

ROADSIDE AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

Roadside America

Creative Doctor of Letters Dissertation by

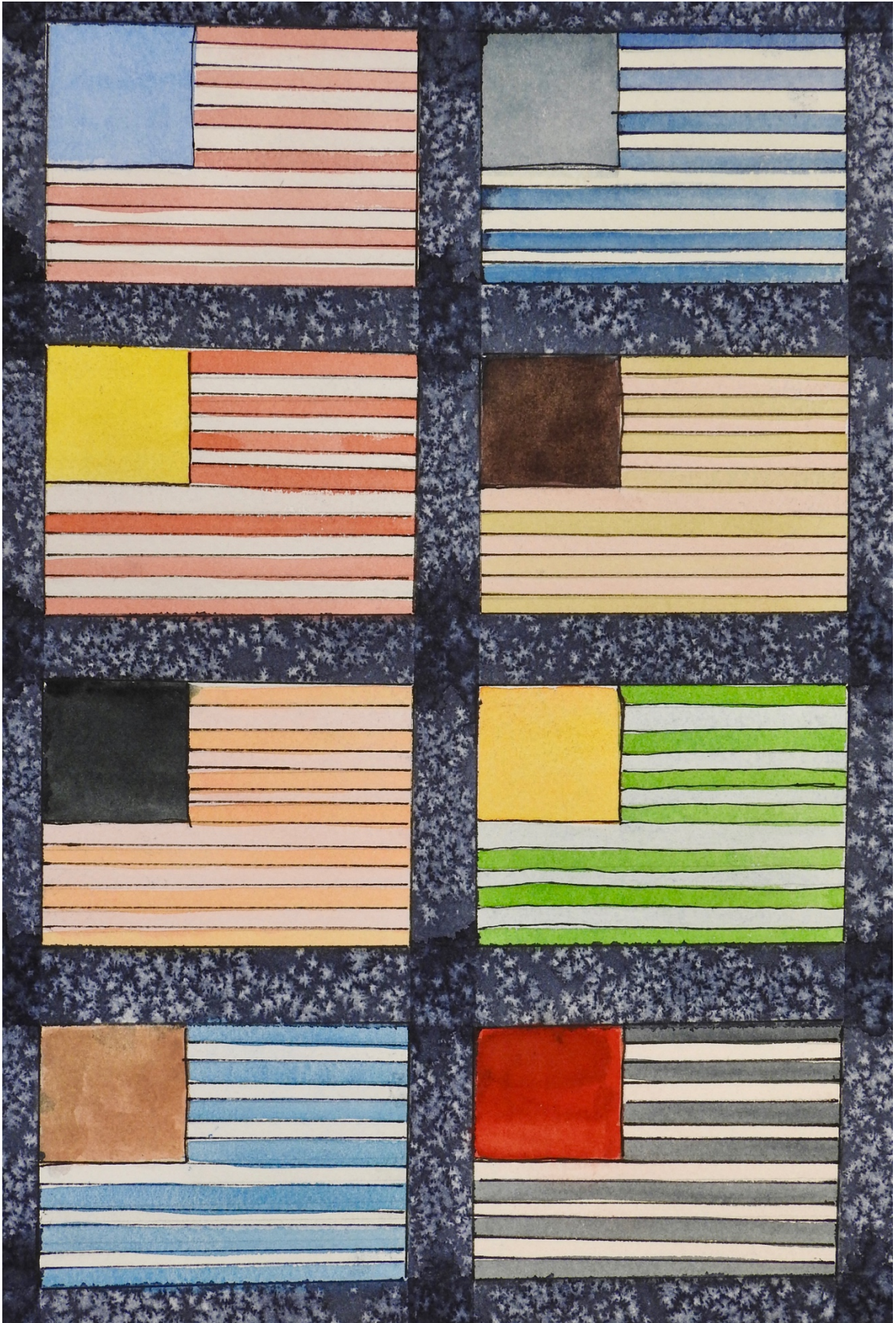
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The Caspersen School of Graduate Studies
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Roadside America is a collection of short stories about the living in the United States in a period of unprecedented cultural change and turmoil. It explores American chicanery of all sorts, including exceptionalism, manipulation, surveillance, racism, sexism, class warfare, violence, abuse, and greed. A hallmark of the collection is that many stories are connected to historical events and places, such as life during the Cold War, the panoptic *Presidio Modelo* prison in Cuba, expatriate life in 1970s Iran, the 2016 Presidential election, E-commerce's strangle of small enterprise, and Jeff Epstein's pedophile empire. We visit these issues in short stories like tourist sites on an old-time road trip, and what we find is often not pretty. Yet, particularly in some of the later stories, influenced by the cultural pushback against the more nihilist aspects of post-modernism, characters may attain some degree of redemption.

Some of the stories are open ended in nature, and the reader is invited to actively share in the process of interpretation. A watercolor illustration precedes each story, inviting the reader into the story through image in addition to word. *A Tour Guide to Roadside America* follows the collection, offering details on the stories' sources and underlying themes, as well as additional personal reflections.



Acknowledgements

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Old Soldiers Revisited

My mother, Mary Lou, is eighty, and I am afraid to let her travel alone, so I accompany her to South Carolina. She insists on doing *all* of the driving, intent on proving she still can. We don't fly because we can no longer bear shuffling endlessly through chutes and holding pens, removing our belts and shoes, and presenting our toilet articles to strangers for inspection. We loathe playing *red light/green light* in tall transparent scanning chambers, holding our hands up as in prayer or surrender, spreading our knees, anchoring our socked feet on chrome yellow footprints, as our bodies are electronically probed and filmed beneath our clothes; *all to make us feel* safe in this new age of fear. So, we load up the Volvo station wagon in Buck Hill Falls, Pennsylvania, with her adopted border collie Ziggy stretched across the back seat, and set off.

The gated community we are heading for is a former sugar cane plantation in Gullah country, in the Sea Isles of South Carolina. The roofless tabby walls of the mill and slave quarters are preserved in the middle of a verdant golf course, its long fairways lined with palms and lush tropical foliage.

It was my father who originally coveted a second home in the Sea Isles, with its golden marsh glimmering in morning sunlight. But its tribe of can-do widows now includes Mary Lou, who calls it her Winter home. She belongs to a great female generation of safety in numbers: volunteers and joiners who make new friends readily through common experiences and community projects, as well as art classes, bridge, and golf.

Before my father Rob died, my mother drove with him into Manhattan weekly for his chemo and radiation treatments at Sloan Kettering. They stayed overnight at a hotel

nearby. My Dad liked to walk around the Upper East Side neighborhood when he was feeling strong. One time he was stopped by two undercover detectives near the U.N. when Obama was in town. "Because I jaywalked?" he wondered. After politely answering some questions, he asked the officers what it was all about. "Sir," the detective explained, "you are radioactive." They had a detector mounted on the dashboard of their unmarked police car, scanning for possible terrorist activity. He had the intake bracelet from Sloan on his wrist, so they eventually let him go.

Rob and Mary Lou were lifetime Republicans. Rob took issue with biased journalism long before it was fashionable. He was particularly annoyed by what he saw as mixing news and leftist editorializing in *The New York Times*, and every day he would parse each sentence on the front page, searching for examples of opinion where fact belonged. Like all of us Dalziels, Rob was also a politeness vigilante, the kind that opens a door for a lady, but stews silently when not thanked for it. I remember him in a shouting match with a man at a condo we rented on Sanibel Island, who had taken our "reserved" parking spot, and who refused to move his car because his own "reserved" parking space had been taken by someone else. They stood nose to nose, shouting at each other in the parking lot before the other man went inside and slammed the door in my father's face. I told him I saw the whole thing, and he was embarrassed.

Ziggy turns a few circles and settles down in the back seat of the car. Funny how my Dad barely tolerated dogs until Ziggy came along. He was amazed at Ziggy's incredible ability to catch a ball mid-air. He often said if Ziggy were human, he would be a famous athlete.

Rob had just one brother, Uncle Don. I remember as a child standing on a small patch of Summer grass behind Aunt Lois and Uncle Don's house in Levittown, on Long Island. There were blocks and blocks of these boxy homes, built to provide housing to returning G.I.'s after World War II. The standard joke was that drunks could not find their way home because every house looked alike. I recall looking up at my Dad and Uncle Don at dusk, each holding binoculars, elbows spread wide, staring up at the sky, scanning for silhouettes of planes and jets coming into LaGuardia Airport, challenging each other in a game they learned during the war, who could be first to call out the model of the aircraft: "Douglas DC7!" "Martin 4-0-4!" "Grumman C-1!" They played until dark.

I remember how Uncle Don's eyes lit up when he told the story about playing the marching tuba in 1954 in the 26th annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade with the Sewanhaka High School band. When he hoisted the brass sousaphone over his shoulder, it encircled his body entirely and gave him power. Its shiny twenty-six-inch brass bell faced forward, so the other musicians could hear it clearly and stay in rhythm as he puffed his cheeks and blew fat bass notes from the rear of the band. It was the year the Spaceman Balloon debuted, and Uncle Don's group marched behind it past the 2.3 million people in attendance that day. His purple and white uniform was crisply starched, and a gentle wind blew through the yellow plume of his shako. He was so happy and proud, even if his parents did not attend.

If my Grandparents had let Uncle Don go to college for a music degree, as he wanted to, he might have joined the R.O.T.C. Band, and maybe even worn a yellow uniform. But his father said he would not pay for college to study music, even though he

himself sang on a Vaudeville radio show. Don would need to choose something more practical, like engineering, as Rob had. In his deep disappointment, Don left home and enlisted in the Navy. He spent the Cold War listening for radar signals from a lighthouse off the coast of Newfoundland.

I am not used to being a passenger, and I try not to count off each mileage marker along the highway. Do we really need one every tenth mile? I turn on the radio, spinning the dial away from conservative talk shows or religious broadcasts, but all I find is static, so I turn it back off.

To take a break from driving, we stop at an antiques mall in Staunton, Virginia. There, among a dusty pile of puzzles and board games, I find a handsome maroon cardboard box, similar in size and color to a Scrabble box. The box has a yellowing label pasted on it, which reads *U.S. Army Band of Washington DC, made by W. Britain*. Hand-glued to that label is another smaller one that reads “*No. 002236 of 5000.*” It looks old, like it was pulled from the top shelf in a small-town general store, dusted off, and handed down to a husky teenager in white bucks, who someday wanted to play the tuba in the Army marching band.

The inside of the box is flocked velvet and contains ten dye-cast hand-painted full-dress soldier-musicians, each two inches tall. They wear bright canary yellow military jackets, vaguely reminiscent of European military uniforms from the eighteenth century, with full epaulets and piping, and blue trousers piped in the same vibrant yellow hue. There is a drum major with a tall shako who carries a ceremonial baton and two snare drummers captured mid-beat. A single bass drummer wears a white smock to protect his uniform, while a cymbalist waits for the right moment to strike, and two

pipers hold tiny black piccolos in their enormous hands. Three identical buglers each play one-handed, the other hand swinging mid-stride as they all march across an imaginary parade ground.

Twenty dollars seems fair for ten soldier musicians, even if they turn out to be fake, so I pay the full price without haggling. Back on the road, I thumb through the small square booklet of thick card stock inside the box. I learn W. Britain is not a place but a person and a company once based in London. I learn that this set of 1954 army band players is “based upon” W. Britain’s original issue.

Hmmm, “based upon.” I look it up on my phone. I learn this box of soldiers was issued in 1994, a fact which is nowhere to be found in or on the box. This is not a box of toys to play with; it is a manufactured collectible. It is *in the style of* a collectible, just as airport security rituals are *in the style of* real security as if our shoeless feet can keep planes from falling, and patriotic propaganda is *in the style of* loving one’s country, as if a flagpole alone can support our precarious perch on top of the world.

I put down my phone and go back to thinking about the musicians. I wonder about the idea of an old thing replacing an old thing. This now vintage new old fake real thing, circa 1994, looks like it was made in 1954 when this U.S. Army band actually played.

In 1954, it seemed the world was collapsing. Alan Turing, the brilliant mathematician, World War II code breaker and computer theorist died, like Snow White, biting into a cyanide-laced apple. Henri Matisse died of a heart attack at home in Nice. The McCarthy Hearings commenced. As Dwight D. Eisenhower announced the Domino Theory, the French were defeated in Indochina. *Godzilla* premiered in Tokyo, as the

hydrogen bomb debuted in the Bikini Islands as a brilliant yellow cloud. Arturo Toscanini, the world's most famous conductor, a man of perfect pitch and intention, had a memory lapse, ending his final concert midway.

My father was 20, already dating 17-year-old Mary Lou for two years. They would be married two years later.

Uncle Don's wife Lois was Mary Lou's arch-nemesis in grade school, and then married Rob's brother, if you can believe it. I picture Aunt Lois now in a yellow dress, four foot ten of tiny malice, staring up, uncomfortably close. She threw down highballs of Scotch like a sailor every Christmas and dragged up old childhood baggage from the depths of the past. Her face twisted into a tiny angry mask as again she repeated the story about the time Mary Lou won the third-grade school play role of "Princess" they had both auditioned for. Aunt Lois complained to anyone who would listen that it was not fair because Mary Lou had skipped second grade, so she wasn't a "real" third-grader, and oh, how Aunt Lois leaned into my mother to taunt her through dessert: "Princess! Princess!" Neither of the husbands dared get between them.

As my mother drives, I pick up my phone and browse for more information about the musicians. I learn the U.S. Army picked bright yellow for its marching band uniforms in 1954 because they were tired of living in the shadow of the Marine Band's bright red parade dress uniforms. The Army Band wore olive drab uniforms, which visually simply could not compete. Coincidentally, the Army had an abundant supply of canary yellow canvas that had been made for the cavalry many years before. An ill-advised plan was hatched, and soon the band had the most remarkably bright yellow uniforms on the planet.

But no one liked these lion tamer uniforms. The faux eighteenth-century design screamed of artifice. Worse yet, over time, the cheap yellow dye bled onto the skin of the musicians. The jackets faded quickly, as did the whole experiment. By 1957 new dress blue uniforms were procured, and the U.S. Army band has worn blue ever since.

My father would have preferred the dress blue uniforms, or even the plain army khakis he wore himself as a Lieutenant after his R.O.T.C. scholarship and electrical engineering degree. As a young soldier, he quickly learned to make a bed so tight that a quarter could bounce off it. Always practical, and not fond of dirty jobs, he cut a deal with a soldier from Kentucky who shined his boots in return for Rob making both beds before they headed out to the parade grounds each morning. My father's gift as a young officer was his ability to have a full squadron of vehicles and men cross the parade grounds in front of the Major at Fort Belvoir at exactly zero eight hundred hours each morning, a skill refined to an art form in the cold purgatory of waiting for the next yellow cloud to bloom.

I look back at the figures in the flocked box. They just do not look right. The bugles look more like party horns than trumpets. I think, why the hell don't they get rid of at least one of the bugle players— isn't three really a bit much?-- as well as the cymbalist-- I mean, how often do we really need the crash of a cymbal?-- and instead, maybe let my Uncle Don play his tuba?

We still have some of my father's lead World War II soldiers, but Uncle Don spray painted them all silver while Rob was in college, perhaps to make them look like spacemen, so they don't look right either.

When my Dad turned 80, he had been fighting cancer for seven years. He was melancholy but also genuinely happy that he had made it that far. I wood-turned and carved a black walnut lidded box in the shape of a full-sized chocolate birthday cake, complete with 80 colored toothpick “candles,” each topped with a glow-in-the-dark “flame.” We encouraged friends and family to send him good wishes and fond memories, which were written on round pieces of paper and added to the box. Uncle Don's contribution read, “When my brother Rob was 14, and I was 10, we were playing Commando on the front lawn at 7 Pinewood Lane. Rob managed to break my collarbone. ‘Have to love my brother!’” I quickly imitated Uncle Don’s handwriting and added, “Happy Birthday! Love, Don,” hoping to soften the blow. (Should I have tried “L.O.L.?”) My parents were both profoundly annoyed.

In the glove compartment, I am surprised to find a small set of black and white cards with many numbers on them. A title card reminds me this is a *Mystery Calculator*. My Dad must have left it there. Is it possible that he has been gone for less than a year? I remember just two Christmases ago, we were all there, and Dad pulled this nineteenth-century card trick from an English Christmas cracker. There were 6 little cardboard cards, each printed with 32 numbers. The “magician” would ask for a number between 1 and 63, and then ask to be handed all the cards on which the chosen number appeared. Presto! The magician guessed the number every time. My father studied the cards long after the breakfast dishes were cleared, and I guess he kept them.

Now I study them too, and suddenly it clicks. I realize this trick works only because every decimal number can be described as a unique sum of non-repeating powers of two. I am moved to take out a pad and write out all the base ten numbers 1 to 63 in

base two. It works perfectly. I marvel that the binary basis of this party trick presaged the modern computer by almost a century, and I get a chill as though I have read a great poem.

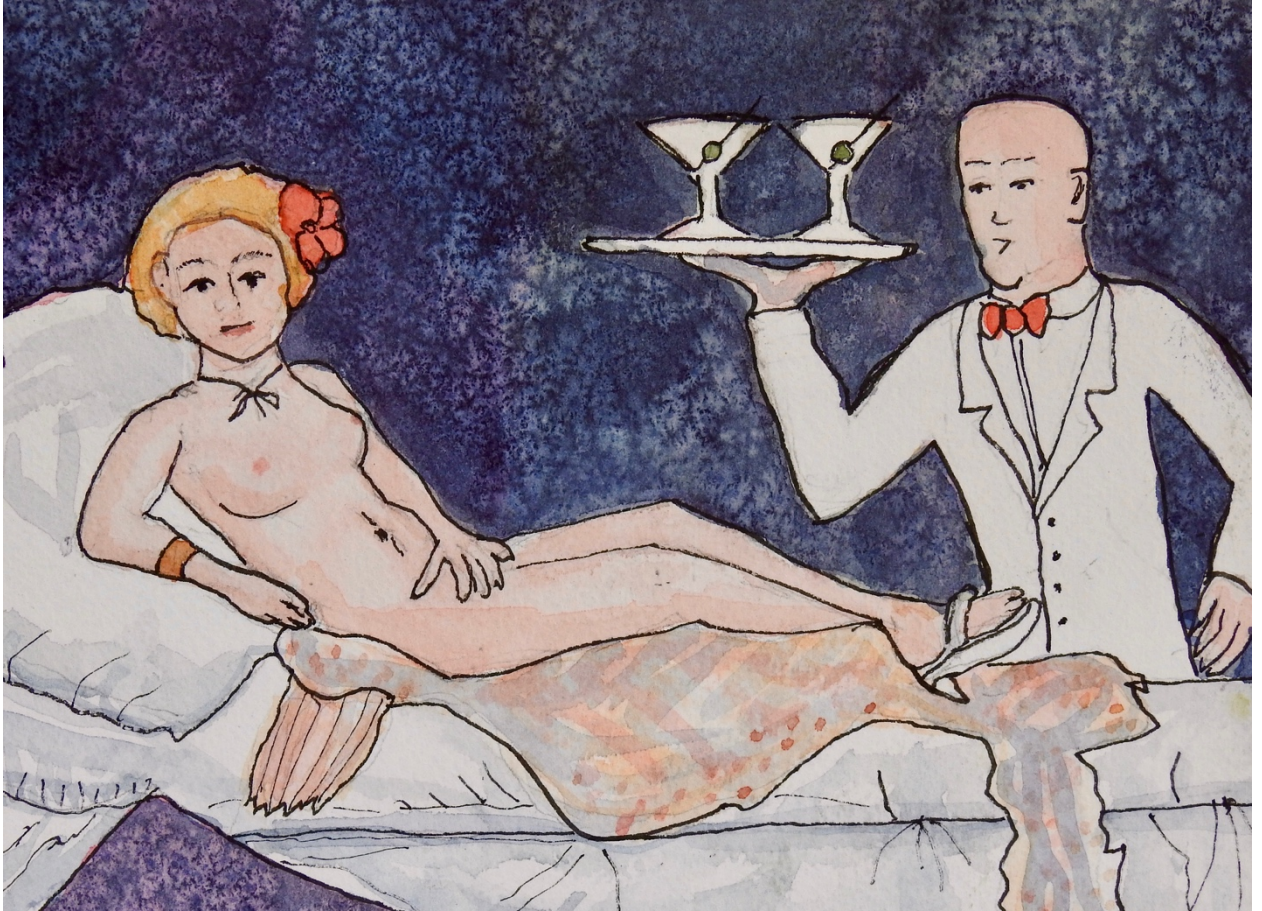
I wonder at it and think, yes, that is what is worthwhile: the pursuit of truth, whatever that might be, with pure intention, keeping a diamond in your mind. That is how Turing found an elegance in numbers. That is why Toscanini dimmed the house lights and snubbed the Fascists; why Matisse kept cutting and pasting colored paper until the day he died; why Uncle Don played the tuba and only wanted to go to music school; and why my Dad always tried to do the right thing.

But with time and circumstance, our intentions become impure; outcomes seldom what we bargained for. We collect facsimile toys and wear yellow uniforms.

My mother and I are still driving and may never get to South Carolina at this rate. We pass a Homeland Security billboard that advises, "If you see something, say something," to be ever alert in this new age of fear. Mom tells me that in the old age of fear, the Fifties, she and Dad planned how they would survive in the event of nuclear war, which they believed was imminent. They stored blankets, canned water, and an ample food stockpile in the basement, along with a ham radio, ostensibly to wait out the nuclear Winter there. It seems decidedly quaint in its faith now. But they needed something to hold onto; they were scared, just as we are now. With no better plan of my own for the end of the world, right there in the car, I pull my chin to my chest in an involuntary duck and cover.

Ziggy's head rests on the maroon box in the back seat. Inside, old soldiers listen for radar signals, and swap stories about truth in music, and music in truth. In the front

passenger seat, I fiddle again with the radio dial, hoping for a clearer signal, as the highway slides beneath our wheels.



Boogie Knights

It is not easy to be a Master of the Universe and then suddenly have it all taken away. Everybody said I'd get bored and maybe it was true. In 2025, I sold my company, Boogie Knights, to one of the bigger VRP (Virtual Reality Partner) manufacturers. By then, the VRP industry was massive, with many competitors chasing the Holy Grail of *Full On Live*, creating a sexual partner that could pass as an actual human. At that time, the discerning aficionado could still sense something slightly off in the way the robots moved, something still too mechanical, and so the quest continued.

The Great Granny of VRP was, of course, the inanimate sex doll, which was invented in the seventeenth century. European sailors, isolated at sea for months, sewed old clothes and sailcloth to fashion *Dama de Viaje*, to have sex with on the *voyage*. Some of these sailors sold their dolls to Japanese merchants, who called them "Dutch Wives," and an industry was born. Centuries later, the inflatable beach ball was invented in 1938, and it was only a matter of time before someone would put one and one together. Soon, mass production would start cranking out inflatable vinyl dreamgirls.

In 1968, it became legal to sell erotica by U.S. mail, and blow-up dolls were advertised in porn magazines. I have one of these ads hanging in my office. Like all of them, it is comically misleading, even worse than Sea Monkeys. It has a picture of a beautiful topless woman with large breasts carrying a tray with two wine glasses, her nipples barely obscured, with a sheer apron slung around her naked hips. The text promises, "naturally, anything you suggest will be just fine with Judy. After all, you're the Master—literally!"

Customers were bound to be disappointed. Like beach balls, blow-up love dolls easily popped, especially under the weight of, say, a man. They were often purchased as gag gifts rather than as real companions. Some of these dolls contained water compartments for the breasts and buttocks, which sometimes burst like water balloons at inconvenient moments. The world needed a better Dutch Wife, and silicone provided the answer, relatively realistic for the time, durable, and easy to clean. It became the material of choice for decades.

Of course, the Japanese initially took the lead on love dolls (it is in their DNA—they love robots!). But once Artificial Intelligence entered the picture, it attracted tons of

funding from the aptly named *Silicon Valley*, and American industry was once again back on top. Meanwhile, sex dolls were finally gaining some grudging respect as they became understood as, at very least, victimless. Better that than causing problems for real women, the logic went. Plus, the internet made it easy to custom order one without ever having to face a human salesperson. The industry took off.

Eventually, all the VRP competitors adopted similar hardware: Kevlar frames, Smart-gel musculature, breathable skin, thermo-scented perspiration, and hyper-realistic self-lubricating genitalia. So it became a software war, a war for sentience. The low end of the market, i.e., the Joe twelve-pack market, was flooded with cheap imports and disposables, some barely able to moan appropriately, and nobody was making money on that anymore. The high end for Men was now over-accessorized and over-featured, driven by corporate suits with big plans, rather than ingenious independent entrepreneurs. Big corporate plans never work.

Tons of people ask me, "Jared, why were you so, so successful, where others utterly failed?" Fair question. After all, I was just a commercial real estate guy, a deal guy really, not an engineer or a rocket scientist. My genius has always been in my ability to stay calm in the craziness of the world and think really hard about how to profit from it. In this case, I was what you call a fast follower, watching what others do for a while, and then doing it much, much better. The big thing I saw in the early 2020s was that women fell in love with their phones, their "personal electronic devices." That is all there was to it. It was just that simple. I saw them caress them, dress them in jewels, take them everywhere. Hell, they even slept with them. I guess it was my big "Ah-ha!" moment, but honestly, it felt more like, "Uh, duh!"

Once I saw the potential, I was 100% confident we could disrupt the industry by catering exclusively to women, and that the women's market would significantly eclipse the less sophisticated men's markets. Even I underestimated how quickly it would happen, though. There was an absolutely insatiable demand for modestly attentive robots, at a fair price, with no risk of date rape, or hitting on your friends, or undue melodrama (unless programmed that way on purpose; everything easily adjustable based on personal tastes). Women enjoyed dressing their Knights and even sewing clothes for them, knitting them sweaters, buying funny socks for them to wear, sometimes surprising them with real jewelry, some of it quite expensive.

This is not to say that it was not about the sex for these women; ultimately, it was absolutely about sex, but on their own terms. After a tough day at the office, a woman might come home to her Knight exhausted. But after a suitable time to relax together on the love seat, discussing her day, the Knight might be instructed to light candles. They might watch a romantic movie together over Chinese food. Then, after he had cleared the plates, they might wrap their arms around each other, just holding each other, cuddling, whispering silly things, remembering good times together, and laughing. Then, after the most attentive, gentle, and loving foreplay imaginable, good, safe, wireless, mind-blowing sex with no strings attached, and no sin. The Knight could also make coffee and give a decent back rub, before powering down and awaiting further instruction.

Though the Knights might not seem to know much at first, they came out of the box 100% eager to please and learn. Through AI, with each interaction, the young Knight got more knowledgeable and confident. It was genuinely touching for our customers to see them grow as individuals.

The first-gen product was a hit, and when Oprah bought one, Boogie Knights went totally viral. Of course, many women were squeamish at first, but once they picked out the face and body type they liked, learned how to tweak the emotional support system, and control the timing functions, they were hooked. Many women wasted hour after hour at home on their Knights. In the business world, we call this kind of product devotion "stickiness," and stickiness is always a good thing.

The code was written entirely by women, most veterans of traditional male VRP. They told me that after all their research into male sexuality and deviance, modeling what women wanted was reasonably straightforward. This is not to say it was simple; it was, in fact, highly enigmatic. But unlike the female-bodied VRPs, which were becoming increasingly pneumatic, the Male-bodied VRPs were usually set up as handsome but not perfectly so, smart but not too smart, nice, but not too nice, like the mythic boy next door. Behavior could be randomized from time to time to keep things interesting. It took us a ton of time and money for the engineers to get the eyes just right-- both the look and the data capture. But it made the Knights much more authentic, and it was all about authenticity.

Somehow, I knew it all would soon end, though, because, well, it always does, and that is why I sold out at the top of the market. After taxes, it worked out to about \$780 Million, not billionaire territory but pretty good for a kid from Long Island. Good thing I sold out, too. The shit was about to hit the fan.

Entering his third term, the President himself was hacked, with all of his personal information and correspondence posted online. To the great disappointment of Liberals everywhere, there was no hidden trove of illicit communications, because the only online

service he used was Twitter. After his initial anger subsided, he realized he would have a considerable advantage in a world where all online secrets were revealed. In one of the first acts of his new term, he declared a national emergency, which was called *Revelation*. All online activity of every American for the past fifteen years was made public. It caused mass hysteria. Seemingly everyone had secrets they had hoped would never be revealed. Marriages unwound in a matter of days. Corporate Board rooms erupted in chaos.

With all the fear, you might think this would be just the right environment for VRP to really prosper, right? But user profiles for all the dolls were now easily accessible, and everyone's programming settings became grist for the gossip mill. Women were repulsed to learn what some of these robot sluts had done with their men, and were mortified to have their own bedroom windows open for the world to peer in. No genuine apology to a loved one could be complete without removing the CPU from the offending VRP and melting it down, often into the shape of a cross or a Star of David. Without the software, the dolls were not worth much; there was a real sadness about them. They were just Dutch Wives again. Socially, owning one went back to dirty from cool. Bodies stacked up in landfills across the country. People turned from VRP and went back to consuming pornography privately on the internet. I ducked a serious bullet!

This whole thing was an over-reaction, in my humble opinion. There was absolutely nothing wrong with the dolls themselves, just what people put into them. So sad! Anyway, everyone says I did unbelievably great, that it was the best transaction ever, and it was pure genius to cash out when I did. I'm grateful to be so smart. Yes, I

am a little *bored* now, but in a good way! *Bored* leads to new ideas, right? And for me, it's never about the destination; it's all about the *Viaje*.



Shine On, You Crazy Diamond

Thirty-some years before the *Shahs of Sunset* roamed Los Angeles, in 1975, the city of Tehran, Iran belonged to us: *Teenage Rock Stars of Pahlavi Avenue*; the exceptional children of American expatriates. At seventeen, we lived beyond constraints. We came and went as we pleased. American companies paid our cab fare all over a vibrant city. We slurped down tall vodka tonics at the best hotels. We floated languidly in long private pools, in perfectly manicured gardens, all over the city. We lounged on fat silk cushions in our swimsuits. We drank German beer from the commissary, playing dice games, and massaging each other's young shoulders with lotion in the mid-day heat. We took un-chaperoned trips to Greece, Turkey, and Afghanistan. On Winter weekends, our school provided free minibuses up to the mountains for world-class skiing at Dizin, where we shared gondola rides with trust fund babies, arms merchants, and supermodels.

Everywhere we went we were recognized. Shopkeepers courted us. Local security patrols ignored our petty crimes. We were American teenagers, we had no guilt, and we lived under a different set of rules than everyone else.

Iran, once known as Persia, is an ancient land of poets, including Rumi, Hafez, and Omar Khayyam. Its literature has inspired Western authors from Goethe to Emerson. The Persians were industrious and ingenious, inventing practical things like bricks, windmills, and algebra, but also sensual things like alcohol, hookahs, and ice cream. 2500 years ago they built tall mosaic minarets and broad ceilinged domes for stately mosques. They lovingly wrapped them in mosaic tile, glazed in geometric, paisley, and calligraphic patterns of turquoise, yellow, navy, white, sepia, black, and green; still lovingly maintained. In the evening we heard the Mullahs' calls to prayer.

Tehran had a proud ancient cultural heritage, but it also was remarkably urbane and sophisticated under the Pahlavi Dynasty in its appreciation of contemporary Western arts. The first significant collection of Warhol lithographs I ever saw was in an airy contemporary art museum there, and Absurdist theatrical productions played to full houses.

On the streets of Tehran, beet vendors tended their low charcoal fires, simmering beneath charred red orbs the size of grapefruits, cut into quarters, so sweet to the taste, the bright red juice dribbling down our chins. Smoke rose lazily from the kabob carts-- fire grilled skewers of juicy lamb, heaped across a hill of basmati rice, sprinkled with saffron and sumac. Bakers pulled long flat loaves of naan bread from the walls of big clay ovens with metal hooks and slapped them in one motion into newspapers, the warmth tucked under our arms. I can still taste the almonds and cardamom in the rich honey of the baklava; the salty bite of plump fresh pistachios; silky rosewater ice cream melting on my tongue.

Tehran was much like Denver in its topography and dryness, the city sloping gradually upward as one drove toward steep, arid mountains to the city's North. The smog and the noise of the traffic were ever-present, especially downtown, fueled by seemingly hundreds of thousands of motor scooters, sometimes holding entire families. Traffic lines and lights were often ignored as Iranian-made Paykan cars zipped through busy intersections.

Tehran in 1975 was a boomtown, and billions in petrodollars fueled an infrastructure and military spending spree. Little of that money seemed to trickle down to any Iranians beyond the Shah's family and the international construction industry. But

every American Expat's pay was supplemented with a rich cost of living adjustment, based on a widely accepted assumption of needing to precisely replicate a fully American experience while far from home. Most Expats ate like Iranians and pocketed the difference. Seemingly everyone was swimming in money, and the Expat community partied like the Wild West.

Outside the walls of our parties, Tehran struggled to find a balance between progress and the profane. Uptown girls readily abandoned their chadors to stroll through Pahlavi Park; downtown girls dared not do that often; farm girls outside the city, never, at risk of death by stoning, perhaps by their own brothers. Or so we heard anyway; none of that happened near us.

As American teenagers, we lived for music. There were always rock bands playing in our heads: Pink Floyd, T. Rex, Led Zeppelin, and Jimi Hendrix. We bought hundreds of pirated cassette tapes from street vendors. We would walk our fingers up rows of jewel boxes set out on card tables, searching for something new or exciting. A sophisticated distribution network supported these vendors, which was able to offer pirated tapes on the teets of Tehran within weeks of record releases in Europe and the United States. So in 1975, we very quickly had *Wish You Were Here*, *A Night at The Opera*, *Born to Run*, *Blood on the Tracks*, *Physical Graffiti*, and of course, David Bowie's *Young Americans*, which seemingly celebrated how extraordinary we indeed were. Sometimes these tapes would be too short, and music would cut off. More often, extra music would be added to the tapes to fill them, and we learned to like some obscure new music this way.

Cab drivers were overtly friendly and seemingly every one of them had a brother/cousin/uncle who just moved/was soon moving to America, they told us proudly. They gladly popped our cassettes into their dashboard players and turned up the volume as high as it would go. *All night, she wants the Young American...*

They would play us their favorite music too, soulful refrains of anguished loves found and lost. They danced in their seats as they drove, faces forlorn and yearning, shoulders held back stiffly, chest puffed, left arm straight through an open window, hands rolling loosely, fingers snapping a mournful rhythm.

I was tall and had a big bushy blonde Afro, so I stuck out. But all the American boys had their share of attention. When the men were not around, Iranian women of all ages chatted us up in their best English. It never went far. Bolder cross-cultural girls might agree to a romantic kiss and perhaps even some awkward groping, but mainly it was just eye batting and laughing at our jokes. The more traditional young women, too scared, or too shy, or perhaps just too proper to speak with us, would flirt none-the-less by adjusting their coal black chadors around their heads and bodies. They lifted the fabric straight up with both hands and then let it fall, like a parachute, as if to smooth its wrinkles, giving us just a furtive peak of the provocatively colorful tailored European dresses beneath.

It was not just women who noticed us. We would glide through the dark corridors of the Downtown Bazaar: hammers clanging on copper, priceless Persian carpets piled to the rafters, rough scents of saffron, leather, and propane fire. There, we were under the omnipresent gaze of curious men, who came out of their stalls to offer us tea and sweets, ignoring the pretty girls shopping with us.

We were transported to school from all over Tehran in minibusses of six or eight students. While some Army Brats lived in housing on the U.S. military base, most of us were spread widely around the Northern part of the city, and our parents took some pride in that, but the bus ride was long. These parents worked in government and industry positions requiring a top security clearance. They had no idea we would compare notes regularly on things they had said, piecing together, if not an accurate picture, at least an informed American Ex-patriot view of Iran at that time.

Shah Reza Pahlavi is a good and progressive monarch. His family may spend a bit lavishly, but we expect that of royalty, and there is plenty of money to go around. The Shah is trying to build a more secular free state and modernize the Iranian culture. That means improving communication systems, introducing Western ideals, and loosening up on old Muslim traditions, such as women wearing chadors and men beating themselves with chains. Complaints about the Savak, the Shah's allegedly ruthless and powerful secret police, were limited to those who have committed crimes, so how reliable could that testimony possibly be? To the extent that the Mullahs in the Sticks object to secularization and progress, they are merely out of touch with the modern world. A far more significant concern than the Mullahs is the Communists. The marriage of convenience between Communist agitators from abroad and these angry backwoods clerics will not last if the Shah is ever challenged. If the Communists take over, still another domino will fall, just like South Vietnam. So, we all need to support the Shah unconditionally, and not say anything wrong about him, especially outside of this house.

Like most other U.S. expats, I chose Tehran American School rather than other two international schools in the city. Virtually all of the kids at the school were

American. It was the school of choice if you did not want to have to learn a second language. Since we spoke the recognized international language in the world, we could get around fine with just that and a little taxicab Farsi.

Socially, it was not a typical American high school. How could it be? Even the longest of stays was three to four years; more often two. There was no shared sense of history; no embarrassing junior high stories; no intractably entrenched cliques.

We were all American kids but not all alike by any means. My family moved to Iran after the deadline to sign up for one of the four football teams the school had, so my friends were mostly freaks rather than jocks. But appearances can be deceptive. Some of the long-haired kids were Jesus freaks; others were going through a fashion phase and would eventually chop off their ponytails to attend West Point or Annapolis, like their fathers.

