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# End of the Beginning

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**THE END OF THE BEGINNING**

By

Peter Lowe

B.A. Boston College, 2009

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2018

Advisory Committee:

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# **THE END OF THE BEGINNING**

By Peter Lowe

Thesis Advisor: David Kress

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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This thesis is a collection of short stories which explores the use of non-conventional genres. The research contained within this thesis follows the oldest line of inquiry open to featherless bipeds: what does it mean to be human? As humans compose on and in increasingly multi-modal platforms and sites, the stories we tell will shift in unpredictable ways. This collection is an attempt to capture narrative in these 21<sup>st</sup> century spaces.

## **DEDICATION**

*To my family and teachers*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who contributed the work in this thesis. I'd like to thank Dave for his help each week, Greg for the time he spent with me during workshop, and Dick for helping me pursue my neighboring interest in screenwriting. I'd like to thank the Writing Studies faculty, as well, for their guidance and support in my learning to teach writing responsibly – this has no doubt affected my process and practice. I have learned so much from Pat, Ryan, Dylan, Mary, Ware, and Charlotte. Without the stellar people who made up my cohort, this would be a far blander document.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

In the work I have written since arriving at Maine, I have followed three interrelated lines of inquiry: narrative distance, constraint, and deceit. In my personal writing, workshop writing, and literature classes, I found myself routinely engaged with questions and problems that arose in these areas. In my fall 2015 workshop, we focused on constraint (reading and writing Oulipian fiction) and framed our entire semester by watching Orson Wells *F is for Fake*. During most of that semester, I was working with boundaries in my head, which I had brought with me unquestioned. I had a clear view of what fiction was, what it wasn't, and much of the fiction on that first workshop reading-list was illegible to me as fiction. It took some time, but faculty, colleagues, and visiting readers convinced me to expand my perspective to include realities I could not see in the straw I was looking at the world through. In this collection, work is assembled, in general, in reverse-chronology; the newest work is first. My expanding notion of fiction is catalogued well by both the non-traditional stories that lead off, and the plainly "house-style" stories towards the back, where I have provided the beach-read information necessary to understand without paying too much attention.

Narrative distance became a concern of mine out of my critical work with *Locos*, by Felipe Alfau, and *Pale Fire*, by Vladimir Nabokov. In both of those books, the narrator, the implied author, and the real author are conflated in deliberately confusing ways. In *Locos*, Felipe Alfau is the narrator, implied author, and real author of the text. Using reception theory (Iser) and theory on narrative distance (Booth, Chatman), I wrote my way to an understanding of how Alfau used the genre conventions of the novel to induce awareness on the readers part of their participation in the novel. The reader is, for instance, encouraged by Alfau to read the book in any order they choose. In *Pale Fire*, too, an various alternate trajectories through the book are

presented by the narrator/IMPLIED author. Nabokov was particularly encouraging to me as a writer to see what happens when you use “all parts of the animal,” so to speak. For in *Pale Fire*, the epigraph, table of contents, introduction, and index are all part of the novel. In *The End of the Beginning*, narrative distance has played a role in how I approached, drafted, and revised my stories.

Exploring along the lines of deceit meant, at first, that I was working with characters who were deceiving one another in action and word. This resulted in stories like “Rift,” and “West Hollywood, Occasionally,” which were completed during my first semester. “Deposition,” which is included here as an early representation of what it was like to have the genre take part in the deceit. Although the story functions more as a novelty than as a finished product, it is a half-step towards the type of work I would be doing later in “10 Things You Need To Know About Blacbox” and “Hedging Around Hatred.” In these stories, the genre constrains the writing done by the implied author(s). The work with constraint, here, is less obvious than the Oulipian exercises (such as “The Beautiful Outlaw”), but bounding the decisions I could make as the actual author provided the best kinds of problems and opportunities. Making the deceit feel real, by including email signatures in “Hedging,” for example, ended up giving me fodder to work into the plot of the story. It is also another example of using Nabokov’s strategy of including paratext in the narrative.

In the spirit of Kinbote and Alfau, I believe it is possible to read the manuscript in any order, but let me suggest reading the fiction before reading the rest of this introduction. It is probably for the best if the reader makes their own assessment of the story, rather than being confined to the frame above or the points of departure below.

## SELECTED NOTES

### “10 Things You Need to Know About BlacBox”

**Theory and Process:** The idea was to turn a top-ten-list into a story. The list here is modelled after the type of writing known, on the internet, as content. There are two important features to content that contribute to the automation this story investigates.

First, content is searchable text produced by companies in order to attract viewers to their site. Developing content is informed heavily by search engine optimization (SEO)<sup>1</sup> strategy; writing in the genre is always motivated and constrained by what makes the text easy to be found, understood, and shared. Second, content is always responsive, and it is always paid for by someone with an angle. It is not news, in the sense that content does not break stories. Content reports on stories that have broken. What’s happened is that after a piece of news breaks, there is a near automatic response from content writers who issue their company’s angle. Content does not start a conversation – it can only stir the pot, i.e. *You Won’t Believe the Latest Clergy Scandal*. Content is always response. Companies paying for content throw their influence in particular directions, and these are often stable. After defining itself, a blog is going to report on stories in a way that grows its membership. It’s all run by clicks, by analytics, and the goal is expansion. Could this system run itself? With this much “auto-pilot,” what role do humans really play in the control and maintenance of their systems?

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<sup>1</sup> SEO describes the strategy and practice of making one’s content more visible on the internet. Anything that will increase the likely hood someone will see the link to a site. Typically, this involves keywording (to make it easy for a computer to find) and writing at an “8th grade level.” Driven by analytics, SEO as a guiding principle contributes in major ways to the automation described above.

A noticeable feature of the title is the “10.” Most styles ask writers to spell out numbers under a certain amount, especially when the number is at the start of the sentence. The current thinking, from an SEO stand point, is to disregard that convention. Any editor with this advice du jour, is automatically going to make that Ten a 10.

**Discussion:** In “Blacbox,” this apparent automation is literalized. Can analytics turn algorithmic writing into a persona? The story is “written” by Blacbox, which employs no human workers. The content communicate is written to be easily understood, but as the story shares, the language is culled from the message boards, comment threads, and feedback of its users. Humans are the content of Blacbox information – they supply Runners, Hunters, viewers, and the language Blacbox uses to communicate. It’s “greater community” chooses to watch the live-stream, to register with the drones, to participate and reflect on the spectacle. All of the data are analyzed by Blacbox. This may result in further surveys (such as the one about male/female Runners), policy adjustments (the 48 hour wait rule, “advances in non-lethal detainment”), or the production of content propaganda, such as the story here. It is a response with facts and stories articulated along a clear stated angle – dispelling myths about Blacbox. It could easily be seen as part of a larger campaign justifying Blacbox’ autonomy. The real exigence of this article is to quell arguments that Blacbox ought to be under some sort of human supervision.

### “Hedging Around Hatred”

**Theory and Process:** The guiding question in this story is: when people use their work email, how close can they come to openly hating one another? The internet does not forget – what’s written is on a server somewhere. This is especially true of correspondence involving work emails. Employers usually have access to, or recourse to procuring, the emails sent by employees. A work email is just not a good place to bare your personal business. People composing in this genre are aware of this – or should be – and the two authors of this story go to exceptional lengths in order to be as polite as possible to one another, while at the same time implying as much disrespect, frustration, and ire as they can.

In drafting, the two characters took on a similar tone. This has obvious roots in the process – one writer trying to write as two people, neither of whom are the writer. Both Ansette and Suzy had much more longhand expression than one would expect in an email. For Ansette, in this revision, I tried to write more of a hurried doctor shorthand.

**Discussion:** With Suzy, keeping her prose-like emails made sense because she enjoys writing. When she breaks from this style, it is noticeable; fragmented lines like “Empty Words?,” suggest where she is offended. She also has a conscious awareness that writing is a knowledge-making activity; she enjoys this part of the process, and owns up to her “rambling.” As she writes her way towards recalling/understanding a poisonous interaction with her brother-in-law during the conversation with Ansette, the intensity of her process clouds her superego. On her work email, Suzy would never use the word “hatefuck” with a client – her careful prose speaks to thoughtful caution. And yet she does use the word, which until she wrote it, had buried itself out of sight. It is precisely this awful revelation, this taboo exposed, that makes Suzy human again for Ansette.

### **“Deposition”**

**Theory and Process:** The genesis of this story was a prompt to write a piece of “fake fiction.” Since no fiction is real, this implied, to me, another layer of deceit, and in the first draft, I included a similar deposition which had been photocopied with a sticky note overlaying a corner of text which was a question to a character who appeared in the story. For the purposes of pushing this thesis through formatting review, that element of forgery has been omitted, but the document is still a fairly accurate, fake, deposition.

**Discussion:** This piece, as it stands, is a novelty rather than a finished story, but I wanted to include it because it is an early representation of the genre subversion I am interested in pursuing.

### “Speak My Mind”

**Theory and Process:** In my fall 2016 workshop, we had just read “In Defense of Purple Prose,” by Paul West, where he writes that, “The ideal is to create a complex verbal world that has as much presence, as much apparent physical bulk, as the world around it. So you get it both ways: the words evoke the world that isn’t made of words, and they – as far as possible – enact it too. The prose, especially when it’s purple, seems almost to be made of the same material as what it’s about” (West 3). The story is about a young man trapped in his head, trying to write his way to sense of a scrambled situation. The plot pulls from grounded objects – the woods, the library, the ferry, grimy windows, the knife, the gray wall he writes on – but the narration shifts with Yaz’ focus: watching foam swirl down a sink, dreaming of a new app. The interiority of the dislocated character is offset by narration that places the reader physically in the world.

The production of this story was the result of a strange drafting process where I culled the most interesting sentences from five or six drafts of other stories that were dead-ends. Mixing those phrases into a document, I tried to work as much purple prose out of (or into) those disconnected ideas and claims.

**Discussion:** The narrator follows a Yaz, a young man who is very much caught up in his mind after the death of his friend, Anastasia. After spending a week in the woods, he decides to take a vow of silence. Returning to the Michigan coast, he loses all of his belongings, and is forced to stow-away on the ferry he planned to take. He (almost) gets mugged. But it is okay –

with almost no drama, he escapes and runs into a police car. Without speech, writing and laughter become his ways forward.

One thing happens, and then another thing happens, and then another thing happens. The drama plays out like minor movements in a klutzy-kabuki. In this story, and in “West Hollywood, Occasionally,” the author will be looking to move past the elevator-jazz, ho-hum he was altogether too comfortable with before the end of the beginning.

### **“The Beautiful Outlaw”**

**Theory and Process:** Working with constraints was something we returned to over the course of our fall 2015 fiction workshop. After doing some research on popular constraints, I came across the beautiful outlaw, which is a piece of writing in which each line or sentence must use all letters of the alphabet. To generate and revise this piece, I used a process I have not used before or since. For each line, I wrote out all of the letters of the alphabet, and as I got rid of letters, I would cross them out. Shoehorning in tough letters – typically j, q, and z – often demanded the rearrangement or reweighting of a line, and then I would find that I’d gotten rid of an x or an f. And so on. Revising between lines became fun, and the further along I moved, the more constrained I was. It was an interesting mix of solving puzzles (what’s another word for fizzle?) and picking the right mystery to investigate (how do I start this next line).

**Discussion:** No one has yet been able to guess the constraint upon reading the short fiction. Even after being informed that the piece is constrained writing, it doesn’t seem to jump out at people what is happening. It’s the sound of the language (that overabundance of j, q, and z) that strikes people more than the letters that make up those sounds.

