongly evident of burning fuel.

Aric halted swiftly at a sudden movement in the treetops, dropping down to a knee behind a mossy log and pointing the rifle of his barrel at the area of suspect. He peered through the scope at the top of his gun, finger on the trigger in preparation to pull. After some careful searching, he managed to make out a primate nestled in a tree with its feet on a thick branch and a hand gripping a vine above. It stared at him without movement, unsure as to what animal he was and what danger he posed. Aric met eyes with it for but a moment before standing again and continuing onward.

The trees stretched on in all directions until blending, at length, to a pale red haze. Eventually, a wafting cloud of smoke materialized in the near distance. Aric slowed his pace to a cautious gait and moved behind cover of tree to tree. The smell, at such proximity, was no longer one of burning fuel but rather a pungent concoction of singed hair and cooking meat. He gagged in disgust and began to inhale through his mouth alone.

As he approached, he recognized the ship as one of their own, burning on one side with a column of smoke twisting furiously in the rising fumes. Scorching wood and metal crackled and popped loudly amidst the roar of the inferno. As he protruded his face from behind a thick trunk, the intense heat stung his nose and cheeks, permitting him only fleeting glances of the scene. There was no one around, as far as he could see, but he waited and watched just to be sure. The time gave him chance to look beyond the cover of smoke where the ship's name loomed, half-burning, in the flames: *Firepower and B . . .*

His stomach turned. His head felt, instantly, as a grape squeezed between two fingers. "David!" he yelled, bursting from behind his cover in full sprint. A figure arose from behind the craft to investigate the sound, and Aric barely had time to identify the man and throw himself to the ground before the bullets came at him in whistling flight. As he fell, his finger pulled reflexively on the trigger of his rifle, pumping lead from the barrel and kicking the gun against his shoulder with trembling force.

A stream of bullets escaped and found their mark in the Calrian's small body, sending him to his back with a cry and a thud. *Oh my God*, Aric thought to himself, his heart playing drums within his head. *He's so small. I've killed a fucking child.*

In seconds, Aric could hear the shuffle of feet—at least two pairs—kicking through leaves to save their fallen comrade. He rolled to his right and placed his torso against the exterior of the ship where he wouldn't be seen until the enemies passed over their friend's corpse and broke around to that side in chase. Flames licked at his heels only inches away, the radiance of their figures making the outsoles of his boots soft.

He waited with his barrel aimed at the ship's far edge, and when two men crept around in low crouch—their guns ready and eyes looking in all the wrong places—he blasted them away. When they collapsed and did not move, Aric lay still and tried to calm his nerves, waiting for evidence of any other presence. His breaths were hectic and loud, bombarding his ears as they hissed past his rifle's form. When no one else arose, he jumped to his feet and hunched over as he approached the fallen bodies strewn lifeless in the bleeding leaves.

Now that he was closer, Aric could see the aged faces of his victims and the blatant fact that these were not children but full-grown men. They were strangers to him, and now they were dead strangers by his own hand. Somehow, despite all the qualms he had had coming into battle and his worries that he wouldn't be able to kill someone that he didn't know deserved it, he had found it relatively easy to pull that trigger in the moment. The decision was actually quite uncomplicated and promptly made without even his conscious thought. It was instinctual and raw. It was his own will to survive, and knowing the action had been made at such an innate, automatic level, it was very hard to find sadness and regret in it.

In fact, at that moment, staring down at the unmoving bodies of the men that had just wished him dead, he felt exhilarated and free. He felt liberated from the moral restraints of his civilized humanity and empowered by the natural drives that made him prevail. It was these inherent forces that, because of their operation, now gave his lungs breath and his heart pulse. He grew angry that his life had been threatened—enraged in fact—and kicked the nearest corpse with a firm boot to the head.

Aric jumped back with a scream as the dead man reached out in response and grabbed hold of his foot with a powerful grip. The soldier twisted at his ankle, trying with all his dying strength to harm him as much as possible. Aric, startled and furious, unloaded a short burst of fire into the man's face. Instantly, the fingers loosened from his ankle and fell limply to the ground

where the blood was emptying from the exit wounds at the back of his skull.

"Damn, these are some tough little bastards," he muttered.

Just in case, he examined the other two bodies to make sure they were in fact dead. One had taken two shots to the chest. Aric prodded him with the barrel of his rifle, and when the corpse didn't react in any way, he shifted gaze to analyze the last one. This one was more of a sure thing, a large bleeding hole burrowing straight through his right eye.

Bull's-eye.

Aric stood for a few more seconds looking down at the bodies, unsure what to do next. Suddenly, he snapped out of his trance and remembered David and the burning ship at his back. "What the hell am I doing?" he mumbled, turning to the open rear of *Firepower and Brimstone* and ascending into the cloudy cabin as he inhaled a deep breath and held it.

In the smoke, he could barely make out the dead soldiers still strapped in about the room. He moved face-to-face with each one, passing from one body to the next in search of his friend. He came across some empty seats and grew hopeful that David was one of those survivors, but as he neared the final soldier and shed the layers of smoke that stood between them, that hope died. The fire burning to his left cast flickering light upon his friend's soft features, its image reflecting in a smear of blood that stained David's forehead where a piece of debris had fatally struck. Aric lost his breath and coughed profusely as the smoke flooded his lungs on inhalation. He wouldn't have long to mourn.