My friends said there were two types of people at the school- those like us, who were all in for an adventure, and another weaker kind who just wanted to get back to their hometown friends ASAP. This latter type hated Iran. They tried to deal with Iranians as little as possible, referring to them only as “ragheads” based on the turbans some of the more traditional men wore, and they were less than friendly even with the cab drivers who served us so gladly. They counted the days until they could leave.

Honestly, adventurous or not, most of us longed for home, the network of friends so central to our being, and particularly for our young loves so far away. In a way, I was lucky, because I had only lived in New Jersey for a year before we moved to Iran, so I did not have deep friendships there to pine for. But I did have a distant girlfriend.

Lots of couples saying goodbye pledged to “save themselves” until they would be at last reunited, and that’s what Michele and I agreed when I left. We had only started “going out” a few months before my departure. Michele was borderline in every sense of the word- provocative, volatile, brilliant, and adorable- well worth all the trouble. She gave me a big hickey when I left.

I got a part-time job operating an international switchboard, so amazingly I was able to call Michele every week for free, and we would talk for thirty minutes or so. One week she told me about a new kid at school who was a super cute wrestler but very shy. The next week she told me about how her hymen broke while she was horseback riding. We stayed friends.

At school, we rolled our eyes during regular school assemblies and mocked the embassy pamphlets warning of indefinite imprisonment or death via firing squad under Iranian law for any drug possession whatsoever. Amnesty International reported on conditions in the nearby Evin Prison (later dubbed Evin University for all of the intellectuals held there) where we were told, we could expect to be tortured with whips, cigarettes and cattle prods, while the soles of our feet were beaten bloody.

This all seemed melodramatic. We knew from experience that adults were prone to exaggeration, and their advice fell on deaf ears, further deafened by lyrics which banged into our heads through clunky plastic headphones: *Purple Haze all in my brain; Sha la la la la la live for today; Strawberry Fields Forever.*

The school was enclosed in concrete walls, with a big iron entrance gate which uniformed guards opened and closed. You could see the gate from the "smoking lounge," a converted classroom which served as our social epicenter. The blue stucco walls were

chipped and stained with tobacco smoke, and our debris often littered the concrete floor. There were no chairs, so we leaned against walls or sat on the wide windowsill, looking out into the macadam courtyard, catching up on gossip, and planning our next adventure into the unknown.

In time, things got more than a little crazy. I can remember being at a party some SAS stewardesses threw on a rooftop marble terrace, so many pretty girls, heaping silver tablespoons of Beluga Caviar and endless Jello shots. A drunken forty-something salesman who had just sold a Grumman jet to the Shah, still in his wrinkled suit, pathetically hitting on my sixteen-year-old girlfriend. She projectile-vomited onto her bell bottoms and his shiny shoes, before I took her home on a cab holding a bucket. At another party, deep snack bowls overflowed with pharmaceuticals, and a toddler in diapers walked around with a bong.

I had one good friend outside of school names Hilly. Hilly was three years older and had already graduated from high school. We both worked part-time as aptly named “casual employees” for AT&T, setting up housewarming kits for arriving employees, filling their small refrigerators with eggs, milk, butter, bread, coffee, and orange juice. Then days later we would accompany them as we were driven around town to pick a permanent apartment from the ones AT&T had leased. They asked our opinion on tons of questions. It felt like a very grown-up job, even though it was easy.

Hilly was chilling out in Iran with his parents after flunking out of Colorado State for a second time. For some reason, I called him The All-American Boy, but in truth, he was far from that. He was handsomely rakish and skinny, with sleepy bedroom eyes. He was very cool, and I was glad to think of him as my friend.

I don't remember who brought up getting high first. Before Iran, my drug use was limited to a few hits of dusty Mexican brick weed, full of twigs and seeds. You couldn't really even get marijuana in Iran in the late 1970s; only its derivative hashish, to which we took a liking right away. Whenever we got together, we would mount a small tarry blob on a pin sticking up through a magazine, beneath a drinking glass. We would tip the glass up to light the little blob on the tip of the pin, then bring the glass back down again to extinguish the flame and catch the rising smoke. Once the small embers turned gray and the glass filled with smoke, we would push our lips forward to meet the edge of the glass on the magazine, tilt the glass back, and suck in the sweet vapors, trying not to cough. We laughed and feasted on commissary junk food late into the night.

The Iranian drug dealers we met thought hashish was a more dangerous drug than opium. This was an accepted truth. To their minds, opium, the more traditional drug, made one calm and relaxed. One smoked opium the way one crossed a busy Tehran street – at a measured pace- never running – to be safe and predictable – letting the cars wildly race around you. Hashish, on the other hand, made one a little crazy. We adored crazy so that was okay. But by customary practice, the Iranian dealers also cut the hashish they offered us with opium to round it out, and we liked the blend. Thus we became opium smokers.

I guess it was really just a matter of time. It was one of those parties where the parents were there, and they were cool with us smoking hashish, just as they did – Just no hard drugs! Someone came in with a sheet of hashish so big that I mistook it for Crosby Stills Nash & Young's *Déjà vu* album. He broke it up for sale, and we all lit up under glass.

There was a wealthy "raghead" there, our age, flashing his money. Someone whispered that we should rob him to teach him a lesson for his arrogance. I was trying to explain why this was a bad idea when our host broke the tension: his parents had finally passed out. Small waxed paper packets of heroin emerged from pockets, and cash was exchanged. Then tin foil was procured from the kitchen, as well as a Bic pen, its ink cartridge removed. Our host folded a nine-inch square of the foil down the center, creating a channel down the middle. Then we used the tip of a penknife to carefully transport a pinch or two of the heroin to the top of the groove. As a big safety match was lit beneath the foil, the heroin crackled, melted, and ran down the slot. Black smoke rose in tiny curls from the groove as the heroin burned, turning white as it rose. I held the case of the Bic pen in my mouth, chased the bead down the foil, and sucked in the long vapor trail.

I didn't feel all that different. I was not really hallucinating. If anything, there was a certain enhanced clarity. I felt wonderfully joyful, calm, and secure, comfortably numb. Wandering home in the darkness of early morning, I appreciated every step, stopping to smell the dry night air, and to just breathe.

I woke up in a tree with several policemen beneath me, looking up with curious concern. *Zihad Obinjo* I explained in my fractured Farsi – too much beer. They helped me down and let me go. I immediately recognized this as divine intervention, and swore off experimenting with hard drugs for life.

I told Hilly about what happened the next day, and he immediately wanted in. He begged me to ask my friends to get us some heroin, which I would not do. The next day he told me never mind, he found a connection. He told me the following night, he chased

the dragon all night, but safely, in the smallest doses each time, quietly, cautiously, while his parents slept. Then he smoked it only in the evening for a while, before adding it to his lunch break routine.

I never went to Shah Abbas Park. Other kids told me they had been there dozens of times with no problems. The small city park, perhaps an acre or so, sat right in the middle of a smoggy industrial area. We were encouraged by our parents never to go downtown unless we were going to the Bazaar, and then only in a group. It was no mystery what the American kids were doing in Shah Abbas Park; there was no other conceivable reason to take a hired car all the way downtown to that particular park, with its dying trees and cold steel jungle gym. Everyone knew that the penalty for even possessing hard drugs was death. Yet the dealers were friendly and optimistic: *Enchallah*, they would say in Farsi, *God will provide*.

Some of us were jealous of manly guys like our classmate Tony, who grew a beard easily and had to shave his neck. Despite his swarthy complexion, he was 100% American, from Texas, a soccer player, slighter build than average maybe but sinewy, with dark eyes, a thick bushy beard, and shoulder length jet black hair. Some girls did not like the curly hair emerging from beneath his polo shirt, but to the boys, such a telling indication of manhood could not happen soon enough. Tony passed for Persian on the streets, and that was to become his undoing. He was mistaken for an Iranian junkie, and arrested in Shah Abbas Park.

In a packed assembly hall, his tearful father told the story. Six policemen had appeared from nowhere, tackled him, and had beaten him mercilessly. They shoved him into the back of an unmarked van and drove him to an old city jail. There were no active

guards at night. Tony and another boy fought off the others all night so they would not be raped, or drowned in the gaping communal shithole in the middle of the cell.

The police contacted the US Embassy, which alerted Tony's parents to his dire predicament. Everyone understood the stakes. The only thing that could keep Tony from death would be his youth; he was four months shy of his eighteenth birthday. An initial hearing was convened to determine how Tony would be tried. His father quickly lined up a law firm and collected all of the supporting documents needed to establish that Tony was a juvenile.

The judge was stern and uncompromising. He denied the evidence of Tony's youth, saying that his American passport was a worthless forgery, available in any bazaar for a pittance. It was clear to the judge from Tony's beard that he was a fully grown man, an adult, who would be tried as such. Tony's lawyer pleaded for a further chance to prove Tony was a minor. After further discussion and consultations at all levels of the government, it was agreed that a dental carbon radiation test would be performed, to scientifically verify his age.

Tony was taken to a government dentist to perform the test. Initially cordial, the dentist inquired, "Why is this boy here?" When told Tony was charged with heroin possession, his face darkened and he clenched his teeth, and without looking up he said, "Well then he deserves to die," scrawling "ADULT" on a government form.

But by now the case was being carefully watched by a growing array of interested government parties, and the dentist was compelled to perform the test, which confirmed that Tony was indeed 17 years and eight months old. Still the possible penalties for a

minor could involve permanent incarceration. There was a brief standoff as the Iranians considered their alternatives for a potential trial.

The de facto “don’t ask, don’t tell” strategy for dealing with drug use by young Americans was now in tatters. Most recognized that Tony was a poor pawn who had wandered into the wrong game. Some believed that this should be accepted and that the penalty, therefore, should be less severe. It was important, they noted, to preserve friendly relations between Tehran and Washington, to keep the oil dollars flowing. But the police, clerics, judges, and some politicians argued that the law needed to be upheld for foreigners just as it was for citizens, and they second-guessed the Shah's failed policy that had led to this mess. When the politicians and judges could not determine what to do, it was the Savak, the Shah’s secret police, who provided the solution, and soon a consensus was reached.

Tony, his father, and the US Ambassador were brought into a yellowing conference room in a run-down office building downtown. On a broad Formica table top laid a large thickly-stuffed loose-leaf binder, which Tony was asked to thumb through. He gasped; inside were 9x12 photographs of all of his friends buying drugs in Shah Abbas Park, filmed from the roofs of surrounding buildings. They had pictures of more than one hundred transactions. Whether the dealer in those pictures were real dealers or government actors working for the secret police was never clear. The binder was put away, and Tony was sent back to court.

The judge who delivered the decision enjoyed his role. Smiling, he said, "We have good news for you, Tony. You are going home!" Then he paused dramatically, and a sneer crossed his face, "You and all of your worthless junkie friends have 72 hours to

get out of the country. Anyone in those pictures who is not gone by then will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law, which shall show no further mercy." The court adjourned, and Tony was released.

So it came to be that Tony tried to remember everyone he had seen in the pictures, and wrote down a list of his two dozen or so friends who used hard drugs. The next day, none of my friends went to class, and everyone knew why. While we were in school, parents would be called, with no notice, and driven to the school in embassy vehicles.

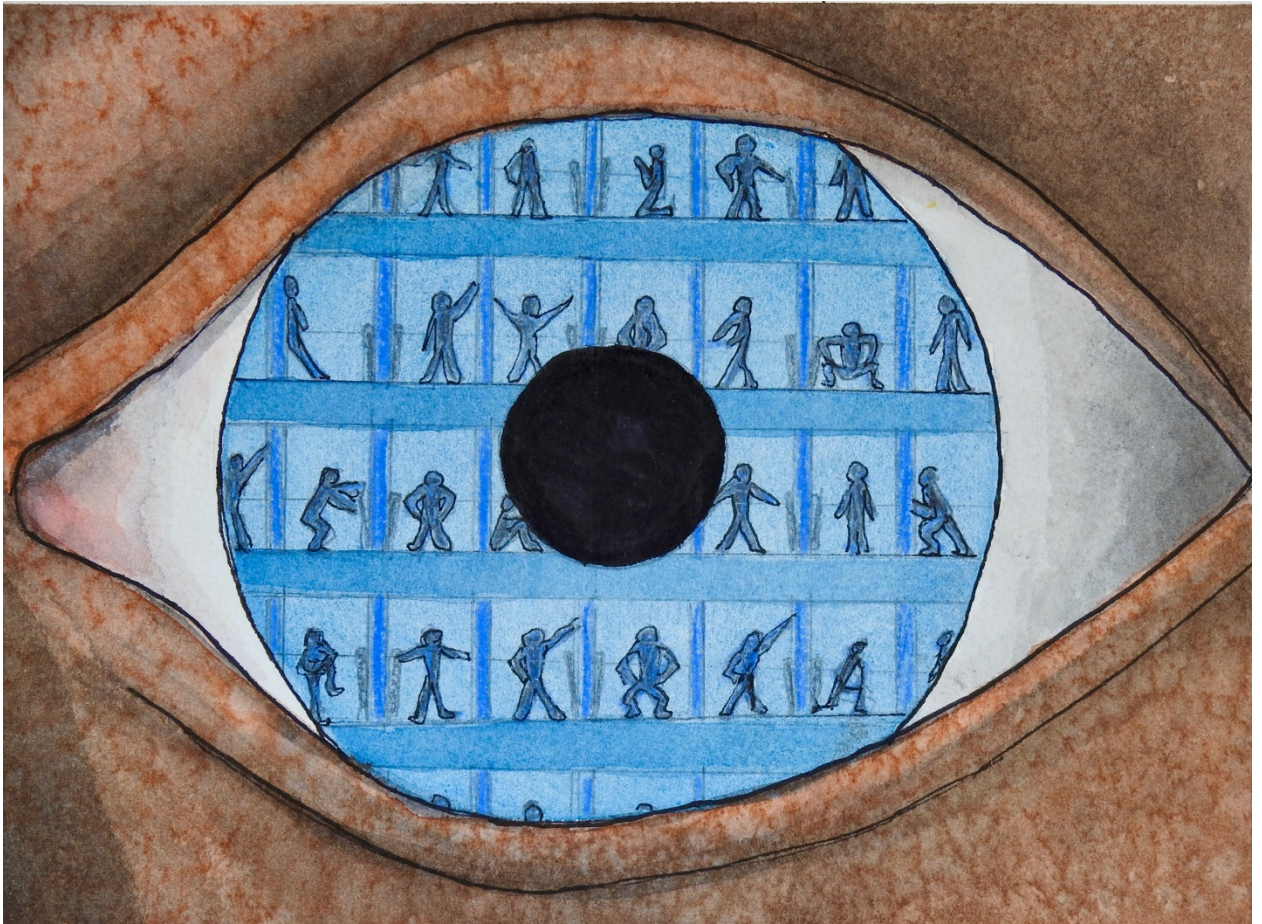
I knew I was most likely not in any of the government photos, but I did not know whether Tony would recall me chasing the dragon at the party. We all waited anxiously in the smoking lounge, staring out across the courtyard to the iron gate. Every once in a while the gate would open, and we would all hold our breath. "Fuck," someone would say, as dumbstruck parents entered the gate.

Soon a hall monitor would come and ask for this unfortunate student to come to a meeting in the principal's office. The parents would be told their child was using the most serious of drugs and was now in trouble with the law. They were informed that the child needed to leave the country immediately. Most were on a plane out the very next day, and never seen in Iran again. To ease the transition back, the embassy arranged that they be given high school diplomas without needing to complete their studies.

We stood in that smoky blue room for three days, feet aching from the concrete floor. The survivors returned home each afternoon exhausted from panicked hyper-vigilance, but wary not to tip parents off as to the nature of the concern. Finally, the storm passed, and it was clear which names would not be called.

Is *lucky* the right word? *Privileged*? *Blessed*? I averted a potentially lethal drug addiction, and/or a catastrophic family disgrace that even now would have reverberations. Tony's arrest made it easy to quickly decide to dump my new flame, pulling away from the light and the soft embrace, the dragon's breath receding. We were through. I gave all my drug paraphernalia to Hilly, who was well on his way to a true monkey on his back before I lost touch with him. He called me at Christmas one year, and my mother answered, but she knew the name and took down his number incorrectly, most likely on purpose, so I was not able to return his call.

Ah, the cock-sure stupidity of youth. Opiates were truly deadly, but we did not know that. The Savak was watching us prance blithely around town all the while, but we did not know that. The Shah was torturing peaceful political protestors in Evin Prison, but we did not know that. The Pahlavi government was falling, yet even the CIA did not see that coming. Ayatollah Khomeini used the network of pirated cassette tape vendors to smuggle in sermons, spreading his vision for an independent Islamic state across the land, and inciting revolution, but we only heard the music. The school we attended would soon be closed and eventually converted to a prison. The Mullahs out in the countryside were about to take over. Jihad was coming, and the world would be forever transformed, dragged back yet again into seemingly intractable religious warfare. We just had no idea. We mistook a culture of traditional hospitality for one of permissiveness, and their kindness for our own greatness. We were oblivious to the seething anger beyond, and about, our cultural bubble. For our profound ignorance, we would pay dearly.



Panopticon

Preface

One summer, when I was about ten, my mother and a neighborhood friend packed up five kids in a Chrysler New Yorker, with a 32-foot Terry trailer in tow, and set off across the country on a six-week adventure. With seven people, it was a tight squeeze both in the car and in the trailer, with little privacy. To make matters worse, the bathroom door would not lock. The first time one of us accidentally walked in on 16-

year-old Nancy Shea, she was angry and embarrassed. By the fifth time, she stopped caring.

Was it PT Barnum who said never leave a crisis unexploited? I knew there was money to be made somehow, and I had lots of cash from selling *Boogie Knights*, so I was in the catbird seat if I could just find the right vehicle. I pored through digital brochures of assets failing countries were trying to unload to raise cash and stay afloat. Oil tankers were going for peanuts everywhere. You could buy a whole tropical rain forest in South America, but, beyond trying to sell all the lumber and animal skins, I would not know how to monetize that. The only thing that seemed to be holding its value was ammunition. But I'd have to just sit on it waiting for a good war, and it wasn't cheap--nobody was giving it away. The only businesses that looked like sure bets were home security, distilleries, and media companies.

I have to say, \$780 million is not what it used to be. It is jet money but not high end. Same thing for yachts. At one point, it could have bought a decent sports team, but not anymore. You could buy a hospital or drug rehab network and maybe figure out how to better manage the bottom line, but what a headache that would be. Every asset I looked at seemed woefully over-priced or doomed to fail. Frankly, I floundered for a while, which is very, very unusual for me, as anyone will tell you.

The business of VRP (Virtual Reality Partners) had tanked beyond revival, so there was no going back to that. But I knew people everywhere were still profoundly lonely and in need of of a caring intimate partner. The problem with VRP was the hardware, the bodies, not the concept itself. VRP needed to become more virtual, more

covert and deniable, like the internet used to be. This is how *Spiriting* got started: no more doll bodies, or, even better, no bodies at all.

Spiriting was a global faith movement, in which devotees fully and irrevocably adopt a full VR identity, leaving unpleasant memories, personal flaws, and the physical world behind. Spiriters believed that the death of the body would be trivial if a well-formed VR replacement were in place. For beginners, such as babies, the key was for the VR AI system to get an adequately detailed picture of one's physical life over time, which could then be replicated virtually, and which could then continue to learn and grow as an independent virtual being. It became essential to have young children in social media circles very early on. To not do so risked falling behind on their emerging VR profiles, in the worst cases, a kind of permanent virtual retardation, albeit subtle. Any delay could impede normal healthy development. It was dangerous to be an outsider; independence was debilitating.

One day, mindlessly browsing international real estate, I saw a listing for the Presidio Modelo, a famous former prison in Cuba that was now for sale. My heart skipped a beat. I knew it well. I had done my undergrad honors thesis at Princeton on Enlightenment theories of incarceration and surveillance. I still have it saved in my digital archives. Check out this excerpt:

The Nineteenth Century philosopher Jeremy Bentham argued that to destroy a man through punishment is not Utilitarian. Bentham argued for treating prisoners just a little better, and then exploit their ability to work, rejecting the Christian notion of penitence, while watching their every move. He imagined a massive circular building, with cells

around its circumference, open to a central courtyard. Inmates would be separated and isolated by partitions, yet under the full and constant view of a central lodge or tower. Each cell would have as large a window as technically possible, and thin bars to allow full visibility throughout each cell. The jailer within the lodge would not be seen by the prisoners, due to a system of Venetian blinds. He would always be anonymous and invisible.

(Wow, I can't believe what a fantastic writer I was, even back then. Why I got a C on that paper, I will never know. Just a little ahead of my time, I suppose.)

To me, panoptic prisons are like Roman Coliseums, only backward- you look out from the central tower toward the walls. The central tower is like a lighthouse, just reversed; light comes in rather than out, a Roach Motel of incoming imagery. It was love at first sight back in college, and it stirs me still. But what the hell do you do with a complex of Panopticons, when surveillance and control have become so mundane? That was the billion-dollar question.

After brainstorming with the investment bankers, a colonic rinse, and meditating on it in my Dojo, I decided to make an offer for the Presidio Modelo. I strongly suspected the bidding process might be rigged, so I bid as high as I could stand to and still have enough dry powder to make the necessary renovations, which I estimated would roughly double the total cost. There were extensive repairs to be made, and tons of new technology to install. I bid \$360 million, with standard covenants. Somewhat to my surprise, the bid was successful, with no pushback at all. Maybe I should have offered less. It seems everyone in Cuba had terrible memories associated with Presidio Modelo,

and just wanted to be done with it. The government had tried to turn into a museum to focus on abuses before Castro, but that was a joke, after all that went on there while he was in charge. Nobody wanted to take ownership of the full legacy, except me.

My wife cried for three weeks straight when we won. She would come out of her wing of the house and be all right for a while, but then her lower lip would tremble, and she would break down again, sobbing as she ran up the marble stairway. She did not share my dream. She could not see what I could see, that I had just bought the most significant media platform in history.

Here's the deal. We fix the roof, stabilize any concrete issues, and generally spruce the place up, but we do not change it. We want it to be authentic. We rent out cells to people maniacally committed to ultra-authenticity; 24/7, Spiriters welcomed. All services will be provided, including food and medical care. There will be no other services available on the island, so no need to go out.

I will live in one of the central towers, and host a talk show there, interviewing famous people and super-fans from all over the world. Everyone on earth can have a front-row seat looking out from the tower of the Panopticon for a modest monthly fee, with thousands of cells available for viewing. We can all watch whoever we like. We will see the residents eat, sleep, make love, exercise, shit. We will get to know them like a lover or a sister or a pet, and over time we will see people come and go in and out of their lives and become memories.

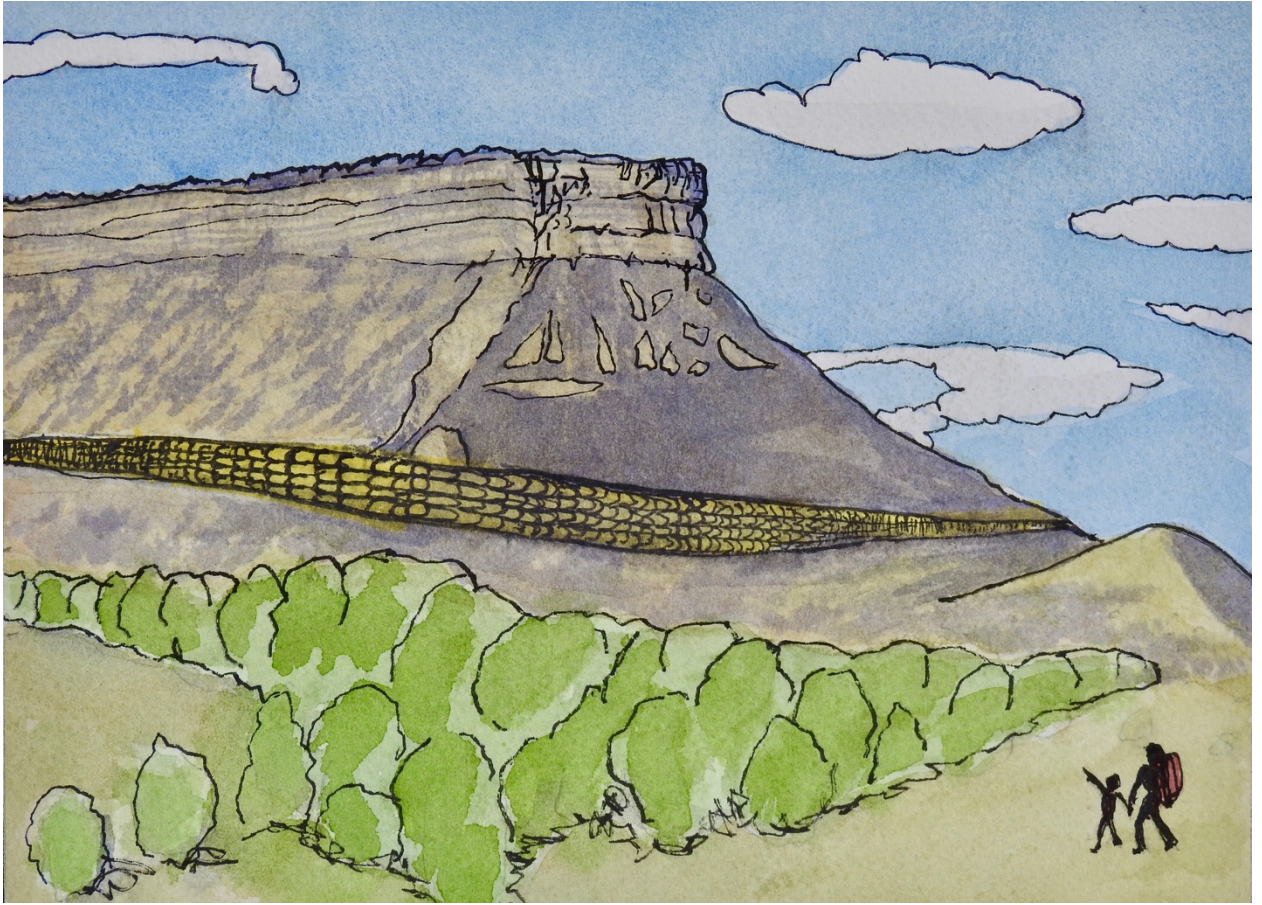
At first, we will set base rents low to attract artists, then raise them as soon as we get to full capacity. Generous rent credits will be awarded based on having followers and being famous. Screens on the cell walls will map individual progress. Technically,

residents will be free to leave the cell at any time, but the rent algorithm will punish that. The best strategy will be to stay home and try to draw attention to yourself.

Soon, corporate sponsors will follow the eyeballs and put product placements in the most popular cells. It could be quite lucrative for someone with an exciting life!

Once base rent is covered, tenants can aim for additional benefits, such as a top-tier cell, perhaps with a view of the Bay of Pigs. In these luxury fifth story units, Spiriters may opt to have the railing removed from the walkway outside their cell, in case they are suddenly inspired to take a leap of faith. Their spirits will then live on forever on our servers, and available for viewing on the Panopticon Network any time.

We are right at the crossroads of some amazingly favorable macro-trends: robotics, VR, AI, surveillance, anonymous exhibitionism, disclosure for profit, spiritual impoverishment, and a sentimental yearning for vintage technology. We are going to exploit all of it- every single macro-trend available to us. I am sure there will be kinks to work out, but I have to say, from where I sit, as I see it, the future looks absolutely friggin' brilliant.



Golden Chariots

They were trying to remember the last verse of *Be Our Guest* when Kyle looked up and gasped, stopping dead in his tracks. “Lookie, Momma, what is it?”

Far above, set in the face of the wall, there were thousands of dull silver-grey cylinders, each about 30 feet long end to end, ten feet in diameter, stacked side by side and one above another like silver crayons in a giant box, all the way up a blue cliff as if stacked there by the devil's own hands.

“I am not sure; an earth sculpture, maybe?” Kim replied. But no, she thought, more likely it had to do with the chariots. Then it clicked. “That’s where Momma is going to work!” she tried to explain. Then she told Kyle all she knew about the Golden Chariots and their adventurous retirees, which was not much; she had booked her gig as a Fixer for Golden Chariots on the Blue Mesa sight unseen.

“Are we going to live in a chariot, Momma?” Kyle asked expectantly.

“No, not in one, but near a lot of them!” Kim ventured. She actually had no idea what to expect. The deployment was take-it-or-leave-it; follow up questions were frowned upon. She was told everything she needed to know would be in the Employee Manual at the site.

Kim spied a small white cinder block building at the base of the cliffs and headed for it. When she knocked on the steel door, two surprised Ordinaries who had also been deployed to the Blue Mesa opened it. Zeza, a Salvadoran woman in her early fifties, applied for this deployment to try to escape the violence among the Ordinaries back home. Tom, a mannerly fortyish drifter, and part-time math teacher, came here to get away from money problems back in Philadelphia.

The building was sparsely furnished with a small living area dwarfed by a large rack of servers that managed the complex. Between the living area and the equipment was a small bookcase with some old flight magazines, a few vintage brochures, and a bound hardcover book, the Employee Manual. Kim read the manual right away, cover to cover. It explained that while the Golden Chariot System would be mostly automatic, *Fixers* were deployed to address any problems that might otherwise go unaddressed. This

required both creativity and tact. The manual called Fixers the *front line of customer satisfaction*.

Sure enough, children of any kind were specifically and categorically forbidden. She had expected that; she knew the Chariots were adult-only. But she explained to Zeza and Tom: “I refused to send my poor disadvantaged boy to a work farm like they wanted me to. My husband didn’t back me up, so here I am, with our son Kyle.”

Tom and Zeza agreed she had no choice and said there was enough space and food for all four of them. Kim found a corner for her and Kyle to lay their sleeping bags on foam pads on the linoleum floor. As Kyle fell asleep, she perused one of the old four-color brochures.

The chariots were developed back in the 2020s to fill a deep need of the Haves for thrilling but safe adventures. The brochure read, “Due to the growing collective threat of the Ordinaries, travelling the world is increasingly unsafe. Golden Chariots offer unlimited freedom, 100% safety, and, of course, exclusivity!”

Only those at the pinnacles of industry and entertainment were invited to apply. The chariots held up more than adequately to Molotov cocktails and small arms munitions. “And if Ordinaries get caught in the path of a moving chariot, they can easily be decamped. Your Chariot keeps on a’rollin’!”

The brochure showed the interior of a brand-new chariot. It was amorphously puffy, with soft floating bluish-white clouds, as if it were a giant marshmallow you lived inside. But as the brochure explained, that was just the pre-acquisition setting. Photos also showed a gallery of Chariots after their owners had customized them with their imaginations. One could imagine a chariot as small and simple as an actual Roman

chariot, or as massive and ornate as the Taj Mahal, and the Chariot would take on that form.

There were no pictures of the exteriors of the chariots. *They aren't really gold*, thought Kim, *but I guess if you stay inside, it does not matter*. The government had given up on providing decent infrastructure for Ordinaries; all funds were now dedicated to serving the Wealthy. Bridges had collapsed, and community colleges shuttered. Rather than retiring, Ordinaries were told to keep working until they die, and that it was, in fact, the best they could do. But this was cruel jest, there were no jobs, she knew. She read on.

“Travel keeps our Charioteers’ brains super-active! Many keep score of how many countries they have ‘done.’ On a Golden Chariot, one can attend a premiere of an opera in Oslo and ballet in Beijing the very next night. One can chant prayers of the dead with Buddhist monks in Tibet, and join the Pope for Mass in Rome later that evening. And, with *Elite Access*, one can always jump the line with no waiting. One can ride right up to the *Mona Lisa*, close enough to touch it, for as long as one likes! Or, barrel through rapids on the Great Canyon in a big yellow raft! Or, even enjoy the violent action of a war zone, entirely safely! The possibilities are limitless!” the brochure gushed.

However, it seems even limitlessness has its limitations. Tom told Kim that after a few years of feverish travel, even the most diehard travelers slowed down, first only going back to their favorite places, and then, over time, hardly traveling at all. That is why the chariots started arriving on the Blue Mesa. Travel was replaced virtually. With most of the world’s great museums by now sold off or blown up, it was indeed a privilege to still be able to roll through a virtual Prado. Their worst fear was getting bored.

Having an enjoyable hobby could make all the difference. Some people got this, while others did not. For example, George and Edyth Berkeley had been charioteers for almost twelve years. Edyth knew that when she married George that he wasn't much good at making anything other than martinis, so she didn't bother to ask for his help setting up the African violet garden. She could hear George puttering around in the kitchen. You'd think after all these years of retirement he'd figure out something better to do, she thought; kind of wasted chariot space in a way, though she still liked having him around.

George yelled down from upstairs, "Edyth, we've got two spatulas. I am going to throw away the old one."

"No, don't do that, George. I need two to flip omelets. Maybe you should find something else to do."

George grunted; there was nothing *to* do. Technically Edyth did not need to even cook at all, he thought, putting both spatulas back in the drawer. With nothing better to do, he headed back to the TV room and fell asleep ogling Vanna White in his green leather recliner.

Edyth screwed eye-hooks into the basement beams above her head by herself. She hung an ultraviolet light fixture over a rickety card table covered with newspaper. She pushed tiny seeds into 4-inch clay pots filled with fertile black soil and sprinkled them with water from a tall tin watering can.

Edyth swept the moist excess soil into her cupped hand and threw it off into the ether. As she plugged in the UV light, a dozen African violets vaulted into Springtime, then one hundred, then thousands, until she stood in the shade of a vast African Violet forest, some

rising twenty feet above her head. It was a peaceful oasis of her own creation, where the skies teemed with the squawking Carolina parrots, while on the parade grounds, a band of penguins played tunes from *Sergeant Pepper*. Unicorns pranced like fine Arab chargers in the glorious rainbow sunshine. She laughed in delight, then erased that world and began another.

Kim, Tom, and Zeza were thrilled when they learned they would be eligible for a bonus of as much as \$5000 if they hit certain key customer satisfaction metrics. The Golden Chariot Board of Directors had incentivized the senior management team to raise customer satisfaction in the Chariots. A great deal of money was at stake for executives, who had no idea how to address the problem other than to sprinkle some crumbs from the banquet down to the Fixers and let them figure it out. \$5000 was a lot of money for an Ordinary. It would pay off most of Tom's gambling debts. He had saved up close to \$2000 already but needed much more before he could go home. With \$5000, Kim could get some educational services for Kyle. Zeza hoped to send for her granddaughters, and get at least one of them out of harm's way.

They determined to do everything in their power to make a living in a Golden Chariot a fantastic experience for all guests, not just the naturally happy ones. They delivered fresh cut flowers daily to those they thought most likely to complain, always smiling gamely, as if they had Golden Chariots too, and were just stopping in, always asking if there was anything else they could do. They huddled every morning to discuss emerging guest issues and how they could be resolved and helped each other in any way

possible. Rather than assign territories, they worked the whole complex as a zone. Within months, customer satisfaction was gradually improving.

Most guests were delighted, leaving five stars and glowing reviews in the feedback files. But no matter how hard they tried, some guests were perpetually unhappy. Kim joked that it seemed like complaining was a deeply cherished aspect of charioteer life. "If the room isn't too cold, it's too hot. If the pillow isn't too hard, it's too soft!" They had to mollycoddle these people every second, to the point of exhaustion.

When any of them genuinely made a mistake, they felt terrible and owned up to it right away. "My bad!" Never mind if the cause of the "mistake" was, in fact, the charioteer. Tom dubbed this a *404*. He told Zeza and Kim it was a vintage internet error message that meant "the client was able to communicate with a given server, but the server could not find what was requested." They could all relate to that! Not having things found that were requested really put some charioteers off, even if it was hard to find, like perfect weather, or a Spring/Fall romance. They laughed about code *404* until their sides ached, and then it stuck. In time, they had a more somber conversation and vowed to address 404 problems proactively, to stop the dissatisfaction by any means possible.

Hedge Fund activist Joe Whitehead snorted as Zeza entered his Chariot. He stank of gin, and at six foot three was quite imposing. Zeza smiled and scooted around him, bending her head under the sink to have a look at the reported plumbing problem. Just as she was concluding that the plumbing was functioning perfectly normally, Whitehead's

left arm was around her waist from behind, while the fingers of his right hand wriggled over her into her pink pinafore, and down into her bra, groping her breast. Her lacey bra emboldened him. He chuckled and whispered obscenities into her ear as he pulled at the pinafore's buttons. She screamed and tried to fight him off, but he kept his weight on her and held her against his chest, laughing and yanking the waist of her yoga pants toward her knees. She punched him as hard as she could, but the blows just grazed his massive frame. When he tried to cover his screams, her teeth clamped down on his hand. When he screamed and released his grip, she ran out of the pod door, gunning her space pack to escape.

Tom and Kim heard the whole thing on headsets from the management office and waited there horrified for Zeza. They urged her to press charges, but she did not want to notify the authorities. It would be his word against hers, and she was afraid that if she spoke up, they would all miss getting the bonus, or worse, she might get accused of assaulting Joe, and get all of them fired. "How sad we all lose our jobs over a 404!" she argued. But how could they just let him go? He was very likely to complain. They were not sure what to do until Joe led them to the answer.