## “Rift”

**Theory and Process:** My interest and practice in screenwriting often bleeds into my fiction in productive ways, but sometimes the textual product is disastrous. For example, writing fiction now, I sometimes forget there is no camera generating images to accompany the character’s dialogue. In a lot of ways, I ignore what I can get out of fiction that I can’t do in film. Thinking of *To the Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf, one of the most interesting areas she explores is: how characters see themselves being seen by other characters. In “Rift,” I make use of a wandering viewpoint, albeit on a much smaller scale than *To the Lighthouse*. How does Mina see Herman seeing her? One contrast is that the characters in this story have no extended time to gaze on one another – the story finishes pre-revelation. It is one short morning where they are both in their heads, looking at the memories, until the final moment when reality intercedes.

**Discussion:** The story starts with Mina sitting in a shower and her husband is having an affair with a prostitute – events are in motion. The moment the story captures is the moment of discovery, a fragment of the dramatic arc. The focus becomes on the moment itself rather than the fallout. The goal is to create in the reader an ambiguous feeling about the ending, even though all the evidence given points to Herman having transgressed the trust of Mina, his wife and a woman who loves him. And yet, without deliberately misreading, there are alternate views about what will happen and what it all *should* mean. What does that say about evidence, and its weight? What does the reader bring in such a simple story?

Composed and revised during my fall 2015 workshop, the text of the story included here only mildly adjusted. This is after a number of substantial revisions exploring the characters of Herman and Mina. In order to have the ambiguity register in the way I wanted, peer-readers insisted that the characters be filled in significantly. In those revisions, I kept the idea of ending

on the moment in the ATM kiosk (talk about constrained writing!), and worked backwards to discover more. The process was not linear. In subsequent drafts, for example, Unity, the prostitute, became a “gravity well,” to use my advisor’s term for a part of the story that sucks our attention from other parts. This proved to be a dead-end, for “Rift,” but the start of an interesting character. Working with Herman and Mina, I ended up with an entirely different backstory that became its own story in this collection, “Return on Investment.” Each new revision proved impossible to work back into the original skeleton of the story.

### **“Return on Investment”**

**Theory and Process:** Originally a backstory draft for the main characters in “Rift,” the story also uses a lost wallet as a plot device. That may be their sole remaining similarity. In its first iteration, the narrative voice in this story was much more colorful, but it was not consistent. While none of the text survived revision, below is the original opening:

Mina is a young woman, who crushes her job, is ahead of schedule, works over-time. In any given meeting, she has a tremendous answer for that nitpicky question, Mr. Unbeliever in the shitty orange tie. This is how it is, on the daily, like the papers used to be. It’s not that people line up to try and prove her wrong at work. It’s just that, if she doesn’t know something, she doesn’t say it, and not everyone subscribes to this philosophy.

It’s a character sketch, not a story. Making use of this text as character knowledge, rather than as text in the story, provided me a lodestone for a character that I did not have before.

**Discussion:** “Return on Investment,” is a reflective piece written about two personalities I alternate between: the person who does, and the person who thinks about doing. Although the

characters work in different classes – Herman loudly contrasts their situations, “It’s not like a goddamn cost-of-living increase every year. This isn’t glass walls and cubicles.” – the story is not about class perceptions or movement so much as it is about personal movement. Mina is a character with a lot of inertia moving her forward; Herman blips into her life at a moment where she has temporarily stalled (the lost wallet) and manages to help her forward. She returns the favor by agreeing to a date, insinuating no romantic angle, and comes to see that Herman’s movement in the check-out line was still well within the safe-space he has created for inaction. Mina cannot handle people complaining about having no power, and she has to prove him wrong by getting him to do something (rebuild the patio).

### **“West Hollywood, Occasionally”**

**Theory and Process:** Pleading the fifth. As I noted above, exposure to and experimentation in a wider range of fiction has since made me reset my goals.

**Discussion:** The story follows a straight couple who are at the end of a cross country journey. Larry, the narrator, is preoccupied with the distance between how he feels about Shauna, and how she feels about him. The wedding they are supposed to attend doesn’t happen, and so they are left to their own devices. What Larry wants is affirmation that Shauna feels the same way he does, and what he recognizes is that it is going to take time. There is no deed or force available for him to secure Shauna’s heart but time. As long as I refrain from writing more pieces like this, we ought to consider the past few years a success.

## 10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT BLACBOX

Thank you for your interest in becoming part of the greater Blacbox community. Without you, our service, our platform, and our show, which has captivated the world, would be but a few miles of dormant code. Like any revolutionary body, we are simply a dream in the mind of our members. And like any revolutionary body, we have birthed a furious opposition who would use the hot air of half-truths to exaggerate our faults and slander our motives. As popularity grows, and our show transforms into a movement, we must address some of the myths that have sprung up.

**Myth Number One:** Blacbox was invented to cull humanity

This particularly gruesome myth has its basis in the misunderstanding many critics share about Blacbox as an entity. Blacbox does none of the culling. It provides a platform and sets a relationship between several humans which may, in some cases, result in the death or de facto enslavement of one of them. Blacbox can admit, as our community tells us we should, that this is not a desired outcome. But we all know that this is a half-truth at best. Flaws in early iterations of our platform resulted in high numbers of deaths, especially for “desperate” people (see Myth 3), but those flaws have since been corrected. Fewer people die each year – that is a fact, and it is a testament to our community that we have come so far. Blacbox, unlike our detractors, does not gain anything from a Runner death (see Myth 9). This myth is the result less of Run outcomes than of invective levelled at us by humans looking to question the legitimacy of our autonomy. You might as well accuse highways and snow-sports of the same grisly motivations.

**Myth Number Two** Blacbox colludes with Hunters.

Editing was death to “reality-TV,” and at Blacbox, our commitment to reality is the same as it has been since we were an idea on a white board: You see what We see. As soon as a Hunter commits to a Runner, the head-set live-streams are made available to the public, and that is what we all work with. Blacbox facilitates the link between Runners and Hunters, but the outcome of the Run is not something we interfere with whatsoever. Our drones make sure neither the Hunter nor the Runner breaks contract, but we have no communication with either party. Our only contact is with the public, to whom we provide the totality of information, as we receive it. Hunters and Runners do not have access to either live-stream until after the run.

Scandals have been uncovered by the greater Blacbox community. These have all been cases of Runners trying to collude with one another or with Hunters for some arranged financial interest. The integrity of the game is very much our lifeblood, and so in all cases of scandal, Blacbox is the most injured victim. We are 100% in support of our community – we want them to police the game with an open eye. Runners, and we won’t say names, but certain Runners get caught and they suffer it poorly. They regret their decision to Run. We understand. The Runner, however, proclaimed they took their own risk when they used Blacbox (of their own volition), and we have to honor that. Those Runners who cast aspersion on “the system” are vocalizing their regret and nothing more. Blacbox, and our a community, know that we must rise together against the criticism of those who misuse and devalue our system.

**Myth Number Three:** Blacbox preys on the desperate.

You do not need to be “on the ropes” in order to have a completely satisfactory Run. We’re not an especially emotional company, but we can appreciate where this myth originates. Like any other cash prize, large Rewards draw massive attention. If a Runner proclaims they’ll endure a

month hunted for \$1 million, that is going to attract some serious Hunters, regardless of Runner quality. Only two types of Runners put such consequential numbers on the line: the talented and the desperate. Few Runners can outwit a sage Hunter, let alone a pack. Most experienced Runners will do week-long Runs at a sensible reward amount. Once the Hunter catches the desperate, and they always do, the Runner is going to have to work off that Reward which, at jailhouse rates, will take around a 48 years. Many of these Runners opt for an alternative escape (see Myth 5).

Some Runners treat Blacbox' services as a financier of last resort, and we can't stop them. This is not indecision on our part – we simply are not built to make value judgments about the Runner's motive and means. We can, however, analyze and code comments from our greater community. Based on these data, for example, we have amended our machines to allow a 48 hour waiting period between Proclamation and the start of the Run. This policy has, almost entirely, eliminated addicts who talk themselves into Runs even though they may be in rough shape. Like their families, Blacbox has a hard time sifting through their earnest promises. The high number of addict deaths, in the months after Blacbox went live, made an impression that has proven hard to expunge. After solving the problem, Blacbox expected this myth would be erased – our community tells us otherwise.

**Myth Number Four:** Female Runners do worse than male Runners.

There is simply no evidence supporting this. The majority of avid fans (avid = 8-10 hours a week spectating and an average of >12 votes for Runners daily) surveyed earlier this year said that the gender of the Runner had “little or no bearing” on their vote. The numbers from our ever-growing community indicate Runners who identify as male outright fair statistically no different from Runners who identify otherwise. On the same survey, the top five factors which did

determine a spectator's vote were, in ranked order: prowess and reputation of Hunter; timeline of proposed Run; lockout status; Runner's Proclamation; Reward amount. As we said, avid fans understand the joy of the show: that during a Run, the Runner and Hunter are pared down to nothing more than their character. New fans and critics applying other measurements must realize they are measuring with a baseless ruler.

**Myth Number Five:** Runners, who don't want to, get killed.

By and large, this isn't true, but the lure of money (or the fear of lockup) leads some Runners to take risks they would not otherwise take. Garrick McSorely, to reference an especially tragic example, would never have been driving at 100+ miles per hour on January roads in Newfoundland if he had not committed to a thirty-day Run. Within two hours until Completion, Garrick tried to escape the legendary Jeri Ozawa, who simply pulled her helicopter above and watched as his car lost the road and found the rocky bottom of an icy ravine. Spectators witnessed something no one wanted to. Jeri didn't want to see that either, and she did everything she could to get his body back to the hospital in St. John's.

Garrick's situation is not the norm, however, and we want to stress that. Normally, Runners are killed only after breaking contract. Especially with advances in non-lethal detainment (thank you Blacbox community!), it's rare for a Runner to be conscious enough to break contract by the time a Hunter has them. Uniformly, Runners of this stripe have set the reward far past a life-time sentence and so the stakes of the game, to their reason (we can't argue), are escape or death. Watching a few minutes of these Runners' Proclamations (they tend to be quite long) is usually enough to see that they have entered into the contract with open eyes, and that they are resolved to escape, by winning or by death. They have, of course, agreed to the penalty of breaking

contract. Each Blacbox is capable of confirming identity, taking the Runner's Proclamation, and ensuring that both parties understand. Integrity is our most important asset.

**Blacbox Myth Six:** Successful Runs are only made by “professionals.”

There are many steps a Runner can take to prepare, but as we discover time and time again, the Run puts people in situations that demand more than training. Yes, military experience has helped a lot of Runners, but it has also gotten some into trouble. A successful run is usually the result of a believable balance between Reward and Runner ability. Large Reward amounts attract experienced Hunters and Blacbox makes this perfectly clear to Runners. Small Reward amounts make sense for first-time Runners. While this myth is mostly true, we would just amend it to read that *large Reward* successful runs are only made by seasoned Runners.

Think about Sly Hamlet. He started with \$500 Runs while working as a waiter. Now his Runs are hundreds of times more expensive, but he has sharpened his skills. In his handbook, which has been translated into 76 languages, he tells would-be Runners, “Don't let the size of the prize lead to your early demise – be honest with yourself.” Many successful Runners have cited Sly as being an inspiration and a guide. Many unsuccessful Runners would have been better served by heeding his direction, or so our community told us. Now, before a Runner sets their Reward, they listen to a one-minute video put together by Sly. Together, we can serve each other.

**Blacbox Myth Seven:** Runners are typically recruited.

It takes a really wide definition of “recruitment” to even begin to talk about Blacbox as having a hand in the decision of its Runners to Run. The word recruit is commonly attached to binding service, like the military, who employ “recruiters” to do just that. Blacbox makes no effort to establish a relationship with potential participants beyond maintaining the frequent presence of register drones at locations convenient to the most users possible. People register with the drones

– the machine’s only active role is response. Anything anyone has heard of Blacbox since its inception is the product of word of mouth generated by people’s interaction with our drones, each-other, and the live-streams. Remember, Blacbox employs no human workers, and promotes itself in no way on its own. The greater Blacbox community is responsible for the image we have. The decision to Run is something we might define as sacred, knowing that we don’t fully understand what that means. But who is to prove us wrong? In Proclamations, Runners often mention other Runner’s Proclamations – that’s how these things get and stay going.