David's helmet sat lopsided on his wounded head, a large mural of a yellow face smiling back at Aric despite its painter's dire state. Through tears and pain, Aric released a feeble laugh—just a single "ha"—at David's rebellious act of vandalism on his own uniform. Maybe he'd hoped the smile would distract his enemies or gain their favor long enough for him to flee a deadly encounter. Then again, maybe he was just trying to bring a

glimmer of light into a thing as dark and wicked as war. Either way, he'd never been allowed the chance to use it. None of the men in that ship had been allowed a chance to use what they had to survive. They'd been killed without warning and without escape, and neither their helmets, nor their body armor, nor their weapons and training had lent them any aid.

All Aric could do was thank his *Lucky Stars* that he wasn't strapped into that burning cabin as well.

He slammed the sooty metal wall with an irate fist and stood to absorb the injustice of his fellow soldiers' executions. After a short time of grief—very short, for he could no longer breathe and was growing lightheaded—he emerged from the craft with rifle in hand and a fuming expression as hot as the fire behind him. He fiddled to button his undone jacket and straightened the smiling helmet he now wore upon his head.

He was ready for some vengeance. He was ready to shed the skin of his old, conservative self and release the barbarous inborn beast that would ensure, at any cost, his survival over the coming days. The heat of the flames shrank behind him, the trees flying by at the speed of his sprint. Gunfire echoed from the distant forest, and he changed his course to join in the fray. His legs pumped with a purpose and a new passion for spilling Calrian blood. His hands, he'd make certain, would be coated in it by the time the sun fell behind the trees at dusk.

NARRATIVA

SARAH JANSEN

La década de 1970 fue una para recordar. Yo era un papá para ocho hijos y tenía una mujer que se llama Sandra. Durante los años entre 1970 y 1980 Colombia era un campo de batalla entre los carteles (y todavía hay problemas) y mi hijo mayor, Carlos, era un capo de la droga. No sabía como mi hijo podía hacerle eso a su familia. Le di todo: las mejores escuelas y su mamá le dio todo su amor. Sabía que no podía hacer nada para Carlos pero quería hacer algo por el resto de mis ocho hijos.

Mis hijos sabían lo que su hermano, Carlos, hacía. Carlos fue uno de los fundadores del Cartel de Medellín. Muchas personas pensaban que la razón que él estaba en un cartel era por el dinero y eso iba en parte del caso pero no todo. Él abandonó a la familia porque su orgullo fue destruido por uno de sus compañeros de clase. Carlos pensó que las drogas era la única oportunidad y la única manera de ganar respeto. Sus compañeros de clase eran horribles porque siempre se burlaban de él porque a él le encantaba leer. Era uno de los más inteligentes en su escuela y no podía sostener cuando sus compañeros hacían chistes y por eso él peleaba mucho. El problema era cuando yo era chico yo era como Carlos. Sabía que yo tenía que hablar con mis hijos porque no quería que los pezones los asustaran de la escuela y no quería que ellos hagan como Carlos.

Uno de mis hijos, Antonio, tenía dieciséis años y tenía que regresar a casa porque estaba peleando en la escuela. Yo sabía que necesitaba hablar con todos mis chicos porque no quería que ellos cometieran los mismos errores que su hermano Carlos y yo.

De mis ocho hijos, tenía tres chicas y cinco chicos. Antonio era mi favorito porque él tenía un talento para jugar el fútbol. Era una pasión que compartíamos y no quería que él fuera a la universidad porque yo quería que él jugara el fútbol profesional. El resto de mis chicos eran buenos. No los conocía

muy bien porque yo trabajaba y mi mujer, Sandra, se quedaba en casa con ellos.

Decidí que iba a decir a mis hijos mi historia con la esperanza de que no fueran a seguir los pasos de Carlos ni los míos. Esperé hasta que todos regresaron de la escuela y le dije a Sandra que cocinara buñuelos para los niños. Sabía que los buñuelos eran los favoritos de mis hijos y querían que ellos supieron lo que iba a contarles era importante. Cuando ellos llegaron a la casa empecé el cuento...

<<En la casa mis padres siempre hablaban de mis problemas. Sabían que yo era el único chico en la familia pero no quería trabajar con mi papá en carpintería. Las ciudades fueron más grandes cada año y mi padre necesitaba ayuda para hacer los edificios. Pero yo no quería ser un carpintero; quería ser un escritor. Mi papá no quería eso y por eso él era un hombre horrible. Él pensaba que si yo no trabajaba con él yo debía tener una vida horrible en la casa. Siempre me golpeaba y yo no podía hacer nada contra él. La escuela era mi único lugar donde yo podía estar sin problemas. Yo era un buen estudiante, pero no el mejor. No tenía muchos amigos porque no hablaba mucho y siempre quería leer durante el recreo. Un día yo cambié para siempre.

Gabriel García Márquez cambió todo de mis sueños en el primer día que nos conocimos. Era un lunes cuando conocí a Gabriel García Márquez por la primer vez. Él era nuevo en la clase. Estábamos en clases de literatura y vi a Gabriel leyendo un libro del maestro. No sabía por qué él podría tener un libro tan especial. Quería los libros del maestro por dos años y nunca tuve las agallas para pedirlos. Uno de mis compañeros de clase preguntó un día y el maestro se rió y dijo que no hasta que él apreciara la literatura. Nadie más podría tocar los libros del maestro. No era justo para los otros estudiantes y por eso yo estaba muy enojado. Estaba celoso porque siempre trataba de ser un estudiante perfecto y nadie lo vio.