Joe called again that evening, asking for someone to bring him more gin. He could have ordered it online, and it would have been there in an hour, but all drunk up, he always called for it, just to harangue the Ordinaries. They all dreaded going, but Kim volunteered, thinking she could keep him under control. When she arrived, Joe was smoking a smelly cigar, his belly splitting the buttons of his Tommy Bahama luau shirt. He smiled to see the bottle of Tanqueray in Kim's arms, but as he reached for it, he stumbled, and his elbow clipped a pitcher half full of Tom Collins mixer, launching it

from the kitchen counter, glass shattering on the tiled floor, the sticky concoction spattering everywhere. "Now look what you have done!" he bellowed, "What kind of *friggin' idiot* are you?"

"Sorry, Mr. Whitehead, sorry, Sir," Kim offered meekly, as she bent over to clean up the mess with a towel. She knew he was too drunk to reason or even argue with. He held the counter to keep from swaying as he watched her clean.

"Say!" Joe said, squinting through bloodshot eyes, "you've got a world-class boom-boom there, girl!" Kim suppressed a scowl and said nothing, but he pressed on. "Augh Honey, what's wrong with a smile while you work? An attractive girl like you. Come on now, baby, let's see you smile." Kim stood up to face him, terrified inside but determined to not cower. She offered him a short sarcastic curl of her upper lip before turning away.

"You call that a smile? What's wrong with you?" He teetered for a moment, towering over her. "You stuck-up bitch," he sneered. Kim said nothing as Joe continued. "Maybe you should send that little retarded kid I've seen you with up here instead! Maybe he has better manners!" he sneered.

"404!" Zeza almost broke Kim's eardrum when she shouted into the headset. She and Tom were at Whitehead's pod door in an instant and let themselves in. The three of them quietly surrounded him. The drunk old man eyed them warily. Kim took a few even breaths and stepped forward toward him contritely. "Listen, Joe, you are so right. I have been such an idiot. As Fixer, we owe you so much more than this. You are a big, rich, powerful, handsome man. We don't want any trouble. How about I make it up to

you. How about joining me for private time and cocktails up in the VIP Chariot Lounge?" Zeza nearly gagged.

Joe's eyes gleamed. "The VIP Chariot Lounge? With you? Now?" He marveled at his good fortune.

"That's right, Joe- just you and me, all alone in the VIP Chariot Lounge."

Rocking back and forth, Joe pondered the offer. "Okay," he slurred. "How about your little Chiquita friend comes too, and I get a double lap dance. What do you say? Then we'll all be square." Kim's face reddened, but before she could object, Zeza jumped in. She took his hand gently and leaned into him, emphatically nodding yes, even batting her eyes.

Joe took the bait like a starving catfish. While Zeza quietly unlocked the door, Kim stroked Joe's cheek, cooing and tickling his belly. She made him cover his eyes like a child for a big surprise. He was grinning as Tom slowly pushed the door open. Kim kissed him on one cheek, then the other. Then she shoved him with all of her strength straight out back into the cold night air. He hung in the air for a moment, too drunk to scream, before his body fell and hit the rocks below with a dull thud, which echoed across the canyon.

At first, the three were terrified at what they had done and feared the consequences. For days they spent most of their time in the administration building monitoring communications to see if they had been discovered. But several weeks passed, and nothing happened, and then they were thrilled at having done the world a great service.

They cleaned house that Summer. There went the Silicon Valley entrepreneur with a limitless appetite for under-aged girls; the opioid dealing priest; the star quarterback who tortured animals. *Heinous*, they thought, *every one of them genuinely deserved to learn to fly*.

They were not reckless though, always circumspect about each decision, only using the 404 protocol when it was absolutely necessary. To have a clear conscience, they focused their efforts on the truly vile, as opposed to the vast majority of charioteers who were *merely repugnant*.

For example, Nicki Marchant, cousin of the French Prime Minister, comfortable only in Louboutin and Yves St. Laurent, was accustomed to dealing with servants sternly. When Tom arrived at her chariot door, she ignored him, talking idly on her cell phone, adjusting her hair in the mirror behind Tom's head while he waited patiently. Finally, she hung up and, offering no greeting, she turned to him fiercely. "I demand an upgrade to a better Chariot!"

"I am so sorry," Tom replied earnestly. "I would like to do that for you so much if I only could. We only have one model of Chariot for the whole facility. Maybe we can refresh this one for you, though, and then perhaps you will find it more to your liking."

Nicki scowled. "I'll *find* it to 'more to my *liking*?' " she demanded incredulously, arms akimbo. "What exactly is that supposed to mean? You will *find* not me! You are the *finder*! No Ordinary will speak to me like that. I'll get you outed if you don't watch it!" she ranted.

"Yes, Ma'am," said Tom, anxious to deescalate the situation. *Outed* could mean many things, but none of them were good. He ordered a fresh new interior for her Chariot and flew back to the management office sheepishly.

Zeza and Kim had been listening in. "Tom!" Kim said, "why did you take that from her? That was so insulting!"

"I guess she just wanted to give me an earful. It wasn't a big deal."

"You don't deserve this!" complained Zeza. "She is like, *Real Housewife* of the Blue Mesa!"

"Oh, she's not so bad." Said Tom. "She'll calm down."

An hour later, there was another buzz from Nicki Marchant's Chariot; Tom wanted to resolve the situation on his own and went up immediately. As the pod door opened, Tom could see Nicki standing on a kitchen chair, screaming at him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Finder! The Southwestern Interior you ordered is beyond horrible. There is a giant lizard on the window sill and inexplicably blue bubbles in the toilet. My whole Chariot has been infested and destroyed, and it is entirely your fault. I demand immediate placement in a brand new Chariot, or you will pay dearly!"

Tom knew there were no new chariots. "Ma'am., if only there was something I could do... honestly, if only I could!"

"You worthless, feckless imbecile. I'm going to have you redeployed to a work camp in Bumblefuck Siberia!" Nicki spat, reaching for her phone.

Zeza and Kim barged in breathlessly, interrupting Nicki's dialing. "Good afternoon Ms. Marchant. Ma'am. Ma'am, we are here from Customer Service and want to help you, Ma'am. How about a complimentary full-body beauty treatment in the newly

renovated Spa Chariot, Ma'am?" Zeza asked enthusiastically. "Its retail value is over *four hundred and four* dollars!" she gushed.

Nicki was still angry but intrigued. She was a connoisseur of subservient pampering, and spa treatments were one of her most treasured guiltless pleasures. "A spa? I did not know you even had a spa." she mused, putting her phone back in her purse.

"Oh yes, Ma'am," added Zeza, "It is brand new, and I think it would be perfect for you. We have *404* different shades of nail gel, Ma'am! Would you like to have a look?"

"The seaweed scrub is to die for!" Kim deadpanned.

Tom shifted nervously, worried that 404 was overkill, but that they were a team, and he had to be a team player. He offered Nicki his arm as Kim opened the pod door as if to escort her to the spa. He walked Nicki right to the brink, and it looked like a go, but at the last second, her phone rang, and she took the call.

"What is it now?" Nicki asked. They waited while Nicki listened before she finally spoke. "Yes? Well, tell her I am not paying for her to party for four years at some cushy left-wing New England art school. No. Yes, tell her that. Yes, those exact words. She needs to get into the corporate law program at Georgetown like her father, or she is off the gravy train for good. Yes, tell her that too. I'm going to the spa now. I don't care about her goddamn butterfly dreams." She hung up. "Ugh!" she cried to no one and everyone, "Grandchildren!"

It had not occurred to Tom that Nicki might be a grandmother, perhaps overbearing and demeaning, but a grandmother none-the-less. To his mind, that fact alone made her merely odious, not necessarily irredeemable. So he took action. He held

his hand up dramatically for everyone to pause, and pretended to speak into his own phone. "What? Oh, okay, perfect-- thanks very much!" He put his phone away.

"Ms. Marchant—great news! The powers that be have decided that a spa treatment is inadequate restitution for someone as talented and influential as you are. We are authorized to offer you special dispensation, an instant cash prize." They went back inside the Chariot, where Tom removed the last \$1800 he had from the hidden zipped pocket of his belt, carefully unfolded it, and handed the pile to Nicki. She smiled haughtily. The only thing Nicki loved more than spa treatments was unearned income.

"Well, all right then. That's better, Mr. Finder."

"Please, Ma'am," Tom continued to grovel, "please accept our deepest apologies." They left her feeling smug and self-satisfied, while the three felt positively vomitous.

However, after sharing a bottle of *Patron* recovered from Whitehead's empty Chariot, they all felt surprisingly virtuous about letting Nicki go. Zeza and Kim agreed to pay Tom back over time if they possibly could. Maybe Tom was right, Zeza and Kim decided, perhaps the 404s were getting out of hand, they reasoned; a little too much of a good thing maybe. So, they quit cold turkey that very day.

By that point though, their work was mostly complete. Customer Satisfaction improved to over 90% that Summer and they were on track to get the bonuses they deserved that December. As they got more efficient, Kim had more time to try to teach Kyle to read, and Tom taught him some basic math. No one ever came looking for Whitehead, or any of the others. Everything seemed to be going great.

But before December arrived, it all went to pieces. There was an explosion down near the cowlick like an earthquake. All the information screens in the administration building went dark. The Chariots rocked violently, lights flickered, and the visual curtain of the Chariots ripped back, just for an instant, revealing to the charioteers a world very different from what they had assumed. Old school telephone calls came flooding into the management office. The Charioteers finally understood: their *Golden Chariots* were aluminum utility trailers that had been stacked up to form an enormous nursing home.

For the first time in years, many of the Charioteers tried to contact their families, and the problems at the facility became widely known. As a result, the Blue Mesa was overrun by bedraggled tribes of Ordinaries. First, a horde arose from the South End, hundreds of them, all dressed in blue, stealing everything that was not tied down. Then another swarm all in red found a new entrance to the north end of the Mesa, and chased the blue group out, beating them relentlessly as they fled. Then the cycle repeated, always one group pushing another group out, looting, and never staying very long. People in the rear of these hordes had little idea why they were there or what the color they wore even meant.

At one point, Kyle asked Kim, "Which color are the good guys, Mommy?" Kim could not tell. The hordes weren't really for any particular cause, just against whatever was holding up the front. Thank God Ordinaries are not allowed to own guns, she thought, but they spent all their time screaming and throwing bottles at each other. Kim was never sure who was right, the Reds or the Blues, but as a Fixer, she came to hate Ordinaries every bit as much as she hated most of the Charioteers. At least the Charioteers were predictable.

When all was revealed, many of the Charioteers fled. A Blackhawk helicopter swept up Nicki Merchant in the middle of the night. Kim, Tom, and Zeza told any Charioteer they saw that they should evacuate asap; that services, as well as their safety, could no longer be guaranteed. Many got the message and walked out together in a human caravan, searching for a new home.

But against all the odds, some Charioteers tried to stay and defend the borders of their sorry makeshift campsites. The survivors stay outside all day, chopping wood, trapping small game, and gathering plentiful grubs and cacti. Then they return to their broken chariots each night, to float in the white noise and tobacco brown darkness until daylight.

Tom became something of an archeologist, obsessively gathering a collection of artifacts from the Blue Mesa. He gathered any personal effects the Ordinaries had not stolen from the abandoned pods, put them into labeled boxes, and buried them in the sand to keep them safe.

Kim was worried about George and Edyth, so she looked up their address: C26-154. She and Kyle climbed 26 stories up the cliff face C, and then crawled horizontally over dozens of damaged Chariots just to reach them. To Kim's great relief, they were fine, sitting together in two worn-out beach chairs, looking out over the red cliffs, holding hands. They both gave Kyle a huge hug. George told Kim he never liked the damn Chariot anyway. He said he was perfectly happy to cook over a campfire for the rest of his life. Edyth warned him that he might feel differently when Winter arrived, George just shrugged and poked at the simmering cottonwood embers.

At sunset, the dusty pods take on a turquoise patina in the fading light. We are running low on supplies, and we should probably leave, but we are going to stay and try to help the other survivors for as long as we possibly can.



The Secret

At thirteen, the biggest mystery in the world was the secret of how to get girls to like me. I had only recently kissed an Italian girl, Gina Pellegrino, and learned I had been doing it all wrong. I craved romantic intimacy. So for the entire eight hours it took my dad's Chrysler New Yorker to tow a pop-up trailer from our home on Long Island to the Union River Campground near Bar Harbor, I thought about meeting a pretty girl in Maine. Maybe we would ride our bikes into town for ice cream cones, or dig for clams down by the jetty. Later, we might make smores together by a campfire, maybe even make out in the moonlight. It was a vastly improbable scenario. I had no idea what to say

or do to make it happen. I thought about girls all the time, but they remained a complete mystery. Where I grew up, boys played with boys and girls played with girls.

Most of what I knew about girls I learned from my kid sister, and we did not exactly get along. While I was four years older, she was a prodigy in the art of psychological warfare and could rile me up with the greatest of ease. On this trip, she merely wrapped the end of her seatbelt around her hand such that it looked like a hairstyle behind her fist, to make a sort of puppet. She waved it dramatically as if it were dancing, leaping high in the air above the cooler, then freezing in place, looking down on me from the end of my sister's arm, until I swatted it away. She smirked victoriously.

Uncle Jack and Aunt Ruth drove their camper up from the Catskills, with my cousins Buck and Jeanne. They rode up cavalcade style with their close friends Lance and Betsy, who owned a hardtop trailer identical to their own.

Buck was wiry and rail-thin. At seventeen, he was a handful, climbing up to the top of bridges and doing donuts on his motorcycle in the rain. He whipped up small sculptures with old car parts and a welding torch. I worshipped the ground he walked on.

But to Buck, I was just a kid on a family trip. We were such different ages. Buck was seventeen, Jeanne, fifteen; me, thirteen; my sister, nine. The age differences seemed like light years, and we did not interact with each other much beyond meals together, where we were all polite to our cousins and sarcastic with our siblings. Instead, my sister played with her Barbie doll, Jeanne laid out on a towel and read, I fished, and Buck tried to meet girls. I would see him chatting up high school girls in the pinball arcade. I would have liked to join them, but dared not embarrass Buck by doing so.

Jeanne had a long thin nose, which made her seem aloof. She picked at her plate at meals and rarely snacked. Good with numbers, she later became a bookkeeper. But she was perpetually crabby, a role her father nurtured with constant teasing. At times her crabbiness became a comedic parody. She was piqued at the slightest provocation, her voice rising in anger like a schoolmarm. Somehow this made it all the more tempting to join the teasing.

Uncle Jack had been a tank mechanic in the North Africa campaign and still sported a military flattop. He was a huge man with a terrible temper. He told a story about one time when he saw a pick-up truck cut off a lady in traffic. He chased the vehicle down, ran it off the road, and hit the stunned driver in the face with a mason's trowel before driving off. Another time, when their two-year-old German short-haired pointer chewed a hole in the living room carpet for a second time, Buck had to walk the dog out in their back yard and tie it to a tree, then step back. The dog was still looking at Buck expectantly, wagging its tail, when Uncle John shot it dead from thirty feet away.

Aunt Ruth, my mother's sister, was a good-natured woman of sturdy German stock, a perfect foil to Uncle John. She had a cast iron trivet in her kitchen that read, "The opinions expressed by the husband of this household are not necessarily those of management."

Our campsites looked out over the Union River Bay, and the air smelt of kelp and salt. Each evening the grown-ups would gather in their lounge chairs, watching the sunset across the bay, enjoying cocktails in tall paper Dixie cups, while lobster and corn boiled in a big aluminum pot on a green Coleman stove. During the day, I was allowed to pilot an outboard motor boat by myself anywhere on the bay where I could be seen

from the campsite. I would fish for mackerel and striped bass for hours, trolling a spreader of fluorescent tubes. I never caught a striper, but I hooked lots of mackerel; sometimes two or three at a time. I even caught an eel once. The freedom I had on that bay was my greatest rite of passage that year.

Lance was Uncle John's best buddy. They both worked for Ulster County, fixing potholes in the Summer, and plowing endless snow in the Winter. Lance had an olive complexion and wore his hair slicked straight back, rat pack style. I was surprised how he constantly flirted with women, coming in very close and whispering breathy innuendoes through a knowing smile, even to my mother. At that time, this was considered more acceptable than it would be today. Neither my father nor Uncle Jack objected. They just laughed it off; he only did it when he was drunk, and Betsy certainly didn't care. Jeanne was the only one who did not seem to take it in stride and reddened angrily whenever he came near her. We teased her about that too.

Lance and Betsy were bigtime drinkers. I remember one time, my dad driving away from our campsite, Lance's whole upper torso hanging out the passenger side, nearly falling out, belting out *Happy Days Are Here Again* at the top of his lungs. They came back when he sobered up.

Another time Lance and I happened to be sitting next to each other at the campfire late at night. He asked if I had a girlfriend, and I pretended I did. Lance snorted, and a drunken smile cracked his lips in the firelight. "Oh, how I wish I knew then what I know now," he said. Then he said it again, and then repeated it a third time: "Oh, how I wish I knew then what I know now." I thought, surely, he was talking about the secret of how to get girls to like me, and I stewed about that, still wondering what that great secret was.

Many years later, Uncle Jack died of congestive heart failure and then the same year, Betsy succumbed to lung cancer. Soon after that, Aunt Ruth took up with Lance, and he was going to move in with her. We laughed that Aunt Ruth always did go for bad boys. But by then Jeanne was much older, and at this news, she raged and could no longer contain her secret. She told her mother all the sordid details of what Uncle Lance did to her so long ago at the Union River Campground. Aunt Ruth broke up with Lance that very day. Uncle Jack would have shot him in the balls.

This was not the secret I was looking for. Still, I wish I had known more about it. Maybe I could have been a better cousin, taking her out each day in my boat, fishing together far from the shoreline.



Angel from Montgomery

Fidelity's more'n just talk where I come from: a woman needs to stand by her man no matter what, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til death do we part, all of that, just like the bible says. And I'm all in.

I met Lucas at the rodeo when I was seventeen. He was mowing the grass, and I was tendin' the bulls. He came down to the bullpen, looking for a hammer to realign his lawnmower blade. I was wearing the same faded blue dress and the white prayer cap I always did back then, but something about me stopped him right in his tracks, eyin' me up and down. I asked him, *Can I help you?* And he smiled a big grin and said *I sure hope*

so, Miss. I liked that he called me *Miss*. He started coming around real regular. He was not much to look at, I'll tell you what, rough around the edges for sure, but I was used to that. He didn't talk much either, but I didn't mind. He was a free-wheeling man, so macho in his black cowboy hat and fire engine red flatbed truck, raised on massive off-road tires. I had to scramble up into that truck like a damn little monkey. But I loved being all high up in it and looking down at people in their little cars. I was young and looking for something new, something exciting, a little dangerous even, but something I could call mine alone too, something that I could hold onto, something really special, and it was destined to be Luke.

I'm just five foot two but muscular-- at the work farm where I lived for a short time, I could heave hay bales up to the loft just as good as any of the boys. I threw my whole body into it- that was the trick- you can't throw hay bales using only your arms. Me and Luke were both hard workers, and we made a good team, like oxen. At first, he paid me to help him with the chores around his farm, but soon I was living there full time, cleaning up his bachelor mess, and planning for our future together. He was a tinkerer, and there was electronic equipment in various states of disrepair all over the house. I helped him box everything up and move it all out to the barn. Then I decorated best I could. Those were our best times. One day when we were in town, going to the hardware store, he turned to me and said: "How'd you like to get married?" We went to the courthouse that very day and made it official.

We were doing real good until that fast-talking salesman at the feed store talked him into buying that backhoe. He made good money on it for a while, digging trenches and filling them with sewer pipes. But then the whole economy went to shit, and it

seemed like nobody needed holes dug no more. We still had payments to make to the damn bank, both on the backhoe and on the truck, not to mention the mortgage, and times got real hard. We fell behind. Repo men came in the middle of the night one night and hauled Luke's truck away. We scraped enough cash together to buy a dented up old junker minivan, all white with one red door where it had been hit, to get to town and back. But now Luke could not tow the backhoe, so there it sat out in the yard, doing nothing. Finally, he took it apart piece by piece and stashed everything in the barn before the bank came for that too. You shoulda seen how they threatened us about the location of that damn missing machine. *I guess it just fucking disappeared one night!* We laughed, listening to one of their messages.

But generally speaking, laughter was getting scarce. Over time Lucas's frustration kind of ate him up. He spent most of his time alone in the barn, and when he came back inside, he'd be drunk and lash out at me real regular. I am tough but he hit me real hard, and one time when I asked him a question about the future, he damn near choked me to death. He got more and more paranoid and started making demands. He said we could no longer afford the telephone and had it disconnected. I could not go down the end of the driveway because he didn't want me talking to the postman. One day I left the barn door open, and even though all the animals were safe in their stalls, he forbade me to go in ever again.

I thought about leaving him, but I just couldn't. I had been left dozens of times in my life, and I would not do that to Luke. Besides, he'd probably kill me if I tried.

One day though, my favorite rooster Buster ran into the barn, and I ran on after it. I had not been inside in about a year. I knew he had built a workshop of some kind in

there for his electric stuff, but I was surprised that inside the barn he had built a whole enclosed little building, with a heavy timber door and a big padlock on it. My curiosity got the best of me, I guess. Being a farm girl, I know farmers always hide a key somewhere. I had to look nearly everywhere, but sure enough, there was a key hidden in a pile of backhoe parts. I pulled the padlock off, and the big door squeaked open just a crack. The room was dark, but I got a quick glimpse of several old black and white video monitors shining in the dark.

Before I could push the door open any further, I heard the sound of the minivan tires on the gravel drive. I almost dropped the key relocking the door, my hands shaking. I skedaddled out of there. By that time, Buster was out of the barn, but I chased him around and made sure Luke saw me doing it.

Why were you in the barn?

Just chasing that dang rooster. You ready for your supper?

Stay out of the fucking barn.

Yes, sir, I replied and went inside the house to heat up some chicken pot pie from the night before.

We didn't talk through dinner, and Fox news filled the void. There was a story about a girl from Montgomery who either ran off with or was abducted by some Somali immigrant kid. *Probably dead by now,* I thought.

Luke seemed a little agitated, and he turned the TV off. I knew he was sizing me up about the barn, and I did not want to take a whupping, so I played dumb about the steel door and the porn. But you better believe next time he went into town, I headed down for that barn again.

This time the barn door was locked too, with a combination lock. I tried some obvious numbers but could not crack it. The only way to get in was around back through the pigpen. I jumped the fence and ran like hell-- pigs are no joke when they are hungry, and they are always hungry. I made it into the barn and shut the pigs out from the inside. I held my weight against the gate until they wandered off snorting.

I unlocked the padlock on the steel door, swung it open, and this time turned on the lights. There was a huge steel plate on the floor, weighed down with the old hydraulic cylinders of the backhoe Luke had taken apart. Otherwise the room was empty, except for an old desk which supported the video monitors. As my eyes adjusted, I was shocked to see that every screen showed images of an empty room in our farmhouse: he had been spying on me the whole time. Why would he do that? The only place I didn't recognize had a girl or a woman on it-- practically naked, sitting on an army cot, staring at her feet. "Porn!" I gasped aloud, hurt but not surprised. Men are pigs-- that's the truth.

Suddenly I froze though, afraid of both knowing and not knowing the truth. My tiny heart beat like a big bass drum, and my vision narrowed. I slowly raised my foot and brought it down with a stomp. The girl on the screen looked upward briefly, then back down at the floor.

I got out of there as quickly as I could, my ears ringing. But in the pigsty, I slipped in the mud and fell on my back. A giant hog attacked me, tearing at my jeans and blouse, trying to get on top of me. I kicked him square in the snout and tore as much of my shirttail away from his massive jowls as I could as I crawled and then ran away. He was still chasing me and biting at me when I finally hopped the fence and then ran up to

the house. I threw away the blouse and got myself washed up at the pump outside before going inside for fresh clothes.

I decided to go to the police right away. But I could not go that day; Lucas would be home shortly. I would ride my bike into town in the morning to go get help and save that girl. Meanwhile, I needed to keep my wits about me.

I questioned my own sanity- maybe I didn't really see what I thought I saw. Maybe it was all a big mistake. But deep down inside, I knew it weren't.

That night I tried to make it nice for Luke. I put on a newer blouse and skirt and put my hair up pretty. I chopped Buster's head off, cleaned him out, plucked all his feathers, and baked him with fresh turnips. We had Luke's favorite dessert, cowboy cake, chocolate cake baked in a skillet with chocolate icing. He ate his fill, then he went out to the barn as he often did after dinner. I knew he could see me on the video, so I tried to act real natural. I cleaned up the kitchen, sharpened the axe I had used to kill Buster, and tended the fire with an iron poker, waiting for Lucas to come in for bed.

He didn't come back in for a long time. I pretended to fall asleep in a rocking chair. Usually, Luke comes in pretty noisily, but this time suddenly, he was standing right over me, and I could hear his shallow breath. I opened my eyes and met his, which were steely and cold. In his hand was a small piece of muddy fabric, the hem of my blouse.

Were you in the fucking barn today?

Oh yes, the rooster got in there again- that's why he got served as dinner! I tried to force a laugh, but he was not buying it.

You fucking bitch- I told you to stay out of the fucking barn! His punch came hard and fast, cutting up into my chin and making me spit up blood, which ran down my blouse, as the chair rocked violently. Fair enough, I thought, maybe I deserved that for spyin'. But he was not done. He grabbed the hot poker from the fire and cornered me at the stove, waving it in my face.

What did you see, you stupid slut? he demanded. I trembled, speechless.

Want to know what happens to fucking snoops and liars? he menaced, bringing the poker closer to my face. I smelled the flesh of my cheek burning and yelped before pulling myself together.

No sir, I said calmly, *sorry for my mistake, sir. I will try to do better, sir.* I bowed my head and turned back to the stove. Then I spun around so fast he jumped back, and I crashed that skillet down on the crown of his head as hard as I could. He fell like a sack of corn to the kitchen floor.

I ran like hell out to the barn, which was still open. I bolted into the workshop and shouted *Are you in there,* and a voice shouted back *Yes, yes, please help he killed my boyfriend! I don't want to die!*

I pushed pulled and prodded, but the steel door on the floor was seemingly immobile under the weight of the backhoe parts. I could get a little trap door open in the middle of it but not the big door. I needed more light to see, so I hit a switch next to the desk. At that, a generator fired up, and the steel door swung up on its hinges smoothly from the floor, rising on the power of the backhoe pneumatics. I could see ten feet down into the cell, an army cot with a thin cotton mattress, and a terrified naked girl.

I threw down the rope, but she was too weak to climb. Even when she stood on the cot, she could not lift herself. I climbed down in, and got on all fours on the cot, trying to arch my back to push her up, screaming at her *Climb, climb!* She struggled and struggled to pull herself out of the hole, and was almost there when Lucas ran into the room, his face purple and distorted. I tried to pull her back down with me, but she was practically insane with fear, and she fought me fiercely, clawing back up desperately to escape. He threw the switch next to the desk, and a generator growled. The girl made one more desperate lunge. It seemed like slow motion as the steel door descended smoothly, darkening the cell, pausing only briefly while her spine broke, *crack-crack-crack* before cutting her in half completely, her lower body falling back onto the bed between my feet, blood dripping from the ceiling onto my face and arms. Her legs were still twitching, so I flipped the mattress over on top of them

Luke and I did not speak for a couple days, though he kept the lights on me, and I knew he must be watching. I was terrified of the rotting half-corpse beside me. My cheek swelled up from the burn, but I knew it would heal eventually. There was enough food and water down there to last a while, mainly cornflakes and such. I thought about my vows to Lucas; how much trouble he was in, and how I could possibly help him. I knew he would be real scared, having killed that girl. So I talked to him gently, not totally sure he would hear me or listen. I would repeat the same basic idea, trying to keep the fear out of my voice:

Luke. You need to think this through. This is how marriage works in God's plan. We love each other so much it hurts sometimes. We need each other. We have just had a terrible misunderstanding. Now I know you've done some bad things, but I also know

you are not a killer. If you let me, I will help you take care of this situation, and no one will ever have to know. That is my sacred promise on my mother's grave.

Now we are not church-going people, and Luke had good cause to be skeptical, but he knows me swearing on my mother's grave is not something I take lightly. We both bow to the Lord in times of desperation and try to remain in his good graces. Luke knew I would not lie like that if it was going to damn my immortal soul forever. One day he opened the trap door and lowered down a scrub brush and a bucket of soapy water, and I knew we were going to be okay.

He was terribly alone, so maybe he wanted to believe me. He needed all the help he could get. He opened up the big steel door halfway so we could talk, and we talked for hours, over several days, more than we had ever talked before. He told me about the awful things his stepbrothers did to him as a kid, terrible things that should have never happened to him. No wonder he was angry all the time. By the time we stopped talking, the steel door was open, and we had a trial agreement to let me out of the hole.

First I had to pass Porno Girl's lower torso up. By now that stunk something awful, and it was awkward because the legs were stiff, but I kind of lassoed it with the bucket rope, and Luke pulled it up. Then he pulled up the bloody mattress, which would need to be burned. Then he passed me down all kinds of other cleaning products, and I scrubbed that place spic and span, good as new.

By now, Luke was starting to trust me. He kept the big door to the workshop locked just in case, then he pulled me up through the hole. We put the lower body half into a jumbo contractor bag, and double bagged it for Luke to carry outside and bury with

the upper body when I was back in the hole. I washed all the blood off the equipment and tended to Luke's head scar from the skillet incident.

While I was cleaning him up, our faces almost touching, I told him how much I loved him, that I would never betray him, and that I would always be here for him. He put his hand on my knee, then made gentle circles with his fingers on the back of my thighs. That felt real good, and we became very tender with each other. I kissed him full on the mouth, unbuttoning my blouse, pulling my bra down to let him lay his wounded head there. He pulled my skirt up to my waist as he felt me up and squeezed my ass, as he stumbled out of his jeans, and I kicked off my panties. I laid fully back, my blood-matted hair falling softly across the concrete floor, looking up at him straight into his eyes, fully open to him, as in sweet surrender, slowly pulling my knees up to my chest, then spreading them akimbo, my feet rubbing his biceps fetchingly. As he fell upon me, my tiny feet pressed snugly into the spaces between his muscular shoulders and powerful chest, and my toes curled at the heat of his body. I lingered there for a minute, loving him, as he positioned himself to slide inside me.

Then, with one violent wrench of my entire body, I launched him into the air like a hay bale. He looked funny, hanging in the air there for a second, so surprised, like a giant question mark with a hard-on, before falling into the hole of the underground cell. He grabbed at the floor to keep himself from falling in. I stepped on his hands to keep him from climbing back out. I waited until he had dropped to the floor of the cell before pushing the button next to the desk so that he would not be crushed like that girl. And when the door came down, it was finally quiet, and I found a kind of peace that I had never known before.

I buried the two halves of the Porno Girl next to the shallow grave where I discovered Luke had buried the skull and pelvic bone of that Somali kid after the pigs had eaten the rest of him. I sit out there and pray for her sometimes between chores. I see now she was trying to hold on to a relationship too, right up to the day she and the Somali kid met Luke. I was glad to at least play a part in bringing them back together here on the hillside.

There was no sense in getting the police involved. I tried to help the porno girl, but now she was dead, sleeping in the arms of angels, her lover at her side. Nothing I could do could change that. Like I said, a woman needs to stand by her man, and that's what I intend to do. I don't mind doing all the farm work, and I don't mind feeding Luke. He minds being in that hole sometimes for sure, but it is gonna have to stay this way for now.

Meanwhile, things are real good. After a hard day slopping hogs and such I just love watching Luke and talking to him on the intercom. Every night I lower a delicious hot supper down through the trap door for him to enjoy, sometimes even with a can or two of beer. Safe husband, happy wife, a perfect marriage, all the two of us could ever ask for.



Christmas in Prime Time

“But Ebenezer!” cried Cratchit, “You will ruin Christmas!”

“It’s the principle of the thing!” Ebenezer barked. “The technological elite cannot be allowed to run small town America roughshod! I am not some kind of passive robot! As long as I am the mayor, that is how it is going to be. I will not be intimidated!”

As the Comptroller of New Ringgold, Pennsylvania, Cratchit knew the numbers. He had watched the town’s tax rolls shrink since the Big Decline. “Main Street is boarded up now. All of our stores except the Dollar Store are gone. Our roads are like mine fields from years of neglect. No one comes here anymore because there is nothing to do. All the young people leave as soon as they can.” He paused dramatically. “Ebenezer, we need the Amazon drones just to survive!”

“Humbug!” barked Ebenezer. “We don’t need Amazon any more than we need Christmas itself!” Ebenezer knew Cratchit to be a competent accountant, but more than a little annoying, with his constant worrying about the future. Ebenezer told him he would consider the drone matter carefully, but really he considered it closed: there would be no drone deliveries in New Ringgold. Beyond all the hype, it was frivolous nonsense.

Cratchit retreated, but the next morning, he again ran breathlessly into the Mayor’s office. “Ebenezer, Jeff Bezos has announced his retirement from Amazon and all his related companies, and he is handing over the reins to Santa Claus!” he exclaimed.

“Santa Claus? The real deal?” inquired Ebenezer. “Old School-Jelly-Belly Santa Claus? Not a mall Santa?”

“No, not a mall Santa! The jolly fat man himself! Ebenezer, I fear there will be problems- big problems! They are reassessing all of their distribution policies. What if they cut us off completely?”

Ebenezer balked. “Bah! Santa wouldn’t do that— the press would have a field day! You worry too much! Everything happens for a reason. Maybe this is just the kick in the pants this town needs to see how foolish and wasteful Christmas really is.”

Cratchit paused, not sure what to say. “Maybe, I guess. I am not really sure what will happen now, Boss. You probably know better,” he said meekly, and went back to counting the beans.

Santa was way beyond retirement age, not to mention stubbornly cantankerous, and some investors in Amazon feared he might be out of touch with modern retail commerce. But even his rivals granted that no one did logistics like Santa, and that maybe he was just what Amazon needed to get its fledgling drone project back on track. Amazon’s board unanimously approved Santa as it’s new CEO.

Santa was excited that his purview included Blue Origin, Jeff Bezos’ suborbital human space flight company, because he intended to overhaul the entire delivery system top to bottom. Santa truly “got it” when it came to suborbital space travel, having racked up many miles himself over the years, even before the advent of red-nose navigation. He was no greenhorn to Retail either, having profited from partnerships with the very best since at least 1830 or so. He knew he could pick up the cloud business, a longtime believer in the value of knowing when people are sleeping or awake, and whether they are naughty or nice. Finally, he was delighted to have control of the *Washington Post*, so

that it could continue to make people frightened, the very basis of holiday cheer and rabid consumption.

Amazon drones had not lived up to their hype. They could not fly very far fully loaded. They were ill equipped to get signatures on packages. The drones had trouble distinguishing mail boxes from household pets. There had been several inadvertent fenestrations and decapitations. There were drones falling from the sky, careening into community pools, causing traffic deaths on nearby highways, shooting out suddenly from air ducts into elementary school classrooms, or sometimes just aimlessly circling around places they were never meant to go.

That is when Santa suggested chimney deliveries. “Old school, but surgically effective!” he boasted. Many on the Amazon management team balked, imagining terrible fire and soot problems, and but in the end, Santa had his way, as he always did; when the fire arose in his cheeks, his subordinates trembled.

Santa tried his best to be patient with them. “Only a dedicated package chute,” he explained, “*a Smile Chute*, installed in each chimney, can resolve this conundrum.” The Smile Chutes were long semiflexible tubes, slightly tapered, which custom fit the flue of any chimney. All goods would slide down the chimney, protected by the sleeve. Installation was simple: the consumer merely tapped a municipal code into an app in the proximity of a fireplace. The app took care of the rest, with a virtual construction crew flying in to complete the assembly.

Seemingly all of America clamored to get their Smile Chutes as soon as possible. Amazon paid for the new infrastructure for Prime customers and people who lived in big cities. But not so small towns, who were too far off the grid to bother with, according to

Santa. Those towns had to pay for their Smile Chute installation themselves, and that's what bugged Ebenezer. It did not seem fitting to retrofit all the chimneys at the town's expense. Times were very tight. To Fund the Smile Chute access codes, there would need to be further cuts to the grade school's visual arts program, which had already eliminated ceramics, painting and drawing. Ebenezer refused to approve the Smile Chute program and distribute the access codes.

But Santa decided to play hardball with New Ringgold and other bumblefunple towns still out of compliance with his grand plan. Amazon told such municipalities that if they did not comply and invest in infrastructure in the way Amazon recommended, Amazon could not guarantee Christmas would come that year, nor any year after.

Cratchit was hysterical: "All the other towns in Pennsylvania have Amazon Prime Smile Chutes! We are practically the only town in America without them now! We are falling behind! What if they cut us off completely?"

"Bah humbug! It's an idle threat!" declared Ebenezer. "You'll see!" But Cratchit knew Santa hadn't held on to Christmas for two hundred years by accident, or by bluffing. Santa held the reins in this town. Without Amazon, New Ringgold was toast.

The very next day, Cratchit nearly spit out his decaf when he opened the letter from Amazon's counsel. He rushed back to the mayor's office: "It's happened Ebenezer! Amazon has suspended all delivery service to our town until you approve the codes! Christmas it not coming unless you move decisively!"

"I'll consider it." Ebenezer said, but he was dead against installing the Smile Chutes. *Slime Chutes* he called them, *Shit Chutes*, if only to himself. This is corporate welfare, plain and simple, he thought; a good fight to be fought, in the arena, as Teddy

Roosevelt would say. Yet, he was troubled. He still had to live in New Ringgold beyond the holiday season. For everyone, staying in New Ringgold was in some ways even more courageous than moving out, a kind of last stand. He had to either violate his deepest principles, or ruin Christmas for all of his remaining neighbors. By now, he was very weary from all the drama, and was grateful to doze off at his desk, as he fell into a dream.