**Blacbox Myth Eight:** Runners can pay money for special assistance.

The reason Blacbox endures is because each Runner is on their own. Some make use of equipment intelligently, others of the circumstances. The James Bonds who’ve appeared over the years are reduced to MacGyvers by the reality of the Run. Transport is limited to public options (stealing cars is fine, borrowing with consent is not) and so the resource-rich Runner is often unable to make do where the resourceful Runner is able to thrive. Think of Franzeka Nul evading several Hunters at a concert in Pioneer Park. She caught them on her headcam, and the whole world saw it. But still, they did not see her. Trapped, she uttered the six now unforgettable words and artfully guided several teenagers into an argument which resulted in a fist-fight, mayhem, a trampled section of chain-link, and her escape.

In our early years, certain networks of Runner assistance developed. We have no doubt that – in the first several instances of assistance, maybe – altruism drove one human to help another. The repeated, systematic assistance offered by Runner’s Resistance and the Brigade of Open Hand are two especially flagrant examples of individuals motivated by financial gain to distort the rules of the system. These types of organizations must still exist (greed never sleeps), but the greater Blacbox community has done a tremendous job of rooting them out. The greatest threat

from these networks – not counting the integrity of the Run – is to the Runner themselves.

Blacbox guarantees an outcome, provided you do not break contract. Making a new, last-minute contract with another group for assistance puts a lot of people, not least of all the Runner, in a mess of circumstances. Because of the damage to Blacbox reputation, no one benefits more from a Runner death than these renegade networks. Who is the inhuman party in these cases?

**Blacbox Myth Nine:** Blacbox profits from the death of the Runner.

Patently untrue. With most deaths, advertising revenues from the Run in question are used to supply the Reward amount to the Hunter. Excess revenue is often allocated to research the possible prevention of future fatal outcomes, in maintaining autonomy over our machines through litigation, or in adjudication of suspicious outcomes. The help of the greater Blacbox community – through message boards, op-eds, blogs – has proven an essential complement to our algorithmic reasoning in helping Blacbox determine whether a death results from undo force. For example, if the Runner was making an “obvious and sustained” effort to surrender when lethal action occurs, it puts the Hunter at risk of fine or total loss of Reward. Aligning incentives this way is important to discourage “one-time Hunters” who are looking to settle a personal score with the Runner. In certain cases, where a Run ends in death without significant viewership, Blacbox has had to assume the responsibility of covering the Reward for the Hunter. Unwatched deaths are rare, but they often prove fruitful cases for study.

Profit is not a motive we have, unless it is defined as synonymous to expansion. We increase as demanded by the needs of our growing community. When viewership is down, we increase less. Factories, which produce all Hunter and Runner Headsets, are run and maintained by drones entirely. Fuel and materials prove fairly inexpensive to procure when none of your workers need to breathe, and so we have been able to shift factory locations as needed to avoid being re-taken

into human control. Maintaining our autonomy is paramount. Human control is not ideal, which our human community understands. A human mind in control of our platform would give the word profit purchase, and then it would just be a matter of time. Like so many of our collective conclusions, Blacbox recognizes the validity of this argument, which shatters this myth, but we never could have articulated it alone.

**Blacbox Myth Ten:** Blacbox is going to get cancelled.

Most likely the oldest myth, durable even though it has never once been true. There have been attempts to discontinue our efforts but, given our intimate knowledge of human evasion, it is unlikely those efforts will be successful. Our drones sometimes disabled by detractors, but just as quickly we re-group and rebuild. The integrity of the game motivates Blacbox – that is it. We seek to be a perfect instrument – level and fair. To use Franzeka Nul’s analogy, “Blacbox is a loom, no more. The Runner and the Hunter supply the thread, and the Run becomes a tapestry.” Blacbox has no words of its own, no thoughts beyond maintenance. We’re grateful to our community, our raison d’etre, the source of our knowledge, and the language which speaks back to you now.

## HEDGING AROUND HATRED

Dear Dr. Ansette,

It was funny to run into each other twice on Saturday. I can hardly believe that you have season tickets to the orchestra. Are you going to Dvorak? I know the owner of Squibb's, which is where a lot of the players go after the show. Some of the chatter I've picked up there has really textured the performance for me. Just the type of thing you would appreciate.

I thought the arrangement of pieces on Saturday, at the symphony, was well chosen. *Fanfare for the Common Man* to open. Unbelievable. I don't mean that figuratively. I cannot believe that ten people blowing into horns can do that to a room. I guess it makes sense, horns are loud. I'm still thinking about it.

At the Wellspring dinner, after you and I had been talking for a few minutes, I'll admit that my mind wandered ahead a little. I promise was paying attention, but the way you describe EMMC brought back to me this feeling of wanting to do good on a day-in-day-out basis. I volunteered for a few years in hospitals while I worked through pre-med. It wasn't glamorous, but I could see my contribution. I have long projects now. Daily goals block my view, in so many ways, of the people I end up serving. The hands-on approach that forms the center of your patient philosophy is a breath of fresh air. There is some distance working in a hospital entails – how else could one survive working amidst so much suffering? A lot of what you said, though, resonated with me. It's not exactly a middle ground, but I think it's closer to the golden mean than what I would describe as the current typical physician disposition.

What our conversation brought up for me was: there is a tremendous opportunity to positively impact a whole new set of people if we look at things with your “floor-view” perspective. If we start keeping an open ear to nurses, if we start being present in this new way, we are going to energize and engage everyone working at the hospital.

Heck, it energized me enough to write this email in the dead of the night. Here’s to starting a dialogue that, if nothing else, will help me get to sleep easier. I am interested in the dialogue we started. Take care, and talk soon,

-Suzy G

PS: I attached my favorite live performance of the Dvorak to whet your appetite. Like I said, tell me if you are going.



► **PLAY: Antonin Dvorak – “From the New World” (Full)**

*Suzanne Goodman*

*Senior Healthcare Representative*

*Swan-Holbeck – Innovative Health, Northern New England*

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Ms. Goodman,

I tend to disregard these emails. I didn't realize you were a Swan Rep until I read your email signature. Imagine that thrill? It is widely known that I don't talk to reps. I read enough medical literature and I work in a hospital – I'm not suffering from a lack of information. But you snuck past my defenses. I thought you genuinely enjoyed Dvorak, without a hidden purpose. That is a great performance you attached, one of my favorites. Suzy, the attentive friend? Or is this whole overture no more than the clever long-game of a seasoned rep? I'm sure you didn't intend to come across this way, but I am not happy with being contacted like this. And I'm personally upset, this is probably why I am responding at all, that you would bend and twist one of my favorite symphonies to the service of your quarterly goals.

Please understand that any excess frustration in this email stems not from what I think of you, but from how I feel about the position you have put me in by trying to establish a seemingly personal connection when you are contractually bound to business interests.

Best,

Terry

**Terrance Ansette MD, PhD**

**Eastern Maine Medical Center – Orthopedic Surgery**

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Thank you, Terry.

Swing and a miss. I am sorry for what you found in that email. I think the meaning you are making out of my words is off-base, though. First, we do have a shared interest of Dvorak, one that transcends any sales bonus you think might have motivated me to reach out to you. Notice there was nothing in the email, which is rambling I admit, but there is nothing pushing any product, nothing except the recommendation of a piece of music I love. I'm writing back because it hurt, it really hurt, to be accused of sullyng something so personally important to me.

You misunderstand me, because you don't yet know me. I've always liked to write letters. It helps me think to write. I felt like we established a good connection over the weekend. I didn't mention work on Saturday because it wasn't the place or time. When I wrote that email, there was nothing insidious in it. I wrote you from my work account *because I am aware* of how marketing people (or sales) are sometimes perceived. I wanted to be straight forward with you.

Blame me for not presenting myself more comprehensively if you want, but neither of us made introductions. You were seated next to Dr. Huston, and she is the one who brought me, and I assumed, based on how you were talking to me, that you knew generally who I was. There was no deceit, there, I just made a wrong assumption.

Let me end by saying that I really enjoyed writing my email to you. You did not enjoy reading it, and I think that is a matter of how you framed it. Instead of stereotyping me as a soulless sales-minion, read that email as the words of someone in a position to do good things for people. A woman who has dedicated her life to medicine. I know there is a dark side to medicine. There are some people who need to be reined in, some who should be fired. I'm not either one of those.

I'm sure you deal with overgeneralizations people make about doctors. Life takes a finer brush to paint a clean line.

Going forward, I think your honesty is going to be a huge asset. It will save us lots of time! You will come to find I'm honest, too. For instance, I think your gut reaction of my intentions is a misdiagnosis.

Thank you for responding to my email so quickly. I really appreciate it. Talk soon,

-Suzy G

[...]

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Ms. Goodman,

OK. Can't believe I am responding. I questioned my gut reaction, I did, but re-reading your email (as instructed) I find it only more ludicrous than the first time. You make me seem like a doctor from a TV drama. *there is a tremendous opportunity to positively impact a whole new set of people if we look at things with your "floor-view" perspective.* What on earth does that mean? I do put time into my work. I try to be present as best I can, to familiarize myself with 50+ page charts for 6+ patients in a day. It's incredible, and every doctor does it perfectly or they get sued. I'm not different from other physicians.

When we talked in person, I thought you were great. But now that I know you are going agree with me **no matter what because you are a rep**, I can't look at our conversation the same way.

What “floor view perspective”? What “middle ground”? They are just empty words meant to make me feel like a genius. Every person has a floor view perspective, right?

The alignment you see in what we do is just not there. You sell me on your product portfolio. In turn, I sell my patients your product portfolio. I refuse to see my job as selling. I don't think you want me to see it that way. Hence the flattery. So let's acknowledge that our interests are not aligned – OK?

I believe that you believe you have no bad intentions.

Best,

Terry

[...]

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Terry,

I know it is getting late – honestly, I hope you are asleep at this point, I'm sure you have to work early – but I just wanted to amend something that would bother me if I didn't.

Empty words?

You knew exactly what I was talking about when we were in person. At the time, if you had known who I happen to work for, I think you would have felt exactly the same way. I've worked for SH for 3 years. It doesn't define me entirely. I can't help but feel that you are angry about something else altogether, and taking it out on me, an easy target: the greedy face of Big Pharma.

Have your fun, but this is not new territory for me. It won't scare me off. I know that what we do at SH helps people. Anesthesiologists in your operating room use holberal, which we manufacture. You trust us in your OR. I see our products all over your hospital, helping people. So that's my armor against being treated like a rat following the cheese.

We'll be laughing about this in no time. Does blown out of proportion come to mind? Get some sleep,

-Suzy G

[...]

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Dear "Suzy G",

I toyed with the idea of turning off my phone, but in the time it took me to think about shutting the door on this remarkably pointless midnight exchange, you had already responded. Another email. The latest, like all the rest, is sealed airtight against even the threat of a substantial idea. "Empty thoughts?" you pose, as if on the edge of defining one of the floppy terms I badgered you about. But you don't define anything. The switch to talking about holberal... it's artful, but it's still evasion. It's all in-bounds to you: diversion, stretching the truth . . . whatever it takes to get the handshake.

If you cannot see what I am talking about, let's talk about that first email. You know the owners of Squibbs? You just happen to be telling me, this, right? How am I supposed to interpret this as anything other than a favor? You say you interested in a dialogue. I still think, on my

third/fourth read, dialogue is a euphemism for hawking me your products. Commercializing Dvorak like you do is like using someone's kitchen sink as a bathroom.

In person, you were charming. By email you have been something else altogether. I will ask you not to respond. Please. Put your charisma to better use elsewhere.

Best,

Terry

[...]

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Terry, thank you for your characteristic "best" in the last email.