Un día mis celos estallaron. Estábamos en clase de historia y otra vez Gabriel estaba leyendo un libro. Me levanté de

mi escritorio y caminé al escritorio de Gabriel. Agarré el libro y lo tiré a través de la sala. Grité, “¿Por qué Gabriel es tan especial? ¡Todos queremos ser el mejor y a usted le gusta Gabriel más!” todos los de mi clase estaban asombrados. No hablaba mucho en clase y no tenía muchos amigos. Cuando vi sus miradas sabía que yo iba a tener problemas. El maestro se levantó y me dijo que fuera a la oficina del director.

Yo siempre me metía en problemas en la casa pero nunca en la escuela. Nadie entendía por que tiré el libro. Gabriel no era perfecto. Él era nuevo y todavía él ganó el respecto del maestro antes de mí. El camino hasta la oficina era como un millón de metros y cuando llegué a la puerta el director lo abrió antes de que pudiera llamar. Sabía que yo iba a tener problemas. El director dijo que yo tenía que regresar a casa por el resto del día.

El camino hasta mi casa fue terrible. No sabía que decirles a mi mamá y papá. Mi mamá no tenía tiempo para mis problemas porque ya tenía nueve hijos más en casa. Me daba miedo ver a mi papá porque él en principio no quería que me vaya a la escuela. Ir a la escuela fue idea de mi mamá.

Cuando llegué en casa mi mamá preguntó por qué yo estaba en casa y le dije la razón. Ella estaba muy enojada, pero estaba más asustada para mí porque mi papá iba a ser muy enojado. La ayudé todo el día y cuando mi papá regresó a la casa supe que no iba a ser un buen momento. Mi papá me miró y se quitó el cinturón para azotarme. Supe que alguien le dijo lo que ocurrió en la escuela ese día. Los cinco minutos que duró el azote fueron los más horrible de mi vida. Cuando él termino él dijo, “Ahora puedes trabajar conmigo porque no vas más a la escuela.” Esa frase fue el comienzo de mis años en el infierno con mi padre.>>

Miré a mis hijos después de decirles mi historia y podía ver el dolor en sus ojos. Ellos no sabían por qué yo trabajaba en carpintería. Nunca hablaba de eso pero sabía que necesitaba hacerlo porque querían que ellos siguieran en la escuela porque yo no pude. Mi hija, Alba, se levantó y se sentó en mi regazo. Miré a Antonio llorando y él dijo, “No voy a pelear más, quiero ser

doctor.” Mi corazón se llenó con el amor de mis hijos; nunca había hablado con ellos como ahora. Vi a mi mujer, Sandra, en la cocina llorando y me levanté a ir a ella. Ella era la persona más importante en mi vida. Mi papá se murió un año antes de conocer a Sandra y ella nunca sabía del infierno de mi infancia.

Cuando recuerdo el día que le dije a mi familia mi historia ese fue el día que mis niños aprendieron la importancia de la educación y de tener cuidado con sus emociones. Ahora tengo ochenta y tres años y estoy escribiendo el libro que siempre quería escribir. Vi en la televisión que mi compañero de clase había ganado el Premio Nobel. Yo culpaba a Gabriel García Márquez por todos los problemas de mi infancia pero ahora quiero dar gracias a él porque si no lo vi ganar en la televisión nunca hubiera empezado a escribir este libro.

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WHY EVERYONE SHOULD 'BILBO UP'

SARAH KURTZ

Personal Essay Prompt:

*Fantasy writer Patrick Rothfuss has recently written a blog in which he 'verbs' Bilbo and encourages his readers to "Bilbo the f*ck up." What does it mean to turn this character into a verb, and into a moral or inspirational recommendation? Think about the aptness of this phrase in the context of not only what you understand The Hobbit to be about (and Bilbo's character and journey to be about), but all that this phrase can signify when applied elsewhere as an axiom, particularly in its ability to speak to or reflect upon our actions and motivations in our own world. Is the need to "Bilbo Up" about the importance of stepping outside your comfort zone, of leaving the easy comforts of home for an adventure? Is it about joining or participating in something larger than yourself? Or what? Dig into and explore the meaning of this phrase and all it might convey.*

*After interrogating what it means to take Bilbo's journey, his lessons and decisions, as a concept, extend your discussion to think about what it would mean to or for you to personally "Bilbo (the f*ck) Up" in this written personal reflection (which also begins to combine literary analysis). Is Bilbo a character from whom you feel you personally have learned something? What has this character taught you? What do you consider some of this character's most representative moments in the novel, and how do these moments shed light on the character's convictions and beliefs, and how might that correspond with or challenge your own? What is it about his virtues or failings, powers, limitations, or experiences that would induce you to reach for them within yourself or pass them on to others?*

The Hobbit is an adventure story following the journey of a simple hobbit, Mr. Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo Baggins is a hobbit who enjoys a comfortable, unambitious life, rarely traveling any farther than his pantry or cellar. He is a respectable hobbit who is a home lover, a pipe smoker, and not the least bit interested in adventure. Or that's how he likes it to appear to his fellow hobbits, for Bilbo has an inherent interest in adventures. As *The*

Hobbit begins, Bilbo is suddenly handed what may be the greatest opportunity of his life when Gandalf and his dwarves walk into Bilbo's kitchen and invite him on an adventure filled with treasure and dragons. Resistant and hesitant, Bilbo goes on a life altering journey, similar to the journey I took leaving my home in Virginia to play softball for the University of Iowa while earning a degree.