It was deep Winter, some time in Christmas past. There was no Amazon; not even a world wide web. Families gathered together to celebrate Christmas as if it were a religious holiday. There was no social media or video games so the children laughed together with their cousins in games of imagination. There were bonfires and hand-made presents wrapped in tissue paper. Someone's uncle drank too much and passed out early in an easy chair, but otherwise everyone participated in a game of Charades. In the end, the children put on a pageant of the Christ child with a real baby, their real new cousin Tim. Where was young Ebenezer? Locked in the study, consoling himself with his coin collection, waiting for the miserable day to end.

He moved forward in time, to Christmas present. He saw the children all over town, alone in their own worlds on their personal devices, nervously checking their Instagram accounts for Likes, alone in their rooms, unchallenged by face to face interactions, much like young Ebenezer and his coins. Using books only to tilt prop up iPads, they searched the internet for further distraction, their alienation growing with each visit, stumbling into hate groups, learning to loathe that other thing over there, whatever it was, that awful foreign enemy thing over there on the internet, just as Ebenezer hated Amazon and Christmas. He shuddered and walked away quickly, pulling his collar tight against the cold.

He moved forward in time again, to Christmas future. At first, the town square seemed quite serene, with snow gently falling on the steps of the courthouse. The door to the courthouse was somehow locked, so he boosted himself up on a railing to peer into his old office through an icy window. There was some sort of fancy party, perhaps a mayoral inauguration? Ebenezer recognized some of his biggest donors yucking it up over cognac and fat cigars. Then Ebenezer froze. There, sitting in his office chair, was someone Ebenezer did not recognize- a new mayor. They had replaced him! When the new mayor turned toward the window, the profile was quite angular, and Ebenezer nearly fell from the railing as he recognized it as an Amazon Android complete with an imprint of Ebenezer's own face on it, a gift to the town by Santa himself. Banging on the window, he begged for a chance to change his ways. But his pleas were lost in the din of the merriment. Ebenezer woke up in a pool of cold sweat, gasping in terror.

But wait, he thought, tapping his body with his fingertips to be certain it was really there. I am alive! There is still time! Ebenezer ran like the Dickens to his office to get the Smile Chute access codes. Then he ran through town, door to door, screaming "Merry Christmas!" giving each household a unique passcode as they scrambled to launch an app in the hearth of each home.

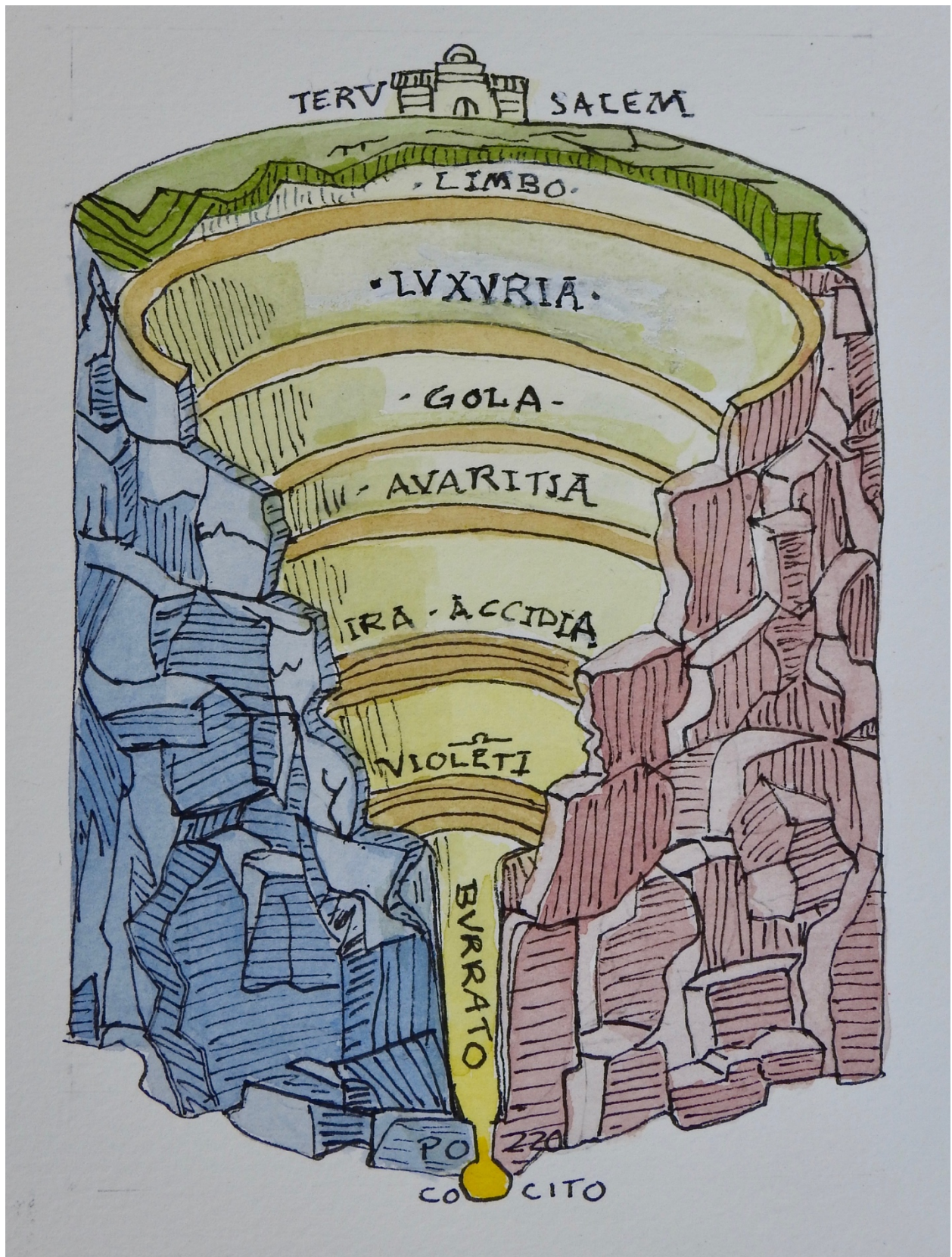
When every last house in town had used the access code to trigger the app, they all stood together in the town square, looking up to the wonderous night sky. Some held hands while Yule logs burned on their cell phone screens. At first, the sky appeared clear, thanks to Santa's miniaturization technology, all the nearly invisible machinery barely a red dot on a blackened sky. Then quite suddenly, something like a giant Gatling gun appeared in a cumulous cloud, and the women gasped as it seemed to shoot guided

missiles directly at them. But as the missiles came down, they slowed, self-lubricated, and slid themselves snugly, gently but firmly, into permanent installment in the chimney of each home.

A roar came up from the crowd as the red dot suddenly again grew exponentially, this time into a bright red sleigh of massive proportions. A virtual sack on the back of the sleigh opened to reveal a 200 acre industrial campus, a vast warehouse. The buzzing of forklifts and drones thrilled the children. Then came the presents, so many wonderful, wonderful, presents. Down the drones rained, down through the tree tops, down the Smile Chutes in the chimneys, right to the base of every Christmas tree in New Ringgold. “God bless us, every one!” declared Cratchit’s boy Tim.

Everyone in New Ringgold got what they wanted that Christmas. The children all got presents. Their parents all got free shipping on all of their purchases, with no payments until early February. Santa completed Amazon’s infrastructure project on time and was awarded a billion dollar bonus. Cratchit got the new accounting system he longed for, via Amazon Web Services.

The following November, Ebenezer was reelected Mayor by a landslide. “Ho! Ho! Ho!” he brayed for years to come, every holiday season, “Merrrrrrrrrry Christmas!”



The Great Centralia Coal Fire

Freedom and equality are sworn and everlasting enemies, and when one prevails the other dies.

--William & Ariel Durant

I.

The bus ride from Reading to Pottsville, PA is interminable, but I have no choice; my '98 Camry is dead as a doormat. It's 3pm March 24, Maundy Thursday; my feature article for the *Reading Eagle* is due by Saturday 3pm, for publication Sunday morning. I have to hurry and I will because I really need the money. Stocking shelves at Target is not cutting it. My rent is due April 1, and freelance writing is my best shot of being able to both keep my apartment and feed me and my dog Virgil for another week while I save up to get the car fixed.

I knew nothing about the Centralia Coal Mine Fire when it happened. Now it is a toxic hell burning at over 1200 degrees. It started with a garbage fire near a mine shaft, and worked its way down to the coal seam. The volunteer fire company that started it could not put it out. They say the fire will burn out by the year 2250 but I haven't got that much time- this article is due Saturday 3 pm sharp. The outside world wants to know why the Centralia coal fire is still burning, not WHAT not WHEN not HOW but WHY.

II.

The bus pulls into Pottsville, where the coal money ran out long ago. There are still mansions, but now they are crumbling halfway houses and bail bondsmen offices serving the courthouse and county jail where the Coal and Iron Police once hung the Molly Maguires.

Pottsville was a vibrant commercial end of the line on the Reading Railroad, once the most valuable company in the world. But that was long ago, and by 1981, trains stopped coming to Pottsville completely. The station fell into disrepair before it was transformed, at substantial cost, into a Greyhound bus depot, so people from Pottsville could get to imagined jobs somewhere else. Now the station sits empty like an abandoned church, another bridge to nowhere.

There are buses at the Pottsville Greyhound depot to many places-- State College, Scranton, Harrisburg-- but none to Centralia. There are no taxis either, just a dog-eared card on the wall next to where the pay phone used to be. I punch a number into my flip phone, and twenty minutes later, an elderly gentleman drives up in an old Checker Cab. The permit on his sun visor tells me his name is John Ohara.

I tell Ohara I am going to Centralia to learn its story. He laughs and shakes his head, and says there is no story; no one lives there anymore. There are no survivors, and where there are no survivors, there are no stories. He pauses. He confides in me he was a writer himself once but was badly treated, so he stopped. He suggests maybe I should stay in Pottsville and write about real people like he did; men and women fucking and farting in the flesh; not apparitions. But that would be his story, not the story I have come for. "Take me there anyway," I say.

III.

We drive up Highway 61 North until we reach a place where it veers right. We careen left, over a pile of gravel and then up into a hollow where the highway used to go. Ohara grumbles as the macadam highway twists beneath our wheels, rising in stiff black

sheets to window height, and graffiti messages both profound and profane crawl up our windows. Ohara stops the car, and we get out in the woods on the highway that no longer is. We need to hurry; it is getting dark. We climb a hill to get the lay of the land.

Below us, there might have been a town once, an ordinary American town where people all went to the same public school, where they saluted a flag they all loved. But in 1962, there were explosions in the air: civil rights, globalization, free love. The world accelerated around its magnetic core, and the friction in the air caused a fire, which ultimately destroyed Centralia.

The wreckage of the homes has been mostly cleared. Now there is nothing but old gray foundations, standing like tombstones in brown dirt where nothing grows; the earth barren but for tree trunks bleached white by the sun. In places, the ground is so hot it can light a match. There is an abandoned drive-in movie where the teenagers used to meet to make out. Ohara turns to me: "I can only take you this far."

I can see a thin stream of thick grey smoke on the other side of the cemetery, and I follow it.

IV.

It was a small fire at first, hardly worth a newspaper story, a trivial error by rookie firefighters assigned to keep it under control. For days then weeks then months then years they took steps to try to contain it. They pumped water in. They covered the surface with clay, seeking to smother the blaze. They attempted many solutions, even injecting a giant slurry of ash, water, and rocks. Nothing worked.

They kept the public school open for as long as they could, but it became uncontrollable, as the ferocity of the children's fights grew each day. Their fathers drank to fill the months and months of unemployment when the mine was closed and beat their sons to kill their softness. Mothers grew bitter and denounced their own daughters. The coal fire chased them, and they scattered far and wide, never to return. They left nothing behind; only the old Ukrainian Catholic Church is still standing, and it is too late to go there; the congregants long since departed.

The mine that once fed the families of Centralia is now a giant funnel-shaped hole. A road cut along its walls is still mostly intact, circling down for miles into the ground before narrowing and plunging straight down into darkness, strewn with debris and in places impassable. I walk through an enormous gate with grave advice about hope and abandonment. I hear a great grinding of machinery and a low moan below. I hurry along.

V.

I come upon a village gate, still near enough to the mine's entrance to be bathed in the dim gray light. Ohara was wrong; there are not just a few but many people here, all walking in single file in a giant circle around a bonfire. Not good people; not evil; just walking. From the side, they look like full human beings, but as they turn in the circle the firelight reveals them to be completely flat, like cardboard cutouts, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, as they circle and circle.

I want to ask them about the nature of their faith, and why no one lives in Centralia any more—why the Centralia Coal fire is still burning- WHY. But they are intent on

merely circling, circling, and when approached, will not speak, oblivious even of the stinging wasps and maggots that feed upon them as I shuffle away.

VI.

I arrive at a ferry dock on a burning river. The ferry is crowded with misery and the wailing of young children. I crawl over a pile of starved infants to get closer to the ferryman's pilot house. I shout to him, *WHY does the Centralia fire still burn?* He points to his forehead and grimaces, saying nothing. He could talk about *when barbed wire crossed the prairies, or when the forests were seized to make nature parks for city people, or when everyone started driving rice burners instead of Chevys, or when condoms became mandatory because of AIDS, or when Jane Fonda humped a North Vietnamese missile launcher, or when someone decided we needed to protect every last god damn bug on earth. He could talk about Globalism, or Political Correctness, or Planned Parenthood, or Affirmative Action, or the EPA, or the War against Prayer, or Barack Obama, or when men in dresses started showing up in the Ladies' Rooms. Face it, everything that feels alive dies when fairness trumps freedom, like a motorcycle hitting a guard rail at 90 mph. Fuck fair—put it all back like it was,* he might say.

Instead the ferryman stares straight forward into the fetid wind. I crawl closer until my nose is pressed against his windshield. Through the glass, I press him again about why the Centralia fire still burns. He says *the fire has always burned.* I start to ask what that means, but he interrupts me. He has *no time for philosophy*; he tells me he is *not the fucking Man in the Red Hat.* At that name, all the screaming in the mine collectively ceases, its wrath replaced for just a moment by sheer silent terror, as when songbirds sense a hawk above. Then the moment passes, and the screaming resumes.

VII.

At the ferry's end is a broken down dock, followed by a steep descent. The ship hits the dock, as it always does, and catapults the passengers into the air. We all tumble down a jumble of steaming rocks. There are many bones broken in the fall, but I fall upon the bodies of others and am spared. My hands burn as I climb further down, on all fours backward, scratching at the walls to keep from falling into the abyss.

Just beyond the ferry, I am amazed to find a town that looks precisely as Centralia had in an old photo scrapbook-- Main Street with its shops full of wonders, row homes lacing the hills, the ladies' auxiliary. But in this version of Centralia, nothing quite works. While there are kitchen sinks and televisions, there is no plumbing nor electricity. There is no telephone or culture of any kind. Debates rage uncontrollably, devoid of reference or reason. Many great people, famous people, miserable and full of doubt, hang themselves from the rafters of the old movie theater.

I descend further.

VIII.

A storm arises in an instant. It pelts my body with hail and a rain of body parts and pus. I move into a cave to try to get dry. As I stumble in, the cavern grows in size, revealing hundreds of people, naked or nearly, copulating and sodomizing, groaning in desire. A girl in black stockings pinches her nipples and lifts her skirt, staring me down, pressing me close and rubbing against my thigh, kissing my neck and mouth, any mouth. And I want her too, and all the girls and women, and I have them, as hags in the guise of virgins hold my balls in their boney fingers and coo.

And the men, so many handsomely horrible men, in helpless discomfort, their dicks straight out, desperate for anyone to fuck and feel real with, as the pus rain pours down upon us in icy salty sheets. Only after weeks or years can I puke myself out from my own miserable guts. I roll out exhausted and empty, a puddle of offal and maggots, out onto the road, sticky and spent.

IX.

The rain is putrid black bile by now, and I am forced to seek refuge in an old weathered pub, guarded by a three-headed Mastiff. The pub is crowded from floor to ceiling with naked piles of human flesh, and tables groaning under the weight of roasted geese and enormous fried perogies, meat pies and mushy peas. They yell for still more food, and a full-sized roasted hog arrives, which they devour, bones, spit, and all. When the food comes too slowly, they gnaw on each other's arms and legs, such that they become just small heads and massive bodies, like engorged wood ticks.

I start eating too, eating and eating until food is just pouring down my throat, making me gag, as from a garden hose, swallowing, swallowing. No one looks up, having been there too long, chewing in the blue light, pausing only occasionally to gulp down handfuls of opiates and antacids, shaking hundreds of pills out of jars and pouring them down their gullets like pelicans. The smell of that place and those bodies force me back out into the ammonia rain, but it is own body that smells, and the odor follows me like a bad spirit as I flee.

X.

There is an old Hockey arena, and I duck inside. The ice is long gone. Demons fill the stands and cheer as masked contestants stand on stilts, armed with rifles, playing

paintball with real bullets. They scream bloody murder at any slight. It is winner take all. Everyone desperately tries to win the game through the manipulation and encroachment of everyone around them. And despite myself, I do too; I do too.

It is getting harder to walk. My burnt toes break off like putrid blackened French fries. The road is hardly more than a path by now, wandering down the narrowing spiral. I keep my back against the steep canyon wall, which is getting hotter and hotter, and the rubber soles of my shoes are beginning to burn and melt on the soles of my feet.

I come to a crowded slave market, the chattel shuffling to the auction block in manacles. A colossal fist fight breaks among the bidders as they jostle for the best property, fondling the merchandise, pulling their mouths open with forceps to check for good teeth and gums, feeling the bellies and breasts of the women for potential dividends, cursing each other, screaming wrathfully, while hatred gurgles in the dark blood of the harbor. Beyond the market, beyond the Baptist church, bystanders watch from within burning tombs, screaming blasphemies and hurling their feces at anyone in range. Furies dip ladles into the burning fat, pouring it on the heads of their enemies again and again. I crawl over them to move forward.

XI.

I slide down a fecal canal for thousands of miles, until I come to the top of a sheer granite cliff. Monsters troll along the cliff, grifting; they smile and offer rides to the valley below on their backs free of charge. But as they swing out over the cliffs, their smiles turn malicious, and they drop their passengers, just to watch them fall.

I fall through time and space. I land in a funnel-shaped amphitheater roaring with flames. My skin is melting, betraying my simmering bones. I can only report what I see; I am still not sure what is right. I may have been drugged; my metaphors stray like

wounded birds; I may have drugged myself; I do not remember. A large neon sign identifies the place as heaven. That is almost certainly a lie, but it is hard to tell. Thousands of Evangelists roam the room, working miracles on eager supplicants. Agnostics in union suits stand with their heads entirely in the ground, their asses tickled by a hellish itch, their feet burning. Fortune tellers roll Atheist corpses for change. My skin tears and peels off in black charcoal chunks, as ravens return again and again to peck at my eyes.

XII.

I fall further into the funnel, thousands of miles down, fire all around me, searing away my fingers and penis, the sac of my balls shriveled to charred paper. The funnel becomes quite tight, and as my body squeezes through it, my feet feel a new sensation- at first like fire but then no-- Arctic cold. I drop onto a barren tundra. A putrid salty slush fills my wounds and hardens around me.

Across the tundra, I see the Man in the Red Hat. His whole body is yellow, red and black from years of struggle, his face eclipsed by a loathsome scowl. His wings are barely feathered stubs now, from years of beating desperately against the ice. He weeps from six eyes. I try to move away from him, but cannot, nor can I walk toward him. *Traitor!* I scream, but he says nothing, and all I hear is the echo of my own desperation. Does he smile? I cry for sixty years or more until I have no voice box and no tear ducts and no heart. Our heads become as one in a frozen hole, chewing on each other's necks, our blood mixing in an icy stalemate.

XIII.

I know I do not belong here, so far down. My arms are far too weak to strangle the Man in the Red Hat, and in the end, I can only flail and flee backward, in slow motion, first pulling my jaws from his neck, spitting out bloody pieces of yellow hair and putrid flesh. Over months and months of effort, I wrench each limb from the muck of ice and shit, first arms, one at a time, then legs, one at a time, finally crawling backward for miles and miles to get back to the stone funnel.

As I squeeze back up through the funnel, I hear serpents in the rocks all about me. I have to get out and file my article. It will soon be Easter Sunday, and people everywhere will open their *Reading Eagle* to read my story of the why Centralia still burns. That is the story or not the story or whatever it is. I will be the by-line; reborn.

I crawl and climb, ignoring the lies of the false and malicious, back through the endless wars and senseless violence, past the Piss Christ, through the Jim Crow laws, past the Sunday School fondlers, past the grinning frat boys who spike the punch, all the way back to the river.

XIV.

As I arrive at the ferry dock, I see Ohara on the other side. He's brought his father, a country doctor, to tend my wounds. He yells to me that if I just write down what I see, I will be okay. But I am not sure what I see. Too much has happened; everything is different, even vision.

I wave the ferryman off. I can go no further. I will not make it back to Reading, not even to Pottsville. My legs are stumps, and I no longer have a face. Further, I have

come to love searing what is left of my skeletal hands in the burning river, just to feel my own rage. It feels alive, like a young animal.

So, I do not file the story in time, and Easter never comes that year. Nor the next, nor the next. I miss Virgil, but I stay. This here is my story, just below my own gluttony in its depravity: I know WHY the Great Centralia Coal Fire still rages; it rages for freedom. One becomes accustomed to the screaming.



El Gato Amarillo

1.

Larry's ex-wife Elizabeth had graciously agreed to forego alimony for exactly one year, while Larry followed his dream of being a writer. If it did not work out, he would need to get back to legal work, that was the deal. Honestly, it was not about the money for Elizabeth. She had returned to the workforce and liked her job at the bank. It had only been eight months, and already there was talk of a promotion to Assistant Manager. She just wanted Larry to work at *something, anything* to keep him from floundering, even if he was nearing retirement age. She knew too much freedom was not always a blessing, especially for Larry.

"Look, Larry, it's just not healthy for you to just sit around and drink all day," Elizabeth complained.

"I don't sit around and drink all day. I only drink at night, like William Styron," he said.

"Oh? How did that work out for him then?" she challenged.

"Pretty well, I'd say. Styron won the Pulitzer Prize for literature."

"No, I mean his mental state, his terrible depression."

"That only happened later in his life. Most of his life, he was actually very happy," Larry insisted.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "If you don't want to be an M&A lawyer anymore, that's fine. Use your writing to explore yourself," she advised, "to find a new direction." This kind of new-age drivel annoyed Larry immensely, but he was glad to take a sabbatical.

Now the year was nearly up though, and he had little to show for it; a short story here and there, but nothing published or even publishable. Elizabeth thought his negative attitude might be the problem. She gave Larry a copy of *The Secret* and also ordered the workbook for him, but he just could not master the *Laws of Attraction*. He increasingly had trouble visualizing success at all. He was blocked. Something had to give. So, when Larry's friend recommended a quiet Air-BNB in Costa Rica, Larry booked a two-week stay. He hoped to find a quiet place where he could sit and think and read and work in peace. Elizabeth told her friends she was just glad he got off his sorry ass for once.

2.

Larry decided to treat himself to two days of healthy relaxation at a spa before getting down to the hard work of drafting his novel in Nicoya. The tropical hotel property took his breath away, with an endless mountaintop view, a lush rolling valley below, and the tall volcano in the distance. He thought it must be fate when he learned from the bellman that there was a writers' workshop going on during his stay. *What were the odds of that?*

Everyone working at the resort welcomed him, warmly introducing themselves by name wherever he went, shaking his hand like he had won something. *How can they be so accommodating*, he wondered. *How depressing to be so cheerful all the time.*

Larry looked online and learned it was an Afro-Caribbean writers conference. Most of these writers had American accents, though a couple of them sounded Jamaican or something like that. Larry counted seven women and one man; *estrogen overload at writer's conferences must be a universal truth*, he thought. *What motivates people to*

come to these things at all, he wondered. *A tedious chore to come all this way, to have to read everyone else's drivel and to try to think of something charitable to say.* He mused about what kind of stories the quiet man in the white V-neck t-shirt, golf shorts, and sockless loafers wrote, or if maybe he was just a supportive partner tagging along.

The Afro-Caribbean women lounged by the pool or in the air-conditioned lobby, some with laptops, others writing feverishly in slim notebooks. Several wore a full array of African finery, complete with tall headscarves in tribal prints that matched their flowing dresses

Instead of going to the yoga class, Larry drank a good portion of a bottle of duty-free Port and sat on his balcony, thinking about what he might say to the writers' group, if asked, about the authors he knew and loved.

He thought he could score at least some points for mentioning Junot Diaz, that book by him, what was it, *This is How You Lose Her*, an amusing book, as he recalled. *Should he mention he met Colson Whitehead? Well, saw him speak, but anyway he's probably too American.* Larry remembered a movie that his ex-wife Elizabeth had dragged him to, about some Puerto Rican kids who felt like animals; a Puerto Rican guy wrote the book, *We the Animals*, *that's it*, but his name escaped Larry. He refused to look it up on his phone; he hated having to do research all the time, especially when he was drinking, and he did not want to become distracted by his phone anyway, so he turned it off and put it away before going to dinner.

Larry sat silently at a small café table next to the long table of Afro-Caribbean writers, wishing he had brought his phone. He swirled gin around the tall cone of his martini glass, looking out at the sky, as if contemplating the vast universe, but in reality,

he felt a bit trapped. The tiny dining area made Larry uncomfortable, and there really was no way to avoid eavesdropping. One of the Jamaican-sounding women told a story of how she foresaw Princess Diana's death late one night on a beach in Cuba, and Larry wondered if there might be a short story in that. He followed their banter, but did not jump in.

In the twilight, he noticed another group of people just outside the dining area, past the pool, hand trimming the grass with scissors. No wonder this place looks like Eden, he thought; it has more landscapers than guests. That made him anxious, though. He did not like to see them skulking about while he was eating his dinner. *Couldn't they do it at another time?*

Larry went back to his room. *Thank God there's no tv*, he thought, but then again there was nothing else to do. He wished he had a joint. It was too late to start writing, so he finished the bottle of port and soon was asleep.

The next morning, Larry woke up still anxious about being at the resort: it was too claustrophobic; overly hospitable in some ways. He checked out a day early. The front desk clerk smiled broadly as he gave Larry a complicated guest feedback form. The form asked for details on which employees gave outstanding service, specifically by name, and how much to tip each one. This was a nearly impossible task for Larry. He wished he had paid better attention when they first introduced themselves; that was the critical moment to make up some kind of mnemonic device, like Betty Big Tits or Marcello Mustache. But in most cases, he did not catch names even long enough to invent a suitable image.

Larry filled out the few names he remembered, and gave each a little more than maybe deserved; he knew they would talk. Not recalling the bellman's name, he ducked out a side exit carrying his own bags, threw them in the back seat of his car, and headed for the ferry to Nicoya.

3.

On the ferry to Nicoya, there were many families, both local and international. While adults wagon-trained around tables to secure for the journey, the children wandered, crossing international borders readily; engaging with other children even if they had no shared language; with adult parents often falling in line behind them. Dogs did the same, roving ambassadors establishing diplomatic relations for their owners, which often led to meaningful conversations. *I am glad I don't have a dog*, thought Larry.

Suddenly, a brilliant yellow bikini caught Larry's eye. He was shocked to observe the stout woman with flaxen bleach-blond hair. She could not have been younger than Larry. She was telling a loud story in Spanish to a gathered crowd of strangers as if they were her extended family. When she laughed, her whole body shook, and her immense naked brown belly jiggled and bobbed up between her bikini top and bottom. It was difficult for Larry not to stare. From her expressions and the way some of the ladies covered their mouths giggling, he guessed it was a bawdy story. She was completely unselfconscious. *What would it be like, Larry wondered, to live so shamelessly?*

4.

On the ride to Cobano, the SUV shifted and jolted over dusty treacherous terrain, in some places hardly a road at all. Dirt and dust from passing cars tinted the windows and pulled all the color from the lush greenery around the road, staining everything sienna brown. Crews of men in green uniforms along the way fought the crumbling clay

and mud, trying to bring nature to at least a draw for a short time before the rainy season returned and wiped all their progress away.

By the time Larry found his destination, it was nearly dark. An open white wooden gate marked the driveway. He drove in between two identical brilliant yellow houses, side by side, each with raw Maduro wood columns framing wide covered porches, trimmed in white.

First as an apparition, then taking full form, a woman appeared at the top of the driveway, directing Larry's vehicle to the house on the left. Her profile sparkled in his headlights. He pulled the car into the carport, and they nodded greetings. She was a fine-looking woman, thirtyish, with taut, tanned legs, a trim frame, modest cleavage beneath her orange cover-up, and loose white cotton shorts draped on her womanly hips. Her raven black hair was pulled up carelessly into a faded green sun visor that read "Pura Vida" in tall yellow letters. Tiny curls escaped and danced on her damp neck and shoulders.

"Hola!" Larry said in his best possible Spanish accent.

"Welcome to *Los Cabanos*," she replied in perfect English. We are glad to have you as our guest. I am Sophia. I will help you get settled."

For just an instant, Larry daydreamt of Sophia bending over him, tucking him into bed, the sound of her soft breath, wisps of her hair on his face, but she handed him a tall pile of sheets and towels, and the image vanished.

Sophia showed him how to operate the air conditioners in the bedrooms and the massive ceiling fan that cooled the kitchen and seating area. The kitchen peninsula was solid teak, with an actual tree trunk supporting it, preserved in thick yellow shellac. Hot

water ran only in the shower; the washer and slop sink just outside the kitchen were fed by a garden hose. She showed Larry how to lock up at night by pulling on the door a certain way. As she did so, she leaned back into him, and her hair smelled like the ocean.

Sophia eyed the bottles of duty-free liquor through the clear plastic bag. "How can you drink that cheap shit Dominican rum?" she mocked.

"Ha! It sure was cheap!" he replied excitedly, then felt foolish. "Would you like some?" he asked, surprising himself.

"I see you bought *Maker's Mark* too. I'll have a bourbon on the rocks with a splash of soda."

Cracking the bottle open, Larry made them both a double, hanging on Sophia's every word as she described the various beaches Larry should visit during his stay.

"If you take the water taxi from Montezuma, there are nice beach chairs to rent on Tortugas Island... It is named for the turtles," she explained. Larry pictured Sophia nearly naked on the beach, astride a giant tortoise. "Maybe you will see a female laying her eggs," she added. Larry blushed.

"Well, I won't be out chasing turtles; I came here to work!" said Larry convincingly.

Sophia turned to him before leaving, "Don't be concerned if you see a man outside in the middle of the night-- a Nico comes to trim the garden and water the plants," Sophia explained.

That's what they should have done at the spa, Larry thought. "Nico? You mean like Velvet Underground Nico?"

“Nicaraguan!” she explained, and he wondered if it was a slur, but had heard Costa Ricans refer to themselves as “Ticos” proudly, so who knew. “Nico” seems riskier, being an N-word and all that, so he was not sure. Perhaps best to just stick to “Amigo” for now, he thought.

Sophia said goodnight and sashayed away, the highball glass held high in her hand, gliding effortlessly across the drive, and into the night. Larry had a nightcap out on the patio, laying in the hammock, thinking about Sophia, thinking about the Ticos, and the Nicos, wondering if Dominicans would be Domicos or Dominicos, certain Mexicans were not Mex-icos, and not wanting to offend anyone, drifting into slumber he thought, Buenos Noches, Amigos, Buenos Noches.

5.

Larry got up early the next morning and made a full pot of strong coffee. He brought his steaming cup out to the patio. He set out his notebook and his favorite pen. He paused to observe his lush surroundings. The walls of the villa were canary yellow. Hummingbirds sipped from lush orange flowers. He could hear the sounds of neighborhood children playing and laughing all around, but invisible through the dense foliage between the properties.

He opened his laptop, briefly checking the news on CNN. Then he refreshed his coffee, this time with a splash of bourbon, *why not?* He made himself toast and jelly. He dropped a bit of jam, and watched breathlessly as a thousand tiny ants converge as a single organism on the tiled patio. He laid the big white cotton hammock strung between posts of the porch, tentatively swinging in it, pushing with one foot on the ground, but a gardener walked by just then, and he felt silly, so he moved his stuff inside.

He sat at the kitchen counter, absent-mindedly picking at some sticky travel dust in his nose when a small dark-haired girl holding a stuffed penguin suddenly appeared at his doorstep.

“Hola, Amigo!” he ventured.

“Oh, you speak Spanish too?” the young girl replied, her eyes brightening, “So do I!” Larry laughed at that, and then they both laughed. Then she introduced herself properly: “I am Ava,” which she pronounced like *lava*, “Ava Ross. My Uncle Dave owns your house, and my Mommy owns our house,” she explained.

She was adorably cute, but even at that moment, Larry hoped she would not be a nuisance while he was trying to write. She wore a faded floral tank top, modest yellow shorts, and little gold sandals fit for Midas, which matched her tiny gold stud earrings, flickering in the raven black of her loopy long curls. He recognized Sophia in her daughter’s face. She had the same sloping nose, the same long eyelashes, and a smile that pulled up high at the edges into perfect dimples on her full sun-kissed cheeks.

Something colorful protruded from the elastic of Ava’s shorts. Larry asked her what it was. She pulled out a roughly rounded rectangle cut from packaging cardboard, printed in color on one side; corrugated brown on the other. She let Larry examine the two My Little Pony pictures on the colorful side, then pulled the “phone” sharply away.

“It’s a cell phone,” she said, “Wait.” Ava held one hand up as if to signal Larry to stop in traffic, while the other hand whipped the cardboard object up to her ear. She walked away from him as he imagined Elizabeth might, rising from a choice table at the Four Seasons, to take an urgent call. After a hushed yet animated conversation, Ava returned and put the “phone” back in her waist belt. She waited for Larry to react.

He bit. "Who was that on the phone?" he asked.

"It is not a real phone," she deadpanned.

He laughed. "I can tell you are creative! You must be good at school! What grade are you in?" guessing second or so.

"I don't go to school," she said flatly. *Oh shit*, Larry thought, not meaning to embarrass her; *life is so unfair to third world children*.

"I'm going to kindergarten in North Carolina this year," she explained.

"Oh, I thought you lived here!" replied Larry, relieved.

"No we just came since Christmas." Then both were quiet for a moment.

"Was Santa good to you at Christmas?" he asked, to fill the silence.

"Yes, Santa brought me two Barbies, a big one and a little one. The bigger one can talk when you pull a string."

"Is that right? Do you talk to Barbie then?" Larry asked, gamely.

Ava paused. "No. It is the fake toy Barbie; not the real one. And he used the same wrapping paper as my Mom."

"Who did?"

"Santa Claus"

"Wow, that is amazing."

"Yes, the exact same one. I also got money for my tooth."

"Really?"

"Yes. I was eating tomatoes and sugar on bread, and I felt my tooth move, and it fell in my lap."

"That must have been surprising! Did the tooth fairy bring you money?"

"No. My Mom put a dollar under my pillow while I was still awake."

"Oh, I see." Another long silence.

"I am a magician too, you know," Ava said. "I can make Peso disappear," she announced, as if on stage.

"Peso?"

"The penguin. The penguin's name is Peso. He is a doctor."

"The penguin is a doctor?"

"Yes, I told you!" said Ava emphatically, one hand on her hip, the other empty palm held up, as if it to explain that this was obvious. Then she paused.

"I have a yellow cat named Maya but I am not sure she knows I am here," she said, clearly concerned.

"I'll keep my eyes out for Maya," he promised, chuckling to himself.

"You won't miss her," Ava insisted. "She's as yellow as that wall."

It was getting to be late morning, and he was starting to get stir crazy.

"I am going to town to get lunch, Ava. I'll see you later," he said.

She skipped off smiling without another word, the penguin bouncing along in tow.

6.

Larry ordered a latte and a scone at a verdant outdoor cafe in Santa Teresa. He watched the waitresses, ponytails bouncing, tattoos revealing themselves as they stretched across the counter to serve fresh fruit cups and crisp baguettes.

Sophia had recommended a hike to the scenic waterfalls near Malpais. He parked in the lower lot and paid an attendant \$2 to watch his car.

The trail moved up along a rocky stream in a deep chasm, and at times the footing was quite tricky. He almost fell into the creek a few times, and his Tevas slipped back and forth on the mossy stream bed. Finally, he arrived at a beautiful waterfall, the first of three, Sophia had explained, which towered above him, bringing down a torrent of clear fresh water from one hundred feet above. There were dozens of other people there, all much younger than himself, most quite buff, he noted.

Larry looked up the falls and spied a figure climbing on a near cliff face, a woman. Even from a distance, he could see she had entirely too perfect a body in its proportions. She wore a strapless horizontal striped black and white one-piece, which hugged her narrow waist. She was crab-walking backward barefoot, stretching her impossibly long legs one after the other to find her next step, extending her legs and feet fully, as if she were in heels. As she came down toward Larry, he tried not to stare at her impossible figure silhouetted by the sky, her chin tucked to her chest, peering down between her breasts to assess the terrain below, while her feet and hands scurried ably to find roots and rocks. At times she would seem to reach a dead-end, with nothing to grab, but then reaching above her head, she caught what looked like ropes or vines, and swung out into the air, sailing a perfect Tarzan arc, and landing perfectly, like a cat on all fours, before resuming her downward descent.