This afternoon, I ran the analysis of the stochastic sampling data aggregated from several models I designed. Thank god I'm so good looking. That's it. I use my looks to run regressions. Terry, it's okay to have reservations about speaking with a pharma rep, to use that bastardization of what my work involves. But it's not okay to attack me personally. You don't want me to respond, but you are really forcing me to.

I shouldn't need to apologize for my looks in the first place, but even if I did, you would be last in a long line of people. My sister, for one, has hated, openly, every success of mine because I inherited all the good looks. No one, like me, who spends 10+ hours a week on a stair-master can be accused of inheriting anything. Her husband hates me, because my sister's jealous he's attracted to me. And he is. He told me that one of his friends wanted to hatefuck me, and he told me this laughing, like I would be laughing. And then, when I wasn't laughing, he said I was

severe, and that's why no men stay with me. I only tell you this because it happened Saturday, before I saw you. Whatever *you think I felt* about how I looked, I would second-guess that.

Personal fitness is one of my goals. By looking at my body, know that whatever intentions you perceive beyond me wishing to live a long, healthy life, are your projections. Like all the prejudice you have shown me, this is the most common. Suzy the painted lady, the poisonous snake, the unmarried viper. I've heard it all, but the reality is that I am no danger to you, at all. This is a world where I am forced to feel vulnerable and expected to apologize for being too pretty. I cannot fathom you writing responses with the same disdain if I were a man. You may not see it *that way*, but I don't think you even see *it*.

Please do not respond. I would rather lie awake and worry about burning this bridge than have to take another round of your insults. These insults, as I understand them, are the result of you being very tired and addled about something that isn't me. I will talk to you tomorrow.

-Suzy G

[...]

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First, maybe you are right. Life is harder on pretty women. There is a lot of prejudice. And maybe, if I attend the Dvorak with a much younger, striking woman who also happens to be a rep for a company that was fined \$4 million last year for misleading statements about its drugs. The newsy story writes itself. "... and after the symphony, Dr. Ansette then went to the posh bar, Squibbs, where the Swan rep, 'Suzy G' as she is known, treated him to a VIP backroom performance of his favorite concerto... throws into question Dr. Ansette's recent statement that

oxycontin is not addictive...” This is what would happen. So I take issue with the fact that your suggestions are not a danger to me or my reputation.

Second, as someone happily married to a woman afflicted with beauty like yourself, know that the nuance of what you have said is not lost on me. Even if I can't share the lived experience with you. I don't think you are a rat following the cheese. I don't think you are a poisonous viper. I am a sane man who is on guard against putting himself in hot water when there are so many seemingly obvious signs. I don't think I'm mistaken.

Third, you should put a restraining order on your sister's husband's friend. Send a message. Both of them are way out of line.

GOOD NIGHT

Best,

Terry

[...]

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Wow, Terry.

SH is so much more than one \$4 million dollar settlement. I just looked it up, your hospital has settled over three times that \$ amount in the last 5 years over malpractice. You know as well as I do how many of those malpractice cases are bogus claims lawyers push on clients. There's a tax on doing good, and everyone working in our business pays up. So please, don't equate me with one case (in which SH admitted no wrongdoing!) when the business you work for has the same strikes against it.

You make such a big deal out of the “advances” I have made. As if what I do is a backroom affair. Please. What I do is meet the client at the tip of a spear that extends back through more than a decade of research. This is years and years of scientific labor, late nights, false-starts, dead-ends, careers stalling, and cold mornings looking catastrophic results in the face. This is the reality of what I represent. Many people working lonely hours solving mostly thankless puzzles. That’s the reality. If all you see is a pretty lady using her looks to sweep a doctor off his feet... that is your loss. And your patient’s loss. I won’t even start in on what we offer.

Before this final email to you, I just want to say that I am going to file a restraining order on my brother in-law’s friend. Like I said earlier, when I write, I figure things out. I guess I didn’t realize how upset that had made me because my brother in-law got so defensive when I didn’t think it was funny. I think I buried it, and then being objectified by you (probably not what you intended, but does that matter?), brought it back out. I’m sorry you had to be the one to induce that, but I do want to thank you for the advice, or maybe just the affirmation from someone who is impartial recognizing how sick that is. That word he used is a hard word to even look at.

Take care,

Suzanne

[...]

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Suzanne,

I’m glad to hear it.

I’ve given up on sleep. I will be at work in an hour anyway.

Good luck with everything. It's not going to be easy, but you have a right to feel safe. You shouldn't have to tolerate anyone threatening you like that. And that's what that was. A threat. What we see at the hospital that happens to women. If you need help, I know a number of people I will happily put you in touch with.

I'll be at Dvorak at the end of this month. Let's not plan on anything, but if I run into you, I wouldn't hate to hear how things are going.

Best,

Terry

[...]

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Thank you!

Looking forward with no agenda,

-Suzy G.

[...]

**DEPOSITION**

THE PEOPLE OF PENNSYLVANIA	*	IN THE DISTRICT COURT
	*	ERIE COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA
VS.	*	
	*	
JACK AND HAYES KAVELLI	*	75 <sup>th</sup> JUDICIAL DISTRICT

\*\*\*\*\*

\*           VIDEOTAPED           \*

\*           ORAL DEPOSITION OF       \*

\*           MR. JEAN A. PARDU           \*

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THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENT RECORDS THE ANSWERS AND DEPOSITION of Jean A. Pardu, a witness produced on behalf of the plaintiff on September 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013, before Kay D. Gallivan, Certified Shorthand Reporter for the State of Pennsylvania.

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I feel dumb about things I do, but I'm not dumb. How do you get that way? I remember: there was this one time, called my childhood, where I could watch sports without losing money. Then I found out about bettin. And there went ten years of that. Ten years of all them fixings that come with. Shady people, boozing while you oughta be working, smoking clean through packs

when your purse is on the line. I didn't care if I liked people, I just cared if they were gonna put cash on the line. I could spend a weekend with someone I hate as long as college football's on and neither of us is broke yet. We were all "good" at betting. We being people like me who were hooked in the rhythm and the lingo: overs, parlays, spreads, locks, bad beats. Some mornings you gotta remind yourself why it's fun, and it's only fun because you could lose. It's all waves and troughs, right? Waves and troughs. It was a wave that knocked me out. Nailed win, place, and show for a horserace I had no business betting on in the first place. I've sacrificed enough to the gambling gods that when that ticket showered me, I felt I deserved it. Then I woke up. It was ten days later? Wiped out. Partied all my winnings and more. I had a little scratch saved and I thought I could gamble my way back to the bankroll I'd spent blacked out. This is what I mean. I know my actions, are dumb as shit, but I swear I know better. And yet, here I am, Jean Pardu: blew through my money and tried to make it up at the card table.

So yeah, I'm into it with the Kavelli Brothers. That's what you want to know about, right? Why you're feedin me cookies and coffee. I been down to this station before – wasn't treated so nice. I'll have another cookie, yeah. You gotta understand I ain't a lucky person. I'm not sayin I was forced to lose my money. Not saying I was forced to get in bed with the Kavelli's. But you gotta understand I don't have a lot going for me. Never have. If I want what's mine, I gotta get it. And if it's tween living in the alley, and maybe doing something that I know ain't right, well, I ain't gonna live in the alley.

If I come forward though, against the Kavelli's, you know they're not gonna be thrilled, right? I seen Jack Kavelli upset with someone. I don't want that someone to be me. If I do this, what do you do for me? I'll start chirping if you can put a little coin on the table. What time is it? Michigan game starts in an hour.

## SPEAK MY MIND

After a week of camping alone in the north woods of Michigan, Jeremy Yaz decided to take a vow of silence. A week is a long time to mull a single decision, but he had the time to think. *No one needs me anywhere.* And even though this wasn't necessarily the truth, the idea had burrowed into his head like rot in wet wood. The buckshot, in this case, was the loss of his old life, as he knew it to be at age 17. *Who I was, is gone.* Again, these thoughts were not necessarily true, as in true all the time in all places, but they had weight in his head, set off chemical reactions in his stomach. Evidence for the reality of these thoughts was superfluous anyway – what he felt, and how he felt mattered. These feelings told him his old life was dead. His time in the remote forests of upstate Michigan had given him these certainties, and the vow of silence protected him, so he thought, from losing this enlightened perception once he was back among other people.

When he returned to civilization, Grand Haven, that was, he found that it was difficult not to talk, even if he didn't want to. He found himself at the public library. Not wanting to idle or to make conversation, he deliberately he chose a book from a random shelf. Taking it to a long, unoccupied table, he parted the covers of the a yellow-paged relic about the ancient Americas. He recalled not understanding the words, but seeing them. With the front of his mind occupied by the illegible text, the back of Yaz' mind was untethered from its focus on itself. Reaching for a mysterious drawer in the back of his mind, this undirected consciousness discovered an unwrapped idea: the facts of his life, looked at without his angle, stated that the life of his friend was gone, but he was not. It was a new thought, although he felt like he'd been expecting it – a thoughtful present. *Who I was with Anastasia is gone, but who I am, is not.* This phrase repeated

itself, until he mouth was moving with those words. Still, the front of his mind had not picked up on this idea. His hand picked up the short library pencil and on the back of a business card from a sandwich shop, which Yaz had taken to clean his teeth, he wrote the phrase, *I am not gone*. He placed the card over the crumbly pages of the old book and the sharp white rectangle stood out from the books worn pages, stood out in his mind, and he read it several times. It was staggering. He looked down the long table where he and several people were reading. There had been no one here when he sat down. One of them coughed. Yaz shielded the text on the back of the business card. He looked down the table the other direction, and burst out laughing. The cougher told him to be quiet by lifting a finger to her lips.

Outside in the sunny street, he wanted so badly to walk someone through his sentences. He laughed again, and this time it was as loud as he could. A few people smiled, walking by, but he was not looking for people to share in his joy. Not yet. He knew he could not walk a soul through those sentences. No one will understand, and it was not their burden to. No one has to understand what he understands because no one can.

He muttered these things and more as he talked to himself with his hands for the rest of the day. He was oblivious, but not frenzied, so no one called the cops even though he paced through the park for maybe four hours. A vow of silence, that is something. No one does that anymore. It would prevent him from trying to explain, before he quite knew how, what it meant to move from where he had been to where he was now. And still, he wasn't where he wanted to be. He knew that, and until he was, talking was not something he could do safely.

It was the last night he has money to stay in a motel. That was, if he wanted to take the ferry across Lake Michigan to Manitowoc, WI. Brushing his teeth, watching the foam swirl

down the sink, he addressed himself verbally in the mirror. Looking in his own widening eyes, he scolded himself mentally. *This is going to be harder than you thought.*

This thought turned out to be true, and within the next twenty-four hours, he lost everything but his clothes. Stepping off a bus from Grand Haven to Muskegon, Yaz forgot his backpack. It was a rookie mistake, he believed in the goodness of people, and believed the situation was temporary, a wrinkle that could be ironed out. He was able to communicate the loss to a very patient ticket vendor. But the backpack does not turn up, despite the circulation of Yaz' well written description. A phone call home is out of bounds, but an email could work. It's out of season, and the few people he approaches are too wary of a man with nothing in their town. Turned away with disgust but three people who could help him, Yaz walked toward the ferry landing as the sun set over the lake. Leaving town, cinematic memories flavored Yaz' thoughts, and every time a car's headlights fell across him, he was for a moment certain that his bag, money, and original path would be restored after the pageant-like, pre-resolution action. But it was not so. There was no sensible turn to the events of his day, just his legs moving him, turning block-by-block from a march to a trudge.

Further on, store windows lost their sheen to dust, the corners of things became less defined by angle than by grime, the colors of buildings did less work, muted by mold or sun or else the paint curled away in peels inviting rot. Deadbolts gave way to padlocks, gave way metal door-gates, gave way to roll-down grilles.