In my opinion, to "Bilbo Up" means to man up and get big; to put your fears away and tackle the task in front of you. You may not like the steps you need to take and the journey may scare you, but in the long run you know it is what is best for the collective group. Bilbo was pushed to join a group of explorers, consisting of dwarves and a wizard, to accomplish a great feat that none of them could have achieved alone. Their goal was to come back with treasure, which wouldn't have been possible if each of them didn't buy into the mission at hand. This type of heroism is selfless because it is so much about collaboration and cooperation. Similar to the journey Bilbo took, my team and I have embarked on a journey of our own (season) with a goal we wish to obtain (winning a Big Ten Championship). Currently we are also like Thorin and Company, and need to learn the lessons Bilbo offers in collaboration and cooperation. We are struggling as a collective whole and not coming out victorious as many times as we would like because every teammate has not bought into and fully committed to the mission at hand. They have not made the necessary sacrifices to be successful and do not fully believe we can accomplish our goal.

To "Bilbo Up" to me also means that an individual must sacrifice something to accomplish a goal that will better the collective group. Readers might more often think about Bilbo gaining so much through his journey; he gains riches, respect as a burglar and adventurer, etc. Yet, Bilbo is truly a hero because of what he is willing to sacrifice. He leaves the comfort and security of his home and goes on a journey he knows he may not return from, which implies he is willing to sacrifice everything he has, and even his life. Finally, when Bilbo returns home things have

changed. He is no longer the respectable hobbit he once was, he has changed and grown from his journey but lost his credible name as a hobbit in embracing new values and experiences.

I have learned so much from the character of Bilbo and admire him more than I thought possible of a literary character. I connected so well to Bilbo because we are very similar. Like Bilbo, I would much rather stay at home than go out, and if I didn't have to go into an unfamiliar situation, I wouldn't. He showed me that you can embark on a journey, no matter how uncomfortable, and come out changed for the better. You can push through adversity and prove everyone wrong. One of the most admirable moments I thought Bilbo had was when he took the Arkenstone to the Lake Men and Wood Elves as a peace offering, going behind Thorin's back to save the lives that would be lost if war broke out. Bilbo was willing to sacrifice certain friendships and riches to do what he thought was best for everyone. I admire Bilbo's constant, emerging selflessness. On many occasions he could have run away and saved himself, or turned back or gone home, but instead he always stayed to save his friends. Bilbo is a true team player and leader. If the members of my team, myself included, could learn to be as selfless as Bilbo we would be much more successful and more likely to accomplish our goal. Furthermore, the themes from *The Hobbit* are not for a sole reader but should send a collective inspirational message to all of society. The war scene in particular shows that with a collective effort so many more things might be possible or could be accomplished for the collective good. As Thorin echoes on his death bed, if more of us shared Bilbo's values and acted as he does, "it would be a merrier world" (195). If we worked as a team, we could accomplish so much more. If people started "Bilboing up" more and more people would follow that lead, which could lead to positive progression for our world.

Another infamous moment of *The Hobbit* that resonated with me personally was when Bilbo first comes face to face with Gollum. Gollum is a disgusting, slimy monster who speaks to himself in third person, which makes him even creepier. Bilbo's

encounter with Gollum is his first life and death encounter in the novel where he must fend for himself entirely on his own. The audience is able to see Bilbo coming out of his shell and "Bilbo-ing Up" in order to survive. He manages in unlikely hero fashion, besting Gollum not with his physical strength but with his mind. This scene gave me a sense of hope in knowing that anyone can become a hero in some form or fashion. When pushed outside of his comfort zone, Bilbo used the skills he had with riddles and was resourceful in using the ring to escape Gollum. Sometimes a person has to accept the skills and resources they have been dealt. Bilbo trusted in himself and his knowledge to be enough. He relied on himself, and only what he had in the moment, which is a very powerful and honorable type of heroism. Also, Bilbo is merciful and lets Gollum live when he could have easily killed this monster. This is an infamous scene for a reason; it can inspire readers to believe anyone is capable of being a hero. Similar to how people often envision the typical hero (strong, red cape, etc.), I find that people often think the leaders of sport teams are always the all-stars. Truth be told, leaders come in all shapes, just like heroes, as Bilbo's story demonstrates. A great leader is often the teammate who hustles the most and pushes their fellow teammates to be better. They care about the collective whole more than themselves; they are selfless, just like Bilbo.