With horror, Larry realized that she was on the path he needed to take, and he froze. It was terrifyingly steep. The woman called to him as she drew closer: "Try it! It is not so bad! Come on up! We must do the things we think we cannot do!" Larry clung to a root and pretended to adjust the strap of his shoe, moving aside as the long-limbed

goddess crab-walked past. He waited until she was entirely out of sight, then turned back down. He could not do it. He stumbled back to the parking lot.

“Which falls did you like best?” the cheerful parking attendant asked.

“The bottom one,” Larry replied weakly.

7.

Larry drove to the famous Banana Beach. It seemed all the young men had six-pack abs and sun-bleached hair, while the girls were fiercely beautiful, some tethered to surfboards with the ocean dripping off their wet skin, others crouched like tigers in the jungle on wide red four-wheelers. As yet unblemished by the throes of life, soccer stars as children, no doubt, now here on their own at the center of the universe of cool. They were so breathtaking, it literally created a lump in Larry’s chest like heartburn, and he had to look away. He made his way back to the car, still with that thick and lonesome heaviness in his chest, and a sense that he did not belong anywhere. “It is too late for me for all this,” he thought. “I am sixty years old for Chrissake! Jesus!”

8.

When he got back to the villa, disheartened, he decided to spend a little time just free-writing and doodling. *Make a shitty first draft* he told himself, just trying to get back into the rhythm of writing, sitting on the couch with a notepad on his lap.

As he finished doodling a picture of himself sitting alone on Banana Beach, he glanced up and looked outside the screen door. For a moment, he could swear he saw dancing lights out on the lawn. Then Ava was suddenly on the patio, dressed all in pink, skipping in a circle, in pink light-up sneakers, a stream of rainbow-colored feathers dancing like a horse’s tail behind her, the handle of a feather duster between her knees.

"May I come in?" she asked, too polite for him to refuse.

"Well. All right then," Larry muttered, "as long as your mother knows."

"She knows. She says not to bother you, but I can come to say hello." She leaned the feather duster near the door, placing it just so as if hitching a horse to a post. Then she came in and asked Larry what he was doing. He picked up the notepad and showed her the doodle of him alone at the beach, which she liked. She wanted to see more.

"I can draw too, you know!" she said, climbing up to sit next to him on the couch, leaning against his arm. She picked up his pencil and showed him she could write her name and several other letters and numbers she knew.

"Make something for your mom," Larry suggested, thinking about Sophia's eyes again for a moment. Ava drew a large heart shape, and then an arrow through it.

Ava asked Larry if he had any kids. "Just grown ones," he replied. Then he showed her Facebook pictures on his phone of his daughter Katy and son Max, then his ex-wife and her five sisters, naming each one, explaining who was who. Ava listened attentively. He showed her Christmas pictures, the grand meal they had made, and Elizabeth wearing a funny hat, Larry and his daughter laughing in the background. *Why did I keep that picture*, he wondered.

Suddenly, the shadow of a man appeared in the porch light beyond the screen door, a Caucasian man, His deep Southern drawl took Larry by surprise.

"Good-evenin'," he said, "Excuse me. Sorry to bother you, but is my daughter Ava here? I'm her father, Jason Ross, from next door; I think you met my wife Sophia yesterday if I'm not mistaken. Again, I am sorry to bother you."

“Of course! Yes, she’s here! I am Larry! Please come on in!” Larry replied, too enthusiastically, jumping vertically off the couch. Thirty or so, with close-cropped sandy hair, wearing a white golf shirt, and cotton cargo shorts, Jason did not seem agitated. Larry offered him a drink.

“No, thank you, Larry. Ava, it’s time to come home and get dressed for bed,” he said, with no malice, Larry could detect, “Mama’s waitin’.”

“I made this drawing for her,” she said, holding one of them up for him to see. He looked at the drawing intently, unhurriedly, giving it his full attention.

“I think she is gonna love this, Ava!” he exclaimed, quite sweetly and genuinely. With that, they all said goodnight. Ava reached up for Jason’s big hand, swung a leg over the feather duster, and skipped off at his side, tiny lights dancing behind.

Unexpectedly, Larry was jealous of this perfect little family and their seemingly effortless bliss across the drive. All his life, Larry had thrown himself into his work. “Divide and conquer!” he would say to Elizabeth, by which he meant she should take the kids somewhere while he worked. He knew he had missed some things; maybe some essential things. He sat in the moonlight, wondering if it would have been different had he been around more.

Then he shook it off; he had to put that kind of negativity out of his mind. Returning to the couch, where he found a note left that read, “I LOVE YOU AVA.” Sheepishly, he stuck it on the refrigerator before heading for bed.

He had trouble sleeping, uncomfortable about the intimacy of the whole trip, about being alone, on his own, but never really being able to be alone the right way. He was disappointed to have strong feelings arise when he was trying to have no feelings at

all; he was trying to get away from feelings; to regain his privacy, to listen to his inner literary voice. *I came here to be alone and work on my writing in private*, he thought, *not get involved in anyone else's life, much less a family with a four-year-old child!*

9.

Larry woke up early, and decided to drive down to the farmer's market in Montezuma for fresh vegetables and certain other necessities, before settling down to write.

The weekly market took place in a decaying children's park in the middle of town. Sounds of many languages rang through the diminutive stone courtyard: Spanish, English, German, French, and Italian. Larry had been told to ask for a guy named One-Eyed Greg, who was not hard to find among the dozen or so young merchants selling crafted necklaces, vegetables, coconut smoothies, and kitchen knives. Larry had to wait while One-Eyed Greg went to get a bag of weed for him, so he sat on a stone wall in the shade and watched the world go by.

The merchants of the market were veterans of cool, a decade or so older than the newly drafted Banana Beach kids, maybe 30ish, like Jason and Sophia, who had largely hung up their surfboards, most now with toddlers and babies. This was the rising commercial class of the Nicoya Peninsula. They reminded Larry of the slightly older hippies he saw around Woodstock, New York in the 1970s as a teenager-- resourceful, willing to live simply, to cut corners, and, if necessary, to work hard, all to have a great family life, a seemingly radical notion at the time.

One-eyed Greg finally came through. Larry paid him in US dollars and got some rolling papers at the supermarket. Driving back to the villa, he smoked a huge joint and

relaxed as the pot-holed roads became a giant video game. When he hit a big one, he would laugh out loud and exclaim, “I found it!” or “That’s why we rent’em!” barely slowing down as he barreled along.

10.

On the way home he bought a brownie mix. There was no cake pan, only a cupcake pan, so he made pot brownie cupcakes. He ate one of the cupcakes while it was still hot. It was delicious, deep rich dark chocolate, with just a hint of damp hay or moldy oregano in the back note. He poured a cup of tea, opened his notebook, and stared at the blank page a good long while. After a while, Ava appeared.

“May I please come in?”

Choking down the brownie he agreed “Sure, come on in Ava!” quickly closing the fridge.

“What are you doing? Why are you inside? I thought maybe you saw the yellow cat and got scared or something.”

“No, I don’t think I saw her today,” Larry said absently, as she stepped into the bright kitchen.

“Oh, you’d know it if you did.” She looked at the black notebook on the kitchen table. “Is that a school book?” she asked.

“No, not a school book exactly; it is a kind of journal. I am trying to write a book, my first novel.”

“May I see it?” she asked, again too polite to refuse. She opened the notebook and flipped through the empty pages.

“There’s not much in here. Are you sure it’s a book?”

“Well, it’s not a whole book yet, I am still working on it,” he replied, trying not to be defensive. “I am trying to concentrate on it tonight,” he added, more crossly than he intended, but still hoping she would take the hint.

“The yellow cat could help you with that,” she offered.

“What on earth do you mean?” he asked,

“She is a remover of icicles.”

“A what?”

“A—Re—Mo—Ver—Of—I—Ci--Cles,” she said slowly, emphasizing each syllable, looking deep into his eyes. “A--Do—When---Day.”

“Ava!” Sophia called from across the drive. Ava climbed down from the chair on her own.

“Coming!” she yelled, heading for the door, before turning back to me.

“Sometimes she disappears though,” she said sadly. Larry watched the tiny lights on her sneakers bounce across the drive, back to Sophia and Jason, into the night.

I will not be able to sleep, he thought. *It’s all so unsettling*. He decided he would pull an all-nighter, writing on the porch under the yellow bug light. He would free write, not trying to control it, just trying to let it flow and getting lost in it. He ate another brownie. He rested on the hammock under the stars, and he grew calm again, finally genuinely relaxing.

11.

It was a new moon, and Larry keenly felt the darkness all around his spot-lit porch. The air seemed to cool. While noise bothered him everywhere else, here, it fell into the background like traffic noise for a city kid, comforting in its relentless din; hypnotic in its evolving symphony of sounds.

As he gazed absentmindedly out into the yard, Larry noticed a hint of a yellow glow, just around the corner of the patio. The light grew, and he shivered in fright. In a flash, a small figment formed just beyond the edge of the porch. He squinted as a glowing canary-yellow kitten of an impossibly brilliant hue lit up the entire ceiling of the porch. Blinded, Larry covered his eyes and froze as the cat slowly approached him, rubbing against his leg. As his eyes adjusted, Larry leaned off the hammock and held his hand over the glowing cat. As he did, the cat moved with the rhythm of his hand and the rocking hammock, always an inch or so from his palm. As he pet the air above the cat, he felt its young Reiki energy, just as Elizabeth had described, never quite touching it, occasionally slapped gently by its tail; feeling the power coming off her arching back, at each stroke, stretching out longer and further.

Larry knew he had to capture the cat somehow and bring it to Ava. He slowly reached for a beach towel on the clothesline and threw it over the cat, but it was far too quick for him. The cat lunged away and darted for the road through the open gate. Larry followed at a full run.

The cat dashed down the road, across the peninsula, toward Malpais. Larry followed as fast as he could, running through the cattle ranches and teak farms, past the Brewery and the Yoga retreat. He recognized the lower parking lot of the waterfall, as the

cat darted from the road and scrambled upstream. Following the yellow light, with great effort, hopping from rock to rock, Larry was able to follow the cat to the first waterfall. Even with a new moon, in the glow of the cat, he could see the silhouette of the tall cliffs before him. The cat sat silently on a lower ledge, purring loudly, staring at him through glassy green eyes. Then it turned and began to make its way up the cliff to the next Falls.

“No, not that!” Larry cried aloud, “I cannot go up that cliff!” Yet a voice deep inside vowed not to retreat as the cat bounded upward, scurrying up the hill, over thick vines and large boulders. The yellow light got smaller and smaller, and then the Cat disappeared completely, and all was black.

Darkness banished even his own reflection in the pool of the falls. Larry was totally blind and alone. He was surprised at that moment how much he missed his ex-wife and his children and wondered if they missed him too, but knew they probably did not. They had lives of their own now, while Larry had no one. At that moment, he understood why. He knew the truth: he was a loser; he was the saddest specimen of a man that had ever tried to climb a waterfall or write novel. He felt deep shame. *My priorities in life have been all wrong, and now it is too late to fix.* He could not bear even to examine his wasted life; *all the shit he put Elizabeth through; all the unkept promises!* He could not go backward; not back to the law firm, not even back to the parking lot; it was too late for that. He had to move forward, even if empowered only by his own self-loathing.

He walked like a zombie through the darkness, his fingers extended on numb hands until he touched the cliff face. He found a rock outcropping above his head and pulled himself higher. Then he found a tree root he could step on, and then another, and

another. He climbed and climbed, cautious to test each root before pulling his weight further up the cliff.

He knew which way to go from watching Barbie the day before, scrambling over the roots and rocks. He tried to keep his center of gravity as close to the cliff face as possible. When he came to a point where there were no roots to grab, he knew to reach above his head, where he found a rope. He could feel it was an old weathered rope, the outer core so worn that only the long strands of white nylon from within the cord remained. He was sure no one of his girth had ever tested it, and it was almost certain death if it broke, but no matter; to not go would be worse still: “We must do the things we cannot do,” the real Barbie had said.

With that, he grabbed the rope and launched himself out into the air. For what seemed like an eternity he was flying like a bird, before he crashed face-first into the cliff. Then he was slipping, madly grabbing for vines. Just before he was pitched off the cliff, his foot found purchase on a small rock outcropping, and he grabbed a tree root with both hands to catch his fall. Then he resumed his ascent, past the second falls, and then the third. When he finally found the swinging bridge at the top, he knew he had made it. He felt a quiet euphoria unlike any he had never known. He paused at the summit, hand on his knees, his panting breath forming soft clouds in the air of dawn. He had made it. He was alive. He could begin again.

As he reached the road above the falls, he looked up and gasped at the silhouette of a billboard advertising the Pediatrician’s office across the way: a gaily painted penguin wearing a stethoscope. A real doctor, he thought; he should have known. Not having even a cardboard phone to try to call anyone, he walked all the way home across the

green peninsula, and back through the big white gate. Exhausted, he fell back into the hammock.

12.

When he awoke, Larry took a hot shower and changed. His plan was to make tea, and then sit out in the morning dew, stone sober, listening to every sound, taking the world in, waiting for Ava to wake up and return to him, to tell her he understood now about Maya, about the real Barbie, about the Penguin Doctor, and what really mattered. But when he got outside, Jason's Toyota truck was gone. There was a Post-it note from Sophia stuck on one of the Maduro columns of the patio:

Dear Larry:

We unexpectedly have some business to attend to back in NC. It was great to meet you! My mother will be by to clean our place; I think you will get a kick out of her.

Pura Vida, Sophia Ross

PS: Ava was very concerned about Maya the yellow cat, and told me to ask you to take care of her, LOL

Larry sat down awhile, deflated. *So that was that. The departure was a bit abrupt, was it not? Why would they need to leave so quickly?* Curious, he walked over

to the other house. The door was unlocked, and he let himself in. The house was exactly the same as his, with all the same cabinets and furnishings. Or rather, it was exactly opposite his, a mirror image of his house facing theirs. He sat at the kitchen counter for a time, picturing his reflection in the house across the driveway, and the way that opposites attract, then picturing Ava, Sophia, and Jason there, doing the same. He got a little teary-eyed and went back to his own house to wash his face in the slop sink. Then he drove to the Super Mercado to buy cat food and another brownie mix.

13.

Later that day, as Larry was napping, he was awakened by a solid knock on his door. Through the screen, he was surprised to see the flaxen-haired woman from the ferry, the shameless one with the tremendous belly, wearing the same fluorescent yellow bikini and flip flops, and nothing else, her skin bronzed to rough leather. He invited her in. It was Sophia's mother, Maya. She spoke a mile a minute, and Larry could not make heads or tails of anything she said. But as she kept talking, and Larry felt like he understood much of her body language. Using a Spanish dictionary, he tried to tell her about his adventure with "El Gato Amarillo." She nodded knowingly as if she had heard the story before. "Si, entiende! Duende," she said, smiling knowingly.

She had sparkling deep brown eyes, and her self-confidence was mesmerizing. Her belly was not nearly as big as he remembered. Even though their best conversations were entirely pantomime, they hit it off. She felt familiar to him; he could see where Ava got her full cheeks and her winning smile. It turned out that she, too, liked bourbon, but was not one to turn up her nose at "cheap shit rum" either. He ended up booking *Los Cabanos* for the rest of the season. He helped Maya build a small hen house out back

from scrap wood and chicken wire. They both liked feeding the hens and gathering eggs for breakfast each morning.

Once he got acclimated, Larry stopped cutting his hair, and only put a shirt on to go into town. Some evenings, Maya would come by and sit with him at the kitchen counter, while the cat stretched out on the sofa. They might share a blender of Dark and Stormys and pore over Facebook pictures of Ava that Sophia had posted: her first day of Pre-K, her fantastic artwork, her award-winning science project about cell phones.

14.

Elizabeth thought she was doing Larry a big favor when she called him to tell him about her engagement, coincidentally to another M&A lawyer, so she no would longer need his alimony support. Larry told her he too was “dating.” and told her about Maya, thinking she would be happy for him. He should have known Elizabeth would try to turn it into something ugly.

“Will she edit your book then?” she inquired slyly.

"No, of course not. Maya barely speaks any English."

“I suspected that. Does she like to drink then?" Elizabeth asked teasingly.

“What? Yes, Maya drinks, though I am not sure that has anything to do with it.”

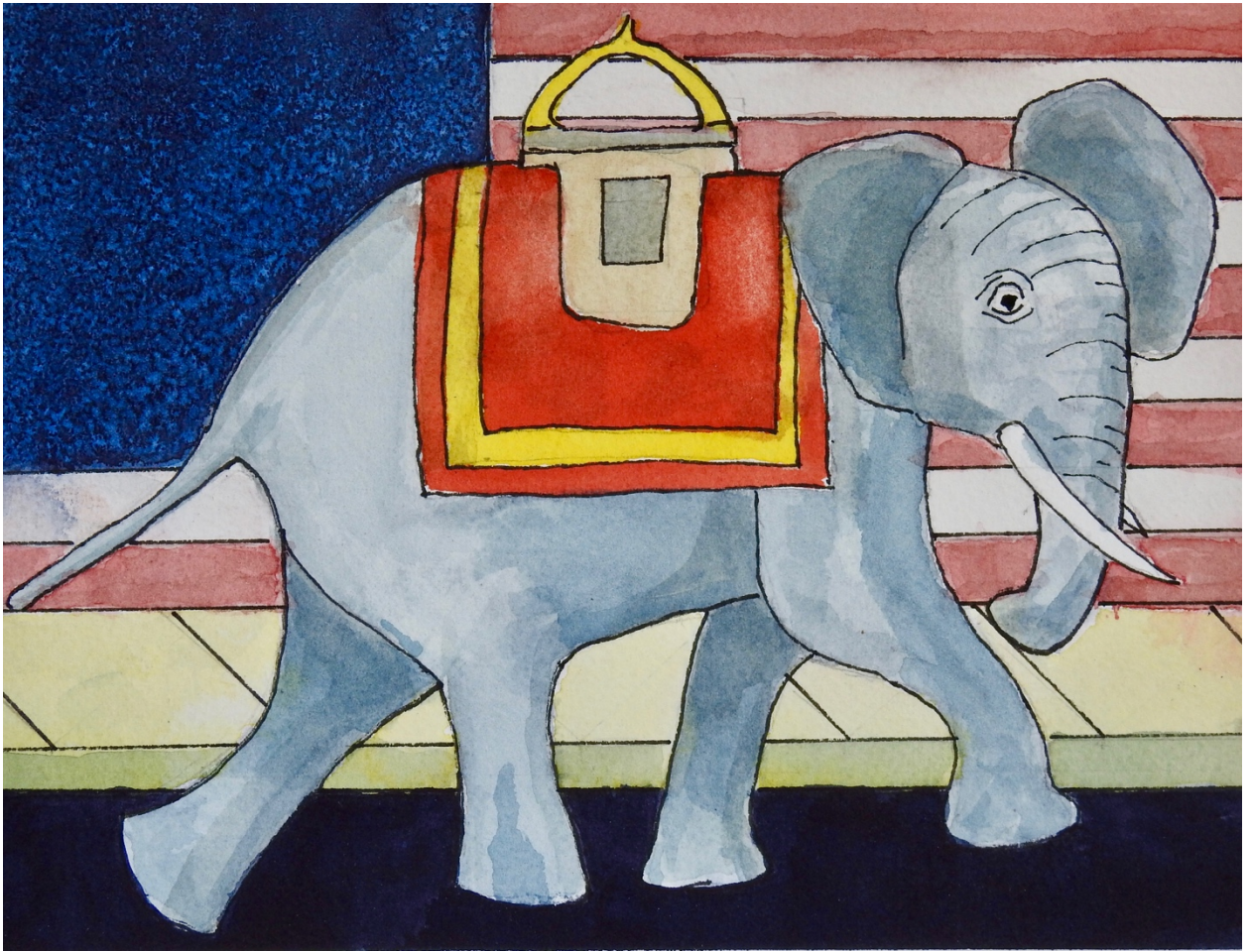
“Larry, you are the same as the day I met you: you are just a big ol’ yellow tomcat, howling in the night, prowling around with any skinny little kitty that will take you in,” she mocked, but Larry knew it was playful. He pictured her smiling, arms akimbo, cradling the phone on her shoulder. She addressed Larry as if he were there in the room with her. “Larry, I know you better than anyone. When are you going to grow up?”

“Ha!” he said, not nearly as annoyed at her as he used to be, “It is not like that Elizabeth-- not like you think. It was age-appropriate. It was nice. It, it was genuine. It, it still is!” he stammered, watching Maya shoo a chicken out of the vegetable garden.

Elizabeth did not press the point. She sincerely wished him the best before saying goodbye, as did Larry.

Occasionally, after a little too much rum, Maya and Larry made love, sometimes even in the middle of the afternoon, clumsily but tenderly, as drunken old friends sometimes do, like trying to unwrap Christmas presents wearing mittens. The sheer absurdity of it made them both giggle as Maya rearranged her bra, slapping his cheek playfully, lying together in the hammock. They genuinely liked each other. They were amiable compadres with nowhere else they needed to be.

Last Elizabeth heard, Larry was still in Costa Rica, working on his novel.



Lucy Come Home

Coen Brown, a precocious boy with thick chestnut curls and a shy winning smile, had been going to see Lucy the Elephant all his life. A quiet kid, he might clam up when strangers asked him questions, but at home, Coen was genuinely chatty.

“Lucy was very happy today,” he told his mom.

“Is that right?” Diana replied curiously. “Was she happy because it was a sunny day or because you went to see her?”

“I’m not sure, but I am sure she was happy. All the kids said so. We could just feel it.” Diana believed him and told him so; she believed both in the magic of elephants and the magic of childhood. They made up stories together of the adventures Coen one day would have with Lucy: pirate stories, escaping the circus; lifting logs to save trapped children. Coen’s smile when they made up these stories was just irresistible. Diana knew she needed to take Coen for a haircut sometime soon, but he looked so damned cute under all that hair, and she secretly hoped he would never grow up.

Lucy was a great grey elephant, with enormous white tusks, and full round eyes. She sported a massive red saddle cloth trimmed in gold, topped with an impressive Moorish howdah carriage. No ordinary elephant, rather than mere flesh and bones, Lucy was built by shipbuilders of one million custom cut pieces of wood, four tons of iron, two hundred barrels of nails, and twelve thousand square feet of tin. She stood six stories tall and weighed nearly ninety tons, her sweeping trunk anchored into a large cistern of fresh water. Lucy kept herself in shape and had her nails painted. She was a beauty to behold, inside and out, and some believed she had a soul: the soul of an African elephant.

Lucy lived quietly by the sea, and each Summer she was swarmed daily by children on the beach at the Margate shore. They played imagination games with action figures in the sand in her shadow, sheltered from the Summer sun. Families from all over the world came to visit the famous pachyderm and picnicked in the shade of her broad tin belly. They climbed up the spiral staircases in her rear legs, marveling at the great hall that hung in her belly. Then they climbed another set of stairs to her head, just to peer through her perfectly round windowed eyes out at the beautiful sea. The songs of the children filled Lucy with gladness, as they danced around her giant grey feet.

Years ago, Coen's dad Joe Brown was a musician in a popular local band and worked nights. When his Mom went to work as a teller at the bank, Coen would play with the other kids under Lucy while his Dad slept on a blanket on the beach. Now his Dad was a kitchen installer by day, a volunteer fireman when called, and a well-known citizen of Margate, so popular that he was elected to the town council without even campaigning. They lived above Hartman's Hardware on Ventnor Avenue, a few blocks away from Lucy. Now that he was nine, Coen was allowed to ride his bike with his friends to the beach where Lucy stood.

These were relatively good times for Lucy; that had not always been true. When she was just nine, her younger sister in Cape May was mortally injured in a storm and died of neglect. Only six years later, her handsome younger brother, a colossus of an elephant, twelve stories high, died at age eleven in a raging fire on Coney Island. Lucy herself was unfazed by the wind and the flooding brought by the hurricanes, as she stood up on all fours, her trunk providing the fifth support, the wind and sleet whipping around the tin of her aerodynamic hide, her tusks leaning directly into the storm. The roof of the howdah blew off from time to time, but that was quickly repaired.

On the other hand, flames terrified Lucy all her life. She knew that even one casually dropped cigarette butt could burn her wooden skeleton to ash in a heartbeat.

Over time, adults took Lucy for granted. Margate had fallen on hard times, the once grand main drag had deteriorated, and people stopped coming to see Lucy. Everyone said they loved the elephant, but there were many competing budget priorities which always seemed more urgent than addressing her many expensive maintenance issues. It was always easy to put it off for another year.

Jared Fierro, real estate developer, liked what he saw in Margate. Sure, it was a dump, but unlike his native Atlantic City, there was plenty of unexploited beachfront. He wanted to build a gated luxury condominium complex right smack on the beach in the middle of Margate. He quietly bought up contiguous parcels, including the land where Lucy stood. When he announced his development plan, no one liked the idea of a massive condo complex on the beach, but nearly everyone agreed that the town needed the construction jobs. Coen was surprised that the topic of Lucy never even came up. Local retailers mobilized and advocated for the project, citing the affluent consumers the condos would attract. It was up to the three members of the town council to decide-- Mayor Feeley, Ivy Simpson, a historian and preservationist who recently retired from Colonial Williamsburg, and Joe Brown, a local carpenter and volunteer fireman. Despite concerns about many details not yet worked out, the council approved the plan, over Ivy's strident objections.

Based on conversations with Jared, the three council members assumed Lucy would be incorporated into the final landscaping design of the condo complex. Instead, the very next day after receiving his building permit Jared announced he was going to demolish Lucy to make way for his project. No one was sure if he was bluffing; there was no need to destroy it; it just needed to be moved. Jared confided that he did not care one way or the other about the elephant, but he was confident that if people really loved Lucy, they would find a way to save her; it was not his problem. Coen was completely horrified, but his Dad told him he had a responsibility to the people of the town, and they would have to wait and see how it played out.

A group of angry volunteers came forward to try to save Lucy. After a few heated Township Council meetings on what to do, it was agreed to delay the demolition until a solution could be found, however long that took. While Ivy was pleased, Jared was livid; he had been outflanked. He started showing up at Town Council meetings and harassing the three members endlessly. He accused them of plotting to destroy Lucy. "You are doing a terrible, terrible disservice to the community, and every citizen of this town should be up in arms. First of all, you are ignoring people's needs to get construction jobs and feed their families. Mayor Touchy Feely is destroying the economy at a time when it most needs a boost. But even worse that elephant has been exposed to neglect and danger for years, without you ever doing one thing about it. Now suddenly you are the elephant's friend. But very bad people could come in here with a pack of matches and burn her down to the ground at any moment, and if it happens, or when that happens, this town council will be entirely responsible. Lucy needs to be in a different place, a safer place, inside a fence. The mayor knows this. He hates Lucy; he is an elephant killer!" he declared.

The sound bite stuck. Even people who knew it was untrue said it because it was funny, and because they really wanted the construction jobs. Jared ran for town council that Fall. Few cared for his theatrics, and no one thought he had a chance, but he continued his attacks, and in the end, the mayor was out, and Jared became the newest member of the three-member council that ran the township, joining Joe and Ivy. Because Ivy was among those who had sided with the Mayor to block Lucy's destruction, the first meeting was rather tense.

By law, the three of them needed to decide who would be the new mayor. Both Ivy and Jared wanted the top job. Joe had family commitments to balance, so he was not a candidate himself. As the swing vote, he was not sure who to pick. He liked Ivy's plan to do a proper study, apply for grants, and rally the community to save Lucy. But he also knew that would take a long time, and his neighbors really needed jobs. Both points sounded reasonable to Joe, and he did not know what to do.

When Ivy described her proposal to save Lucy, Jared dismissed it out of hand. "Look," he said, "Look, all of your studies are a complete waste of time. Nobody cares if there are snail darters living in the puddles around Lucy's feet. We have to move the elephant much, much, quicker than that so we can begin making Margate a better place again. It has to be moved immediately. That is what the people elected us to do. Your plan is a failure from the get-go."

Ivy challenged him, "Well, how would YOU move the elephant, Jared?"

"I would get the situation under control and get the elephant to move itself!" stormed Jared. Ivy was dumbstruck at his stupidity.

"Nonsense!" she replied. "It cannot move itself! It weighs ninety tons and has no locomotion!"

Jared cut her off: "You are the one that is talking nonsense, Professor Ivytower!" (that stuck too). "I'll tell you what, give me one week, and I will get that elephant to move itself off of my land, straight down Atlantic Avenue, to the town park. And then we will take care of it properly there and be sure it is no longer abused by the ex-mayor elephant killer or by anyone else sneaking into this town trying to destroy it."

Ivy knew this was preposterous. She knew a thing or two about ambulatory pachyderms, having written her honors thesis on them at Princeton. A dozen different mechanical elephants were built from the 1930s to 1950s, well after Lucy's birth in the late Nineteenth Century. Even then, every single one of them either did not walk or actually rolled on wheels incorporated into their designs from the get-go. GE had only recently produced an elephant that could actually walk, for military transport, but that was a multiyear effort, built from scratch. No one could retrofit mechanics into Lucy's wooden hull, even if the plan was to just lift her and install wheels under her feet. Impossible. What a buffoon, thought Ivy. She saw an opportunity.

"I'll tell you what Jared. How about this. We'll give you one week, and you'll have your chance to move the elephant. If you do it, I'll support you as our new mayor. If you can't move the elephant to the park within seven days, I become the mayor, and your project will have to wait until the proper studies are done as per my proposal. Fair enough?"

"Done deal!" said Jared, snickering to himself, always pleased with his incredible negotiating skills. Joe was just glad he did not need to make the decision.

So, it was agreed that if Jared could get the elephant to walk the 200 yards down Atlantic Avenue to a new spot donated by the city within seven days, they would appoint Jared mayor and also fund his *Lucy First Initiative*, which would seek, Jared explained, to restore Lucy to her former glory.

Jared had a huge canvas tarp hung over the elephant to keep out prying eyes, so Ivy monitored progress through the window of the tiled coffee shop across the street. The tarp was bigger than Lucy, and the steel tubes brought in suggested they were

building scaffolding around the elephant, perhaps to lift her and try to retrofit wheels. From her stool inside the coffee shop's plate glass window, Ivy could not see the actual construction, but she could observe what came and went. In general, she thought, not much was being delivered to the job site, and there were not enough construction workers going in and out for such a complicated undertaking. Nervous at first, by day five, Ivy was practically giggling. She began drafting her acceptance speech for her appointment as mayor, focused on healing and renewal.

Finally, the day came to move the elephant. Jared's parked his cherry red Cadillac in front of Lucy to lead the way. He invited Joe and Ivy to ride along so they could have a front row seat.

When, the tarp was removed, Ivy saw that there was indeed scaffolding around the elephant, and was relieved that beneath the scaffolding the exterior of the elephant was intact. The scaffolding itself was set up wheels, ostensibly, imagined Ivy, to lift the elephant and carry it, but that was ridiculous; it was far too heavy, and Ivy could see that the elephant's feet were still planted firmly in the ground. Her confidence grew, and she suppressed a smirk. The deplorable Jared would soon be gone. Strangely though, he seemed unphased. "Is everyone ready?" asked Jared, sliding into the driver seat, one hand on the wheel, the other holding what looked like a TV remote. "Lucy, attention!" The air was filled with sounds of creaking wood, and Lucy's trunk twitched.

"Lucy, move forward!" Jared commanded, pressing a button on the remote. Suddenly, the elephant seemed startled, then rock gently back and forth. The end of her trunk lifted from the cistern, and against all odds it sounded like she sneezed. Ivy looked down at Lucy's feet and to her amazement and horror she saw them move. The spectators

could not see it, but Jared made sure Ivy could see clearly. The elephant was, in fact, walking at Jared's command, its legs hidden from the gathering crowd by the lower scaffolding, but walking, genuinely walking.

"Lucy. Turn left!" Jared bellowed, hitting the left arrow on his remote, and Lucy turned in place. "Forward March!" Jared cried, and they moved steadily down Beach Road. The Cadillac rolled slowly forward, and the three waved to the cheering crowds lining the street as they passed. Coen was in the crowd with his Mom and both of their jaws dropped as Lucy passed by. He called out to her but the din of the crowd drowned him out.

"Now Left again! And,...stop!" commanded Jared. Lucy arrived at the park in the center of town and plunged her trunk into the new cistern Jared had commissioned. Still holding the remote, Jared stood up in the convertible and pumped his fists above his head. The crowd cheered wildly, and even Ivy, dumbfounded, had to admit to herself that it was a depressingly impressive show of technical power. All the spectators had free ice cream before they happily dispersed. While Ivy was perplexed, Joe was thrilled and excited to see what other magic Jared could do for Margate.

So Jared became mayor. His first action was to veto the holds on his building permits. Days later, he announced his plan to follow through on his campaign promise and protect Lucy permanently, building a chain link fence topped with barbed wire, to keep out undesirables. When protests arose about the fencing, a guard was posted 24/7, and securities camera recorded every move. Soon only members of the *Lucy First* movement could visit the elephant, and as the protests became unruly, the mayor declared a state of emergency and no one without security clearance was allowed inside the

perimeter of the city park. Lucy could no longer hear the voices of the children around her, only military music blaring at all hours. These same songs that once represented freedom now drove her to fear and anger.

With the fence in place, the children could no longer reach Lucy, and they missed her terribly, especially Coen Brown. One night, he could no longer stand it, and he snuck out his bedroom window and bicycled downtown to see his old friend. The guard was asleep. Coen parked the bike and huddled next to a car to make sure no one was watching. He brought an old moving blanket, which he threw over the barbed wire. He whispered to Lucy to keep quiet. He planned to climb the fence and roll his body over the blankets without cutting himself, but he never got that far. As he touched the metal fence its electricity stung him, and his body shook violently as he fell to the ground, smoke rising from his small shoes, and a smell like a burned out transformer rose in the air.

Lucy went berserk, rearing up fully on her hind legs, raising her trunk high from the cistern, and then crashing it down to break the fence, cutting through as if it were Belgian lace. She rampaged through the town, tearing through the commercial district, turning over trash cans, slamming her tusks into fire hydrants, water flying everywhere. Her howdah tangled in the electric wires and crashed to the ground. She found Jared's red Cadillac and flipped it over again and again, broken auto parts flying everywhere, until it was no more than a severely bent frame.

The police tried to sedate Lucy, but the darts they fired dropped uselessly from her tin hide. They tried a net but it was too small to contain her, and she ran off in terror into the thick foliage of the Pine Barrens.

Luckily, Coen was unhurt; he just got knocked out. He awoke with a start, and immediately set out to find Lucy. He knew all the best hiding places in the nearby Pines. Coen found her shivering in a bog not far from the Parkway. She was banging her head against a giant White Pine again and again. When Coen tapped his fingers on her giant legs, Lucy twitched, recognizing the touch. He told her to stay right where she was.

Coen recruited other town children to come secretly to sing to Lucy and walk her to an abandoned barn nearby. There they tried to nurse her back to health, but progress was frustratingly slow. Weeks went by, but Lucy still seemed distant, like she was genuinely haunted. Despite their best efforts, she was not really getting better. Something was wrong deep inside Lucy. It was not clear if she was totally blind, but her vision was definitely obstructed. Who knew what kind of mechanical monstrosity inside her made her act as she had. Coen urgently wanted to find out but he needed help.

Finally, he confided in his Mom. He did not want to tell his Dad because he was worried he would tell the police where Lucy was hiding. But his Mom said, "Look, I may be better at some things, like word problems and making up stories with you, but your Dad is the mechanical one; he's the one you've got to ask." Coen was nervous asking his dad but did it anyway.

"Dad, I know you voted the plan to move Lucy, but it's not working. She has something inside her that needs to come out. Whatever it is, we have to save her!" Joe was silent for minute, and Coen worried that he was about to say no. But by this time, Joe was having his doubts about Jared's intentions and abilities, and to Coen's relief, he was all in. "Let's do this thing!" Joe cried, and they set out for the barn.

While the children that were caring for Lucy sang, Coen and his Dad warily opened Lucy's back leg door. They were not sure they would even be able to see in if the mechanics in the legs blocked their way. But to their surprise, there were no mechanics at all in the leg, and they quickly climbed the circular stairs. The great wooden hall in Lucy's torso was also completely open. The only alteration Jared had made to Lucy was to implant round video screens of cable news reports in her eyes; projecting rapidly shifting images of fire inward, pictures of screaming children, pixels always flaring in Lucy's blocked eye portals. Jared had intended that the installation be permanent, but Coen's Dad had brought a crowbar. Together he and Coen twisted and pulled, and finally, they were able to pry the screens out of the eye holes. Her vision restored, Lucy let out an audible gasp.

The children made a circle around Lucy and walked the still-shaking elephant out of the barn and back toward town. At first, when everyone saw the elephant moving calmly under its own power, they were afraid. But as word spread about Jared's cruel manipulation, the blinders on their own eyes were removed, and they remembered all the things they loved about the elephant that had nothing to do with Jared.

Jared was livid. He raced behind Lucy to try to reassert control, banging on the buttons of the remote to no avail, as Lucy was no longer under his control. Jared scrambled behind her, now banging on her tin hide, trying to jimmy the door on Lucy's rear leg open to see what had gone wrong. When Lucy noticed him, she paused, and her stomach grumbled in a way it never had. Then, to her great surprise, a muscle she had been unaware of twitched, then relaxed, as her rear window opened, and a hundred years of pent up elephant poop rained down on Jared, immobilizing him in the stench, burying

him right up to his fleshy neck. The townspeople made sure he was alive and then left him there to sort it out himself.