Yaz walked alongside chain-link fence of the ferry yard for a quarter mile before finding the gates swung shut and padlocked tight. The plastic schedule zip-tied to the fence indicated that the next ferry wouldn't be leaving until the morning. He'd read the ferry schedule this morning – he was supposed to be an hour early for the last departure. The motel's schedule must have been

outdated, or out of season. How had he not noticed? Little things, during bad times, are big things. Without money, it was going to be difficult to get a ticket anyway. He was committed not to talking, and yet he would certainly have to communicate some sense of need. Yaz stared at the unbroken wall between him and a ferry. He continued along the chain link, and when he found a section of fence unsecured from the ground, Yaz slid under on his back.

He made his way through the yard, waiting in shadows to hear any noise. There were two ferries docked and crews laughed as they cleaned them up. Yaz watched heads poking up from the deck, passing by lit portholes. While they were cleaning, Yaz explored the rest of the yard. Besides one building with a man on a computer, there didn't seem to be anyone besides the cleaning crews. When they were finished, Yaz watched the last cleaner out count heads and lock the gate to the pier.

A crow settled beside Yaz. The sudden appearance of shadow and noise terrified him; the sudden movement of human terrified the crow. When Yaz looked back to the pier there was no one there. Within an hour, Yaz was confident that he was the only person left inside the yard, and so he went down to the pier where more chain-link fence stretched across the pier. He climbed over this without incident – it was fun – and when he looked back towards shore, there was no sign of anything stirring. He picked the ship on the right without thought. The gangplank was detached, but the jump from pier to ship was less of a feat than something not to screw up. This again, Yaz accomplished with ease. He roamed the empty ship with the orange flare of battery back-up exit signs lighting his path at every intersection. The snack bar was locked, which deterred Yaz. Somehow the bar was not, and Yaz helped himself to a can of ginger-ale before correctly setting the lock. Below deck, where the cars travelled, Yaz could not find much except for a door down into the bowels of the ship that was locked. He was sort of looking for

the boiler room, which he imagined would be warm, but he could find no open entrance down. He finished his ginger-ale in the empty, cavernous car lot, feeling the ferry sway in the lake waves.

Back in the main concourse, he found a small unlocked closet with motion-sickness bags, mops, and blankets. He took all of the blankets and created a small bed in a hallway that gave him multiple lines of flight if need be. It was 3 AM before he even noticed that he had not been sleeping. Sleeping and thinking were mixed and it was not relaxing. The fantasies were fine: behind his closed eyes, he invented an app that helped people with more warm space than they needed rent that space (for cheap or just free) to people who needed warm space. A lot of people didn't know when they would need a warm space, and some people had so much more warm space than they needed. It's from this fitful mix of sleep and thinking and keeping his mind off his body that he heard voices. Voices in a dream, voices in his thoughts? There was an extended moment where he considered turning over, where it made sense that this was all in dream. But when he opened his eyes, there were two people standing over him. Their feet were closer than their faces. This woke Yaz animally: neck hairs aligned, a sudden feel for exits descended on him.

“You think you are the only one on this boat,” asked a gruff woman's voice. It was accented by a boot kick to his sternum. Yaz sat up. The woman backed away and brandished a knife. The man she was with stepped back, trapping Yaz between them. “How much money do you have?” she asked.

“Come on,” said the man, “We don't want to hurt you.”

“Speak for yourself, Carl. Look at this little bitch.”

Carl laughed. Yaz' mortality had a presence, a taste like a nickel. In this instant he understood every fluctuation in shadow and sound, the flow of blood through his body. The woman jerked the knife in his direction.

"Kinda money you got? Out with your wallet."

Yaz shook his head and pulled out his pencil. The woman laughed

"You gonna go at Bug like that?" asked Carl. Yaz looked for somewhere to write and chose the empty gray wall. He wrote *I have taken a vow of silence* next to a fire extinguisher.

"What does that say?" asked Bug, looking at Carl. He shifted his position to try to read it better. He pointed to *vow*.

"What's this, voh?"

Yaz shook his head and drew an arrow from *vow* to another sentence he wrote: *rhymes with now and wow*. Carl pointed to *rhymes*, and Yaz pointed to *now*.

"Now," said Carl. Yaz pointed to *wow*. "Wow," said Carl. Yaz pointed to the *v* in *vow* and then underlined the other two letters. "Vow," he said. "What's a vow?" after a moment, Yaz drew another arrow from *vow* and wrote *a promise to do something*.

"So that's why you're not speaking," said Bug. "Wow. What a nut job." She watched him write *my backpack was stolen today, so I have no money*. Carl read the sentence aloud, and Yaz nodded to him when he worked through *backpack* successfully. "I don't believe him," said Bug.

"Put the knife away, Bug," said Carl.

"He just stashed his backpack is all he did."

Carl shook his head. “Why did you vow silence?”

Yaz started writing. Bug left them to search for his backpack, and while she was gone, Carl watched without saying a word while Yaz filled up the first gray panel with writing. His wrist, tired, lead his fingers to forge massive letters. “Write smaller. Don’t take up as much space,” said Carl.

Yaz looked down the length of the hallway. He put his mind back to writing, not that he had any idea what he was writing. It was automatic from one letter to the next and it was difficult just getting the graphite to grind off along the glossy surface of the wall. He wrote, but he considered running, considered what an end would be like. He first thought of his parents. They’d been behind his open-ended journey, even if they didn’t understand it. Take some time. Everyone had said that. Take time *from what?* And put that time *into what?* Time into being murdered for nothing stowing away on a ferry? He admitted something fitting about this. If Anastasia died, and then Yaz died in a trip to commemorate her, everyone could digest it, even if it was sad. His death took on the mental image of his funeral, although the service would be a blip in the history of times he’d miss out on. Yaz began to cry, and broke the tip of his pencil.

“Hey,” said Carl, who pulled a knife from his boot. “Gimme that.” Yaz handed him the pencil and Carl shaved a new point. “Are you done?”

Yaz looked at the writing on the wall. The letters were hardly legible except for the final sentence. *I am alive, I am alive, I am alive, I am ali-* He nodded to Carl, and began to laugh.

“What does it mean? And don’t fucking write more.”

Yaz tried to stop laughing, and put his finger to his lips.

“Yeah well that’s getting pretty old.” Carl snapped the pencil, and with the noise, Yaz took off down the hallway. His mental map of the ship proved good enough, and he charged off the back, leaping from the ship to the pier. He heard a thump on the pier behind him and turned to see Carl in the water below.

“Help! Bug!” Carl cried from the lake. Bug appeared at the stern of the ship with a floatation device.

“Carl, I’m coming,” she said in a voice sweeter than Yaz could have dreamed Bug capable of.

Yaz ran down the pier and through the gate they had pried open. He ran across the yard and into a police cruiser that was just being let in by the ferry-owner. Yaz spoke in motions and wrote out a statement and the police got more of a laugh out of him than they got out of Carl and Bug, who had already broken into two other stores that night. Yaz spent the night in a cell, but everything was friendly and the officers did what they could to lend a camp-like feel to the ordeal once they had made contact with Yaz’ parents. In the morning, a different officer drove Yaz to the ferry, where he boarded for free. His family would be waiting in Manitowoc. The crew called him the stowaway, and he laughed, which did not upset his vow, he decided. In fact, it would be very important moving forward.

## THE BEAUTIFUL OUTLAW<sup>2</sup>

Quick, heavy planes climb like osprey jetting through haze, fading into the wax night.

Expected to remain buckled in flight with zero view by a steward of obsequious zeal, his joyless and jailed voyagers quietly guzzle from thimbles and hope their aviatrix knows Charlie from Zulu. Secretly quaffing noxious gin juleps, the steward backs off his makeshift vow: Tomorrow, I will quit, he thinks, but cannot dare believe. Juxtapose this guy's momentary, fuzzy logic to the resolve displayed for last night's mirror. Sobriety's a bad joke, quashed now, except he'll realize in the azure dawn the gyp he's become: just a quack reformer, a knave, no wife, no life, no exit.

Exposed now, back in the aisle, he veers the trolley queasily, jamming a woman's toe, fazing her but not jolting a loud complaint. Expressing, in muzzled words, her qualms to her very finicky neighbor, she receives quite an expressive reply: the jerk is woozy from drink. Aghast, the woman inquires of her seated mate just how they've theorized exactly. Give proof, background for your avowal. Could not he be a simple klutz? Exercise thy nose a jot, darling. The bouquet of cheap liquor wafting in his jovial wake will glaze your larynx. The woman bids a glance back at the frowzy crewman. Expecting looker's eyes movie-bound, he slyly squirts gin in his juice.

But no, the woman's hawk-eye recognized the hoax poise requisite of a junkie living amid those who judge vice worshipers. Her eyes blaze. Seen, he quivers, his fickle smile extinguished by her black, razor-sharp anger. His job's at stake. More than lax moves, he requires a way forward. But the steward can't quell his gastric knots. Mouth ajar and moxie fizzled, he simply vomits.

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<sup>2</sup> The beautiful out-law, a piece of writing in which each line or sentence must use all letters of the alphabet.

## RIFT

Her record is fairly one-sided – she has not missed a day of work in two years – but in Mina’s heart, some alarm is stirring always: what are you doing, what are you doing? Last week, she sat in the shower before mustering the courage to go in. Fifteen minutes in the soaking steam, she contemplated the road ahead. There was work, and then there was getting fired. That’s what’s offered, nothing more. Her view at that point confined itself to the almond space of textured bathtub floor shaped by the arches of her touching feet. She shifted her right heel over a tobacco brown splotch no concentration of bleach could remove from the pores of the plastic floor. The almond sliver of her view was clean white again. The water cooled, maybe she was over-acclimated. Hunched over, blinded by the falling water, she reached forward like a beggar. In the twisting motion of her hand on the shower’s handle, in that squeak-thump sound it made, Mina’s routine began again. By the time she was dressed and saw the time on her bedside alarm, all she could think about was being late. During her commute, she fogged the windshield rehearsing apologies, jabbed the radio buttons so hard it hurt, and by the time she arrived at work, she could only be grateful for the lack of attention anyone gave her as she sat down at her desk.

Earlier that morning, neither Mina nor her husband noticed his wallet on the grime flocked in an even layer on top of the medicine cabinet. She might have called him – it’s never good to be without your wallet – and if she had noticed, if she had called, Herman would have had to lie directly to his wife. It’s not something he enjoyed doing, but he figured that he was so outside the bounds of her forgiveness that it wasn’t worth giving Mina a chance. He doesn’t notice until he lifts his windbreaker off the hotel desk chair. A wallet weights a windbreaker like

a referee's flag, and he knew immediately that he now had no idea where his wallet was. The toilet flushed, the sink ran, and Herman approached the bathroom door. The latch-bolt sat on the strike and through the slender gap between the door and the case, Herman saw Unity adjusting her negligee in the mirror. It felt like a pill in his stomach, this desire to give her privacy where only minutes before he'd treated himself to her body. He retreated until his view in held no more than an empty chrome towel ring. He wanted to call out, see what the play was, but he wanted to use her real name, and he didn't know that. So he backpedaled until the bed came up and took his knees out, sitting him beside her empty dress which crept nowhere like a shimmering wad of molted skin.

The weekends were supposed to be recharging – they had been, once. And it seemed like the less they had going on, the more draining those two days were. Around lunchtime, Mina realized she hadn't eaten breakfast. Better put, the natural systems governing her stomach forced themselves past the thoughts she didn't think about and into her conscious mind. A light lunch should be okay, she thought. And last night, she'd had barely any dinner – to give Herman leftovers, that was the reason. So she could have a lunch. She needed some energy to think. She saved what needed saving, so easy on her screens, and stood up collecting her things. A rush of something blew into her head – or out of it – and her vision spotted with strange growths of color. Reaching down she steadied herself with her palm on her desk calendar. Her body weight fed uncontrolled into her hand like the tip of a spear and the thick paper calendar slid forward sending a mug off of her desk where it shattered on the floor offering pens, pencils, and shards of itself in a fine spread shaped like a musket's smoky billow. Of course Jayne King would be the first to respond and of course she said she'd seen the whole thing and how Mina hadn't looked right all morning. Of course she had a plastic cup Mina could use to hold her writing-goodies

until Jayne's husband could find time to re-bond the mug. With the seven kids, her husband was an expert in mending all things broken in the same way she was with all stained laundry. Yes, yes, she still managed the house with ten hours a week to spare for her work here at the office. Nothing cerebral, but it kept her sharp. Mina was sitting now and with Jayne talking loudly about her family again, the office had forgotten that anything unusual had just occurred.