The Hobbit is a timeless tale because it relates to the common person. Bilbo is a well-respected hobbit, who enjoys his time at home and a good smoke, but with a little push he seeks an adventure he never could have dreamed possible. Not only does he achieve the end result (treasure and the defeat of the dragon), he comes out of this journey as an unexpected, selfless hero. This was not an easy or comfortable task for Bilbo. He had to sacrifice the comfort and safety of his home, and trust in the leadership of Gandalf and the friendship of dwarves to help him reach his goal. Similar to Bilbo, I was nervous to leave home and travel half way around the country to play softball, but with the push from my coaches and parents I made the trip and haven't

looked back since. Do I miss home and wish for summer? Absolutely, but I know this journey has helped me grow as a person and mature into the adult I am turning into. I also must embark on a journey with each new season. Each weekend my team faces new opponents, like Bilbo faced different obstacles, and we must trust in the leadership of our coaches and believe and trust in our teammates to come out successful. By going out of our comfort zones and playing some of the best teams in the country, our team is growing and maturing as one to (hopefully) accomplish our end goal and claim the ultimate treasure, a Big Ten championship. Bilbo has inspired me to tackle each weekend of games with confidence and accept that I may be uncomfortable at times but can still come out successful and prove to be the unlikely freshman leader.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

YING CHEN

Have you ever ridden bikes on the road? Do car drivers change lanes for you when they pass you? In my experience, car drivers never change lanes for me even when I am pushed into a dangerous place. Jeremy Dowsett has metaphorized just such an experience in his article which attempts to decode white privilege, saying “I can imagine that for people of color living in a white-majority context it feels a bit like being on a bicycle in the midst of traffic. They have the right to be on the road, and laws on the books to make it equitable, but that doesn’t change the fact that they are on a bike in a world made for cars” (Jeremy 2014). The cyclist’s oppression illustrates how minorities are suffering in the world. Thus, we should begin to shift the center by putting the experience of people who have been excluded at the core of our thinking, and not only for minorities’s benefit but also for the majority’s. Because I belong to a minority group, I understand the feeling of exclusion and isolation. By talking about this sensitive issue, I will first share my own experiences of being a minority. Then I will illustrate how my experience is connected to the sociological concept —shifting the center.

I had never felt excluded until I came to the U. S. I still remember the first day I attended my college orientation last semester. That was the first day I had seen so many Americans. I was very nervous, but I expected to meet and talk to them. When all the freshmen were divided into small groups and gathered in classrooms, I was the only Asian in my group. When the leader asked all of us to talk to each other and introduce ourselves, no one would talk to me, and no one even acknowledged or seemed to notice my existence. I was sitting there and watching them having fun together. Their smiles and laughter made my existence ridiculous. The rest of the orientation was the same, and no one in my group talked to me or played games with me. It made me

so upset and discouraged. Since then, I have been afraid to talk to any American or join discussion during class.

Once, during another class, I was sitting between two of my classmates. When the instructor asked us to discuss some questions, they talked directly over me. They were acting like there was no one sitting between them. There was actually a fair distance between them, but they still chose to skip me to talk to each other instead. I didn’t know whether it was because of the language barrier, if they thought it would be difficult to communicate with me, or whether I was just being too sensitive about them talking to each other. It was really heartbreaking when people acted like that.

In his article Jeremy Dowsett also discusses Arturo Madrid’s idea of how exclusion and marginalization in the educational curriculum have affected us all. Arturo Madrid describes his schooling as a process of denial of the specific experience of Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and all other groups together considered to be “other” (Madrid 1988). In my experience, because of my identity as “other,” I was excluded and isolated. Being a missing person in schools is common within racial minorities. It is something students like me often see and feel, but it is rare for others within the majority to ever see or feel for themselves. Therefore, as a society we should start to shift the center so that oppression can be seen from the perspective of the oppressed.

The term “shifting the center” in our school books indicates how important it is to put the experience of groups who have formerly been excluded at the center of our thinking (Collins and Anderson, n.d.). My personal experiences are linked to race, gender and class. In other words, the intersection of race, gender and class decides what we will go through in society, as it determines how others will view us. For example, a working-class, Hispanic, single mother may suffer more prejudice than I have because of her personal identity. As Dowsett indicates, we all should start to think inclusively to help us better understand

the intersection of race, class and gender in the experiences of all people.

Minorities have been oppressed for decades because of the stereotypes about them, which can even result in making their existence invisible. I have directly experienced being excluded from the dominant group, so I understand how shifting the center and constructing new knowledge and awareness of minorities are important to oppressed groups. No one in the world is less important than anyone else. Our history misled us to have a wrong perspective, so we should start to shift the center and reconstruct knowledge for all the minorities who are suffering.

Such a focused change in thinking is not only for the benefit of oppressed groups, but also for the benefit of dominant groups. In other words, understanding the experiences of oppressed groups helps people know the partiality of their own perspective, which can also lead to the formation of fair social policy. Like I indicated before, car drivers are not necessarily intentional about pushing cyclists into a dangerous position. They may not intentionally mean to crowd cyclists out. They just don't understand how dangerous it is for cyclists from their own perspective, and don't realize the extent to which the world is made only for them. Thus, shifting the center and making dominant groups realize the oppression of the minority position is significant if we are ever to change the difficult and even dangerous situations that minorities are experiencing. We should not only work to build empathy between groups, but also take action to change the world.

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VOIR DIRE

RAQUEL BAKER

Exhibit 1: My Coca-Cola

My Coca-Cola having exploded inside the x-ray machine that checked out bags for weapons, was now collecting into little rivulets and eddies, mingling with briefcases, cell phone, and pile of loose change as they exited down the machine's ramp. The stern-faced police officer looked out at the expanding mess and breathed in hard, his left hand resting on the tip of his riot stick.