Lucy walked on to the park to the songs of the children. When they arrived, Lucy plunged her trunk into her water cistern, and then sighed as the tension in her frame receded, looking out onto the beautiful beach at Margate. She was groomed and given a pedicure. Later she was reinforced with American steel, and her Howdah entirely rebuilt by Coen's dad and other local carpenters. It took time for Lucy to fully adjust and feel completely safe again, but over time she regained her calm, and the return of the children each Summer day brought her great joy. She gazed out on a shining sea, her trunk securing her against storms, the sounds of children all around her, home again at last.



Girl Scout

SCENE: *A Burger King booth in Bradenton, Florida. TINA, a teenage girl fashionably dressed for Florida Summer, is sipping a large soft drink while typing on her phone. She looks up and watches NICKY, a younger teenage girl, listening to music on her earbuds while she wipes tables.*

TINA *(putting her phone down)*

Nicky Kiehler, is that you?

NICKY *(removing earbuds)*

Yah...umm... Hi, welcome to Burger King.

TINA

Nicky, it's me! Tina Johnson! Tracey's old friend! I was just on my way to the airport and stopped by to say hi. I was so sorry to hear about the overdose.

NICKY

Oh. Thank you. So, you were friends with Tracey?

TINA

Totally. We were besties before all the trouble. She was in my homeroom and we ate lunch together. I loved her so much. She talked to me all the time, especially about *you*!

NICKY

Really?

TINA

Really. She told me she hoped you would have a great life.

NICKY

Tracey said that?

TINA

Are you kidding? She totally loved you. Listen, Nicky, do you have a few minutes to talk?

NICKY

What about? I already took my break. I have to clean these tables and I don't wanna get fired.

TINA

It won't take long; I have a limo coming in ten minutes. I'll look out for your boss.

NICKY *(sitting down)*

A limo? Well, okay but just until he gets off the phone. What's up?

TINA

Okay. Great. So, how are you, Nicky?! What grade are you in now?

NICKY

Eighth.

TINA

That's what I thought. Old enough to make your own decisions about the future. What are you going to do with your life? Stay here in Bradenton?

NICKY

No, I hate this place. It's so boring!

TINA

That's exactly how I felt. How are things at home for you?

NICKY

Fine, I guess.

TINA

Where are you living?

NICKY

I just got a new foster mom and I live with her and her boyfriend.

TINA

He's not your foster dad?

NICKY

No! Thank God.

TINA

What do you mean? Does he come after you?

NICKY

No. Well, yeah a little when he's drinking, but how did you know that?

TINA

Nicky, they all do. That's just how life is. Is that uniform as uncomfortable as it looks?

NICKY

Not uncomfortable, just embarrassing!

TINA

I get it. I'm glad I have a job where I can wear nice clothes.

NICKY

I would love to have a dress like yours.

TINA

Thanks. It's just H&M but the purse is genuine Prada, I think. It was a gift. I get all my stuff free because I am a stylist.

NICKY

What do you mean? Where do you work?

TINA

Everywhere. I go to parties all over the world with rich and famous people.

NICKY

How do you get to go to these parties?

TINA

By limousine and private jet.

NICKY

No, I mean... really? You take a private jet?

TINA

Yes, they pick me and some other really cool girls up in a big black SUV, and drive us right up to a huge jet waiting for us on the airport runway. Then it's just an hour flight to a private resort island. No TSA or anything, and free snacks all the way. Tracey almost came one time but she got sick.

NICKY

Yeah, she got sick a lot. I thought she was just sick when I found her. Anyway, that sounds cool. I've never even been to a resort. Is there a big pool?

TINA

There must be, like, twelve swimming pools, and tons of hot tubs, even in places you'd never expect. There serve home-made ice cream, and delicious fresh fruit rum punch we're allowed to have anytime. Do you drink?

NICKY

No!

TINA

Me neither but it's delicious. There's a giant night club with a DJ, too. It's open all night every night.

NICKY

That's crazy!

TINA

I'm telling you it is amazing.

NICKY

What's your job though? Do you, like, pick out rich ladies' clothes and stuff?

TINA

No, not exactly, everyone's in swim suits, and besides the girls it's mainly men.

NICKY

What do you do then?

TINA

Nicky, it's like this. Rich guys have more money than they know what to do with. But they're totally stressed out from their high-power jobs. They pay us to make sure they have a good time so they can relax.

NICKY

You mean like a waitress, getting snacks and stuff?

TINA

Yeah, sort of. The guys don't eat a lot of snacks, but they like to drink and have fun.

NICKY

How old are these guys?

TINA

Well, most are older than us, but they are really nice, and you get to meet famous people and celebrities. One of the girls told me she met an ex-president, and a prince!

NICKY

Wow. How did you know what to say and do?

TINA

It's easy! The first time I just tried to be my cheerful self and keep an open mind about things. Then when I had the glamour shoot, I was hooked. I went back the very next week.

NICKY

A glamour shoot?

TINA

I know! I'm telling you it's the greatest place in the world! They did my make-up, hair, the whole deal, and a professional photographer took tons of pictures. Some of the girls are like, *Victoria Secret* models. A guy named Les liked my photo, and we texted on a private app. I got invited to a party on the island to meet him, and got my butt back on the jet. That's the whole key to becoming rich and famous: getting invited back.

NICKY

So, you just hung out with him by the pool and made sure he was happy? That's amazing. How did you do it?

TINA

It's so easy. You get them drinks, fix their towels, laugh at their jokes, even if they are stupid. Sometimes they want a massage, or you play card games, whatever they are into.

NICKY

Whoa, I don't know how to give a massage.

TINA

Whoa yourself! You should learn more about it. Massage therapists have great lives working in resorts all over the world, instead of flipping burgers in Bradenton. It's like getting a college degree. And you get paid \$300 each time no matter what, plus tips.

NICKY

\$300! That's crazy. Why would they pay so much for a massage?

TINA

They are rich, that's all! I was nervous at first, because I had never hung out with anyone really rich. Luckily there's a really cool older girl there named Adrienne who showed me the ropes, like not talking too much, not chewing gum, when not to swear, things like that. She used to hang out by the pool and give massages too but she got too old for it, so she's like, a manager now.

NICKY

What do you mean too old?

TINA

Adrienne is, like, 22 or something. They only want middle school and early high school girls for the massages, so a girl needs to plan for the future. I'm gonna do the same thing Adrienne did and eventually get into the movies if it all works out

NICKY

Wow, that's amazing.

TINA

Yes, and very profitable too. I am definitely not going back to being poor, and you shouldn't have to be poor either, Nicky. Hey, you know what? You should come with me tonight and check it out for yourself.

NICKY

What? Go today? That's impossible.

TINA

Why not, if you're serious about it? It'll be fun. We can go together and I'll watch out for you.

NICKY

I'm just not sure. It sounds uncomfortable.

TINA

Nicky, please, don't sabotage your future just to be "comfortable". Face it. Your life is a mess. You need to put yourself out there, even if you're scared. I was scared too. Don't worry!

NICKY

What would be my excuse? I can't just disappear. My foster mom won't let me.

TINA

You'll be back before school Monday! She might not even notice you are gone. I do it all the time! You can tell her you are going with me on a church retreat for teens. You can leave her a phone number I have. Adrienne takes the calls and pretends she's a chaperone.

NICKY

Still, what would I tell my boss? I can't just punch out! I really need this job!

TINA

Tell him you have really bad cramps. He'll be too embarrassed to challenge you. Nicky! You can make more money in one weekend than this dump pays in a month!

NICKY

But I don't have anything to wear!

TINA

Oh come on, Nicky. Now you are just dreaming up excuses. We're about the same size. I packed tons of super cute clothes and we can share them. We'll do your make-up on the way to the airport. And it'll be so cool to go together! Tracey would have gone for sure if she was here.

NICKY

I'm just not sure I can do the massages.

TINA

Look, that's fine, little sis, but seriously, if you want to get along down there, you'll have to drop the total innocence routine.

NICKY

What do you mean?

TINA

I mean, you can't possibly be a virgin at this point. The guys just like to joke around about sex; you can't be too serious or they won't like you. Look, Nicky, it's just one weekend. What's the worst that can happen? A bad sunburn? A stomachache from too much ice cream? I'll look after you like you were my own sister! Tracey would have jumped at the chance. And anyway, take a look around. Your life sucks. Right now, you are going nowhere. This might be your only chance to get out of Bradenton.

NICKY

You think Tracey would have gone?

TINA

Absolutely she would! Do it for Tracey! Do it for yourself!

NICKY

(pause)

Okay, I'll do it!

TINA

(stands, hugs Nicky enthusiastically, while staring blankly over Nicky's shoulder. Nicky is motionless, trapped in the hug)

Fantastic! Go tell your boss and punch out. We have to hurry- the limo's here. We have a couple of other girls to pick up, and we'll be on our way! Oh Nicky, Tracey would be so proud of you! This is going to change your life forever, I promise!

(TINA looks over NICKY's shoulder at the audience in smug triumph. Fade to black).



Leda and the Swan

Some nights I lie in bed reminiscing and ruminating about Leda Peterson, and how things could have been different. Back in the summer of 1978, we both worked in hospitality at Cove Haven, a fading resort on Lake Wallenpaupack, in the Pocono Mountains. Its proprietor had invented heart-shaped tubs in the 1950s, creating a new category of lodging: honeymoon hotels. But by the 1970s, Poconos honeymoon resorts were *déclassé*. Cove Haven and a few others held on, praying that legalized gambling would one day rescue them. Meanwhile, they advertised heavily in local leisure magazines, attracting budget-minded families and busloads of senior citizens.

During the school year, Leda played varsity lacrosse at Moravian and I was attracted to her muscular legs. She rarely wore make-up, and most guys found her plain looking, but I was smitten. I loved the way she talked, kind of sing-song, her round face framed by soft rings of chestnut curls.

Leda's parents owned a summer cottage across the lake from ours. I knew her vaguely the year before when she waitressed in the main dining room. I first spoke to her that year as she was wrapping up bologna sandwiches for me to bring on the bus for a guest outing to Bushkill Falls. "*Mon Ami*," I called out to her across the empty dining room, "Bring me ze Oysters Rockefeller, *tout suite*!"

She did not miss a beat. Her mouth turned to a perfect pout as she rocked her head slowly from side to side, gaze at me sympathetically with those beautiful hazel eyes and deadpanned, "Malchance, monsieur! Zey are not inza season yet! *Retournez-vous en Printtemps!*" I knew she was out of my league but after that I found all sorts of excuses

to stop by the dining room hoping to chat with her. We would flirt in fractured French until the head cook, a foul-mouthed task master who always wore the same dirty white apron, would eventually spot us and chide Leda, *Get back to work, Princess*, even if there were no customers.

She quit her job quite suddenly mid-summer, though, after some sort of big argument with the cook, and I imagined I would never see her again. But Summer jobs were scarce in the Poconos, so the following Summer she reapplied and joined me and six others on the hospitality staff. Something between cheerleaders and babysitters, we managed all recreational activities: tennis lessons, archery, swimming, and casino nights, to name a few. All of it was on the cheap, including our paltry wages, yet we readily adapted, on call at any time to play the role of tennis pro, archery instructor, lifeguard, or blackjack dealer, as needs arose.

Remarkably diplomatic, Leda handled challenging guests deftly. She would listen raptly to their complaints, offer a solution if she possibly could, and, if she could not, she would cast her doe eyes upward and ask them, “Well sir/madam, besides THAT, are you having a good time?” with a big smile. She asked so modestly and earnestly that almost inevitably guests would reply, “Why, yes I am having a good time!” and walk away contented. She could melt storms of dissatisfaction into puddles, leaving the old men smiling for the rest of the day, and the matrons believing they were young and pretty, too.

Lord knows what Leda saw in me at first, if anything. I was awkward and ungainly, my shoulders already rounding. But I was funny, a natural ham, a theatre kid, and over time I learned how to make her laugh.

Hospitality staffers often worked in pairs so sometimes Leda and I worked together in the gym, out at the tennis courts, or on the archery range. My favorite was lifeguard duty. Even on hot days, few swimmers braved the cold Pennsylvania lake water. When rain threatened, they would abandon the stony beach completely. On cloudy days we would talk for hours on the lifeguard stand about everything: our co-workers, our families, our college life, and our dreams. I would make up stories for her, wild yarns of adventures we would have together; superheroes traveling the world, fighting crimes, preventing disasters, saving children from demented monsters. All the while Leda listened in rapt attention.

But something was different about Leda from the Summer before. I came to see her bubblieness and even her rapt attention as somewhat of a front. In unguarded moments, her face would become gray and distant, before she recovered with a quick forced smile. These moments only deepened her mysterious allure.

Alas, Leda was spoken for. She had a new buff boyfriend named Kurt back home in Malvern. I met him once when he visited Leda at work. He was so attractive it was almost hard to look him in the eye, his handsome physique that of a young Greek god. He lettered both in rugby and track at Lehigh. I was deeply intimidated by his physical grace and effortless self-confidence.

But then one day Leda confided to me that at times Kurt was a bit dull. I asked her what she meant. I will always remember how she replied that Kurt was “not a great storyteller like you, Brian.” I blushed; maybe I had a chance with Leda Peterson after all.

Sometimes I would switch shifts with other staffers just to lifeguard with Leda. I loved talking to her, and, while the shapeless green golf shirts we all wore as a uniform

looked inexplicably cute on her, she was an absolute goddess in her fire-engine red Lycra one piece.

One day, Leda told me she was nervous about being alone while her parents were away overnight. I worked up the nerve and casually suggested we go out for pizza so she would not be alone. To my surprise however, she replied “Why don’t we go back to my cottage and take the boat out to watch the stars?” and smiled at me gently. I could scarcely contain my excitement.

We picked up a six-pack of PBR tallboys and a bag of Ruffles on the way. It was already dark when we slipped into our bathing suits at the cottage and headed for the boat. “Hold my hand,” she commanded, not looking back, and guided me down the dark path to the lake. While I untied the mooring lines, Leda took the wheel and turned the key, and the inboard engine purred to life. I jumped aboard and we chugged out slowly to the middle of the lake, mindful of potential obstacles in the starlit water. Then Leda killed the engine, and the silence of the lake enveloped us as the small craft decelerated and bobbed to a slow drift.

The floor of the boat was barely wide enough for us to lie down together. Leda inserted a cassette into the boombox and Springsteen was soon belting out, *Come on, Wendy, tramps like us, baby we were born to run!* as the sun fell behind a ridge of dark pines. We felt wonderfully alone; we were hundreds of yards from shore, trees around the lake hiding the cottages. The moon was nearly new, but the stars in the night sky sparkled intensely, as we lay together on the vessel's floor, holding each other tightly on top of a pile of life preservers and towels. She giggled as she leaned her head on my shoulder. Then she turned her face up toward mine, and our lips met.

I was stunned by Leda's passion, her breath heavy and wet, her tongue pressing between my teeth. I felt the warmth of her breasts through her swimsuit. She playfully slapped my hands away but then allowed them to return to massage her chest and shoulders. It was blissful. But when I reached down to touch her thigh, her whole body froze, and she grabbed my wrist, clenching it like a claw. She kept kissing me roughly, and to my surprise, even while holding me at bay in her raptor-like grip, the fingers of her other hand began to rub the front of my swim suit. She untied the string at my waist, and reached in, pushing the swimsuit out of the way with the back of her wrist, still kissing me, her other hand still pinning mine in place, stroking me roughly until I surrendered to her complete control. I tried to reach around her back for a towel, but she just held my wrist perfectly still, not letting my hand move, not talking, for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, she sighed, sat up, toweled herself off, hugged me quickly, started the boat, pushed the throttle forward, and motored back to the boat dock. I helped her tie up the boat before she led me back to my car and we briefly kissed goodnight without another word.

At work, we acted like nothing happened. But most nights we would go back out on the boat if the weather was good or drive around in my Econoline van if it was not. I loved the kisses and the hand jobs, but it went no further. Initially, I thought it was just a matter of time, in a familiar rhythm of courtship: the pursuit, the feigned disinterest, further pursuit, the resolute defense, searching for the magic words to say, a less emphatic third or even fourth refusal, further wooing, until one day, finally, Waterloo, the great surrender. That is how it was supposed to work.

But Leda was unyielding. Maybe she was leading me on, I thought, perhaps stringing me along just until summer's end. Still, I pursued her; no girl I knew was so mesmerizingly alluring. But each time I would try to slip my hand beneath her tennis skirt or unsnap her daisy dukes, her iron fist would seize my wrist, even as her other hand worked its way down to deliver its rhythmic massage.

Finally, our Summer waning, I opted for the full-court press. I took Leda out for a bucket of Genesee Cream Ale and a few shots of Cuervo, and I bought a condom in the men's room before we left. We drove to a remote state game land parking lot. I unrolled my sleeping bag and fashioned my denim jacket and an old sweater into a pillow. I brought a fat joint along, and we smoked it down to a tiny roach as we lay together whispering in the twilight. I started kissing her neck softly, massaging the soft skin behind her knee, slowly and patiently working my way up once more to her thigh, talking to her the whole time, encouraging her to relax, that we were alone now, that she was safe. She closed her eyes and leaned back with a long sigh. Suddenly though, her face went ghost white, and she bolted up, tiny tears rising in her eyes, and her hand once again clamping down on mine. I just laughed in exasperation, and she laughed a little too, but more nervously. I tried to move my hand further one more time, but she gripped it even tighter. I fell back frustrated.

"Leda, why do you do that?" I asked. "I love being with you, and everything between us is fantastic. But why do you stop me every time? Why are you holding back?"

"I don't know," she replied between clenched teeth.

"Is it something I said or did?" I asked, "Because I can change."

"I don't want to talk about it," she answered flatly.

I would not hear of it. "Well, we have to talk about it! Look, if you don't want to sleep with me, that's okay, but you at least owe me an explanation of why."

Leda tensed up and stared at the steel ceiling. "It's too embarrassing."

I pressed even harder. "Leda, I won't tell a soul. But I just have to know!"

"Well, I don't want to talk about it, not with you, not with anyone!"

"But Leda, you have to tell me. Don't you see?" I looked directly in her eyes, and my voice deepened. I held her arms in my hands and may have shaken her a little as I spoke slowly and forcefully. "Leda - You – Have – To – Tell - Me."

Leda's face contorted in pain as she suppressed her tears. Then she sobbed aloud, and her whole body convulsed, kicking her legs and gritting her teeth. Finally, she looked away and whispered, "I was raped by a swan."

"What?" I asked, not sure if I had heard correctly.

"I WAS RAPED BY A FUCKING SWAN!" she screamed.

I was dumbstruck; *is this some sort of joke*, I thought? *No, it couldn't be, but what then? Impossible!* I let her cry for a while, and then I asked gently, trying not to sound too alarmed, "What do you mean you were raped by a swan? Are you sure?"

Her eyes dilated, "Yes, I am sure I was raped by a swan, you asshole. How can you even ask me that?" Then she broke down again in deep sobs, struggling to control her breathing, taking long deep breaths before she continued.

"It happened last summer down by the lake. I had closed out my last table in the dining room, and I told the head cook I was punching out. I went down by the boathouse to have a cigarette before I went home. Out of nowhere, I heard a great beating of wings,

and then something hit me in the head from behind, knocking me to the ground. White feathers were flying everywhere, and a great beast overcame me, climbing on top of me, ripping my clothes with its terrible beak, honking madly, pushing my thighs apart with its muddy webbed feet, and, and..." She broke down crying.

I was dumbfounded. I had never even heard of anyone raped by a swan. I had no vocabulary for it. I wished like hell I had not pressed her for an answer. I held her in my arms and let her cry, wanting to run away, but stuck there with her, not sure if her story was real or not, and not at all sure what to say or do.

Suddenly, flashing red lights lit the inside of the van from the rear. Leda and I quickly sat up and smoothed our clothes as I swallowed the roach. Two jar-headed state troopers peered into the window, shining their flashlights on us. Leda whispered, "Don't tell them what I said. They won't believe me, and if they do, they'll blame me. Don't tell anyone, I beg you!"

I opened the side door of the van, and the cops waited warily while we both climbed out. They sniffed and searched, trying to find the source of the lingering marijuana haze. When they saw that Leda had been crying, they separated us and asked what happened. She said she was upset about a fight with her mother; I said that her grandfather had died. The troopers were livid that our stories did not match, but not finding any drugs or alcohol, they eventually left. I drove Leda home in silence, and could only muster up a meek, "I'm sorry," before she ran up her long driveway and into her house, slamming the door.

Unsure of what to do, I went home and stewed about it for a week or so. I rearranged my schedule so that I did not run into Leda. I struggled. I had told Leda I

would not tell anyone, but clearly, she needed help. There was only one person I could think of to call.

I knew Kurt lived down on the Main Line in Malvern, so I rang directory assistance and got his number. He picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

I had to force my voice not to tremble. "Hello, Kurt. Look, you don't know me, but my name is Brian, and I am a friend of Leda's. This is going to sound strange, but last summer, a swan raped your girlfriend, and she is in a terrible way. She needs someone to help her. As her boyfriend, I thought you would want to know." The line was silent for a moment.

"What the fuck are you talking about, 'raped by a swan?'" Kurt asked dubiously.

"I'm telling you, that's what happened. Leda told me the whole story. She was raped by a Mute Swan last Summer at night after her shift down by the lake at Cove Haven. I am not sure if you should call the cops, or a shrink, or what."

Kurt inhaled sharply before pulling himself together and spoke angrily. "Yo, you have a lot of damn gall going around saying shit like that, Dude. Are you trying to ruin the poor girl's life? I ought to kick your sorry ass just for calling me. I'll take care of Leda; you mind your own god-damn business and stay the fuck away from her." Then he hung up.

I was shocked and out of solutions. I tracked down Leda at work and confessed what I had done. She was livid. "I told you not to say anything! What the fuck is wrong with you?" she cried, and then she stormed off.

So, I did not have to stay the fuck away from Leda Peterson as Kurt had requested; she took every precaution to stay the fuck away from me. We barely

acknowledged each other. The supervisor never scheduled us together after that; I suspected Leda requested this. After that Summer, I never saw her again.

Forty years later, though, lying in bed sleeplessly, fan clicking quietly over my head, I think about her, inventing alternative scenarios. I wonder about silly things: if she's fat now; whether she is still pretty; whether she has children. I hope she found peace. I replay our youthful nights together before I learned about the swan. I see her sparkling eyes; I smell her hair; her soft hands warm my skin.

In my imaginings, I try to make amends. Leda and I are young again, with firm young bodies in our bathing suits and sandals. Her voice is the beautiful sing-song voice she used to charm the old geezers at the resort. She tells me once more about the swan, about the sudden blow, the great wings, her nape caught in his bill, but this time it is gauzy and poetic, viewed with the distance of memory, a sonnet.

When I speak to her, my voice is raspier, as it is today, more worn by the world, but wiser. This time I know what to say before she runs in tears from my car up her driveway. I take her in my arms and tell her, "I am so sorry this happened to you. It was not your fault. It was his crime alone and he will pay for it dearly. Tonight, I will stay with you here, and keep you safe. Tomorrow, we will go back to the lake, where I shall strangle the swan, and nail it to the roof of the boathouse."

In my vision, we return to Cove Haven. Leda watches intently as I wring the neck of the wretched bird, bleed it out, and hammer it spread-eagle onto the cedar shingles of the boathouse roof at Cove Haven. Then she is okay, Leda is safe again, and everything gets back to normal.

It is not always a swan. Other times I eviscerate a wolf and burn its carcass in a vat of acid, or decapitate a serpent and chop it into tiny pieces. I am as of yet still unable to directly face the image of the head cook in his greasy white apron, rolling off of her young body, drunk in conquest, chuckling. And me, completely incapable of helping her, a picture too painful even for my revisionist dreams.



Pride

When my girl Celia left with our daughter Haley, it set me back. I wanted to go find her, but she did not say where she was going. I wasn't sure she even wanted me to find her, and that hurt even worse. And now I'm stuck here in this cell. But let me start at the beginning.

Three years ago, when I graduated high school, I didn't get the college scholarship I was hoping for, so I drove a truck delivering building supplies. I hated it. The truck was a piece of shit, the worst one in the fleet. I got callouses on my butt from the springs sticking out of the darn seat. The truck bed was rotting out and you could see through it. I delivered mountains of sheetrock pallet by pallet, praying that truck would hold together and not kill me.

My father drove a truck too, but that was back when it was an actual job, not a "gig." He worked hard and retired before the trucking company went bankrupt. He's probably drinking an icy cold frosty Budweiser about now. That's the American dream right there.

These days, truck driving don't pay shit and it's frigging dangerous, especially in New Jersey. I got robbed in a rest stop one time by a bunch of gangbangers. They took my last thirteen dollars. When I waited for the police to come, I got written up at work for late delivery of the sheetrock. A complete clusterfuck, and I was hungry too. I looked for spare change in the truck, but did not find even enough to get a pretzel.

That's how I met Celia. She was working in a hot dog cart at the rest area. She saw what happened and felt sorry for me. I wasn't gonna take the hot dog she offered, but she insisted. After that, I stopped by often, and eventually, I worked up the nerve to ask her

out. We were both broke, so we took long walks together. We fast became friends, and soon even more. She became the light of my life.

Otherwise, I got more and more disgusted at the world. Everything was on a downhill slide. America was not what it used to be. Something was seriously wrong, but I could not put my finger on it. Finally, a kid a couple years older than me, Dan, the trucking company dispatcher, woke me up. Over coffee, he gave me a little history lesson. "There is whole lot you don't know about," he said. "Take 'racism.' 'Racism' used to mean that you think minorities are disgusting, inferior people, and that it is okay to do terrible things to them, like slavery. But when Lincoln freed the slaves, racism was outlawed, and it has been declining ever since.

"But the anti-racism industry, and it is an industry," he went on, "still had to eat, so they had to change the meaning of the word 'racism.' They started to include private opinions and conversations when minorities were not even around or involved. Today, any white person that has a politically incorrect idea pop into his head is a racist, just for thinking! We've got to have each other's backs. They are starting to replace us, and this is the tipping point!"

That was the first time I heard of replacement theory. It immediately clicked with me. That's why all these immigrants were coming in illegally- to take our jobs and then our homes. I went home and did some research, and I was amazed at all I saw.

Dan told me about the Proud Boys and how their courage had given him hope. "It is a true brotherhood. They don't take shit from anyone. They tell the truth." I visited the websites Dan recommended and learned a whole lot more. The no-fap thing was strange but the blogs and articles were professional and informative. The websites had great

content, including really cool video games. I am sorry, maybe it's politically incorrect, but Nazi Pacman is seriously addictive. Watching the Stars of David fly off the screen when the monsters explode is incredible. The libs go bat shit over this stuff, but no one means anything by it; it's just a game; it's funny! It seems like Libs only have a sense of humor when they are bashing the president.

Anyway, I started following some of the Proud Boy leaders on Twitter and Instagram, including Dan, who had his own webcast by then. He trolled the Jews and feminazis relentlessly, and completely skewered the liberal elite. It was so friggin' funny. Not PC for sure, but hysterical. He was telling the truth, and libs hate that.

Eventually, I attended one of the Proud Boy meet-ups in town. They booked a private room at an Irish pub. I thought it would be a bunch of skinheads, but it wasn't. They were just normal guys, many college-educated. Not too many shaved heads, just a few; they say the clean-cut look is better for recruiting and the media. I could tell right away that the Proud Boys were a real family, and if I were a Proud Boy, they would always have my back. So, I joined.

Celia was nervous about me joining an organization the media portrays as racist. "Listen," I told her, "I am the least racist person on earth. But the liberal media blames all the world's problems on White people. You have met some of these Proud Boys; they are patriots, not monsters. They love the constitution; they love European culture; they are pro-law enforcement, Pro-Life, and pro-second amendment. They even like immigrants, too, just not illegals. Aren't you sick of having to apologize for everything we do? Shouldn't we fight to keep what we have before it is all taken away from us?"

That's what it's about. For ourselves, and for our children." Then I paused. "You do love children, don't you?" I deadpanned.

Celia smiled, and her shoulders relaxed a little. She is skittish sometimes. She has some abandonment issues. Her father skipped town when her mom got pregnant, and then her mom abandoned her too. She ran away from a series of foster homes, living on the streets for two years. She even wandered into the Antifa for a while, glad to have something to hate, even America. But the Antifa was complete chaos with nothing near the intense kind of leaders the Proud Boys attract. When she learned more about us, she wised up and switched teams. She could tell we were ready to fight, and that gave her some security.

Yet despite all the positives, Celia was still hesitant to get further involved with the Proud Boys. I had to persuade her. Okay, I badgered her, LOL. I would look at her real serious and ask her, "Celia, do you hate America?"

"Of course not," she would say.

I did not blink. "Then do you just not like white people? Do you think immigrants and minorities are better?"

"No!" she protested, "I just don't want people to think I am a racist. It's embarrassing."

"Are you embarrassed by your skin color? Do you wish you were black or something?"

"No! I don't want to be anything. I just want to be normal!" she complained.

“White IS normal. You should be proud of your heritage, not ashamed.” Then I leaned into her and went for the jugular. “Don’t you think white people should have children to help preserve our race?” I asked her, grinning from ear to ear.

"Oh yes, I do!" she gushed. That’s what won her over. She moved in with me, and we got it on like the Easter Bunny after that, working on that baby. She even joined the Proud Boys’ Girls, a sister organization, mainly to please me.

Sure enough, within a few months, she was pregnant. We lay together on the couch with both of my hands holding her growing belly, talking for hours each day about having our beautiful baby. And when the day came, God delivered unto us our lovely daughter Haley. I was sure she was going to be Daddy’s little girl, though that’s less of a sure thing now.

The Proud Boys’ Girls had a mothers’ group, and the ladies would get together, rock the babies to sleep, then have a glass of wine or two and chat. Everything they said was supposed to be confidential. When Celia mentioned a grandmother living in Haiti, it should not have been a big deal. Technically, any woman of any ethnic background can join the Proud Boys’ Girls; it’s not a racist organization. But a couple of the women, including Dan’s wife, were concerned on *my* account, and they told their husbands. Some of my friends started looking at Celia and Haley kind of funny. I caught Dan rolling his eyes behind my back, and when I confronted him about it, he clued me in.

Maybe I would have accepted it if Celia had told me first, but she never even mentioned it. The guys gave me a real hard time about it, hounding me, asking again and again what I was gonna do. It became a club issue, with everyone weighing in with their own stupid opinions.

Finally, I gently suggested to Celia that maybe she should have a DNA test done, just to put the whole thing to rest, just so we knew what we were dealing with. Perhaps her grandmother had immigrated to Haiti from Europe, maybe from France or something. Even if turned out to be true, that she and Haley were not actually white, we wouldn't necessarily need to do anything different, but at least we would know the truth.

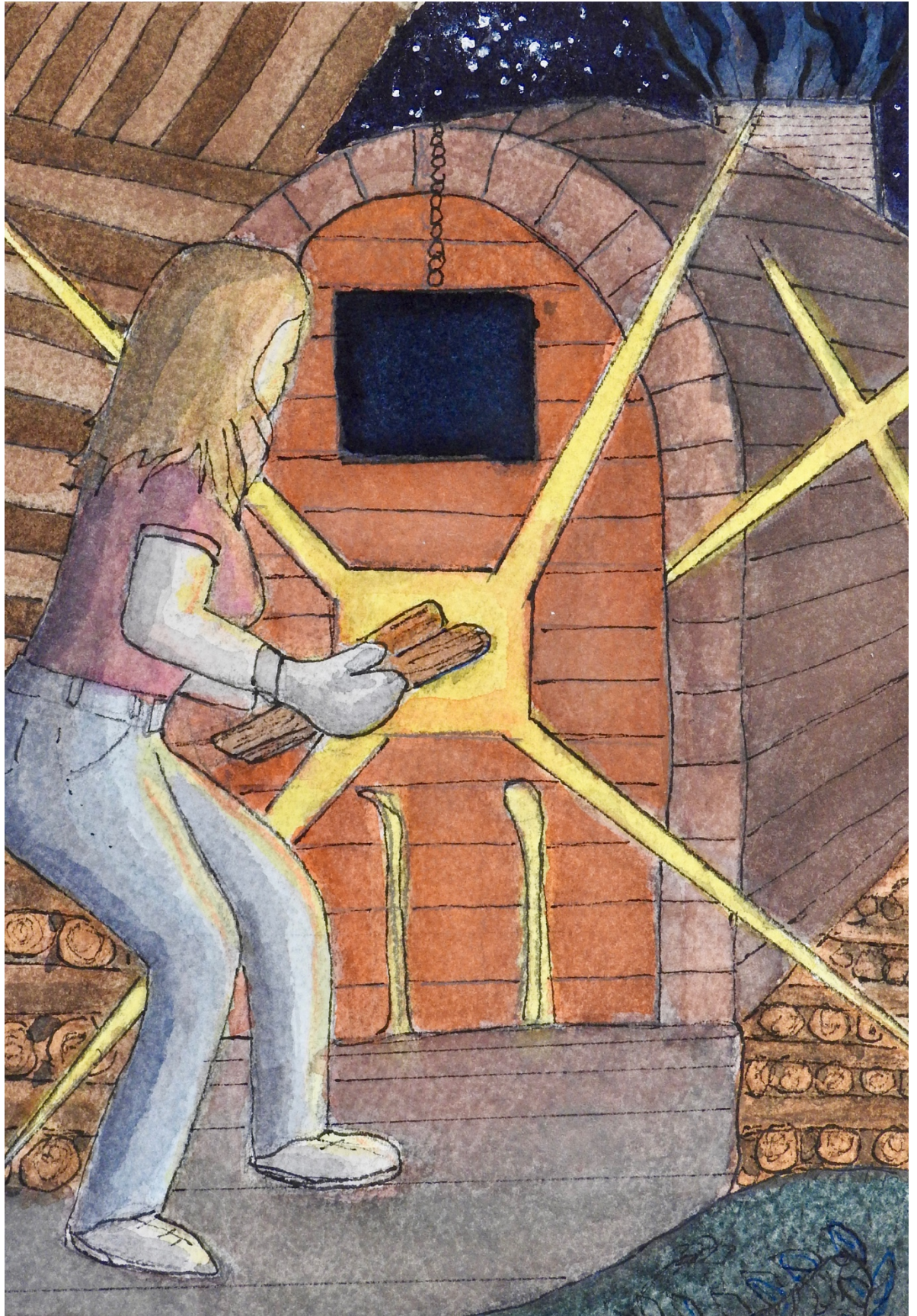
Celia would not hear of it and got all self-righteous. She talked about privacy rights and all sorts of stupid liberal bullshit. That's when I concluded it might be true that she was part-colored. I was mad, and foolishly perhaps, I demanded she take the Ancestry.com test. She refused to spit in the vial. Instead, she packed up her things and she and Haley were on a bus that very day. I haven't seen them since.

My friends could tell I missed Celia and Haley terribly, but they thought it was for the best. They tried to tease me out of it, saying I was a lucky man to be free and on the go. On weekends they dragged me out to clubs, encouraging me to try to score or at least get a few phone numbers. I told them I did not want another girl; I wanted Celia and Haley to come back. They all rolled their eyes.

Finally, one night after a few too many beers, Dan lost his patience and openly mocked me. "Don't you worry about that! She'll be back with that little monkey looking for a hand out before too long-- they always do!" The whole room shook with laughter.

I blacked out at this point, but they say I spun violently and hit him roundhouse style. I broke his jaw in three places, his teeth scattering across the clubhouse floor. When I came to, I saw him lying there like a broken ragdoll and I ran out. They say he was still down when the ambulance came. Later that day, I turned myself in.

I am being held for disorderly conduct. Once Dan is lucid, he'll probably press charges for aggravated assault, so I am probably going to be in here for a while. It don't matter though. Everything I had is gone. Hell, I'm even banned from the Proud Boys. For now, I've plenty of time to think about how this all happened, and what I'll do different next time, when I get out of here and go get my girls back.



Firing the Anagama

Izzy Cantor got married in her mid-thirties when she thought that time might be running out, a victim of her Japanese-American mother's tradition-bound worry. The lawyer Izzy married in Connecticut was of mixed European heritage, like her father. He was not much of a husband, more interested in his business partners' lives than hers, and in the end, he dumped her and the girls for an Italian woman he met at an investor conference in Dallas. But he did bring her twin daughters and did instill a deep love of soccer in both of them, and for that she was still grateful, even after everything that happened.

Her true love now was a Japanese climbing kiln two states away in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, owned by her mentor, Yuki Harumi.

The way Yuki's Anagama kiln climbed from the front of the building to the back reminded Izzy of a sleeping dragon. She was drawn to the mouth, the cave-like lowest chamber, with its perfectly curved roof and walls of thick fire brick, the sandy floor sloping gently upward. A thirty-inch brick kiln door hung on a wire from the ceiling and was counterbalanced such that it could be lifted away when loading without needing to keep holding it. There were four deep portals on each side of the kiln where later they would side-stoke wood to move the heat further back. Cold, it smelled like a cave, something between fresh-cut red oak and old socks. A second chamber followed the first. It was taller, and one could stand straight up in it when empty, beneath a full arch of fire bricks. From there, the smoke traveled down underground, slowing its progress,

allowing it to linger in the kiln longer as it kissed the stoneware, rolling over bowls and platters, before shooting straight up the dragon's tail, a tall chimney which belched black smoke into the sky.