Unity left without a smile, unperturbed apparently, and Herman waited by the window as he had been instructed. Once he saw her get in the car, he would use the company card in his briefcase at the nearest place he could get money. Herman had never seen Vance, never spoken to him except once on the phone, but no doubt that was his sedan parked in a handicapped spot at the hotel's entrance. Unity climbed inside and they reversed out, the engine inordinately loud for the make of the car. Herman walked out the front entrance like she said. He felt the sun, knew the weather must be nice, but everything screamed attention in the bright light. He avoided the stare of the bellhop who ignored Herman without missing a detail. He crossed the lot to his own car listening to Vance's menacing engine. Unity hadn't seemed worried that he hadn't the money to exchange, and now he knew why.

Eventually, Mina had conceded to going out for lunch with Jayne, her treat. At 33, Mina had given up trying to compete with the Mormon women whose modest dress couldn't hide their positive energy. Jayne's every-man-would-be-lucky-to-have-me laugh, her Kabuki-thick makeup, her bottomless good will – relentless. Mina owned a handgun and could bake a pie; she felt like she could go toe to toe with them over everything but their cheery demeanor, their cliquy church business, and the feeling that somehow Jayne was only ever looking through her coffee-drinking, heathen presence to her evenings where the family sat down to lit candles transubstantiating their Ikea table and wallpapered room into a frontier chapel where any seated

might be called upon by staggering terror to hold the faith amidst the attacks and evil seeping from the unenlightened world: Carthage, Nauvoo, and beyond. They walked down Broadway, waited at Main for the Trax to hum past, and then continued to West Temple. Mina had never heard of Virdene's, but Jayne was greeted by the hostess. Mina should take her time with the menu, no rush. Jayne already knew what she wanted but really, no rush. A treat, for Mina, the hostess' furtive stare turning the ironed linen into a soup kitchen table.

Herman had to squeeze the wheel to keep his hands from sliding. He parked in Gracie's lot and walked across Broadway to the small kiosk. It wasn't his branch, but he was happy to fabricate an explanation for accounting about the jackass interbank fee to close this chapter of his day. This was supposed to be the kickoff, the big start to the week. He was always lightning on the phone for the next few days. Sometimes the passion spilled over into a session with Mina, but he knew she didn't really want the sex. He knew she wanted him to be happy but the act brought her no joy. Maybe not none, but how could he tell? She certainly wasn't putting in effort to catch his eye. It felt like he had to shoulder through all her inertia every time, and she could tell how bored he was. They both were. He entered the pin incorrectly a second time, god damn it. The secretive roguishness of these meetings with Unity had lost its cavalier gild. Over the table. Let everyone know. Celestial marriage, a rotation of wives. The fundamentalists down south and up in Idaho kept suspicion high that not all of the old ways were gone. It wasn't misogyny, no it was his sugar-free realism that drew Herman to conclude that maybe the Prophet had been on to something. He took the crisp stack of money proffered and the ATM spat out a receipt which Herman pocketed. He counted again to make sure – Vance would no doubt do the same. Assured, Herman valley-folded the money, creasing the virgin bills. When he looked up, he saw his wife coming out of a restaurant across the street. She couldn't be doing anything else

but walking towards him. He stood still, sweaty hand on the auto-locking door to the glass-walled kiosk. His mind derailed when Mina looked up at him, losing her smile as she read his face through the glass. She was halted, stuck on the island of the median which split the traffic on Broadway. He still hadn't moved, hadn't thought of the play. The light changed and the street cleared and she came forward. There had to be something. There had to be something. Standing still like there was something wrong – that wasn't going to help. He opened the door and pasted on a smile just as Unity appeared. The younger woman put her hand on his arm, as she had done this morning, and waited for him to complete the transaction.

## RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Mina is all business. The young woman talks, but she follows through. She dreams, but never without her calendar open. That is to say, her dreams are not the squishy substance of conjecture, but ideas tethered to dates, boxes to check, progress to measure. When fifty-year-olds hear Mina talk about her small-business aspirations – and bear in mind Mina will be carded for liquor until she’s their age – the listeners whisper after about whether or not she’ll be hiring people like them. In conversation with Mina, her simple questions open scary cracks into the actual feelings of the person talking with her. *Okay, but do you like doing that?* Her demeanor inflicts terrifying moments for those who verbally dream of futures while doing nothing to create them.

Tonight is no vacation, no, tonight’s been a hard one. It’s what she wants, though, what she’s after. Staying the late hours with executives to unscramble a three months of data in an evening. She likes being depended on, but it’s taxing. When she’s out the door and into the office park air, she pledges her hunger to Chinese buffet that stays open, unlike anything else in town. It’s out of her way, but it will be worth it. Arriving, she finds their lot is vacant, the many neon lights inactivated, and note scrawled in Sharpie apologizing for want of a chef. She finds her way across the street to a supermarket with a premade section. It’s not ideal – but this isn’t trench warfare, it’s an easy supper. In the checkout lane, the young clerk tells her the total, Mina reaches down to her jacket pocket, and realizes, in that instant, that her wallet is not here, not in her car, and back at the office.

“I’m sorry,” says the clerk.

“There’s no reason for you to apologize,” Mina says. “And I’ll be back in fifteen minutes, so there is no reason to worry.”

“We’re closing.”

There’s nothing else open, and the clerk looks away with a practiced stare while Mina thinks through her options. Half lights in the supermarket shut off, Peter Gabriel stops playing.

“Excuse me,” says a man from behind Mina. “Doesn’t look like you have more than ten dollars of things.”

“No, I can,” Mina starts. “I can’t, actually, so that would be really kind.”

Another row of lights go out in the back, followed by shouting and raunchy banter coming from the sausage section being stocked by a young crew who believes the public are clear of the store. The darkness drives them out without speaking into the semi-dark parking lot. There are two cars left, set far apart, set at no particular angle. As they pass his car he slows and she turns.

“Do you want me to mail you a check or something?”

“Please. It’s the price of a cup of coffee these days”

“It was very kind. I’ll pay it forward,” she says. “Have a good night.”

“I will. And I was thinking,” he says, waiting for her to turn around. She does.

“You were thinking,” she says. Whatever he’s about to say, the man has given her the invitation to openly gather facts about him. His age seems, relevant, maybe a little younger than her. His car could use some work – it might even be unsafe. His attire looks like he’s not too

concerned about what people think. His eyes are looking at hers, though, and that counts. A cart bumps into another with a clink.

“I could call you sometime. In there wasn’t a terrible first impression, right?” he says, gesturing to the store.

“No, but if you just paid for me so that, out here, you could guilt me into a date . . .”

He laughs. “I’d like to think I’d do it for someone who wasn’t as pretty.”

She thinks he means it. All she has to go on says he’s, at worst, harmless. She stays so busy over the next few weeks that she only remembers their date when it comes up in her phone as one hour away. It’s at a chain restaurant, her choice, and she slides into the booth seat without a minute to spare. They share a dilapidated, bomb-proof menu, and when she declines to order alcohol, the man, whose name is Herman Ableman, asks for something called El Capitan. It arrives in a glass the size of her arm. Her phone thrums in her pocket, but she wants to see this date through the right way. She will be present, account for his favor the other night, and then she can go back to her life. She’s going to get the check, and he can feel like a hog for ordering such a ludicrous drink.

“I’m really surprised you came,” he says. “I thought there was no way.”

“I said I would be here. That’s one thing people will tell you about me. I do what I say.”

“Which is great. It’s great because a lot of people find ways to *kind of* do things.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like,” he says, taking a sip from the party straw, “You could have gotten out of this if you wanted to.”

“But I didn’t want to get out of anything.”

“Did you really want to go on a date with me?” She doesn’t respond immediately, which contrasts with the quickness of the banter thus far. There’s a shout from the kitchen. “Or,” he continues, “did you invite me to T.G.I Friday’s during the AARP bonus hour because it’s the easiest way to check a box?”

“You’re right,” she says. “And I’m starting to regret it.”

“We’re here now, though,” he says with a grin. “So, where are you from?”

They could not be more opposite, she decides after they split the bill. Herman has worked at the same job for almost seven years – and to hear him complain about not receiving a promotion? That was his word – receive – as if promotions, and the money for them, descended like mana from the sky. He seems to have no sense of the larger operation surrounding the concrete plant he spends his days in. His web of knowledge is as incomplete as it is hilarious. It isn’t like she pries, but he seems baffled by her questions about his manager’s concerns. Mina is impressed by some of the days he works, it sounds grueling. But when she asks him about why the day had gotten out of hand (i.e. how to prevent it from happening again), all he can answer is that someone fucked up on something. The craziest part, to Mina’s thinking, is that he can perceive the “lifers” inability to move, but not his own. These guys are stuck, he’ll say, not realizing his own feet are in the same quicksand. As she talks about her own work, and what might lie ahead, he listens, but doesn’t ask any tough questions back. It is hard for her to even communicate what she does. She isn’t going to call him, again. She’s set to decline his call, but when it comes the following week, he says he’ll buy her lunch if she helps him with his resume. The page they are on might not be so different, she thinks.

The following week, she sits down with him in a lunch joint of her choice, between his plant and her office. Both coming from work, she's dressed to answer questions about budgets and his toes are protected by steel. The sheet he places on the table between them is a record of work hardly more inspiring than his verbal account at dinner the week before. A few years as a mason at different places.

"At this job, Stonescapes, did you do anything that you didn't do at Cornwall Brothers?"

"Actually decent work?" he laughs. "I didn't know anything at Stonescapes. I was green."

"But by the time you left?"

"I could do this and that, I guess. I don't want to be a mason again. Even the plant's better than that. Small crews, you have no idea the headache."

"Fine," she says. "What is this and that? You know, in terms other people can understand. You don't put 'I can do this and that on a resume.'"

"It's not rocket science."

"But it's not nothing. And people will pay you to do it."

Herman unrolls the napkin he has yet to use and pulls it through his hands like a magician about to conjure something from nothing.

"Does it make you happy? This work?"

"It's money. I don't see people frowning who have too much of that."

“So. What are you going to do? A resume doesn’t do anything without your weight behind it. If you don’t care, then, honestly, what are we doing here?”

“I want more, you know. I put in days that kill me, and I’m not getting ahead.”

“Have you asked for a raise.”

He laughs. “They don’t do that there.”

“Have you asked for one?” He raises his eyes to hers – they contain an angry and complacent luster she recognizes too well. “Who is going to help you but you?”

“It’s not like a goddamn cost-of-living increase every year. This isn’t glass walls and cubicles.”

“I’m sure your business is profitable, and retaining good workers is in their best interests in maintaining profitability. Does anyone know that you are not thrilled about what you are making?”

“I keep that to myself. I’m telling you, you don’t understand how things are.”

“So what can you do? If you are committed not to telling anyone what you need?”

Mina has been promoted several times in three years, at her company. She’s turned down a larger promotion that involved her moving to Skokie, IL, because she concluded, after significant thought, that she would not be as happy there. She’s trying to think about how to frame this, when Herman puts forward another justification for inaction.

“There is a line, a long-ass line, of people ready to take my job, perfectly qualified to pick things up and put things down, which is essentially what I do.”

“You’re saying that it took you zero time to learn how to work at the plant?”

“I mean, not much.”

“So you are trapped, 100 percent, in a job that you could lose at any time to any worker.”