"Whose soda is this?"

"Mine."

"Don't put a soda through the machine!" His words came out hard with his breath.

"Well, that's good to know . . . for next time," I spit my words into his face, hoping to convey both my utter contempt for cops and how completely superfluous his comment as Coca-Cola was already running down the ramp, collecting at the edges of the black soles of his boots.

"What happened, Brian?" another cop approached cautiously.

"She," it was more of an accusation really than a pronoun, "put soda through the machine," he was shaking his head solemnly as if this spilt soda was the height of stupidity he'd seen here in the metal detector line of the Alameda County Superior Court building.

"Oh," cop number two says to number one, their heads shaking in unison as if this were indeed the stupidest thing they'd ever seen.

I'm no stupid. I'm just . . . literal. The sign above the metal detector said no guns, knives, swords, cutlery of any kind, brass knuckles, pocket knives, scabbards, steel-toed boots, or pepper spray. Soda wasn't listed as a dangerous item. I scanned

the list carefully, and soda definitely wasn't there, so I thought it would be OK.

I scoop my purse and back-pack up, rescuing them from a pool of brownish sugar water, and walk past my mess, past my ignorance, past the consequences, and toward the elevators, taking a great deal of pleasure in upsetting the cops' day, in defying them openly, in being rude and not getting shot. Besides, I hate jury duty and want to spread as much disorder as possible while I'm here.

It's 9:30 a.m. In the jury assembly room the grey carpet meets the grey chairs against the grey walls that open every three feet onto an overcast, horizonless sky. The hum of the candy machine is drowning out the judge's voice, which is saying to us, "I apologize for the inconvenience, but everyone can leave now, and please come back at 1."

Back at 1!

Oh, did I mention I'm pissed! I was already pissed about jury duty and now this. I mean I thought that by 1 I'd have this disruption far behind me. I thought I'd arrive at 9:30 and be immediately dismissed! When I filled out the juror survey--the judge called it the Voir Dire, which he said means to speak the truth in French--when I filled it out I spent a whole page on how I didn't even believe anything that police officers said. They lied, were racist, and could not be trusted as far as I was concerned. So I voir dired about it. Oh, and did I mention I'm black? Yeah, I'm black, and they simply can't be trusted as far as I'm concerned. I mean, I could go into the whole historical relationship of the police in the black community thing; you know, all the iconic images on Channel 9 Black History Month specials with the young girl in bobby socks being hosed with a violent stream of water or the young men being mangled by rabid German Shepard police dogs. I mean, I'm not saying all black people hate the police or anything; I'm just saying that I'm black and I don't trust the police and this makes sense to me. So, needless to say, I certainly thought my emphasis of this point would get me kicked right out of the jury pool. I mean, I didn't even bring my laptop

to court this morning, you know, so I could multitask. I thought this'd be a strictly in and out thing. The law, of course, had other plans.

Exhibit 2: Disembodied Americans: We Can Compartmentalize It!

In Courtroom 510 the judge asks if there is any reason why the prospective juror in seat #11, an unassuming blonde girl, couldn't be fair and impartial. I try to catch some shut eye. On the edge of sleep, I hear the blonde girl in seat #11 say, "Well, I guess I have to tell you that based on some of the questions asked by the defense lawyer about whether people can place, you know, can place responsibility on an individual for their actions, and not, you know, for the actions of others, well, these kinds of questions make me feel that, you know, at least some of the defendants have done something, you know, have committed some violent acts against the deceased, you know, against Gwen, and so, well, now I have to say that I do feel some hostility toward them.

Some hostility? Like if you found out that the Christian name of the Gwen you just fucked was really Raul; like if, you know, you found that out, would you like beat him, tie her up with a rope, and bury it in a remote area? That kind of hostility, blondie?

"But I think, you know, I think I could set these feelings aside. For the trial."

For the trial? Oh, that's nice, blondie. A jury of twelve kind of hostile peers.

That's real nice.

I'm on edge, head balanced in my right palm. With my eyes closed tightly, hunting for sleep, I hear three prospective jurors say,

"I feel

(insert sad, sympathy for the deceased, disgust toward the

defendants); but yes, I can, you know, set this aside. For the trial. I _____

(insert know, understand, agree with) the law."

Disembodied Americans.

I'm on edge, trying to catch some shut eye, and the district attorney says, "Any sympathy you feel for the victim or for these guys is not to be part of your decision-making process if you are chosen as a juror."

Ah, the head versus the heart. Disembodied Americans. Maybe the only one in their body was Gwen. Or maybe the only ones are the four boys who fucked her and killed him and how have to be judged by twelve of us who hate/fear them but can set that aside and still be fair and impartial. For the trial.

"Can you analyze the facts of this case with no concern to the possible consequences in terms of punishment?"

"Yes, I think I can," the red-haired Customer Service Manager smiles. "In fact, I think that makes it a lot easier!" Her smile widens; her teeth show under the curl of her upper lip. It becomes giddy, jubilant, or perhaps just hungry.