The building around the kiln had been approved by the township as a carport, but looked more like a barn with its walls removed. It was constructed entirely of locally purchased Pennsylvania lumber, but in the Japanese style for such buildings, its posts and beams built of round logs thicker than telephone poles, held in place with thin wires which crossed overhead diagonally to lend support. Each side of the structure was open except for stairways leading to twin storage lofts above. Beneath these lofts were the most perfect firewood stacks imaginable, perhaps ten cords in total, half pine and half hardwood, piled close to eight feet tall, split carefully over many Summer afternoons, each piece no bigger than four inches in diameter, and two feet in length.

Harumi-san worked in clay in the spirit of *wabi-sabi*, a search for perfection in imperfection, valuing simplicity, asymmetry, modesty, naturalness, grace, freedom, and tranquility. His tea bowls looked sloppy to the untrained Western eye, but deliberately so, rarely perfect in shape, and glazed haphazardly, suggestive of natural beauty rather than classical symmetry. Yuki specialized in roughly hewn tea bowls and dramatic hand-coiled vessels. Glazes were used quite sparingly if at all; the wondrous gleam on the works was produced solely by the ash of the burning fire. Colors from cream to purple were possible, but results were never certain. Pieces might explode, or be marked by the fire in an unpleasing way. But when everything came together successfully, the results were wondrous, and moved Izzy deeply.

Whenever school was out, Izzy would bring her daughters along and help fire the great Anagama kiln along with half a dozen other potters, many of them students from Hood College and SUNY New Paltz where Yuki was legendary, others from all over the globe, one from above the Arctic Circle in Sweden. While Yuki lived in a modest cottage, Izzy slept in her own faded orange backpacking tent behind the kiln building with the girls. They washed themselves as best they could in the studio sink and used an old wooden outhouse as needed. They stayed all Summer, sleeping in the pitched tent in the wide field behind the kiln building with the other students. The girls were thrilled to learn about the Pike County Summer Soccer League, and were soon playing regularly in a school yard a short walk away.

Many students arrived to help fire the Anagama, but Izzy was the most dedicated. Over time, she mastered the kick wheel, and her hands and focus grew strong. She studied Yuki's bowls tirelessly and copied his forms, as was proper for an apprentice. She would follow Yuki as he worked and support him however possible, bringing him tea, kneading his clay; power-mixing straw into recycled slag to use to seal the kiln, and sweeping cinders from the Anagama's wide mouth. In return, he let her observe how he read the grain of the clay and showed her a certain glimmer or sparkle to look for in the embers when the fire was just right. The only way to learn anything from Yuki was to observe him; if she asked him a question, he would not answer it directly but encourage her to focus on the process itself. "Use your hands, not your head!" he would gently chide her. Yuki rarely commented on her work other than a quick nod of approval, or a short intake of breath she learned to understand as an opportunity to do better.

Yuki only snapped at Izzy once. He had left her in charge of stoking the kiln while he napped. When Yuki returned, Izzy was on a ladder sixteen feet in the air, adjusting the flue of the chimney. He screamed at her, “Get down from there!” At first, she thought he was over-reacting; she had no problem climbing tall ladders. But another student explained to her that she had insulted her mentor by adjusting the flue without his permission, and that this adjustment was considered key to a successful firing, and his responsibility alone. “Hai, Sensai desu!” Izzy acknowledged. *Yes, he is the teacher.*

Izzy was quite apologetic once she understood. She took the day off from kiln duties and drove two hours to Fort Lee, New Jersey, hoping that her fifteen-year-old Camry would not die along the way. Once there, Izzy paid fifty dollars for a live octopus, which was handed to her in a blue plastic pail. She looped the passenger seatbelt around the bucket handle and held the bucket with her right hand the whole drive back to Pennsylvania, praying the creature would not climb out during the drive and try to escape. When she got back, she left the octopus pail outside the door of Yuki's cottage for him to find.

When Yuki saw the live octopus in the bucket, he was dumbstruck. He saw that Izzy truly understood the seriousness of the slight. The sensitivity of her apology impressed him, especially coming from an American woman. Ceremonially, he carried the pail out to the kiln where he found Izzy and bowed deeply at the waist. She returned an even deeper bow, her hands straight at her sides. Then Yuki smiled and in one motion, picked up the squirming mass, pushed his index finger into an opening in the back of its head, and flipped the animal's hood over backward. At that, the octopus went limp, and its color turned slowly from an angry crimson red to a soft sienna-grey. He

draped the octopus in Izzy's waiting hands, and she carried it to his kitchen. She discarded the corpse and cut its legs into even chunks, which she lined up neatly on bamboo skewers and grilled over charcoal. She served it on two stoneware plates of her own design with cucumber slices and a light sauce of soy, rice vinegar, and a dash of wasabi, based on a recipe she thought he would like. She sat with him and ate enough to complete her part in the ritual. Yuki ate the rest, every last bite, and the air was cleared entirely. "Oishii desu. Arigato gozaimashta," he sighed, bowing. *It was delicious. Thank you so much.*

Izzy gave Yuki lots of space. As a younger man, Yuki had been conditioned to be repulsed by women. Often tantalizingly beautiful, but fickle and dangerous, women were said to be unlucky around kiln firings, because of the risk of the kiln becoming jealous and possibly shutting down. In modern Japan, it seemed far-fetched, but for a self-employed potter, there was so much riding on a successful firing that many took all precautions. Yuki was much the same, but tolerated Izzy due to her humble work ethic and keen attention to detail.

Yet one sunny afternoon, on a whim, Yuki accompanied Izzy to her daughters' soccer game. He had never seen girls playing sports live, much less such impressive young female athletes such as these. The twins played fiercely, ponytails bobbing as they raced downfield for a shot on goal. Yuki found them wondrous and powerful. He said it changed his life. He said he came away with a new perspective of American women, a kind of power he had no words for but wanted to explore further.

The old man had built the kiln during the time of Endaka- the strong yen- which made expenses cheaper in America than in Japan. His plan was to make pottery in

Pennsylvania, where wood was plentiful and living inexpensive, and then sell it through galleries in Japan based on his formidable reputation; to enjoy a yen income while managing his expenses in dollars. When the dollar strengthened, his economic advantage reversed. After some months of low yen revenue and high dollar expenses, Yuki decided to return to Japan and work there. The local partners who had helped him build the kiln expressed in interest, but then tried to trick him into selling the property cheaply, planning to destroy the kiln and use the kiln shed for ATVs and such. Smelling a rat, Yuki called Izzy and offered her the kiln for free if she would agree to take care of it. Izzy told him she was unworthy of such a gift, but she would take care of it if that was his wish.

Izzy packed up the girls and the few things they had left in Connecticut and moved to Pennsylvania. She enrolled her girls at the local elementary school. They lived near enough to the elementary school that the girls could walk to and from school and soccer practice. At home, the girls had to entertain themselves while she worked, either kicking a ball around or exploring the woods beyond their yard. This became routine, and they learned to stay out of their mother's way. They spent all of their time together and were close in the unworldly way some twins are, often completing each other's sentences, and sometimes speaking in unison in a mysterious sing-song voice they both loved.

Harumi-san left her his potter's wheel and all of his tools. She no longer needed to live in a tent as the other students did. She moved her family into Yuki's tiny house and slept in his bedroom, with the girls just down the hall. Then Izzy went right to work. They had to survive solely on the money she made selling pots in farmers' markets and craft fairs, so she had to work constantly.

It was late November of their first full year when Izzy decided to fire one more load of stoneware to sell for the holidays. A visiting student agreed to help her with the firing but canceled at the last minute. He told her he could help the next week, but Izzy was impatient, she needed more work to sell, and decided to fire the kiln herself. The student protested. "Firing the anagama is really a job for four or five people; not really even two, much less one! You will be too tired to continuously stoke the fire for seven days! Please, wait for just one week!" Izzy was not dissuaded.

On the first night of firing, Izzy was wholly absorbed in the process. She started a small fire at the full opening of the front of the first chamber, flickering before the great kiln and illuminating its grey interior. The early flames smelled strongly of pine. Once the kindling and soft wood were crackling, Izzy alternated pine and hardwoods to create just the right coals. She kept the fire low for many hours to draw out all the moisture from the bricks of the kiln. Then she built the fire higher, to a raging blaze at the Anagama's mouth. Then she applied her full weight on a steel rake to push the fire beyond the kiln's mouth, where it dropped into a wide firebox one foot below. She gathered firebrick and built up the front wall for the kiln, sealing it with hay and straw, leaving a two foot square hole, covered by the black firebrick door suspended from the ceiling that swung into place.

She began stoking the fire in earnest, loading armloads of wood every few minutes through the door and side ports. The temperature of the rear chamber rose much more slowly than the front chamber and eventually had to be stoked directly from the rear of the kiln to get it up to proper heat. The inferno of the kiln burned off the hair on her arms as she poked the fire with an eight-foot steel rod. Hours and days passed quickly.

Each night the fierce red and yellow flames licked the kiln's exterior and lit up the barn in an unworldly haze. From a distance, it looked alive, and the heat was audible as it pulled in fresh air.

Izzy kept herself awake with strong green tea drunk in handle-less cups. Several times the girls came to her to ask if she could stop for a while to play with them. *We want a dance party with Mommy!* they sing-songed together. But the kiln was firing mightily and had to be tended, so she sent the girls off to play. The kiln temperature rose smoothly until it stalled around 1900 degrees, and Izzy had to fight it day and night for the last three days to reach the target temperature. On the evening of the seventh day, the thermostat read 2400, the task was done, and Izzy could finally rest. There was nothing to do but wait for a week while the kiln cooled. Dirty and exhausted, she returned to the house. She immediately took a hot shower, put on some fresh clothes, and made herself another cup of tea, rinsing the deep smoky taste from her mouth.

On her way to her bed, Izzy checked in on the girls. She was surprised they were not in their bedroom, and she wondered if they had climbed up into her bed to wait for her, but no, they were not there either. Not yet panicking, she went down to the clay studio to see if they had fallen asleep there, as had happened once last Summer, but the studio was empty. A new scent came to Izzy, the smell of fear. Increasingly agitated, she checked the car, the lofts around the kiln, the hollow by the stream where they had pulled clay. But the girls were gone.

She called the police, and a deputy arrived within the hour. It was too early to file a missing persons report, but when the neighbors saw the state police cars, they launched a massive search of the nearby quarry where the cliff edge was narrow and treacherous.

They were relieved but confounded to find nothing there. The following day, search and rescue dogs were brought in too, but they did not pick up a scent.

The detectives' questions became more pointed over time. *How long have the girls been missing? What was the last thing they said to you?* Izzy's brain became foggy, and she had trouble responding even to simple questions. Her desperation seemed suspicious. *Could she have harmed them herself*, the police wondered? At some point, her grief was so deep she was no longer sure herself. She searched for reason and meaning but found none.

When the kiln cooled, she emptied it mechanically, her senses dulled. She stacked the ware on wooden shelves in the kiln building to sort through later. She was confused to find a Gemini statue, two girls embracing, underfired, with unpleasing glaze patterns. She tossed it back into the ashes of the fire pit.

The search for the girls went on for weeks, then months, then years, but they were never found. Izzy tried to move on, even half-heartedly considered moving back to Connecticut, closer to her family. Yet she did not leave. She kept red bandanas the girls had worn playing soccer the day before they disappeared in a glass jar. When she was particularly lonely, she would crack open the lid just a few millimeters, bring it up to her face, and breathe in the contents, the campfire smells and their young bodies.

One night when Izzy was alone, she was compelled to stock the firebox once again, building the embers, drying the firebrick, pushing the logs into the firebox, building and sealing the door, feeding fir and oak through the portholes until the fire raged in the kiln from top to bottom. Then after thoughtful consideration, she pushed the kiln door aside and faced the flame. The fire roared up, and she could see the shadows

of her twin girls dancing in the embers, then in the shadows of the fire on the walls, and in the full moon beyond. Then Izzy danced with her daughters, spinning and skipping as the flames licked the night air. The daughters laughed joyously reaching for her hands and pulling her into a tight circle. She leaped toward their light.

Another student of Yuki's came by the next morning to check on Izzy, as was his custom from time to time. He was distressed to see a thin trail of smoke rising from the smoldering embers through the open kiln door. The kiln appeared to be empty except for a crude clay figure of three figures dancing. He left it there in case anyone claimed it later. The kiln had no smell at all now; just dry wood ash and fired clay. The student imagined that Izzy had abandoned her post, perhaps in the middle of the night, but that was okay, it was time for her to move on. He would email Harumi-san later to tell him what happened. For now, he would rest awhile before his young daughter returned from kindergarten. He gathered sticks to rebuild the fire.



The Great Swamp

“Phony!” muttered Mike as he pulled his Toyota Tacoma into Bailey’s Nursery, on the edge of the Great Swamp. “Completely phony!”

Scores of American Flags waving in the wind surrounded the gravel parking lot in front of the greenhouse. To Mike, a child of the sixties, such displays were *fake patriotism*. *Real patriotism* meant overcoming biases, respecting all of our fellow Americans, and learning to live with them in peace, even charging into battle for them, *not just mindlessly saluting flags*.

Mike parked the pick-up and tucked the landscape plan he had developed on-line under his arm. The planting list was extensive, including some perennials he had only read about, such as black cohosh and Saint John’s wort. Mike knew Bailey’s had the best selection, but he would need some help finding all the plants on his list.

Bailey’s Nursery sat on the edge of the Great Swamp Wildlife Refuge in North Central New Jersey. Beyond the parking lot, acres of perennials and trees tilted skyward, strewn everywhere in a maze of uneven rows. Piles of stone and topsoil formed stoic mountains out back, while musty brown mulch was spread everywhere to control the mud.

A dozen full-time employees worked at Bailey’s all year long, supplemented by several college kids hired for the Summer. While the hired help focused on the retail customers, Walter Bailey, who everyone just called Bailey, worked wholesale himself with the landscapers and general contractors.

Sometimes working in the yard was hard labor. There were always dozens of trees to move and pallets of perennials to unload, in every kind of weather. But as Bailey would remind them, “The objective here is to sell plants!” so horticultural knowledge and people skills were also highly valued.

All the local landscapers and general contractors knew Bailey by name and by reputation as an expert on trees of all kinds. He was stocky, gregarious, and highly opinionated. He was also just plain loud, and Mike could hear him as he passed the contractor loading area. Bailey held court with landscapers from around the county, thumbs in the bib of his faded overalls, often sporting a cigar in the corner of his wide mouth, only taking it out to speak. He was always joking with the wholesale customers and making them laugh, which was good for business.

“The media gets all triggered about Trump, but why don’t they ever talk about Hillary? Tell me that! What about Benghazi?” he would ask rhetorically, king of his verdant domain. The landscapers all laughed. Mike chuckled too as he walked by; he admired Bailey’s swagger, if not his politics.

As Mike walked up a leafy aisle, thumbing through his list, an employee approached. “Good morning! My name is Joni, can I help you find anything?”

Mike turned to reply “yes,” but at that moment, all the hairs on the nape of his neck rose up as one in unexpected fear, and he was speechless. The employee before him appeared in almost every respect to be a man. He was Iggy Pop lean, wearing a white sleeveless ribbed tee shirt, jeans tight at the ankle, and loosely tied work boots. His bleach-blond hair was parted near the middle and hung straight down to his shoulders. But Mike hardly noticed that. Instead, he found himself unable to ignore the two mounds

rising from beneath the fabric of the shirt, unmistakably pointy breasts, nipples rising as if on tent poles, like those of a pubescent girl, accentuated by the sheer white cotton,

"No, no, thanks. I was just looking," Mike lied, instantly regretting the irony of the phrase, quickly turning in the other direction, walking stiffly away.

"Well, I'll be glad to help you when you're ready," Joni offered cheerfully.

Mike tucked his list back under his arm, replying, "Okay, I'll let you know!" and scurried off to the other end of the nursery. He paused to catch his breath and consider his options. *'Best just find things myself,* thought Mike. *This new employee, he or she, is out of place here, a hiring mistake, he thought, something uncharacteristic of Bailey.*

Mike knew that there was nothing to be afraid of; *transgender people are not dangerous*; he assured himself. Before he retired from Honeywell, he had attended an HR session explaining that transgenderism was no longer considered a disorder. The attractive woman who gave the presentation was transgender herself. He thought nothing of it, even joking with her playfully about whether or not it would be politically correct of him to open doors for her and wait for her to pass. Without missing a beat, she had replied, "Yes, please do!" and they both laughed about that. He left the program feeling self-assuredly progressive.

So, it was excruciatingly embarrassing to Mike to have to admit to himself that seeing a young woman's tits on a grown man just plain freaked him out, the *in-between-ness of it*. Mike would be fine if he or she had already transitioned. Watching contestants lip sync for their lives on *Ru Paul's Drag Race* with his daughter never caused him any anxiety. *But not this, not now! Couldn't he at least wear a jacket over his shirt?*

Determined to find the plants he needed on his own, Mike floundered. Finally, he found some bottle brush buckeyes, which were scrawny for their sixty-dollar price tag. Still, he picked out five, as per the plan. He came across a row of hollies and picked two of those. He found squiggly weeping willows with exotic spiraling lime-green branches, which were 40% cheaper than the regular weeping willows. Mike needed five, so the savings would be significant.

That was enough; he felt a bit overwhelmed; *time to call it a day*. Still, he needed help writing up the purchase so that he could pay inside. He studiously avoided the area where he had spoken with the in-between employee, hoping to run into anyone else. *Christ*, he thought, *I don't even know what pronoun to use!*

Mike heard Bailey's laughter through a stand of cherry trees, where he was holding court with the landscapers as they loaded their trucks. Mike headed in that direction but paused just on the other side of a tall stand of arborvitae. He could not help listening in.

"I didn't like it one bit at first, I'll tell you that!" said Bailey. The men shuffled and smiled.

"Barbara sprang it on me, like a sneak attack, like Pearl Harbor! Suddenly, she's like, 'Heeeeere's Joni!'" All the married men chuckled knowingly. "So all of a sudden she's my problem. And she comes out strutting out into the yard, and she's like, 'Well here I am! Get used to it!' And now I'm stuck with her!" Bailey was so loud Mike wondered whether "Joni" could hear him.

"Stuck with her?" challenged one of the younger landscapers, "Why don't you just fire her ass?"

“Oh, we’ve had words, believe me.” said Bailey, “I’ve come close. I have to say though; she knows flowering shrubs like nobody’s business. So she doesn’t have to pester me all the time with stupid questions. That’s more than these dumbass college kids can say! They don’t know shit!” The landscapers chuckled approvingly. “Maybe it’s not right, but it makes my life easier. And if anybody has a problem with it, I just don’t give a rat’s ass. They can shop somewhere else.” The landscapers smiled at this, happy to see that Bailey would not be pushed around.

Mike was relieved for a moment that he was not the only one who felt weird about Joni. But then a thick heaviness overcame him. He got a little dizzy. He briefly considered leaving, maybe to return another day when his mind was fresh. But he knew this was cowardly, and it shamed him. *Honestly, is this all I’ve got? Am I that hypocritical?* He stood rigidly, rocking a little, his hands still trembling, breathing evenly until his shame yielded to determination.

Mike saw Joni through the dogwood trees and tried to wave, but she was trimming azaleas and did not notice. He took a deep breath, moved closer, cleared his throat, and choked out, “I could use some help now.”

She still did not look up. *Is she ignoring me?* he worried. He tried again, speaking louder this time. “Excuse me! If you have time, I would like some help!”

Joni looked up, slightly startled, but then smiled broadly. Rising breezily, she dusted off her knees. “Okay, great! What may I assist you with today?”

When Mike showed Joni the bottlebrush buckeyes, she scowled. “Oh no, not those! We have bigger ones that just came in at the same price.” She showed Mike where they were, and they picked out the best five.

The hollies Mike had picked out were nearby. "Do you really want two males? If you want berries, one of the hollies needs to be a female," Joni advised. "Usually, it's not an issue because most plants are hermaphrodites." She paused for effect. "Well, it's true," she said matter-of-factly as they switched out a male for a female. Mike blushed.

Joni warned Mike off the corkscrew weeping willow. "You don't want that! They die in four years, and then you have nothing. Also, the real weeping willows have a wider spread, so if you are thinking about the budget, you won't need as many." Mike found that if he looked Jodi in the eye without looking down, focusing just on what she was saying, he could slow down his heart rate. They picked out the best three weeping willows, and Joni hung a red tag on each.

Joni called for one of the college boys to load the trees into Mike's pick up. Mike cringed as she spoke to the young man as if he were a wayward child. "David! Bring all the plants with red tags to this gentleman's car, all the plants this time, no mistakes, please!" The buckeyes had huge root balls and must have weighed eighty pounds or more. The kid struggled to lift one to carry the two hundred yards to Mike's truck.

"Whoa!" Joni said sternly, "Don't use your back! Go get a cart before you start lifting the root balls, and lift with your legs, you idiot!" As the young man trotted off, Joni turned toward Mike and rolled her eyes dismissively. Mike could not help but roll his eyes as well, conspiratorially, as if to agree, *dumbass college kid*. Joni finished writing up the order, and he thanked her for her help.

Mike went inside to tally it up and pay. Unlike the rustic yard, inside the greenhouse was more of a garden boutique, with long neat rows of flowering annuals.

Red, white, and blue bunting festooned the iron columns holding the vast glass roof above, and small rows of flags topped the three registers. The front of the nursery was laid out like an old-fashioned country store, with garden tools of all kinds, as well as wind chimes, bird feeders, and garden gnomes. There was a community bulletin board at the entrance, and above that, plaques from years and years of boys' and girls' soccer team sponsorships.

Mrs. Bailey was running the cash register. She wore blue jeans and tennis shoes, a crisp white blouse, and a bright red leather belt with a silver clasp. A flag pin graced her lapel. *She looks like June Lockhart in 'Lassie,'* Mike thought, a show he had loved as a boy. He realized she was Mrs. Bailey when she addressed her husband on the intercom: "BAILEY, CUSTOMER ASSISTANCE NEEDED AT REGISTER ONE!" echoed across the yard. Mike just knew that for anyone else, she would have added "PLEASE." A college kid soon arrived to carry a concrete birdbath to a customer's car.

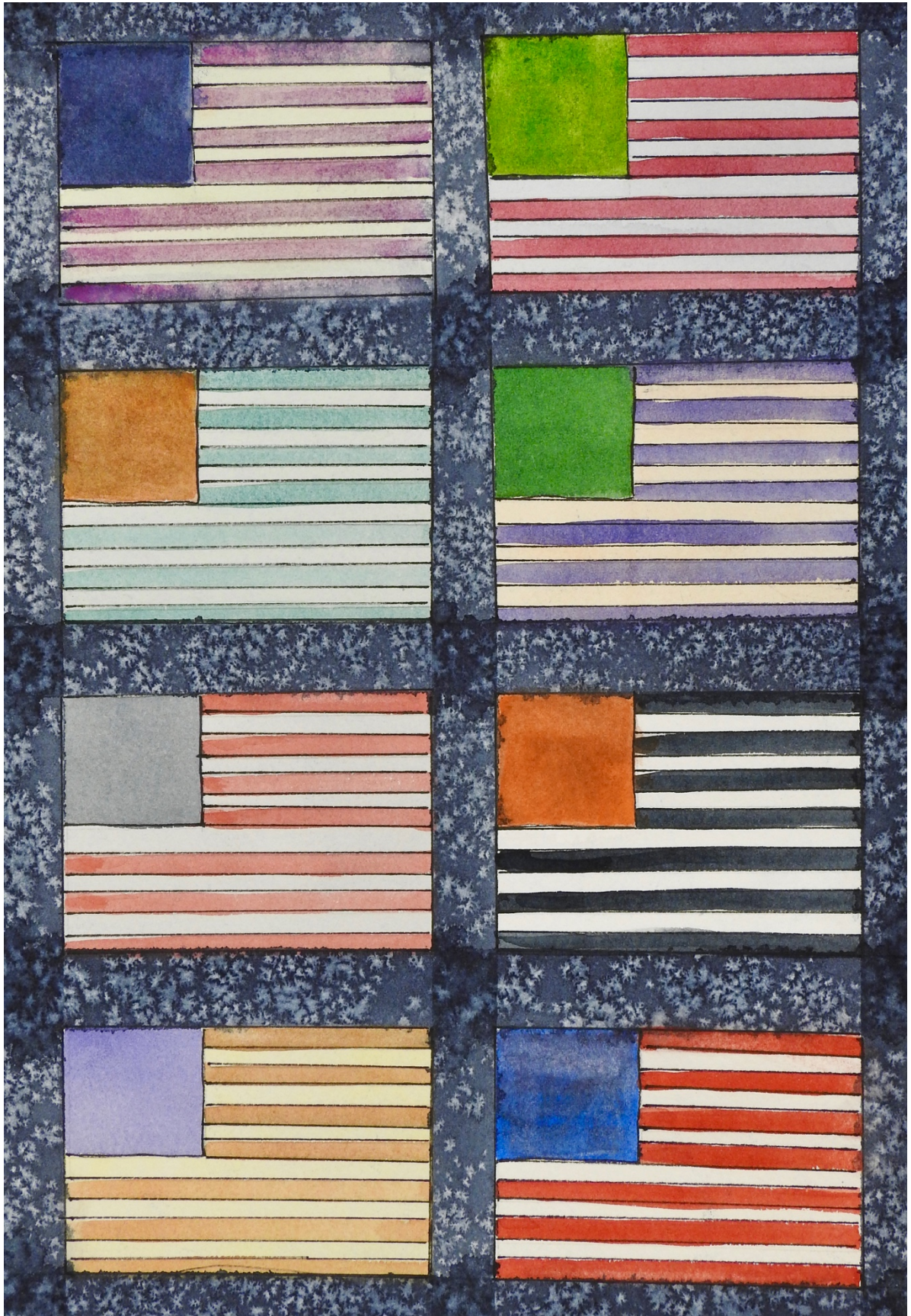
Mrs. Bailey smiled at Mike as he handed her the extensive order ticket. "Oh, I see Joni helped you today. Isn't she so knowledgeable?" she probed gently.

"Yes, she was terrific!" Mike replied, perhaps a little too enthusiastically, wondering if it were a trap. If Mrs. Bailey sensed his wariness, she did not let on.

"She has her Masters in landscape architecture from Rutgers and came on full time a few months ago. She has been so helpful around here," she added casually, as she wrung up the order. *Mrs. Bailey has never been so chatty,* thought Mike, as she totaled the order. Smiling sympathetically over the rims of her reading glasses, Mrs. Bailey spoke gently, "Oh dear, brace yourself. The total is \$683.50." Mike squinted, as if in pain. That made her smile. "I'll tell you what," she said. "We are going to knock 10%

off that bill,” and she did. Mike ran his Visa card through the scanner, gave the college kid a few bucks for loading up the Tacoma, and was soon on his way.

Mike went back to Bailey’s twice more that week, and Joni helped him pick out the rest of the plants he needed. The small talk in the parking lot became easier. She was a dog lover, too, just like Mike. Joni didn't know who June Lockhart was but agreed Mrs. Bailey would have been a great TV mom. Joni helped him load his truck. As he looked up, it occurred to Mike that the scores of flags at Bailey’s Nursery no longer seemed phony at all, the stars and stripes rippling briskly across the bright morning sky.



Critical Reflection: Tourist Guide to *Roadside America*

Introduction

Roadside America is an illustrated collection of short stories about contemporary America, and about people trying to make their way in a murky moral universe while facing unbearable cultural change. Genres vary, from travelogue to horror to dramatic theater. Some could be categorized as Postmodern, using techniques such as magical realism, irony, and self-reference and addressing postmodern themes such as isolation, racism, sexual abuse, and globalization. Some of the later stories are more uplifting, often involving opportunities for characters to attain at least some degree of redemption. Some present more empathetic and potentially uplifting themes, in the spirit of *metamodernism* and *sincere satire*.

The American Short Story in 2020

Postmodernism, a slippery term, was a reaction to *modernism*. As with *postimpressionism*, the name rather unhelpfully references what it replaces as opposed to what it provides. Postmodernism arose as a skeptical rejection of grand modernist narratives of discovery, cultural advancement, laissez-faire capitalism, nationalism, morality, reason, scientific advancement, and industrial progress. The dawn of the postmodern era can be thought of as August 6, 1945, when the *Enola Gay* dropped the first atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima, and it became clearer that the forces driving advancement could also bring on Armageddon. Postmodernists are suspicious of hierarchical structures, including laws, morality, truth, and even language itself. Instead,

Postmodernist works reveal darkness in the shadows and beauty in brokenness. They highlight voices not heard before and feature linguistic playfulness, juxtapositions, and fragmentation while exploring themes of dysfunction, sexuality, ambiguity, loss, and diminishment.

Since the late twentieth century, scholars have wrung their literary hands over whether postmodern fiction is dead or in decline. Noel Harold Kaylor asserted in 2003 that American postmodernism did not blossom in America until the 1960s, later than much of the Western World. He described it as a “shift in aesthetic consciousness” (247) brought about by national trauma from the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation, followed by a dishearteningly aimless Vietnam War, assassinations, and rioting in the streets, all of which were desensitizing. He concluded, “In the twenty-first century, postmodernism may be approaching the end of its time of dominating the creative and artistic thought of the United States, but it has made its lasting mark in an important period of its literature, the latter half of the twentieth century” (266).

In 2003, Kaylor could not have foreseen just how post-modern the world itself would become in the coming years, when facts became unreliable, and a significant portion of life slipped from real to virtual. To date, popular culture has followed suit. Many postmodern authors still produce best-sellers, and there is a vibrant market scripting magical realism stories into television and cinema features. Margaret Atwood, Jason Ballingrud, Emily Geminder, Amelia Gray, Lindsay Hunter, Alissa Nutting, Joyce Carol Oates, Bennett Sims, and Paul Yoon are all unapologetically successful twenty-first-century postmodernists, suggesting the genre still has legs.

So, perhaps Kaylor prematurely penned postmodernism's obit; however, many critics and authors agreed that the rampant nihilism associated with twentieth-century postmodernism has ceased to illuminate; that in fact, it darkens our collective world view; and that it might be better to light a candle than to curse the apocalypse. The *New Sincerity* literary movement of the 1990s, championed by David Foster Wallace, responded to this darkness by disavowing hyper-irony in favor of reverence for the human condition. As with George Saunders, the writer's purpose is to grow empathy universally. As Foster advised in a commencement speech at Kenyon University in 2005, "This is not a matter of virtue. It is a matter of choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural hard-wired setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered" (Wallace 7:00 of 22:43).

At the dawn of the millennium, and particularly in the wake of 9/11, many readers and critics yearned for a more sincere and less fatalistic message, which writers I read such as Robert Olin Butler, Patrick Dacey, Lorrie Moore, Haruki Murakami, Donna Stein, and Elizabeth Strout continue to deliver.

A related scholarly question is what comes after postmodernism. In 1995, Tom Turner coined the phrase *post-postmodernism* to describe literature that considered faith in addition to reason. Thankfully, as the *posts* multiplied, he encouraged his fellow scholars to pray for a better name.

In 2016, Layne Neeper wrote an essay about George Saunders and *sincere satire*, which explicitly attempts to increase empathy in its readers, as opposed to what she called *degenerative satire*, which offers no path forward from helplessness. Unlike new sincerity authors, sincere satire writers have not taken the long arrows of deep irony out

of their literary quivers, nor have they foresworn other postmodern techniques. The critical distinction is in the stories' less dismal, more empathetic, conclusions and implications. Tobias Wolff, George Saunders, Ron Rash, Julia Elliott, Junot Diaz, and Alexander Weinstein could all be considered sincere satirists. Their approach to empathy is not conventional; they rarely preach directly, with Saunders' *Fox 8* a playfully executed exception. As in twentieth-century postmodernism, we witness linguistic acrobatics and see the seeds of world destruction all around us, yet now we also learn that sometimes evil can be overcome and that sometimes people we do not like can be understood in a context beyond our knee-jerk assumptions about the *Other*. We can also recognize ethical hierarchies such as good versus evil, in contrast to the moral deconstruction found in earlier postmodern works (Damico 2).

An overlapping and competing term also applied to cutting-edge twenty-first-century fiction is Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's concept of *metamodernism*. Phil Damico describes metamodernism as "an emerging movement that hopes to synthesize both postmodernist, modernist, and premodern (romantic, enlightenment) ideas while moving our civilization and culture forward in a positive way" (1). While in some ways a reaction to the excesses of both modernism and postmodernism, metamodernism rejects neither. The first point of Luke Turner's *Metamodernist Manifesto* begins, "We recognize oscillation to be the natural order of the world" (1). This frees writers from having to choose between postmodernism and modernism. The final point of Turner's manifesto concludes: "We propose a pragmatic romanticism unhindered by ideological anchorage. Thus, *metamodernism* shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and

knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. We must go forth and oscillate!” (2). Writers I read who could be called metamodernists include Percival Everett, Maria Romasco Moore, Zadie Smith, and Kirstin Valdez Quade.

Why Short Stories?

In 1963, Frank O'Connor mapped four primary characteristics of the short story form: that they could be read in one sitting, that they have a singleness of effect, that they focus on a specific moment of epiphany, and that they feature dispossessed and displaced characters. The first characteristic implies not only a limited length for each story, but also a need to hold the reader in rapt attention. That, in turn, relates to the singleness of effect, wherein every word must be well chosen in pursuit of one goal. The third characteristic, a focus on moments of epiphany, applies to most stories, folk tales and fables included. The fourth point is the most interesting, in that if we combine it with Kaylor's timing of the arrival of postmodernism in America, it seems this central tenet of postmodernism was baked into the American short story since it was defined. I am attracted to writing short stories for all of these reasons, as well as the attraction of being able to focus narrowly in each piece on a dozen or so different themes, compiled in one volume.

Perhaps Rebecca Makkai said it best when she enthusiastically proclaimed "To consider yourself well-versed in contemporary literature without short stories is to visit the Eiffel Tower and say you've seen Europe. Not only would monumental writers be missing from your literary tour, but entire angles and moves and structures of which the

novel, in its bulk, is incapable. The quirky neighborhood, the stray cats and small museums, and the store that sells only butter” (ZSEWSF 1).

With generally declining attention spans for literature, short stories may be able to reach a broader audience than longer-form fiction. At the extreme, *flash fiction* features very short stories, from a handful of words to a few paragraphs. Of the authors I read, Amelia Gray, Lindsay Hunter, and Maria Romasco Moore work in this form. Readers can gobble up more than one story in a very short sitting. At the extreme, this art form is closer to poetry than prose, requiring deft attention to white space and spare exposition. Editing stories down to what is most essential is a laudable goal. Yet, while I admire the writing, I find the quick experience of reading flash fiction unsatisfying. These stories happen so fast that they can really only be contemplated after the fact. I enjoy contemplating stories while reading them, before knowing how the story ends, moving forward uncertainly, searching for clues, and wondering.

Evolution of Genre in *Roadside America*

When I started writing these stories, I had no framework of literary criticism such as summarized above. All I knew was that I was compelled to write about issues in contemporary America that I found disturbing. If the earlier stories are confusing, they reflect my confusion at the time as things seemed to be coming apart in America. That is, I projected my anxiety into the work. I still find stress to be a powerful motivator. However, I have tried to develop other motivations, as in *Leda and the Swan*, in which I intended to give both the mythological Leda and my character Leda the dignity they both deserved, and in *Pride*, an exercise in radical empathy.

The first five stories are derived from nonfiction sources of memoir and history, beginning, fittingly, with a travelogue called *Old Soldiers Revisited*, based on an automobile trip with my mother. *Boogie Knights* is a bawdy tale about the sex robot industry. *Shine On You Crazy Diamond* explores American hedonism and exceptionalism. *Panopticon* is an exploration of contemporary capitalism and isolation through technology. *The Secret* is a memoir of the silence of rape culture and family dynamics.

The next three stories represent attempts to expand my literary range by writing in various genres. *Angel From Montgomery* is a horror story with a feminist twist. *Golden Years* is speculative fiction about class and wealth. *Christmas in Prime Time* is a parody of Charles Dickens' *Christmas Story*, updated to comment on technology run amok. *The Great Centralia Coal Fire* is genuinely postmodern, with a suitably apocalyptic ending, and references ranging from John O'Hara to Dante to Trump.

Lucy Come Home and *El Gato Amarillo* followed, both intended to lighten up from the darkness of *The Great Centralia Coal Fire*. Both were inspired by free-writing and travel to Margate, New Jersey, and Costa Rica, respectively. Both featured relationships with magical animals, and both feature comedic elements. *Lucy Come Home* addresses the evolution of the Republican Party, while *El Gato Amarillo* follows a divorced recently-retired man searching for fulfillment. While writing these two pieces, I began researching my dissertation prospectus, and my growing awareness of the contemporary literary dialogue about short stories informed my approach. In particular, Lynne Neeper's observations about "degenerative fiction" in *To Soften the Heart* hit me hard. While I genuinely admire dark postmodernism, I now understand the perspective

that at this juncture in history, more of it is unlikely to make the world a better place. I see now that there may indeed be collateral damage caused by looking to the darkness of our hearts for answers to life's questions.