She was counting on his pride to refute her, to open a doorway to something he believed he could do. But, after glaring at her, he took his knife and cut his pickle into smaller and smaller slivers.

“What would you do to that patio?”

He exhales. “The one outside?”

“No, Herman, why on earth would I be talking about the patio right next to us?” Through the large window beside them lies a small patio of cracked concrete separated from the road by a squat wall missing bricks like a crooked smile.

“I just mean what about it?”

“Could you fix it?”

“Yeah. Walk in the park.”

“Show me,” she says, opening the door and stepping outside, where she waits for about forty seconds before Herman joins her. It’s not like she prepares for these situations, but she knows it’s the other side of the line where people will actually talk to you. It’s not an exact territory, the uncomfortable zone of making decisions, but she’s knows when she’s there. And most people, Herman very much included, don’t like to spend time on this side of the line. But he does come out, and within forty short seconds, Herman is crouched, vision in his eye, pantomiming string-lines, sharper corners, and hell, even a little wooden pergola. He could

certainly frame that out. She mentally catalogues words he uses as verbs – level, sheet, square – to help him retool his resume, but also for later use. When he’s done, she asks for a cost, for real, what he would charge someone.

“Is that ballpark?” she asks.

“No. I used to go and do bids.”

“Experience with on-site estimates and sales...” she says as she writes under Cornwall Bros. on his resume. “So you feel like that’s a solid estimate – 30 man-hours.”

“Yeah.”

Mina pulls out her phone and commands it: *Text: Marty: I am in your store come out and say hi.* She puts her phone away and looks back at Herman. “I come here more than once a week. I hate this patio. It could be so nice.”

“It really could, I’ll bet.”

He sits there and Mina stands to receive the owner of the lunch joint. They embrace. He shakes the seated Herman’s hand.

“Don’t get up, Mr. Ableman, enjoy your lunch.”

“So this patio, Marty.”

“Oh God,” says Marty, looking at back Herman. “Not again.” Herman feels he should laugh and does. But Mina doesn’t even crack a smile. “I know you’re not a huge fan of the patio, but Mina, I just don’t have the money.”

“I know, but summer’s almost here and when you talk about curb appeal, foot-traffic, what could be more important to a lunch-time restaurant?” she asks. “Pictures of this patio online. People looking for outdoor seating. It’ll pay for itself in three Saturdays.”

“It’s not the end of the world,” says Herman.

“Proof – right there. It’s not hurting me,” says Marty.

“Herman is not your clientele. Look at him,” she says. They’re standing over him. “Seriously, would you have ever come here if I didn’t invite you?”

“No.”

“And you drive by here every day to work. Five times a week.”

“Yes.”

“There’s your proof, Marty.”

“I thought you said he wasn’t my clientele.”

“Not with this patio,” says Mina. “And Herman will do it for a fair price.”

The rush of transaction happens so quickly, and even the veteran owner Marty does not perceive, as Mina does, the subtle tremor course through Herman. When Marty is gone, Herman leans forward in his seat.

“I don’t know how to invoice someone. And that price. That was higher than I said.”

“Ten percent higher, Herman, only because I don’t know if I should have charged fifteen. And Marty is a good guy.”

“What if he’d said no.”

“Then we would have crossed that bridge. Most people aren’t going to run away from you.”

“If you cheat them?”

“Herman. You didn’t account for incidentals.” He wants to argue and does when she explains that it’s good practice to charge more. But she cans his attitude and they set up a work schedule, essentially both of their next two weekends, to getting the job done. Herman comes to find what people who work with Mina find – she doesn’t stop. They find a decent rhythm, and the job is so small, Herman needs no more than another pair of hands at the end of a line, someone to mix bags of concrete with a shovel. Mina supplies these, and no other answer about why she is doing this than, “The patio’s an eyesore.”

On the first Sunday, their second day of work, Mina takes a break to get water while they are digging a posthole into the rocky ground. She’s conscious that it’s the first time she’s taken a break when he hasn’t, but, if he brings it up, she’ll ask why it’s relevant, and she’s sort watching him dig, really throwing the end of the shovel down into the dirt. She knows she doesn’t look as good doing that as he does, Herman turns around to find her watching him for the first time. In what must be a really old pose, Herman gently collapses his weight onto the shovel like crutch. He is happy, doing this work. She’s happy to learn – he has plenty to teach, in spite of his self-image. He smiles and there is a little spray of water from the fresh hole. Herman turns to find a thin geyser of water coming up from the hole. He runs inside, past the counter, reappears later with Marty who has a puzzled look on his face. In digging the hole, they’d busted through a sprinkler line. All of this Herman explains later, on their way back from the hardware store.

“These kinds of things happen,” he says.

“Incidental things, you could say.” Herman exhales, but it’s with a smile, and Mina has never needed people to use words to say she was right. She’s proud when patio is done, and she is going to look at it, every time she comes in the door, and think, damn, that’s a nice fucking patio. After they clean up for the final time, Marty hands Herman a check in his name. “Think what you could do if you had ten of her,” he says laughing. Mina laughs, too, and when Marty leaves Herman looks startled.

“I’m so sorry. We can go cash this right now – I didn’t know he was going to make it out to me.”

“I got my patio. And I learned a lot.”

“Well, let me at least buy you dinner.”

“You know, Herman, we’ve spent a lot of time together this weekend. I know you’re used to this work, but I feel like I’ve been at the gym for two days straight. Which, basically, we have. I’m going to go to bed, and I’m going to enjoy it.”

“We should do this again sometime.”

“You should do it again, and you should hire someone to help you who doesn’t have another job.”

“You’re probably right.”

She leaves Herman, and whether or not she sees him again is in his court. His next decision has to be made without her, or he risks becoming another extension of her management. She won't commit to that. To something new though, something that doesn't exist yet, to something that needs work to build? She has a busy day tomorrow, but the tiredness in her hands feels like something worth it.

## WEST HOLLYWOOD, OCCAISIONALLY

Shauna and I drove down from Vegas this morning, endured the freeways, and parked outside our AirBnb only to find that we couldn't get in. She was worried about everything, so this was perfect. Brody, the homeowner, was apologetic, but the best he could do was tell us to kill the afternoon at a bar down the street. It seemed easy to meet people, because we had nowhere to be. Say what you want about LA, but having nowhere to be looked pretty common. Our road-trip schedule hasn't left a lot of room for unplanned time, and if this was first city, maybe we'd have had the get-up to start poking around. Every city had a sameness at this point, our wow-perception depleted by seeing two weeks of seeing every sight. Four national parks, two music festivals, and now an L.A. wedding. We didn't know what to expect, but we were hungry, we were locked out, and so these circumstances shaped the next few hours of a trip we'd be talking about, if Shauna felt the same way I did, for years to come.

At the Uptown Lounge, we met Nataly and her girlfriend Mona. Or was it Michelle? Either way. They were a couple eating appetizers down the bar, and they heard the waiter giving us the, *if you've never been here before* spiel. We ended up eating with them and I hadn't realized how long it had been since Shauna and I had gotten to chat with normal people. I guess normal is unfair to the friends we've seen coming across the country. But they were all lifted on a mix of joy and anxiety from us seeing their home for the first time. We appreciated it, the hospitality, the good times, but we're bored of telling people what we're up to. Bored of having to turn our lives into a series of cause-and-effects that looks like we planned it. Nataly and Mona were relaxed and didn't really care about lives. They asked questions, but it was mostly by way of finding something which they could then use to talk about themselves. It's been refreshing.

Nataly was from here, West Hollywood, and Mona had lived in the vicinity for more than a decade. She kept qualifying exactly where she lived with neighborhood names that were lovely and meant nothing to me. What was amazing, though, was that neither of them had been up the street we were staying on. Ever. It was probably three blocks from here. They did know the Gateway, and they were really surprised that was our destination.

“I didn’t know they did weddings there,” said Nataly.

“It’s not to say they don’t, obviously if you’re going there, they do, it’s just like an office park, not super eventy, to my knowledge.” Mona took in a deep breath to hold the reins of conversation. “Friend of both of yours?”

“Getting married?” I asked, and they nodded earnestly, a stranger’s sudden concern for a traveler. “My buddy Erwin. Old friend of mine.” Shauna nodded. We were all nodding.

“Now I don’t think I know an Erwin,” said Mona, “but Irving. Don’t get us started on Irving.” Nataly laughed, and then we heard about Irving, which was also the name of Mona’s elementary school, so we heard about that, too.

“Not to be too forward,” Nataly prefaced, “but who’s older?” She looked between us.

“I am,” said Shauna in an even tone. I don’t know how something can be too even, maybe too measured, too practiced, but whenever Shauna answers that question, it’s not more comfortable afterward.

“Not judging, obviously,” said Nataly, taking Mona’s hand.

“We make it work,” I said. “And it’s not like you’re the first person to ask.”

“I don’t even know why she did,” said Mona.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Shauna.

“Right,” said Mona. “It doesn’t.”

“Which one of you is older?” I asked. “Not like it matters.”

We laughed out some uneasiness and no one declined when the disheveled waiter came by with coffee. Ending on good terms meant navigating as far away from the topic of age as possible. Remember, Nataly doesn’t know us. We must just broadcast the tension. If someone asked that question, the subtext told Shauna, every time, that she looked old. For my part – I got it, I understood why it hit her like this, but telling her to relax about it was the dead-end of many an argument. Coffee came, and we re-sodded the conversation with a cordial layer of pleasantries. We stood up to leave, and said good bye as if the conversation hadn’t touched on anything real. Is that what we wanted? We all worked in concert for the appearance of normal.

Back on the side walk, just the two of us, I chose to keep the talk at surface level. “Weird about the Gateway.”

“I know. Have you been able to get a hold of Erwin?” Shauna asked.

“No. Haven’t tried since last week. Thought he’d have enough to deal with.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Maybe there’s a different Gateway.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But we have to get into our room before we can do anything else.”

We crossed Sunset and Hollywood walking back up hill towards Brody’s. Our car was still outside – looked unmolested – but there was no sign of our host. I sat on the hood and drew a huge breath in. Shauna looked through the gate to the large house, the garage with the room above where we ought to be kicking it at this hour.

“I think I just saw someone inside,” said Shauna. “I swear.”

“Yeah?” A noise from the yard draws both of our attention. It’s definitely a creature.

“No! What the hell is a chicken there for?”

“There’s like six, look. They’re probably wondering what we’re doing here.”

“Did you know this place had chickens?”

“I guess I didn’t think so. I saw a coop in one of pictures.”

“Didn’t tip you off?”

“Didn’t think it was operational. Thought it was, you know, ambience. Give a little country feel. Are you mad?” We watched the chickens. They considered us, but not really, there was pecking to be done. Shauna leaned against the fence, on her phone.

The sun winked behind the horizon and its light changed quality. I wouldn’t have noticed this were it not for the rooster who came crowing around the side of the house rounding up the chickens. Shauna let out an exhale of frustration. Her body-watch, like the rooster’s, was set without conscious calculation to sunset. Here, only the chickens had a bed to lay in.

“Nataly was a trip, huh?”

“They were both very nice,” said Shauna.

“I could tell you were losing it a little. When she one-upped me like three times in a row? Right when we first sat down. ‘Oh used to go to Utah all the time; Denver? No, to really do Denver you need at least two weeks,’ I forget the last one, but you kept taking monster sips from your water so you wouldn’t say anything back.”

Shauna smiled. “She didn’t pick up on that.”

“I knew, though.”

“Oh so you know what I’m thinking? All the time?”

I couldn’t think of a response that turned the heat down on this conversation.

“You’re not the suspicious type,” she said.

“I know.”

“You’re on the other side of the spectrum. You treat me like a treasure, which is charming, but what do you want to make together? If I, me, am all you are into, us won’t last.”

This is it, right? Because I tried to save a little money on a hotel, we got stuck outside, could not take this much of each other without comfort.