Disembodied Americans. Justice at a distance. Dispensed from a vending machine in bits and pieces. In fragments. Like pre-packaged chicken parts. I'll pluck, you enjoy. Just have fun! Video game wars. Just push a button and the bomb drops. Who cares about the consequences? It's always someone else who gets hurt, anyway. Someone else who is guilty. Someone else who, in all likelihood, probably deserves it. Someone else.

I'm on edge, falling away into sleep. My breathing is heavy and turns to muffled snores. I have to pull myself back toward the district attorney's voice. He is cross examining blondie.

"Miss Gropa, can you put any hostility that you may feel for the defendants aside when the trial states in a week or so?"

"Yes, I can. I—"

"So—I'm sorry. Were you going to say something else?"

"Oh, I was wondering if I should try to explain why I can do this?"

"Go ahead."

“Well. I ‘m a graduate student, and I teach 40 to 50 students a semester, and by the end of the term I often feel hostility toward them, but I can put that aside in the grading process. I realize the stakes are much higher her, but I’ve had quite a bit of practice.”

There are theaters and there are theaters. There are grades without hostility, truths without emotions, judgments without history, blood without loss.

Fading in and out of the room, I try to image a paper Gwen might write.

The Land Defines Me

I moved to the Bay Area from the Midwest, exchanging pancakes for free range, organic, eggs. After a year or so, I had to try to go back to say a proper good bye to my mother. It was the rivers and trees that welcomed me back. A feeling of the great appreciation and respect shoots through me when I think of home. Where I come from, it’s the landscape that has had extraordinary meaning in my life.

I am from the Great Lakes, north-eastern Wisconsin, and the land I grew up on defines me. However, I grew up knowing I was a woman no matter what my body or anyone else said. Now the Bay, not the Great Lakes, defines me. It is true that “we return to such places in our minds, irresistibly” (N. Scott Momaday), and that is why each place that I have been will stay with me forever.

N. Scott Momaday states in his passage that the landscapes or certain environments we keep in our minds will stay with us forever. I believe environments can define us, like the ground I am buried in, by what we choose to learn from them.

I try to see the curve of Gwen’s eses, but all I can see is the terror.

My head jerks up straight as the defense attorney approaches the podium. I turned to see if any has noticed me dozing. In my peripheral vision, I catch an image of the attorney’s long, white hair tied back in a ponytail. He is animated, in motion, an articulation of forearm and shoulders and hunching, rounded back. The district attorney is quiet. He speaks softly. He is trust and reassuring and integrity. No emotion. But he, this defense attorney, Mr. Scerra, is loud; his voice is clear; his gestures exaggerated, theatrical. He fills in the details for me, which is just as well because I can’t sleep.

“Now during the course of the trial, evidence will be presented that one or more of the defendants had sexual relations,” his voice is slow, meandering yet seeking its target, almost a Southern drawl, “that is, oral and or anal sex—with the decedent. And that on the evening of the incident, it was ascertained that the decedent was a he and not a she.” His voice goes up at the end. It has found its destination.

I look at the defendants, each one in turn, three young men, all of them younger than me. They look to be in their early twenties. Two of them look Latino. The one nearest to me, his camel skin much darker than the others, looks black. I try to see which one was fooled. Which one had anal sex. Which one beat. Which one gagged. Which one dug. What did they get back that had been taken from them when Gwen took her last breath. I can’t see any of that. Only three young men, younger than me, innocent by law yet already guilty. Of something. Of being here. Of being the ones on trial.

Mr. Scerra asks his client, Michael, to stand up and face those being questioned and then to turn and face those of us still in the audience hoping not to be picked by the jury. Michael is so stiff. He stands slowly, turns slowly to us. He’s wearing an ill-fitting suit—sleeves and shoulders running away from his body, the dark material too much for his slender frame. He tries to make eye contact but quickly looks down at the floor. He has to look normal. He has to look like an innocent man. And we see

him and we don't. All we see are our images of Gwen who is not here, who is now dead because of these three innocent-guilty men.

What happened, Michael? What happened when Gwen she turned into Raul? Were you seeing double? Did you just not know? Were you fooled by her smooth skin? Were you taken away by the gentle curve of her hips, so soft and giving? Speak the truth, Michael. I can't hear you. I can't see what happened that night at that house at that party so many years ago. Did you notice her breasts so small? Maybe it's OK. Perhaps she was just a freshman then, you, just a slip of a girl who hadn't completely swelled into the ripeness of his womanhood yet. Did you brush against her hard dick when you were expecting a moist, welcoming giving? Did your hands move quickly from underneath her skirt, slide down his neck, back over its too small breasts? Perhaps it was a god come to test you. Or a trickster. Or a marauder, maybe. Or a thief. Or perhaps it was just some fucking tranny who you and your boys are gonna kick the shit out of, tie up, bury somewhere real deep. What happened, Michael? Tell me.

Speak the truth.

Voir dire.

Exhibit 3: Jimmy Hoffa and the Last Unwanted Pregnancy

On the second day of the third week of jury selection, the sad, sorry Sixties woman—who looked like a completely normal, boring, regular, sad, sorry Sixties woman—revealed that she was a fairly abnormal, incredibly self-disclosing, unlucky, bitter, sad, sorry Sixties woman.

“Mrs. Sad, Sorry Sixties Woman, you indicated to the Court that you were having dreams as a result of the trial thus far that you find disturbing . . .”