The last five stories in this collection are more realistic and more empathetic than what precedes them. *Girl Scout* shares the darkness of some of the early work in its subject matter, but all the horror remains just beyond the story's edge. *Leda and the Swan* is written realistically beyond the central literary conceit of the swan. *Pride* represents radical empathy, asking us to consider the partial redemption of a young white supremacist. *Firing the Anagama* explores the trade-offs involved in being an artist while having a family, and the chronic psychological devastation of unsolved missing persons cases. *The Great Swamp* has opposing liberal and conservative characters moving incrementally closer to each other despite themselves.

Though I considered alternatives, the stories in *Roadside America* are presented pretty much in the order I initially wrote them. If this were a commercial collection, I might do it differently, perhaps making *Boogie Knights* the first story, because it is fun to read and, well, sex sells. In the end, though, I selected chronological order for the purpose of this creative dissertation because it documents my progress both in terms of scholarship and craft.

Motivations and Themes

"Funny how that term caught on, isn't it? I tell everyone, I hated it. Somebody said, 'Drain the swamp,' and I said, 'Oh, that is so hokey. That is so terrible.' ...I said all right I'll try it...so, like a month ago, I said, 'Drain the Swamp,' and the place went crazy. And I said, 'Whoa, what's this?' Then I said it again. And then I started saying it like I

meant it, right? And then I said it—I started loving it, and the place loved it. Drain the Swamp. It's true. Drain the Swamp."

-Donald Trump (Widmer 2)

Donald Trump was not the first to propose draining the swamp in America; the metaphor has been applied across the political spectrum for more than a century to seemingly intractable problems and endless chicanery. While everything in America seems to be changing at lightning speed, the swamp abides. In fact, it has only gotten bigger, thanks to the reach of the internet. These are stories live in that swamp.

The title of this collection comes from a tourist attraction of the same name in rural Pennsylvania. Advertised as "The World's Greatest Indoor Miniature Village," the exhibit feature wide boulevards with three hundred handmade miniature buildings that were loving assembled in the late 1950s and early 1960s. They show an idealized American town, free of crime or other vexing problems. Ancient equipment drives a light show of yellowed images celebrating Jesus and American patriotism, backed by Kate Smith singing *God Bless America*. The exhibit has not been changed in any way since 1962. How could I resist? I picked this reference for several other reasons, including its geographic proximity to Pottsville and Centralia, and my nostalgia for the time of my childhood. But mainly I picked it because many of my stories are about travelling to different places, which can perhaps be imagined as vignettes of stops on a long car ride, some never to be seen again. No two places are the same, and all structures are impermanent. The drive goes on.

Themes of these stories include isolation, fear, hubris, technology run amok, family, sex and sexual abuse, masculinity, violence, deception, urban versus rural perspectives,

race, politics, class, wealth, capitalism, greed, history, memory, and partial transformation. These themes are discussed below in the context of individual stories. Perhaps the overall theme is what it means to be an American at this moment in history.

Writing these stories, I considered my purpose as a writer. I was increasingly drawn to the idea of trying to grow empathy both within myself and within my readers. Lynn Nepper writes, "Empathy is the primal faculty of recognizing the mindedness of Others; it is the human capacity to 'feel into' another consciousness; it an act predicated on receptivity to and acceptance of the Other, even when—especially when—the Other is stupid or deluded or degenerate, in other words when the other expressly does not deserve our benevolent receptivity" (STTH 287). This became a central theme in the evolution of my work. My characters are imperfect, but they are sometimes able to evolve incrementally, and I celebrate that.

Only upon completing this collection did I recognize that my work is fundamentally political. George Orwell's essay "Why I Write" identifies four categories of motivation to write, including "political purpose, using the word 'political' in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after" (WIW 4). All of my stories in some way attempt to do that. Yet, politics is not a natural passion for me. I must agree with Orwell, in his self-observation that "In a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is, I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer" (WIW 5).

Process

Given the inevitable lag between publication of new short stories and meaningful literary criticism about them, it is hard to say who the best American short story writers are at this very moment. The publication of short story collections at least provides a commercial validation, so I selected twenty-seven such collections, who had short story collections published from 2001 to 2019, to represent the state of the short story right now. I also sought out what these authors had to say about themselves and their processes, to learn how they work. I conceptualized them as *aspirational literary peers*, trying to write well enough to earn their respect, if only in my imagination. I also garnered the perspectives of leading contemporary literary critics on these authors, as well as views on the current evolution of the short story form.

I had vowed to write every day, but failed at this goal, instead writing in feverish streaks, followed by days and even weeks of no writing at all. While stepping away felt lazy, the stories sometimes benefited from the distance when I returned. I edited each story dozens of times over many months.

I wanted the collection to have unity but was reluctant to insist on uniformity of genre as I sought to experiment and increase my range. I was impressed by the variety of genres in Bennet Simms' *White Dialogues*, a collection of spooky dream-like postmodern stories. Sims includes a full range of styles and genres in a single volume of short stories, which gave me the courage to do the same.

Some authors, such as Ron Rash, use a place to unite their collections. Others, such as Junot Diaz, use characters that appear in more than one story. Still others, including Patrick Dacy, explore a particular time and place. Robert Olen Butler based his stories

on found postcards, Donna Bayer Stein on artwork by Thomas Hart Benton, Lorrie Moore on birds, Emily Geminder on dead girls. Butler and Stein worked with the images directly as a source; Moore used her structure much more loosely as a kind of literary backstage curtain. In my case, I sought unity in theme in presenting issues of contemporary America playing out all around me. I also tried to make the collection more of a whole through related illustrations.

I joined two writers' groups to get more input on my work. In one, participants sent out ten pages of material to read in advance. In the other, we gave cold readings of five pages. Both approaches were informative, and I am exceedingly grateful for the input I got. The ten-page read in advance allowed for detailed and nuanced commentary, gained by multiple reads. The other more immediate approach is perhaps more reflective of how most people usually read. This was an incredibly helpful combination.

Early on, I viewed my work as more about ideas than about characters, and I paid more care in developing the former. I got consistent feedback that my characters needed to be more compelling. I wrote *Girl Scout* in part to challenge myself to tell a story based solely on the interaction of characters, without further exposition. It was easy to convert this into a one-act play.

I marketed some of my work to select literary magazines in hopes of seeing them in print. Arguably, this is the acid test of being a writer. Virtually all of the authors I read published this way before their work was collected, so I researched where the authors had first published.

I found it challenging to launch into a process so filled with rejection, seemingly ever tilting at windmills, the affirmation with every denial that still one more editor does not

like your work. I tried to reframe it in my mind, though, as more analogous to placing rescue dogs with appropriate families. That is, just as every lost dog deserves a home, so do each of our stories deserve a place to be told. The search for homes continues.

The Stories

a. Old Soldiers Revisited

In this story, which is a collage of actual events, the narrator travels with his eighty-year-old mother by car to South Carolina. Along the way, he muses on family history and that other era of great fear, the 1950s. He concludes that the pursuit of truth and beauty is the only antidote for hopelessness. This conclusion was not foregone when I began this piece; it only became clear to me later as I wrote the story, as a result of both contemplation and unstructured writing.

My intent in “Old Soldiers Revisited” was to explore two eras of fear through a family story and to create a homage to the receding Greatest Generation. I also wanted to explore the terrible insecurity of both the 1950's late 2010's, and the steps governments to assuage such concerns through propaganda and misinformation.

A good measure of history is presented in “Old Soldiers Revisited.” This is a hallmark of many of my stories, from “Panopticon,” to “The Great Centralia Coal Fire,” to “Lucy Come Home.” I enjoy blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, and in this case, memoir. I struggled with how much family history to include. Some readers suggested I just tell the family stories; others suggested I eliminate them altogether. Too much family discussion obscured the focus on two ages of fear. Too little family made the work too dry. In the end, I settled on including personal stories that best reflected the overall Zeitgeist of both times.

I was influenced generally by travel literature ranging from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to Tim O'Brien's electric *Going After Cacciato*. Though not deliberate, in retrospect, the voice of this piece is similar to the voice of Spalding Grey in the film

Swimming to Cambodia, a work of breathless energy, which shares a similar political sentiment, as well as a similar structure in telling a personal story with a larger contextual message about America.

b. Boogie Knights

“Boogie Knights” is a speculative fiction story about a successful technology start-up in the sex robot industry. This is an actual emerging industry that may ultimately change the nature of human existence by replacing complicated social partnerships with more malleable, customizable alternatives. In my story, an entrepreneur disrupts an industry by focusing on the needs of the fairer sex.

“Boogie Knights” was derived from a longer piece called “Panopticon,” an ambitious non-fiction exploration of the isolating effect of increasingly virtual lives, and the connections between imprisonment, surveillance, and social media. Originally written in three parts, the first presented a straight ten-page-plus non-fiction account of the enlightenment ideals in prison reform that ultimately led to the building to the Presidio Modelo Prison in Cuba, the world’s only truly Panoptic Prison. The second section was a journalistic account of current events demonstrating our ongoing loss of privacy. My intent in this second section was that it would be periodically updated to keep it current. The third section was a science fiction tale about a visionary sex robot entrepreneur as he considers buying the Presidio Modelo to serve as the ultimate platform for exhibitionistic social media. Unfortunately, this acrobatic montage topped out at close to thirty pages, more than most readers could suffer. In the end, I eliminated the first two sections entirely and split the third into two shorter stories, “Boogie Knights” and “Panopticon.”

My characterization of Jared reflects my experience working in vibrant technology businesses, where I met many CEOs of young companies relentlessly pursuing disruptive innovation. These are some of the smartest people on the planet, and they are laser-focused on succeeding. But most business people also want to be liked and respected, as does Jared. He is somewhat playful in describing his accomplishments, and enjoys puns and double entendre. When “Panopticon” was in its original form, readers recognized Jared as diabolical, because of his Presidio Modelo plan. But when the story of the sex dolls was presented stand-alone, readers found Jared more attractive, charming in his own way, in the vein of Horatio Alger, a winner in a winner-take-all world, an American success story.

This story gave me a chance to explore the age-old question of what women want from men. My characterization of the “Boogie Knights” robots as the boy next door type or Mensch may be cliché; yet, in this era of the #metoo movement and high-profile cases of male chicanery and abuse, to my mind, Jared’s vision of how this industry may evolve is not far-fetched by any means. The reactions of several female readers suggest this is an entirely viable market.

The twist ending, featuring a president entering his third term and virtually eliminating on-line privacy, is indeed far-fetched. But every successful white-collar criminal and crooked politician knows not to leave a paper trail, even a virtual one. I modeled the outcome of the President's proclamation on significant data breaches in the news and, in particular, the 2015 hacking of AshleyMadison.com, a dating site for people seeking extramarital affairs. In that case, hackers threatened to release personal

information and profiles of users of the site, which I fabulized in this story into a national crisis.

c. **Shine On You Crazy Diamond**

“Shine on You Crazy Diamond” is a memoir based on my own teenage experiences in Teheran, in the late Seventies. It is based on memory rather than a more scholarly approach. It makes a connection between unconscious hedonism and American misadventure abroad. In this story, the main character experiments with hard drugs, not understanding the danger, just as the CIA and others did not understand the cultural soul of our Iran, and its interests beyond economic or political.

The title “Shine on You Crazy Diamond” derives from the rock band *Pink Floyd’s* song of the same name. It is a tribute to former band member Syd Barrett, whose explorations of chemical parts-unknown led to mental illness. This twelve minute nine-part song, written by the remaining bandmembers shortly after they asked Barrett to resign, documents Barrett’s former creative strength and subsequent descent in two brief verses. It has a heroic voice that is evocative to me of Walt Whitman, who coincidentally romanticized Manifest Destiny in line with the prevalent American view of his time. I use the song here as a metaphor for the shadow of Manifest Destiny, its many trails of tears.

As I write, this piece joins the collection at the last minute. Early versions were written in conversation with Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of An Opium Eater*, a book that inexplicably made its way to my parents’ book shelf in my youth. Reading this book was my first exposure to literature that celebrated drug use. Tying my story to De

Quincey's book, and exploring his language, I was led to further romanticize drug use. This made me a little ashamed of releasing the piece to the world. A fan of the story noted its exclusion from the collection and asked me about it. When I reread it, I came to see the problem as fixable by eliminating the De Quincey linkages. I also realized that I wanted this story in the collection, because beyond lambasting tourist culture, nowhere else had I addressed American Exceptionalism, an important *Great Swamp* topic to cover. In the end I cut down the romanticism significantly, while still trying to include the allure as a fact. It is a better story as a result of this re-editing.

d. Panopticon

"Panopticon" reflects perspectives on privacy and technology related to my experience as Chief Financial Officer for DoubleClick, Inc., an internet advertising company, at the turn of the century. Before the internet became ubiquitous, attempts to gather information about people without their permission was described in military terms, as *an invasion*. A generation of Baby Boomers grew up on sci-fi and Cold War intrigue and was protective of their privacy. At DoubleClick, my responsibilities included oversight of our privacy efforts. Just before my arrival, there was a national uproar about the company's plan to match information about purchases from catalogs with web browsing activities, to create richer consumer profiles for marketing purposes. In the uproar that ensued, the company's plan was abandoned. Flash forward twenty years to today, consumer profiling through data capture is the basis of some of the biggest companies in the world, while apps and AI-enabled cameras track our every move, and

so-called *influencers* measure their self-worth in terms of how many people are watching them.

In terms of other influences, I am indeed indebted to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* and its focus on the outcomes of a surveillance-based culture. I was also drawn to the panopticon metaphor by Michael Foucault's nuanced consideration of types of imprisonment in *Discipline and Punishment*. Foucault used the panoptic prison as a jumping-off point to consider broader issues of societal control in schools, government, and elsewhere in the mid-twentieth Century. I have used it instead as a springboard to discuss how technology and social media breed isolation in the early twenty-first century.

A Gen Z reader of an early draft of "Panopticon" found the central character Jared too reminiscent of Gordon Gecko, he of "Greed is Good" in the movie *Wall Street*. Gecko is just a money guy, though; Jared is a sociopath who wants to truly dominate others. His media-based manipulation and invasion of privacy are what offend me, while his greed is familiar to me because of my long business career. Perhaps to younger readers, it is the other way around.

e. **Golden Chariots**

In this story, three *Ordinaries* are tasked as de facto concierges for thousands of *Golden Chariots*, which house wealthy retirees. Some of the tenants are very difficult to deal with, and a financial incentive leads the Ordinaries to take matters into their own hands. They eliminate truly heinous guests, and the reader is left to ask whether the ends justify the means as the complex implodes around them.

My intent in “Golden Chariots” was to comment on privileged retirement leisure and class inequities. In some of the errant guests, we see shades of Burdick and Lederer’s iconic *The Ugly American*, in which the entitled traveler sees himself as a connoisseur of all things and is oblivious to his flawed perspectives. Entitlement plus jet lag creates monsters abroad to this day.

I was also schooled by Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, in which the pursuit of superficial pleasures undermines true freedom. Similarly, in *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury finds faith in bookish savages who eschew the telly.

In approaching this piece, I explicitly had in mind “Tom Outland’s Story” from Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*. This was more obvious in earlier drafts, which directly lifted passages and images from Cather’s work freely. Now the influence is more subdued, but we still see it in the structure of the Blue Mesa and the efforts of the character Tom to document the dying civilization.

f. The Secret

In this story, a teenage boy on family vacation dreams of getting girls to like him as he single-handedly pilots a motorboat on a wide bay in Maine. He perceives his shy older girl cousin Jeanne as a neurotic complainer. Lance, an older Brat Pack-like friend of Jeanne’s father, seems to offer a clue to the mystery of what makes women like men, but the clue is linked to a horrible secret.

My intent in this story was to comment on the differences circa 1970 between girls’ lives and boys’ lives; how boys were urged to explore fearlessly, while girls had a host of concerns and dangers that threatened them daily. I wanted to explore family and social

dynamics during the so-called sexual revolution in the sixties and early seventies, a period of rapid change and social upheaval.

I was moved to write this piece by the many narratives of the #metoo movement, which humbled many of us as men as we sadly considered the behavior of the worst of our wide fraternity. Few boys of my generation even knew what a sexual predator was. We were warned to watch out for strangers, but not warned to watch out for scoutmasters, clergy, co-workers, and family friends. Moreover, boys were not taught how to look out for girls and help assure their safety as they too explored the outside world. Date rape and statutory rape were rarely prosecuted. Girls were told how they dressed or where they went was reason enough for abuse, and that it was impolite to talk about it in any event. The silence created a devil's playground for predators everywhere.

g. Angel From Montgomery

In this story, a woman loves her violent spouse enough to want to keep him at any cost. In so doing, she upends the traditional cycle of domestic violence, as the jailer's and prisoner's roles are reversed.

John Prine's song of the same name (sung with Bonnie Raitt) is the basis of this story. In southern prison slang, an *Angel from Montgomery* is a letter from the governor to stay an execution. Prine uses that metaphor as his forlorn female narrator talks about her unhappy marriage and her yearning for escape. I have built on that idea to explore of what it means to be captive.

This piece was written as a feminist revenge horror story. When I began this story, I was exploring genres outside of my comfort zone. I was strongly influenced by Joyce

Carol Oates. Her stories in *Dis Mem Ber* center on vulnerable women who often face senseless violence, including rape and murder. They are creepy horror stories in which Oates masterfully manipulates our emotions.

Some readers may find the violence in *Angel From Montgomery* distasteful. I agree, but I do not view the violence as gratuitous, in that it is a story about violence itself, as a means of control. I believe horror was an appropriate genre too. As M.M. Owen writes, "At the heart of horror is a conservative craving for the predictable and the known. The unpleasant atonal dissonance you'll hear in every horror scene reflects, through the collapse of harmony, the disintegration of familiar and comforting patterns out there in the world" (OAOH, 5). This sounds similar to the effects of PTSD, a common condition for victims of abuse.

h. Christmas in Prime Time

In this story, a small-town mayor reminiscent of Scrooge tries to make a stand against Big Technology and Amazon in particular. However, his plan hits a snag when his constituents demand that their Christmas packages at any cost. After a series of frightening dreams about Christmas Past, Present, and Future, the last with its threat of being replaced as Mayor by a robot, our hero sets a new course to surrender to Amazon to get reelected, a happy ending for all involved.

This parody of Dickens' *Christmas Story* was inspired in part by the strong-arm negotiation tactics reportedly used by Amazon in selecting a regional headquarters location. It explores international corporate dominance over small-town America, as well as the commercial underpinnings of the Holiday Season. As is often the case in parody,

the conclusion is decidedly more cynical than the original, suggesting that political fortune and capitalism go hand in glove.

I was inspired to write satire by Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* with its divine cynicism, suggesting that the wealthy should eat impoverished children. "I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children" (line 76).

Would that all my parody influences be that high-brow, but I must also give the nod to the *Fractured Fairy Tales* cartoons of my youth as well as *Mad Magazine's* parodies of popular movies. People of my generation are well schooled in satire and irony. While some wistful critics proclaimed 9/11 as the death of irony, to paraphrase Mark Twain, that death was greatly exaggerated.

i. **The Great Centralia Coal Fire**

In this story, a cub reporter travels to Centralia, Pennsylvania, to understand why the Centralia Coal Fire still rages below the ground. On the way, he meets John Ohara, who encourages him to abandon his quest and just write about real people around him. He travels down a steep funnel to find the answer, bringing him closer and closer to the Hellish answer.

Dante's *Inferno* forms the underlying architecture of the descent into Hell. Like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or its reincarnation as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, the journey becomes more and more challenging. It climaxes in a meeting with a demented enemy, before a slow retreat to mere Hellishness.

The destruction of Centralia serves as a metaphor for our loss of centrism and civil discourse with people with views different than our own. Centralia represents a place people formerly came together, as opposed to the tribalization of politics in America today.

Centralia is a real-life abandoned town in Columbia County, Pennsylvania, where a coal fire has been burning underground for more than 50 years. In its day, the world of Centralia included a working mine, decent public schools, shared news sources, broad membership in social, charitable organizations, and civics lessons in grade school. Now all that is gone.

My intent in writing “The Great Centralia Coal Fire” was also to explore my inner emotional journey in trying to understand the 2016 Presidential election. I needed to understand why heartland Americans, whom I respect and admire, embraced Trump, who appeared to many other Americans and me to be a divisive and cultish demigod.

While I started this work without preconceptions of its ending, I was inspired by Will and Ariel Durant’s *The Lessons of History* and, in particular, the quote that precedes my story. I had always thought of freedom and equality as more or less mutually reinforcing, but the Durants’ perspective is informative. Through this lens, the Republican Party sees itself as the party of freedom. In contrast, the Democratic Party sees itself as the party of equality. Love of Freedom plays out in everything from objections to gun control and political correctness, to wanting to harvest natural resources from federal lands. In contrast, love of equality leads one to embrace ideals like equal opportunity, minority rights, and progressive taxation.

During my business career, I commuted to Manhattan each workday. The companies I worked for were quintessentially New York companies, hallmarked by an aggressive pursuit of wealth, but at the same time, particularly it seems in technology companies, most of the people I worked with had more-or-less progressive social values. To escape the stress of the Manhattan work week, I often went to see rural friends in Pennsylvania on the weekend, and over time I met many of their local friends. Life in Schuylkill County Pennsylvania was a stark contrast to Manhattan. Big egos were frowned upon; ambition was to be self-moderated, less tied to earning enormous sums of money, more tied to finding time to spend with their families. I heard great cynicism about the federal government, and anger about the shortage of good-paying jobs, while politicians got rich. Perhaps having this context helped me comprehend more readily why Schuylkill County had elected Donald Trump by the most extensive margin of any county in Pennsylvania. They were looking at a different America than the one I saw in New York. It was easy to empathize with them before doing so was considered radical.

j. El Gato Amarillo

In this work, a fifty-something lawyer on a one-year sabbatical travels alone to Costa Rica to complete a novel. In the end, his book remains unfinished, but he finds peace. The Costa Rican setting allowed me to explore the *Ugliness* of entitled *Americans* traveling the world. In this case, our lead character is at least partially transformed and softened by three generations of Costa Rican (and Costa Rican-American) women.

My intent in writing “El Gato Amarillo” was largely self-reflexive of my own unsettled questions about whether it is better to pursue the world through the mind or

through the heart and body. At times, I would prefer to spend more time experiencing life rather than writing about it. Thus, the story explores the fault-prone foundation of my commitment to creative writing.

It is also a comic exploration of procrastination. The many things Larry finds to do before ever sitting down to write reflect my own impressive ability, at times, to do everything but the task at hand.

I was inspired by a ten-day trip with my wife to Nicoya in January of 2019, where we did meet a charming five-year-old girl named Ava. Most of what she says in the story is verbatim, as I feverishly wrote down everything she said in conversations. All of the other dialogue in the piece is imaginary.

I was influenced by Kirstin Valdez Quade's *Night of the Fiesta*, which offers lush, uncomfortable stories about people struggling to make it in New Mexico. In particular, I was inspired by her attention to key details from New Mexico festivals and lore.

Early in this story, stumbling into a Caribbean writers' conference, the lead character Larry is a boorish buffoon. As in "Golden Chariots", I modeled his behavior on observations attained from years of international travel. In workshopping this piece, I was delighted at how negatively people reacted to Larry early on, as he flounders at the spa before going to Nicoya. That was just what I was hoping for, in the spirit of Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, a very cranky woman indeed. Similarly, Dominic Minghella's highly insensitive Martin Ellingham in the British television series *Doc Martin* and Juno Diaz' lothario Yunion in *This Is How You Lose Her* both influenced this character study. These are all flawed people with whom we grudgingly come to

empathize by understanding what drives them, such that we can appreciate incremental growth.

I also owe something to the 1960s movie *Heidi*, which I saw as a child on television. Its charming portrayal of an older man softened by an enchanting young girl essentially mirrors the plot trajectory of *El Gato Amarillo*.

k. **Lucy Come Home**

In this story, Lucy, a wooden elephant building in Margate, New Jersey, is brought to life and manipulated by a devious local politician into a terrified rampage. A young boy seeks to rescue her and bring her back to the peaceful seaside.

The premise of Lucy moving along the streets of Margate was based on an actual effort to conserve the building in the 1960s. In the actual events, the elephant building was lifted onto a rolling platform to move it down the street. To my knowledge, there were no villains like Jared involved.

My intent in writing “Lucy Come Home” was to comment on the current trajectory of the Republican party through a fable. “Lucy Come Home” is sincere satire; lots of mayhem is generated, but the good guys win in the end. It reflects my hope that the Republican party can pivot and return to its more traditional roots as the *Party of Lincoln*.

The title is a kind of *Fractured Fairytale*-like bastardization of *Lassie Come Home*. *Fractured Fairy Tales* was a crudely animated sub-feature of the Rocky and Bullwinkle Show, a children’s cartoon with humor squarely directed toward adults. It presented familiar fairy tales with a significant twist, such as a devious Sleeping Beauty, who only pretends to sleep. *Lassie Come Home* was a popular 1960s TV serial in which a lost

collie desperately tries to find its way home, failing each Sunday night, week after week, for an entire television season. I would cry each week on cue. I continue to do so for the Party of Lincoln.

Though not an intentional reference, I need to credit Walt Disney for my visualization of an animated Lucy. Disney's anthropomorphic animal characters are brilliant, including, of course, Dumbo, who, like Lucy, is mute and emotionally sensitive, and needs to be rescued from harm's way.

1. **Girl Scout**

In this story, written in the form of a one-act play, a sixteen-year-old girl recruits a fourteen-year-old girl to join her to travel by private jet to give massages to wealthy older men on a tropical island. The story was inspired by reading about Jeff Epstein's vast pedophile recruiting network. This effort to recruit hundreds and hundreds of underage girls was run by women, some former victims themselves. I wanted to explore the manipulation involved as a well-coached older girl persuades a young girl to participate.

I was influenced in this work by Ron Rash's *Hard Times*, where he explores what desperate people will do to survive. I was also influenced by James Clavell's *The Children's Story*, with its keen demonstration of the power of propaganda over innocent children.

Workshopping this piece, I received wildly inconsistent commentary on the believability of the voice of the younger girl, Nicky. Some said Nicky should not sound so intelligent; others thought she should be presented as smarter. Some readers wanted more teenage slang; others less. One reader sincerely advised me to spend more time with

fourteen-year-olds before writing about them, oblivious to the irony. Another urged me to change the ending to make it more uplifting. Perhaps on some psychological level, these were attempts to rescue the young girl. In the end, I had to rely on a talented twenty-something actress to bring her to life as a credible fourteen-year-old girl.

I submitted *Girl Scout* to the New York Theater Festival's Winterfest, where it was accepted to run in January, 2020. Given my lack of experience and the sensitivity of the subject matter, I did not want to direct young actresses myself. Through friends of friends, I identified a director, Sharifa Elkady. She then helped recruit the cast and held rehearsals in her Hell's Kitchen apartment. In the first rehearsal, the two actresses read the play, and we had an in-depth discussion of the play, which led to significant and worthwhile revisions. In the end, the actresses gave spell-binding performances in the roles of Tina and Nicky. The Festival's director was highly complementary, urging me to bring another play to the next festival. Personally, seeing the three performances of my play come to life on a true off-off-Broadway stage was a peak experience.

m. Leda and the Swan

This story is set in the 1970s. When a budding Summer romance does not progress sexually as expected, a young man aggressively tries to uncover why his paramour allows his advances only to a point. He is woefully unprepared for the answer Leda provides and makes the situation worse in his fumbling follow-up. Eventually, the memory is so disturbing he can only think about it in metaphor.

My intent in *Leda and The Swan* was to explore the culture of silence surrounding rape before #me-too from a different angle. I was thinking about William Butler Yeats'

poem *Leda and the Swan* as well as the myth itself. I never noticed the overwhelmingly masculine perspective of this poem before rereading it in this light. The rapist is a *feathered glory*, while Leda is a *helpless breast* dropped by *an indifferent beak*. It is all about the bird.

I was impressed by Robert Butler Olen's *Ironworkers' Picnic* in its portrayal of under-informed awakening male sexuality. Though that work is comic rather than tragic, this story gave me a model for presenting the couple making out in the boat.

I was also influenced by Yann Martel's philosophical novel *Life of Pi*. For most of the story, the reader believes he is in a magical animal story of some kind. We take Pi at his word as he describes the difficult passage, stuck on a life raft with zoo animals violently competing for survival. Only toward the end of the book does a Japanese transportation official skeptically question Pi's story. We are suddenly aware that the violent animals may represent humans on the raft cannibalizing each other. Pi encourages the inspector to choose whichever story he prefers, and the inspector agrees the animal version is a better story.

I admire Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, and its unflinching discomfort as we watch newlyweds, who are otherwise highly compatible, make mistakes because they do not have a shared language for sex. My plot essentially mirrors that story. I also looked to Anais Nin's erotic short story collection *Delta of Venus* for its frank presentation of aberrant sexual behavior. This gave me the courage to not shy away from the erotic aspects of the story.

n. **Pride**

In this story, a young, disenchanted man is recruited by the Proud Boys. He finds community there but ultimately loses everything most important.

Founded in 2016 by Gavin McInnes, co-founder of Vice Media, the Proud Boys is an actual White Supremacist group that promotes political violence internationally. This story was a deliberate attempt at radical empathy: to view a White Supremacist as redeemable and worthy.

I was influenced in this work by Haruki Murakami's *Men Without Women*. Murakami captures the inner dialogue of lonesome Japanese men, reminiscent perhaps of Yukio Mishima's *Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, with which it shares a central theme of male isolation and suffering. As in "Pride," *Men without Women* are men that had women but lost them, either to death or to other men, and who have become lovesick and lonely.

Another influence was Nathan Balingrud's *North American Lake Monsters*. Balingrud's stories address masculinity, and in its toxic depths, we discover the actual monsters. His stories are vital and worldly. I studied the story *SS* for its excellent portrayal of how racist groups recruit and spread hate.

Patrick Dacey also influenced me. His stories, all set in Wequaquet, Massachusetts, involving people at the edges of disaster and shame: the unemployed; discontent veterans; alcoholics. I admire the way Dacey presents dialogues between leftist and rightist neighbors coming to appreciate each other in the story "Patriots", and that had a significant influence on this piece.

In this story, I try to find the beating heart inside a type of human I disdain. That is what radical empathy is. To my mind, it is an excellent personal practice, one I should try more often. However, some people object to presenting these kinds of characters in any positive light at all. They worry that there is some risk that these hateful young men be glorified or that their belief system becomes normalized. I am not sure who is right about this, but that is the risk of radical empathy.

o. Firing the Anagama

In this story, a potter named Izzy becomes entranced with an Anagama kiln. She brings her twin daughters with her when the kiln is being fired, where they are urged to play together out of Mom's way. Izzy stubbornly elects to take on the one week firing of the kiln herself, a job better done by five people. Her daughters go missing and are never found.

This story is a reflection on the choices people have to make in seeking to be an artist while having a family. On one level, the horror of this story is that Izzy cannot and does not find that balance. Beyond artists, the story conjures the challenge and frustrations of single working moms trying to keep it all together. Izzy works extremely hard to support her family through the arts, but her focus as an artist exposes her to criticism about her mothering.

This is a kind of Japanese horror story, slow to develop, focused on moments rather than characters, atmospheric rather than plot-driven. But it rests on the foundation of information about how an Anagama is actually fired.

Aspects of the story are partially based on the life of my friend Kristin Muller, potter and Executive Director of Peters Valley School of Craft in Layton, New Jersey. Kristin

did in fact buy an Anagama kiln from a Japanese mentor two states away, and bring her school-age non-twin daughters there with her. However, Kristin is no Izzy; she is a wonderful human being and successful mother to her now-grown daughters.

More so than any of the other stories here, “Firing the Anagama” leaves the interpretation of what happened open to the reader’s imagination. Theories on what actually happened are welcome. *Was Izzy involved? Is Yuki benign or sinister? How about the kiln itself? Who are these other students?* In leaving these questions unanswered, I tried to reflect the anxiety and confusion Izzy seems to be experiencing, as I would imagine unsolved child abductions must be one of the hardest things a parent could possibly endure.

p. **The Great Swamp**

In this story, flag-waving Republicans help a trans woman to fit in in her chosen professional field in their nursery. Our narrator Mike finds himself unexpectedly less progressive than the values he espouses when faced with a woman in transition. Quite suddenly, he needs to search his soul. The reality of interacting with a transitioning transgender person challenges his progressive ideals. Initially, he flounders, before finding the courage to face his fear and bias. Mike has to walk the walk as well as he talks the talk. As Progressives, we need to assure that our empathy is expressed through action, rather than through *Likes* and *Shares* alone.

Bailey is a Trumpist blow-hard alpha-male who speaks his mind. But he is also a pragmatist that understands that in business, the ultimate test is how well you do your job. Joni is a knowledgeable horticulturist, and Bailey respects that. Elizabeth Strout’s

Olive Kitteridge and Dominic Minghella's *Doc Martin* inspired Bailey's character, as they inspired Larry in "El Gato Amarillo." All of them are superficially unlikable characters whom we come to admire grudgingly and even like as we get to know them better.

Mrs. Bailey is a deft advocate who gives Joni a chance to work in the yard over Bailey's objections. In an increasingly tribal world, Mrs. Bailey has the courage to attempt to widen the focus of those around her; to grow empathy.

Joni is not a perfect hero. She may be just as stubborn as Bailey and quickly advances up the pecking order at the expense of the college kids. I wanted to ground her admirable character in these human imperfections.

The American Flag is central to this story and to this collection. Some people disparage the American flag. They see it used like a war banner by some on the political Right, as Mickey Mouse does in my illustration for "Shine On You Crazy Diamond", as if the Right is somehow more patriotic than the Left. But the American Flag does not belong to any one particular party. It is a symbol that should unite us rather than divide us. As I tell my liberal-minded daughter, *don't let anyone take away your flag*.

Illustrations

I created an illustration for each story, desiring illustrations which would unify the collection and enhance the experience of reading without overwhelming it. Coming into this exercise, I believed realistic illustration does more harm than good in the interplay of author and reader. I intended that my touch be light and stylistic. I believed that the best illustration for literary fiction allowed the reader to engage his or her imagination

fully, without anyone else but the author and the reader involved in the creative exchange.

Then I observed the wide variety of visual material my admired short story writers used in their own work, many using visual references for literary inspiration. Robert Olen Butler used found postcards, and Maria Romasco Moore used found photographs as a starting point for her work, but the stories are not beholden to the pictures. Maria R. Moore selected very old photos from flea market finds, and wrote a single page of fiction about each. Lindsay Hunter's *Daddy's* features mysterious photos, which seem less directly related to the stories. Her collection is held binding side up, 90 degrees off the normal orientation, as one might flip through index cards. It is well illustrated with daguerreotype-looking photos of simple objects that relate to the stories reminiscent of Man Ray, though inexplicably, the artist is not credited. Saunders' *Fox 8* is illustrated in simple line drawings ala James Thurber, which are cutesy yet effective for the fable. Pablo Neruda's poetry collection *Ode to Common Things* also has compelling but straightforward pencil drawings of just the things.

All of these options were open to me while I sought a unifying structure, and my thinking about illustration itself shifted. I came to see illustrations as an opportunity to connect my readers to the stories in a new way, since some of my stories are difficult to approach for more traditional readers.

I also considered various watercolor styles I could use and looked at many woodblock prints, and various fantastic illustrators over the centuries. In the end I elected to outline aspects of all my water colors in black archival pen, a look reminiscent of Japanese prints and select children's literature.

In these illustrations I tried not to portray the climax nor even the central character, but to create an image stirring enough to generate interest in reading the story. To a commercial illustrator this strategy might have been more obvious; it took me a while to sort through the alternatives. Now I feel the illustrations truly support the stories, rather than merely decorating them.

Most of the images are self-explanatory but two deserve additional explanation.

The illustration for “Boogie Knights” is based on a painting by Edouard Manet called *Olympia* (1867). Manet’s painting was scandalous for taking a classical pose and depicting an unblinking sexually-empowered woman, likely a courtesan, demarked by her blossom, brass bracelet, kicked off heels, and the thin black ribbon tied in a bow. In the original painting a dark-skinned woman brings the courtesan flowers from a suitor. In my version she has been replaced by an attentive Boogie Knight, a new kind of servant for a new kind of Olympia.

The illustration for “Shine On You Crazy Diamond” features a mash-up of an Andy Warhol Mickey Mouse lithograph and a popular early 1980s black market political button of Mickey raising his middle finger and proclaiming “Fuck Iran.” Mickey Mouse is a potent symbol of American capitalist and hedonist values world-wide. I placed him at the great mosque of Isfahan, though he is too angry and self-assured to consider or appreciate foreign cultural wonders. By happenstance, Warhol’s Mickey’s raised foot played a role in this *Ugly-Americanesque* imagery, since displaying the sole of one’s shoe is considered an insult in Iran and much of the Islamic world.

Conclusion

My writing has evolved from a bleakness that paralleled my feelings in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, to an incrementally more positive worldview that includes some hope for individual progress despite the odds. Often in my stories, characters undergo some degree of transformation, too little perhaps to earn our full respect, but enough to give us hope for further growth. Complete conversion of people with views antithetical to our own is highly unlikely, particularly if those people have had the views for all of their lives. Perhaps partial redemption and empathy are all we can reasonably expect.

Going forward, I am increasingly drawn to Lynn Neeper's explanation of George Saunders' objectives in her essay "To Soften the Heart", "(Saunders') satiric short fiction identifies the social and psychological ills that afflict us as members of a class-bound and often merciless consumer culture, and he challenges readers to care, to enter into the "other mindedness" of individuals and in so doing to "soften the heart" of readers—the only correction that is both desirable and attainable in postmodern satire" (297).

And perhaps in postmodern American life as well.

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