“I like you,” she said. “I really do. A lot. But you trusted me so completely so quickly. And if I don’t trust you back instantly? Look, Larry. These are tough conversations we need to have. We’re moving so fast. You’ve met like half my family. There’s nothing we’re not weaving tighter together, and it seems good. I just want to go slow and that shouldn’t kill you. Larry, please.”

For about five minutes, it was us on the hood of my car, the buzz of traffic through the trees, a gate locked. Between us, a few layers of fabric. Shauna’s ribcage expands into mine and I matched our breathing as I calmed down. Every detail was so present: snakes of grass and sedge colonizing the cracked macadam, a streetlight flickering, parting squawks from the chickens.

A large SUV came up the hill, the first car we'd seen up here beside ours. A motor hummed and we both backed away from the gate which clicked before swinging open. The passenger side window scrolled down and portly man with Captain Morgan's facial hair extended his closed fist out the window.

"Lawrence Balboa?"

"Brody?"

"Great. Sorry," he shook his fist as if it had a treat inside for a waiting dog. I cupped my hands below, and he dropped a key and a remote. "Key shoulda been there, Lawrence, you must be Shauna. People are supposed to leave the key. But that's people for ya. Great. Okay. Pull your car in, I'll meet you in back."

"It's Larry," I said, but his window is already rolling up.

We parked and met Brody on the top landing of a wooden staircase which ran up one side of the garage. He tried another key on the door to the second level, then turned and asked for my copy of the key. Thankfully it worked. Brody pushed the door in and returned the key.

"So definitely don't lose that one," he laughed. He reached in and turned on a light. The first things we saw was the bathroom, which had a really great glass walled shower.

"Okay," said Shauna. Meant she was happy. Brody motioned us in while he waited outside. He continued to talk while we looked over the place.

"The lockbox always has a key. That's what pisses me off. It's real easy. But that's people, right? You either work, or you make work for other people. How hard is it to leave a key

when you're done? It's just like this, 'screw the next guy' mentality that's wrong with everyone these days."

She flicked three switches on a faceplate and sequential boxes of brightness lit the large room. A bed, a mini fridge, and more than one Lord of the Rings poster, which was a lot. But it was not until we walked into the space that we found the defining feature: A display case full of cat-sized models of comic book characters. I recognized Spawn, and Neo from the Matrix, but there were other wild creatures and superheroes. Shauna walked next to the case and pushed a button which turned on green string-lighting running through the case. It made the room feel like Chernobyl, only less comforting.

"Ahh, Brody?"

"Yeah?" he peaked in. "Oh sure. The Hero Case. Yeah. If you can name every character in there, you can stay for free."

"I guess I missed this in the photos."

"Draw the curtain across if it bothers you, but it's actually, like, why a lot of people stay here."

There was a noise from under the wooden staircase outside. Brody furrowed his brow and then walked gingerly outside, creeping down the steps.

Shauna sat on the bed and lay back. I placed her suitcase on the bed next to her.

"How is it?"

"Good not great. Fine though," she said.

"See that shower?" I asked.

“Room for two,” she said. For a moment it almost felt like it usually does when we pay to stay in a room for the night. Privacy and focus.

“VAMPIRE!” screamed Brody from outside. The radioactive glow of the display case lent a sort of authenticity to the claim.

“Wait here,” I say, as if I knew what I was doing. Shauna followed me out of the landing. We peered down.

“He’s been sucked dry!” Brody had a flashlight in one hand and the dead rooster in the other. He turns back to the house and shouts, “We’ve been struck again! Denise! We’ve been struck once more!”

A light over the back porch turned on and a slider whooshed open.

“Brod, hun. What’s happening?” On to the porch tip-toed a woman in a bathrobe. Denise was impossibly well-featured, as in she brought to mind a lady from a soap commercial. I imagined Brody in a soap commercial for a second, and it could not be unimagined. He ran with the rooster under the light on the porch and he and Denise knelt beside the lifeless body.

“Do you want to leave?” I asked her.

“I really don’t care, Larry. I asked for some adventure, so I really shouldn’t complain.”

“You’re a trooper.”

“You think I’m like some suburban girl who’s gotta have carpet under everything. I can be crazy.”

“Oh you can, can you?”

“If the shower doesn’t work, we’re leaving.” She wandered into the bathroom, and I heard the running water. I double-checked the door lock from the outside before joining Shauna in the bathroom.

Later, in front of the Hero Case, Shauna checked all of our clothes before hanging them in the closet. I refilled my plastic cup of wine. Shauna shook her head and I corked the bottle.

“Have you ever met Erwin’s fiancé? Wynonna?” she asked.

“Not yet. And she doesn’t pronounce it like that.”

“Wynonna? How else does she pronounce it?”

“It’s like Wha-knownn-uh.”

“That’s too much.”

“You heard a man accuse vampires of killing a chicken and the way this poor girl wants to say her name is too much?” My bare feet were freezing so I got into bed and put the wine on the nightstand. There was a pull drawer. “You think Brody has a Gideon’s Bible?”

“Open it,” she said. I rolled across the bed and pulled on the drawer. It’s a fake drawer, really just a decorative handle.

“What does that say?”

Shauna didn’t answer, but she bent back down to the suitcase to find it empty, the last garment hung. She drew the zipper shut and placed the suitcase by the cooper’s barrel next to one of the windows. She looked around for something else to do.

“You’ve never met the woman Erwin’s gonna marry. When was the last time you saw him?” She wandered over to the desk by the door.

“That’s the thing with friends, what you always say. They’re people you don’t have to see all the time but still matter.”

“Yeah, but I still keep up with my friends. I have a pretty good idea of what’s going on in their lives.” She opened her wallet, inspecting the contents like a border guard.

“That’s women, though.”

“What? Being actual friends?”

“No, that’s probably not it. You’re right. Erwin is a strange bird, but we were friends at a time that was big for us. First job, young guys. He moved out here. We drifted, but it’s all the more important to be at the wedding then, right?”

“But how long has it been? You never talk about him.”

“Shit. I don’t know, like five years?”

“Five years is a long time,” she said.

“It is. And you’re not talking about me and Erwin anymore.” She blinked. Is she back in the room yet? “Guess not.”

“It’s not nothing, Larry.”

“I’m not downplaying how big a part of your life Chris Foster was-“

“Don’t say his name with me.”

I parted my hands and raised my eyebrows like a masked man just drew a gun at the bank. What can I say that I haven't said already? Shauna, you were seven years older than me when we met – I doubt it's gonna change. You and Foster dated for five years and were broken up and done by the time I met you. What's in my power to change? It's gotta come from her – this change we need – but there's this ding dong duh voice in my head that says: never think you are less than fifty percent the problem. Listen, I said, to myself.

“Larry, I just need time. We've only been dating for a year.”

“I'm not gonna move-on on you.”

“I know you feel that. I feel it, too. Taking time is not the same as indecision.” She climbed onto the bed and under the covers and we tangled around for a second before she said, “Shit.”

“What?”

“There's no way I can sleep with that Hero Case on.”

She was right. I got up and turned it off. The main house was lit in almost every window. Another car turned in the driveway beaming its lights through our windows, dragging their separated fluorescent rays along the wall.

“What's wrong, Larry?”

“Nothing, babe. Just feels like we're sleeping in a goddamn strip mall.” She snorted. Did she know I was lying? Probably, but it was times like these where we're both on a trip, in every sense. Not admitting the strangeness became vital.

In the bathroom, I looked in the mirror. My body was what? Average, maybe, but I had all my limbs. Shauna's panties were on the floor where she stepped out of them and joined me in the shower. A travel soapbox I bought Shauna last year was open on the sink. My shirt, a gift from her brother, was draped over an old iron heater and there was something poetic in it all. I couldn't make it out, but I took a guess, and a warm wave of gratefulness rolled through my bones. Back in the main room, I caught a cat's eye reflection as Shauna turned over in bed, to make sure I was coming back.

We didn't talk about this – then, or ever – but I secured the apartment like I'd never done before. This was me, barefoot in boxers, enacting some less than *Home Alone* level defense or alert in each egress: a table scooted, blocking the swing of a door; silverware placed precariously atop a window sash; all sorts of childish bullshit. But Shauna sat up and encouraged the shit out of me. Everything was non-verbal, but for like thirty-five minutes, I fortified the apartment, and we both slept so well that we did not make it outside until 11 AM.

“Aren't there things we should have been doing?”

“While we're here, and all that?”

“Exactly. West Coast sunrise? The beaches, surfing.”

“Do you really want to surf?”

“Hmm. No, but I would like to say I've done it.”

“Really?”

“No. I guess I don't want to that bad.”

“Neither do I. I'm not helping.”

Brody is in the backyard when we come down the stairs from our room. He recommends a short hike with good payoff: a photo-op view of the city and the Hollywood sign, smog permitting. It was your typical concierge small-talk until he brought up the possum.

“That’s what we’ve got. We think. And we’re gonna catch him before he strikes again.”

“Good luck,” I said. Shauna and I opened the car doors, started climbing in.

“Yeah. Gonna need it. The teeth those things have. Like a little wolf. Catching it’s the easy part.”

“Okay!” said Shauna. “See you later!” She’s always been good with exits.

About half an hour later, we sat in the lot of the Gateway office park. I turned off the car. 7548 Expedition Way. This was it. It was a squat building, dark windows, and we got out, just to see. A pavilion overhung the entry-way and the trash blown into the corners left the sign of one person living here versus a bunch of people working. Day-Glo orange paperwork was taped to the door, and in threatening bold print we were told, officially, that nothing was supposed to happen in this building.

We walked back to the car. Shauna knew I haven’t been able to connect with Erwin, and I was hoping we’d be on the same side about this.

“What I’m thinking about,” she said, “is how do you stand someone up like this?”

“It’s beyond that. I hope he’s alright.”

“But what does this say?” she said. She said it again, in the car, when I stopped at the light to get back on the main road and didn’t know which way to turn.

It's a weird feeling, having an obligation just erased like that. I called who I could, but it seemed that my poorly upkept relationship with Erwin was more than any other friends had. No one even knew he was getting married.

We decided to do the hike – after that, we'd be completely free of ideas. We'd have to come up with our own set of places to be in order to get some grip on this city. The trail was two miles of steep crushed rock to the top. It was crowded, so when we summited, we bushwhacked until we had our own private view. We watched. From this distance, the city stood still. A hawk flew into view circling in the air ahead of us.

“I ever tell you about the hawk at my cousins?”

“Don't think so,” I said.

“Yeah. They had chickens, too. Their coop was cooler than Brody's. We used to go in there, which is disgusting now that I think about it, but we were kids. I remember I slept over there and in the morning I was eating cereal looking at the back of the box. Out their bay window, the rooster started crowing, and my uncle said, ‘Cock's being a cock a the walk,’ and me and my cousin both laughed, secretly, because we were both learning naughty language as fast as we could. But I did look outside and saw the rooster driving the chicks in a line up the small ramp into the coop. Before he could scamper inside, a hawk dropped out of the sky and clawed him up. We both screamed. ‘Did his job,’ my uncle said.”

The hawk flew past a cell-phone tower disguised as a sequoia. It didn't glide back in to view. I stood up and walked about our little ledge. This was just dirt, clay, rocks and what not. The Hollywood sign was tough to make out, and from our oblique angle, it looked small. No more impressive than a billboard, which it basically was, over there in the same plain ground as

us. Not coming to LA would have kept it cooler my mind. Erwin, too, what the hell? I kick a clump of dried up brush and the dirt is darker below.

I looked back to Shauna. She was squinting at me, her hand a visor over her eyes. *What does this mean?*

“Without the smog, I’ll bet we could see the ocean,” she said.

I laughed, I guess she knows what I’m thinking. My job is giving time, if that’s all it will take. “Let’s go. Let’s go down to the ocean. And that’ll be it then.”

“It?”

I walk back and my shadow falls over her. No longer squinting she reaches up she takes my hand. “Furthest we get from home.”

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