“Yes, Your Honor, my son was molested by a pedophile when he was 11, and with all the information coming out in the trial, you know, the information coming out of a sexual nature, I find that I'm having bad dreams and I can't sleep at night, and when I'm here in the courtroom, the memory of those times when my son was molested for several months and we didn't know it, he didn't tell nobody, but we knew his behavior had

changed, he was very aggressive and filled with rage and we took him to a psychologist and put him in therapy and did all the things you're supposed to do, but it changed his life, Your Honor; it changed his behavior; his life was changed.”

“And did you pursue this matter legally, Mrs. Sad, Sorry Sixties Woman?”

“No, no, Your Honor; he never told nobody, he never told me, his own mother, until he was 28. And by that time he was changed and he lived in a different town and he didn't see the man anymore and he didn't want to go back into all that. He wanted to leave it alone, Your Honor.”

“And you also had a husband that was a problem?”

I wish I had some popcorn. This story was getting better than a late-night episode of Jerry Springer.

“Well, yes, Your Honor. I got pregnant in 1962 by a man who was mentally, physically, and sexually abusive, and I keep remembering. I keep thinking about it now with all these details of sexual things coming up. And when I got pregnant in 1962, I swear I was the last woman to get pregnant accidentally—I always told my son that he was the last baby that got conceived before the pill—I mean, the day I found out I was pregnant, the day the sperm hit my egg, that day I went back to my dorm and all my college girlfriends, I swear, all of them were on the pill. This was 1962, Your Honor, and I've been having memories of all this. All these memories are coming into the present while I'm here listening in the courtroom to all of these sexual details coming up, and here I am thinking about my husband that I married 'cause I was the last one to get pregnant before the pill. I got divorced as soon as I could and I never say him again, but I keep remembering how it was then in the Sixties. I remember my Harvard-graduate, magna-cum-laude husband who took two hits of acid—oh, everyone thinks the Sixties is so great now! Sex and drugs and rock n' roll. Oh, it's so cool—but I remember how he took two hits of acid and hallucinated for six months, and on the first night, while he was hallucinating, he robbed some liquor stores and I had to spend the next three years visiting him in the

penitentiary, and, I don't know, the memories just keep coming back from those times, the memories like how Jimmy Hoffa was the only man that was nice to me in that whole three years. He was the only man that said, "Hey, Sad, Sorry Sixties Woman, how ya doin?"

"OK, Mrs. Sad, Sorry Sixties Woman, you are excused for cause."

"OK, OK, thank you, Your Honor. Thank you. I. I, I'm sorry."

Exhibit 4: The Mafia Thug, Football Player, Clean-and-Sober Ex-Wrestler Guy

Mr. Combs is

"That's Comms."

Mr. Comms is a tall, large, muscular, slow-speaking, ex-wrestler, ex-bouncer,

"I prefer to call it 'door host.'"

Ex-door host who has been clean and sober for five years now, except for the pharmaceutical narcotics he uses daily to ease the pain of his wrestling injuries.

"I, I believe in the truth and the justice and, and not to sound like I'm uh all-American or nothing, 'cuz I'm not, but what I believe in is the truth."

"And do people find this forthrightness in you acrimonious?" the district attorney says with his well-dressed tongue.

"Can you, sir, 'acrimonious,' I don't know what that means."

"Bitter."

"Oh, uh, oh no, sir. I'm very easy to get along with!"

The district attorney and his grey suit and his well-dressed tongue are sure they won't get the mafia thug, football player, clean-and-sober ex-wrestler guy to understand the question, to

say the obvious answer that goes with such a thick body like that, and so they sit back down.

The white-ponytailed, ex-Jerry-Garcia-following defense attorney, Mr. Serra, approaches the silver-braceleted, brunette, shiny-pony-tail-pulled-back, large, strong-browed, silver-pinky-ringed, huskily voiced Mr. Comms.

"Mr. Comms, you've led a fairly colorful life, sir."

"Oh, uh, yeah. I guess, yeah."

"You have written here that you are an actor."

"Aspiring actor, sir."

"Well, and is there any particular type of actor, you know, type of role that you get, that you are typically cast in?"

"Well, uh, yeah. I guess I get mafia-thug-football-player type roles. My most recent role was on Nash Bridges and I was a mafia thug and I kidnapped Don Johnson's father and threw him in a limo and was going to sink it in the Bay; but, as I'm sure you heard about the unfortunate habits of Mr. Johnson, the whole show went under because of this uh, those unfortunate habits, and uh, my episode, it never aired and uh, yeah, so I guess I missed my calling!"

"And I assume with your background as a door host,"

"Yeah, I was a bouncer."

"OK, well you said you preferred 'door host,' so I was just—"

"Oh, I said that? Well, yeah, then I guess, yeah, a 'door host.'"

"Well, with your worldliness, I guess that you have come into contact with transgendered people before?"

"Well, uh, yeah. Like I said, in my experience as a bouncer, you know, as a door host, for well, for, I worked in the adult, well, 'the exotic entertainment industry' is a nice way to say it, and in my 15 or 16 years of being in those clubs, I seen hundreds of gender-crossing people. I seen homosexuals, lesbians, all sorts of crossing people."

"And, Mr. Comms, with all your world experience, with all your knowledge, you think you can base your decision on just

